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SOCIAL BRAND ACTIVISM IN A CHANGING ENVIRONMENT

A qualitative case study on how sportswear organizations navigate social brand
activism whilst remaining authentic

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Title: Social Brand Activism in a Changing Environment

Abstract:

Through a qualitative study, this thesis aims to investigate how sportswear companies navigate in the new complex field of social brand activism while remaining authentic to their customers and stakeholders. The thesis is conducted in a case study setting, where a total of nine interviews were executed. Seven interviews were held with employees in one of the world's largest sportswear companies and the remaining two from companies used as benchmarks. Legitimacy Theory is used to understand and analyze why sportswear organizations want to engage in social brand activism, along with how they can engage whilst remaining authentic. The findings from the cross-sectional study demonstrate several findings of how sportswear companies can navigate social brand activism while staying authentic, namely acknowledgment regarding its importance, consideration of disclosure processes, and execution of organizational claims, all differing upon firm ownership structure and firm size. This thesis contributes to management research by examining the decision-making process in a real-life setting through a new perspective, legitimacy, along with further highlighting the importance of social brand activism for organizations to consider.

Keywords: Sportswear Organizations, Social Brand Activism, Navigation, Woke Washing, Disclosure

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DEFINITIONS & CONCEPTS

| Concept | Definition |
|-----------------------------------|--|
| Corporate Social Responsibility | Voluntary action that helps a business fulfill its perceived obligations to stakeholders as it meets its business objectives (Nalick, Josefy et al. 2016). |
| Corporate Sociopolitical Activism | A company's adoption of a non-neutral stance on an issue that is controversial, politically sensitive, divisive, and arouses strong emotions (Nalick, Josefy et al. 2016). |
| Listed company | A public company that issues shares of its stock for trading on a stock exchange (Kenton, 2022). |
| Unlisted company | A company whose shares are not traded on a stock exchange (Cambridge Dictionary, 2022) |
| Social Brand Activism | The alignment of a brand's explicit purpose and values with its activist marketing messaging and prosocial corporate practice, involving both tangible and intangible commitments (Vredenburg, Kapitan et al. 2020). |
| Sportswear company | A business, company or distributor that buys, distributes and sells sportswear, sports clothing, sports equipment and sports footwear for a variety of sport (Definitions, 2022). |
| Woke | A woke individual is an individual aware of discrimination in society, and actively fighting against oppression (Nationalencyklopedin, 2022). |
| Woke Washing | Brands that have unclear or indeterminate records of social cause practices, but yet are attempting to market themselves as beginning concerned with issues of inequality and social injustice, highlighting inconsistencies between messaging and practice (Vredenburg, Kapitan et al. 2020). |

ABBREVIATIONS

| Abbreviation | Definition |
|--------------|------------------------------------|
| SBA | Social Brand Activism |
| CSA | Corporate Socio Political Activism |
| CSR | Corporate Social Responsibility |
| BC1 | Benchmarking Company 1 |
| BC2 | Benchmarking Company 2 |

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1. INTRODUCTION

1.1 Background

In recent years, sportswear organizations have begun to take a stand on sensitive sociopolitical topics. As consumers have become progressively conscious about their impact on organizations, an increasing trend of consumers supporting the brand they purchase from has emerged. This has resulted in the development of the phenomenon of social brand activism, where businesses take a stand on social issues. Moreover, the expectation for organizations to contribute positively to society, originating from consumers' demands, has led to an increased usage of social sustainability as a strategic advantage (Petro, 2022).

However, there is a delicate balance between taking action and risk being portrayed as participating in “woke washing”, meaning that organizations mislead consumers with their social sustainability claims to earn a profit, without making actual social contributions (Atanga, Xue, et al. 2022).

77% of consumers are motivated to purchase from a brand contributing to making the world a better place, 54% of consumers have stopped purchasing from a brand due to its public position on an issue, and 25% of consumers have a zero-tolerance policy towards organizations with questionable ethical behavior (Stobierski, 2021). Hence, many customers want companies to align with their interests, while some customers want companies to act neutral in sociopolitical questions. Therefore, acknowledging the risk taken by sportswear organizations when involved in social brand activism is important since the organization might lose a large pool of customers, both short-term and long-term.

On several occasions, an instance of social brand activism has taken place in the sportswear industry. A well-known example is Nike and their support for NFL player Colin Kaepernick as he “took a knee” during the Black Lives Matter movement. By taking a stand for controversial social individuals during a time of political disarray, Nike took a risk to convey their brand as a platform that highlights important sociopolitical issues. Nike successfully managed the activity and gained positive attention in the media. Nonetheless, skepticism towards the concept of social brand

activism has arisen (Jobb, 2018). How can consumers know which organizations that genuinely support their claims?

In this thesis, we will investigate how sportswear companies navigate in this new, complex field through the lens of Legitimacy Theory. Furthermore, the authors introduce a new way of thinking when sportswear organizations shall navigate the conflicting demands of social brand activism.

1.2 Problem Area and Research Gap

In an expanding digital era, social media has enabled the acceleration of discussion regarding controversial questions and issues. Afraid of missing out on an opportunity, organizations have adopted similar behavior to attract consumers, but negative consequences for the organization can also occur. However, observing how organizations navigate the field of social brand activism has received little attention, despite its emerging importance. Due to difficulties in obtaining data, little is known concerning the decision-making process within organizations regarding social brand activism.

Figure 1



Figure 1: Research gap. The intersection illustrates the research gap that will be further analyzed.

There is a risk that consumers believe the activities simply are adopted for marketing purposes, to attract new customers, or ensure loyalty from existing customers. Furthermore, research regarding how companies should act to stay authentic exists in general terms. Nonetheless, there is a research

gap regarding *how* organizations navigate social brand activism, whilst remaining authentic and avoiding participation in woke washing. The red area in Figure 1 displays the research gap which further will be investigated in this study.

1.3 Purpose and Research Question

Our study aims to investigate which elements that require consideration before engaging in social brand activism, and how to avoid or mitigate the possible negative consequences. The ambition is to discover what is required from management for the initiatives undertaken by organizations to be perceived as genuine and authentic. In an environment where social media possesses great power, being able to detect the potential risks and understand their consequences is crucial for long-term survival. Thus, our research question is:

“How do Sportswear Companies navigate social brand activism without risking the occurrence of woke washing?”

1.4 Delimitations

This thesis has been delimited to exclusively focus on social brand activism. The authors have chosen to exclude the economic and environmental perspectives. The field of research is limited to the sportswear industry, where the focus will explicitly be on one sportswear company in a case study setting. The selected organization is one of the largest sportswear organizations, making an investigation of them appropriate. However, to ensure accurate data collection, a decision to benchmark against two other organizations within the same sector was made. The thesis is delimited to a qualitative study, excluding quantitative analysis. The underlying reason for a qualitative analysis will be discussed in Section 4.1.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

This section of the thesis displays a review of what is already known from research on the chosen topic, namely how sportswear organizations navigate social brand activism without risking the occurrence of woke washing. A presentation of four topics connected to the research question will be discussed, namely social brand activism, woke washing and transparency, perceived issue novelty versus perceived issue controversy and firm ownership structure.

2.1 Social Brand Activism

The concept of social brand activism, further referred to as SBA, has several definitions and terms for determining its characteristics. We will discuss two common perceptions of SBA, encompassing a more holistic view of the concept.

One outlook in SBA is related to Corporate Sociopolitical Activism, referred to as CSA. Corporate Sociopolitical Activism can be defined as *"a company's adoption of a non-neutral stance on an issue that is controversial, politically sensitive, divisive, and arouses strong emotions"* (Nalick, Josefy, et al. 2016). The shape of the activity is dynamic and has a wide range. Another underlying assumption is that organizations insist that the foundation for their social engagement is altruistic. However, ulterior motives may exist. Even if the behavior of the organization were to be altruistic, consumers may perceive it differently. Regardless of motives, strategic consideration when participating in CSA is important (Atanga, Xue, et al. 2022).

Several researchers view SBA as a subcategory of Corporate Social Responsibility, often referred to as "sustainability" in loose terms. Corporate Social Responsibility is defined as *"voluntary actions that help a business fulfill its perceived obligations to stakeholders as it meets its business objectives"* (Nalick, Josefy, et al. 2016). Organizations have multiple reasons for engaging in CSR efforts, for instance, to strengthen the legitimacy of the organization. Hence, CSR activities nourishes the relationship between organizations and their stakeholders, providing a possible competitive advantage.

Nonetheless, companies need to be aware of the information asymmetry between the organization and the consumers, since senior management ultimately decides on what information to disclose to the external environment. Hence trust, legitimacy and perceived motives need to be considered by the organization since the organization might damage its reputation through contradictory behavior. Furthermore, lowered reputation is particularly detrimental for organizations with well-known brands, since there is a higher demand for CSR transparency from well-known organizations (Reilly, Larya 2018).

Figure 2 displays a typology of brand activism, where brand activism varies depending on the degree of activist marketing messaging, High to Low, and the degree of prosocial corporate practice, High to Low, resulting in four quadrants (Vredenburg et al., 2020).

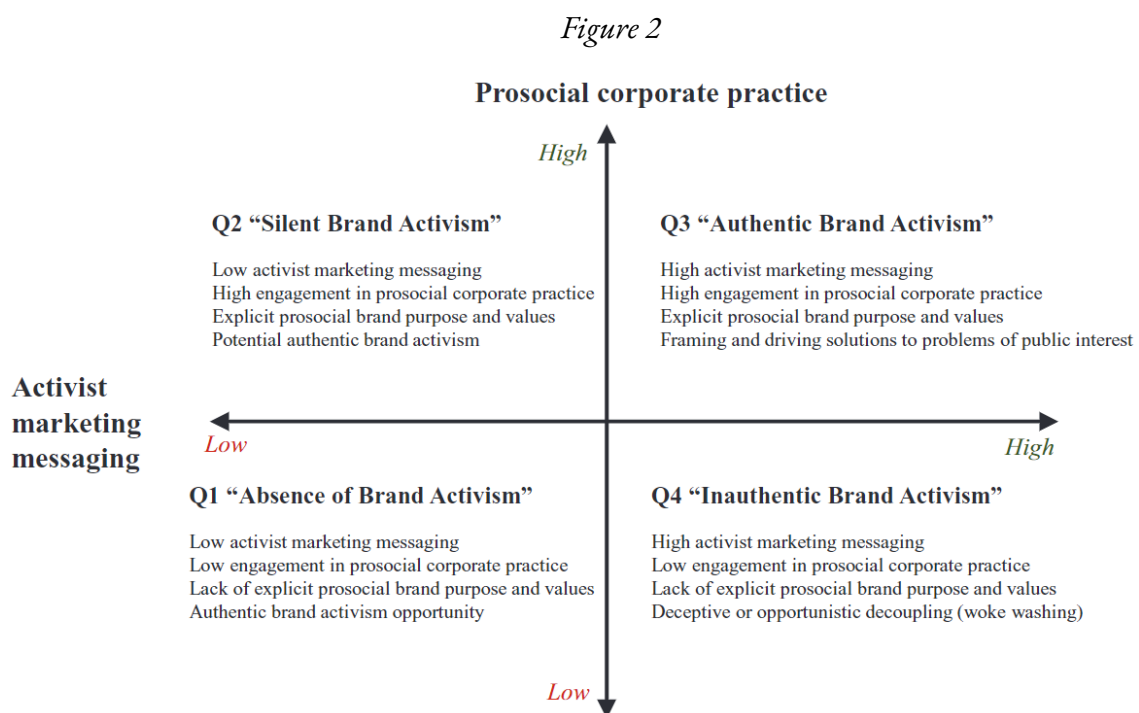


Figure 2: Model that displays silent, authentic, absence of- and inauthentic brand activism.

The four characteristics of authentic brand activism separates brands engaging this strategy apart from their competitors. However, over time, brand activism is more likely to become common practice and be reduced to a point of parity (Vredenburg et al., 2020).

2.2 “Woke Washing” and Transparency

Transparency is necessary for organizations to obtain benefits associated with SBA, for instance, legitimacy. Demand for transparency in SBA has increased, resulting in organizations focusing on relationship-building with their stakeholders. If neither the internal nor external communication is disclosed with transparency, it is likely to be perceived as “woke washing”. Transparent communication also allows for the organization to address its current progress within SBA. When organizations lack disclosure of SBA efforts, it suggests a low level of transparency and implies that SBA efforts are of low priority to the organization. Transparency is of significance for organizations when pursuing SBA efforts, to not be perceived as enacting “woke washing” (Atanga, Xue, et al. 2022). Nonetheless, there are discrepancies regarding what the term “woke” actually means.

Warren argues that “woke” has a negative meaning, although the word is defined as “*alert to racial or social discrimination and injustice*” (Bhagwat, Warren, et al. 2020). However, it is argued that “woke” is now used in a stigmatizing manner to highlight discrepancies between organizations’ expressed values and their behavior. The wave of woke culture is also proclaimed to be similar to revivalist movements (Nationalencyklopedin, 2022).

Nevertheless, other researchers assert that woke still signals political awareness, in particular regarding racism. A woke individual is thus an individual aware of discrimination in society, and actively fighting against oppression (Nationalencyklopedin, 2022). In this thesis, we agree upon this definition, rather than viewing woke as a negative term. Thus, the term woke washing is negative, where organizations want to be perceived as woke but attain the opposite.

2.3 Perceived Issue Novelty versus Perceived Issue Controversy

Two SBA characteristics have a main impact on consumers’ view of an organization’s SBA efforts; *perceived issue novelty* and *perceived issue controversy*. Perceived issue novelty explains how a potential disagreement between the company’s stance and the consumer’s opinion will eliminate the positive effect of choosing a novel topic in SBA. The consumer is also more likely to voice their

discontent publicly. Nevertheless, when consumers agree to the SBA effort, attention from them will not be as high. Instead, the initiative rather goes unnoticed (Atanga, Xue, et al. 2022).

Perceived issue controversy can also impact, especially if the perceived issue novelty is high. The perceived sincerity of the company's motives is crucial for predicting consumer responses to SBA efforts. When consumers perceive the effort as genuine, consumers support the organization and feel an obligation to reciprocate to the organization by remaining loyal consumers. However, when consumers suspect ulterior motives, they will likely feel negative, affecting perceived brand attitude. Nonetheless, it is important to highlight the fact that a controversial action from the organization will only result in positive responses if consumers agree with the organization's stance. Striking a balance between novelty and controversy can ensure a successful SBA campaign. Otherwise, the organization is perceived to simply follow trends, without a long-term perspective (Atanga, Xue, et al. 2022).

2.4 Firm Ownership Structure

Firm ownership structure can impact the voluntary or regulatory disclosure of SBA information from an organization. Carmo et al. explain how a large proportion of economic activity consists of unlisted, private companies with typically locally important stakeholders, hence justifying different motivations or practices towards sustainability disclosure. Meanwhile, regulatory bodies are probing for legal structure concerning sustainability disclosure, since it usually is listed organizations that are subject to mandatory sustainability reporting in many countries as well as several stock exchanges. Furthermore, unlisted organizations often do not disclose information since senior management believes there is no request for it, or because they do not consider the organization having a duty to account for their social impact. Moreover, there are usually fewer stakeholder conflicts in unlisted organizations, reducing the importance of publicly available information. Nonetheless, stakeholders will be the core driving force of sustainability disclosure, for example, if a parent company is listed (Carmo et al, 2022).

However, many large sportswear organizations are listed on the stock exchange. Many stock exchanges and countries have implemented regulations or guidelines for listed organizations, for example, China and the EU. The regulations usually propose that listed companies are liable to disclose their environmental, and occasionally social impact to the public in a timely, accurate and complete manner. Furthermore, the EU has determined broader and tighter regulation requirements for organizations to report their double materiality, and the IFRS have announced the creation of new standards for organizations to follow (IFRS, 2021). Nevertheless, the possibly conflicting behavior of many stakeholders in a listed organization is considered a constraint on the strategy to accurately align the firm's behavior with the external environment (Cheng et al., 2015). Finally, newly listed organizations usually need to disclose more information to reduce skepticism and boost their confidence from shareholders (Uyar et al. 2013).

3. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This section describes the thesis' theoretical framework, where Legitimacy theory will be used in order to answer the research question.

3.1 Legitimacy Theory

Legitimacy theory is derived from organizational legitimacy, which is defined as “*a condition or status which exists when an entity's value system is congruent with the value system of the larger social system of which the entity is a part*” (Dowling and Pfeffer, 1975). Legitimacy theory states that organizations continuously try to ensure that they enact in accordance with societal boundaries and norms (Dewiyanti, S., 2021). Legitimacy theory can facilitate a managerial analysis of various strategies for the organization to remain legitimate. Legitimacy theory can be viewed as a form of stakeholder theory, adding conflict and friction to consider, and can be a tool to further explain specific practices in corporate organizations (O'Donovan, G., 2002).

To remain legitimate, organizations may confirm with, or attempt to alter social perceptions, expectations, or values in a legitimization process (Dowling and Pfeffer, 1975). Moreover, activities attempting to alter social perceptions need to be accompanied by disclosure. If not, the intended audience will be unaware of the company's efforts or aim, creating a legitimacy issue. Legitimacy is conferred by outsiders to the organization but may be controlled by the organization itself, indicating that deltas in social norms and values are a motivation source for organizational change (O'Donovan, G., 2002).

Figure 3

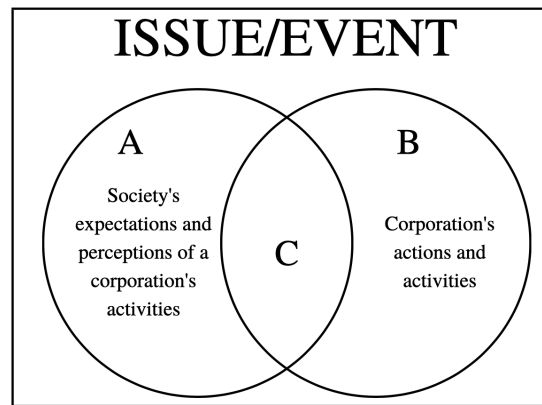


Figure 3: Legitimacy gap. Area C should be as large as possible to increase congruence (O'Donovan, 2002).

The illustration above explains the relationship between threats to an organization's current or potential legitimacy, stemming from an organization's association with a negative issue/event. Area C describes the congruence between organizational activity and societal expectations of the organization's activities. Areas A and B describe the incongruence between an organization's actions and society's perceptions of what these actions shall be. Area C should be as large as possible, to reduce the *legitimacy gap* (O'Donovan, G., 2002).

3.2 Theory Motivation and Contribution

To summarize, organizations are facing increasing demands from consumers to enact SBA, but remaining authentic whilst enacting is difficult. Hence, a focus on Legitimacy theory can be used to describe this interrelationship. The usage of Legitimacy theory becomes useful to capture the difficult position that organizations are situated in and to understand how organizations can seize opportunities without being perceived as woke washing. The choice of theory enables the incorporation of objective phenomena observed, whilst still capturing the subjectivism of the empirical evidence. Legitimacy Theory has been selected since it highlights why organizations want to enact SBA, which is important to understand in order to reach the aim of the study. Legitimacy theory also provides the opportunity to understand how organizations can navigate future actions.

This thesis contributes to theory by intertwining a separate theory within a new industry; the sportswear industry. Moreover, the study also contributes to theory since the aim of theory application in our study is not to understand how organizations can increase legitimacy, but rather to investigate how organizations can mitigate the risk of losing legitimacy. Finally, this thesis contributes to selected theories by not only analyzing previous events but using theory to develop considerations for organizations before enacting SBA.

3.3 Theory Criticism

Hamm et al. present criticism of Legitimacy theory. Firstly, defining legitimacy may be confusing, since there is a conflict regarding what actions by consumers or organizational members shall be interpreted as increasing or reducing legitimacy. Secondly, Hamm et al. argue that the purpose of legitimacy theory ought to do no good since it can hinder intellectual growth and diversity through manipulation. The underlying reason behind the argument seems to be the lack of conceptualization and definitions (Hamm et al., 2022). O'Donovan presents similar arguments as Hamm et al., highlighting that Legitimacy theory is relatively new and is still being developed, hence, the theory is not fully fledged. Finally, O'Donovan emphasizes how Legitimacy Theory is intertwined with other, similar theories, for example, institutional theory (O'Donovan, G., 2002).

4. METHODOLOGY

This section describes the methodology of the study and is divided into research design, data collection, data analysis, ethical considerations and implications, method criticism and reflexive considerations.

4.1 Research Design

In the following section, the choice of research design will be discussed, namely the abductive and qualitative approach, the subjective ontology and interpretive epistemology and the case study.

4.1.1 An Abductive and Qualitative Approach

The research design was a mono-method study, hence, one data collection method was used. Additionally, a cross-sectional study was conducted where the study depicted a certain phenomenon at a single point in time, enabling a more generalized study and ensuring that eventual bias is delimited. Data collection was made through a qualitative design, in an exploratory nature. The qualitative interview was conducted through semi-structured interviews, in accordance with the exploratory nature. An abductive research approach was selected, enabling the study to adapt to relevant findings along the process.

A qualitative method through semi-structured interviews was chosen since it delivered the best opportunities to gain insights contributing to the aim of the study, and due to the prior existence of quantitative research. Secondly, it creates coherence with the selected epistemological approach which will be discussed below. Thirdly, it facilitates an abductive approach due to the exploratory possibilities of a semi-structured interview. The abductive research approach was selected since the aim is neither to test theories nor to solely seek empirical evidence. Rather, the abductive approach enabled theory to adapt when discovering important findings from different perspectives of empirical evidence, as well as further collecting empirical material on the findings deemed relevant.

4.1.2 An Subjective Ontology & Interpretive Paradigm Study

This study has been conducted with a subjective ontology and an interpretive epistemology. The subjective ontology was chosen since it depicts the aim of the study through the analysis of social perceptions and interpretations, which are of significance to investigate why sportswear organizations navigate in a particular manner. Furthermore, the interpretive epistemological approach was selected since it enables an empirical collection of relevance to the aim of the study, as well as facilitating analysis and discussion surrounding the research topic.

4.1.3 Case Study; Company X

To ensure reasonable delimitations, a single, embedded case study was conducted on an organization within the sportswear industry. A single case was selected to enable a rich understanding of navigation in SBA, and the context in which navigation appears. Company X was selected for several reasons. Firstly, the organization is one of the world's largest sportswear organizations. Secondly, their impact on societies is likely to be larger than smaller or geographically limited organizations, increasing their relevance. Finally, the high existence of publicly available data increases the possibility for substantiation of results.

Nonetheless, substantiation of empirical evidence is of significance to enable rightfully drawn conclusions, hence, a decision to benchmark against other organizations was relevant. Benchmark Company 1, BC1, is an unlisted organization, while Benchmark Company 2, BC2, is a listed organization. The collection of material followed the same research design as the case study. Benchmarking enabled a further understanding of the industry, as well as exploration of different approaches undertaken by organizations, and finally substantiating the empirical evidence.

4.2 Data Collection

Nine interviews with different stakeholders and responsibilities within the sportswear industry were conducted. Seven respondents were employed at Company X, whilst two other interviewees were employed in respective benchmarking organizations. Obtaining interviews was harder than

anticipated. The process was initiated by sending emails to stakeholders at Company X who were expected to be relevant to our study (see Appendix 1). However, only three interviewees accepted an interview directly, whilst other respondents referred us to another person within the firm. Eventually, we received interviews with seven different employees at Company X who specialized in relevant areas (see Table 4.1). Nonetheless, the interview with the store employee will not be used in the study due to inapplicability and relevance for the research aim. Moreover, two interviews with smaller, yet established sportswear organizations were conducted and used in the study.

Table 4.1: Table of interviews from Company X

| Respondent: | Firm: | Role: |
|---------------|----------------------|--|
| R1 | Company X | International Sustainability Manager |
| R2 | Company X | International Social Media Manager |
| R3 | Company X | International Marketing Specialist |
| R4 | Company X | International Communication Specialist |
| R5 | Company X | PR & Brand Regional |
| R6 | Company X | Sponsored Athlete Regional |
| R7 | Company X | Store Employee in Sweden |

Table 4.2: Table of interviews from Benchmarks

| Respondent: | Firm: | Role: |
|-------------|-------------|---------------------------------|
| B1 | Benchmark 1 | CEO Scandinavia & Baltics |
| B2 | Benchmark 2 | Marketing Director Region North |

4.3 Interview Process

An interview guide was formed and used as the foundation for data collection (see Appendix 2). The interview guide was distributed before the interview, for respondents to feel prepared. However, due to the ability to host semi-structured interviews, some questions were added or removed depending on how a particular respondent answered or their specialization within a

particular field. Hence, adding or removing questions enabled the interviews to remain focused on the research topic and obtain as much empirical material as possible.

All interviews were held online through video meetings, ranging from 36 minutes to 1 hour, with a median of 52 minutes. Furthermore, some interviews were conducted in Swedish and have therefore been translated into English (see Appendix 3). Three respondents were contacted for further questions after their interview to retrieve a deeper understanding and accuracy.

4.4 Data Analysis

Empirical data has been transcribed and thus processed through voice and text analysis. After discussion surrounding the transcribed material, three themes were derived to cover relevant topics in the empirical material, namely the *relevance of SBA*, *publicly listed versus unlisted organizations*, and finally *communication and transparency*. Furthermore, each theme is accompanied by subthemes, presented in an overview in Table 4.3.

Table 4.3: Overview of the empirical material

| Themes: | Sub Themes: |
|---|--|
| Relevance of SBA | Sensitivity Circumstancing SBA |
| Publicly Listed Organizations vs Unlisted Organizations | Firm Ownership Structure and Firm Size |
| Communication and Transparency | Importance of Organizational Vision Communication of Authenticity Risk of Losing Customers |

The thematic analysis was identified by distinguishing patterns through coding, revision, and labeling categories of data. The authors thought a thematic presentation of the material would be most suitable as it will provide a well-structured approach highlighting interesting findings that will be useful to answer the research question.

4.5 Ethical Considerations

Ethical consideration has been of high priority, where the ethical issues highlighted by Saunders et al. have been considered. Data has also been collected in nonmaleficence with assured anonymity amongst sources, and in accordance with Stockholm School of Economics' regulations. The authors have carefully explained that the respondents may leave the interview or remove themselves from the study at any point in time, without further explanation required. Moreover, all respondents have consented and all other information received but not utilized has been erased and destroyed. After submission of the study, all information received will also be erased and destroyed.

4.6 Method Criticism

Criticism towards the selected research method is important to highlight. Firstly, it can be argued that a qualitative research method allows for potential biases in the interpretation of data and the loss of important information. To mitigate the risks of biases, all interviews have been recorded and transcribed, and then interpreted individually by the authors before discussion between the authors. Secondly, some would argue that a qualitative method solely delivers vague, subtle, and universal answers where little insight into the organization is gained. Nonetheless, mitigation through careful design of interview questions, as well as a semi-structured setting has occurred. Furthermore, the authors have contacted several respondents for clarifications, not only ensuring clear answers but also reducing the probability of biasedness.

4.6.1 Reflexive considerations

Before conducting the study, the authors themselves had some own taken-for-granted assumptions that are important to reflect upon, since they may have influenced the research of the thesis. The topic is social brand activism, where each individual usually has a personal opinion on how companies should act, and the authors are not an exception. The personal opinions regarding how companies shall behave most likely have affected the work, for instance, the interpretation of authenticity as something all companies strive for. This in turn could have affected the choice of interview questions and influenced the research. Furthermore, an underlying assumption relates to the common belief that organizations want to maximize their profit, and view SBA as a tool to

accomplish maximization of profit. Nonetheless, all human beings have implicit and explicit thoughts and considerations that might influence any research conducted.

5. EMPIRICS

A thematic presentation of empirical data is provided in three previously mentioned themes, derived to highlight interesting discoveries and understandings, which align with or contradict the theoretical framework. The empirical evidence aims to answer the thesis' research question and enrich existing literature.

5.1 Relevance of Social Brand Activism

This section illustrates how respective stakeholders reason around SBA, generating empirical evidence surrounding *why* organizations navigate in SBA.

5.1.1 Sensitivity Circumstancing Social Brand Activism

It is obvious that SBA is a sensitive topic. When approaching powerful stakeholders within Company X, some seemed to be reluctant to comment on their efforts. Nonetheless, SBA is becoming increasingly important for Company X to consider.

“Oh, activism is a big word. No, no I would not say that we talk about brand activism that much. We want to do good and stand up for our values but we do not really mark it as activism.” - R1

“I know it can be a bit sensitive to comment on sustainability if you are not in that department since we are such a large organization /.../ With so many teams that might not of course know everything from all teams”
-R5

“I think generally that the industry is more and more moving towards brand activism and I feel that athletes are more and more getting outspoken in certain topics.” -R2

Hence, it seems as if the underlying reason for their hesitation lies within the homogenous opinion that SBA is a progressively important topic, and any wrongdoings might punish the organization in the future.

5.2 Publicly Listed Organizations versus Unlisted Organizations

In the following section, a deeper investigation of the divergence between organizations' navigation processes will be conducted, generating empirical evidence surrounding *how* organizations navigate in SBA. Since Company X is publicly listed, a benchmark from an unlisted organization operating within the same industry, BC1, becomes relevant.

5.2.1 Firm Ownership Structure and Firm Size

Firstly, there seems to be a significant contrast in SBA efforts depending on firm ownership structure, namely if an organization is listed or unlisted. Furthermore, firm size also appears to be an affecting element.

“Since we are a listed company, we have so many stakeholders to make happy /... / We already have 18 initiatives across the whole region, and we are doing something in almost all European countries. It makes it hard to manage all efforts since our shareholders might not agree with all initiatives, and become upset /... / Which can damage us pretty hard.” -R4

“We are listed through our parent company, but that is so far away for us that we are not price sensitive or price affected that closely. That can normally make you more sensitive, and if we would have been listed hypothetically, we would have hesitated to make a decision to go out with certain things”. -B1

Moreover, Company X elaborates on their navigation strategy, along with the barriers associated with firm size when desiring to engage in SBA efforts.

“The general idea is that we want to build long-term good programs and not one-offs, so it always takes a bit longer. Also due to the size of [Company X], it takes longer since there are many teams to align with. A lot of internal work needs to be done, not saying that in 2 weeks we do this. If it's a program that should last longer, with a budget and wants to make a strong impact then it takes 6-9 months to build something good.” - R4

“We looked at what was happening already in terms of our internal teams and said that we want to focus on this area, which was women at the time. First, you need to spread the word /... / Then we need to find an external partner /... / Then we started to build a project. Through the external partner, we managed to find

100 women that we focused on and helped within leadership and project management and they had the mandate to make an impact within their working field in their organization.” -R1

Nevertheless, BC1 operated significantly differently in its navigation strategy, target group, and time frame.

“We choose to include everyone. In this market, there’s a lot of talk about delimiting your target group but then it suddenly becomes exclusive since they only target one or two groups. This exclusion becomes more obvious when you, as we in [Company name], choose to include everyone. /.../ It can take anything from hours to months, but many initiatives occur spontaneously” -B1

“It will be as it will be. We have a vision and we stand for it. If someone drops out, others will join for other reasons. This is nothing that anyone in senior management at [Company name] goes around brooding over.” -B1

“We have spoken out negatively about things Trump was doing which was a very fast decision, it took maybe a couple of days /... / And it was quite sensitive in the US to stand up to Trump during the time he was president.” - B1

These citations demonstrate the respective organization’s differences in navigation and agility towards efforts in SBA, along with shorter lead times for unlisted organizations compared to Company X. The lack of pressure from stakeholders seems to enable BC1 to engage in controversial and more novel topics due to their reception of extended autonomy to act quicker, compared to Company X who seemed to be vaguer in their SBA efforts.

5.3 Communication and Transparency

Since the significant difference in firm structure and navigation strategies has been established, an investigation regarding the communication of Company X’s vision is needed to understand the decision-making process regarding SBA. Furthermore, the importance of authenticity will be investigated, generating empirical evidence surrounding how organizations navigate in SBA *without* risking the occurrence of woke washing.

5.3.1 Importance of Organizational Vision

Senior management seems to display a keen interest in SBA. Several respondents exhibit strong visions for Company X and its social sustainability work. Evidence for long-term goals can be substantiated through annual reports, websites and is highlighted by respondents in management positions.

“The strategic business plan we have right now is running until 2025, where social sustainability is at its core and one of the core pillars. We have a strong vision for the organization we want to be. We want to be a pioneer in the topic and make a real difference. It is important to have goals that stretch far in the future /.. / I think at least 10 to 15 years. “ -R4

“[Company X] has a long history of policies that any employee can download to see what we do and what we don’t do, what we believe in and what we stand against.” -R2

“I definitely feel the pressure of thinking through what I post on social media, otherwise it will have consequences /.../ As you might know, [a famous person] recently lost a contract because of highly controversial statements /.../ That does not reflect the company’s values and visions. Some customers got very angry with [Company X] but [Company X] sticks to their vision at all times.” -R6

Visions provided by Company X are seemingly highly prioritized within the organization, and remedies for contradictory behavior occur. R1 elaborates on the four internal committees that Company X’s social sustainability team has developed, and their linkage back to the organizational vision.

“Since the beginning of the year, we have a global team that is looking more and more into what we want to do with our strategic priorities with our four communities. The four communities were chosen by top management based on [Company X’s] vision and aim, namely [R1 explaining Company X’s slogan].” -R1

Thus, alignment with organizational vision is of significance to avoid the discovery of discrepancies and, hence, receiving criticism of contradictory behavior from internal and external stakeholders.

5.3.2 Communication of Authenticity

According to several key stakeholders, authenticity in Company X's efforts is of significant importance to remain legitimate and trustworthy amongst consumers.

"10 years ago, companies got away with making big statements. However, society and our target customers have become more educated but also more critical, and therefore we need to make sure that we align with our vision which is [Company X explaining their slogan]." -R3

"I think the process of choosing efforts comes down to what are the things that we want to focus on and to our four communities. So what we do fits in these four communities and our vision, and to our overall strategy which is to make sports equal for all. " -R1

"We try to bring initiatives closer to the consumer through the touchpoints that we have, for example, social media where we use Twitter a lot. It also leads to customers understanding our brand and aim, which makes them more tolerant towards any potential mistakes or miscommunications." -R2

Prior to engagement in SBA, R4 highlights the importance of involvement with their legal department, to reduce the risk of being perceived as inauthentic or participating in woke washing. Furthermore, adaptation to demands from their sponsored athletes has been executed.

"There are different directions that are coming from global where they advise each team on how to talk about certain topics and if they can talk about it, and legal is very closely involved since we don't want to make claims or statements that are not true or could be misleading and be taken as greenwashing." -R4

"For example, we have an educational athlete program that is being scoped out where we bring key athletes together and showcase how an athlete can use their voice towards a matter that is important to them." -R3

The citations above indicate that although SBA efforts are usually controversial, Company X still prioritizes SBA efforts. Moreover, Company X places emphasis on navigating and balancing controversy with potentially being seen as woke washing.

5.3.3 Risk of Losing Customers

An important aspect to consider when deciding to engage in SBA is the risk of losing customers. Not all customers will agree with the organization's stands, which is a risk each company will have to face and tackle. When comparing Company X with the benchmarking companies, we could see a delta in their considerations regarding losing customers.

“We are still a bit hesitant with making controversial statements so it's happening but happening rarely /.../
For example we were having a campaign displaying [delicate female body parts] which was highly controversial internally and externally. Controversial statements are heavily being monitored and require a lot of approval processes from communication from the teams, so that's really something where we are very very careful to date.” -R1

“As I said before, it will be as it will be. We will lose some customers but we believe we gain more customers from taking a clear stand.” -B1

However, displaying organizational contribution to social sustainability also seems to depend upon external and internal traditions and values, as well as the geographical position of the organization.

“I work in a Japanese organization, operating in the same industry as Company X. In my organization, you are more reserved and even if you work on a lot of things /... / You don't communicate it externally to customers. Senior management doesn't want to lose face, since losing face in Japanese culture is very tough”.
-B2

These quotations signal the noticeable difference in carefulness amongst organizations, not only dependent upon firm ownership structure or size but also on the external environment and company culture.

6. ANALYSIS

The following section contains an analysis through the theoretical framework, Legitimacy theory, which is built upon the empirical evidence previously presented. The analysis aims to answer the research question, namely *“how do sportswear companies navigate SBA without risking the occurrence of woke washing?”* The analysis is conducted in accordance with the three themes derived from the empirical material.

6.1 SBA is Characterized by Prudence but Progressive Importance

Respondents from Company X seemed to exhibit cautious answers when touching upon the topic of SBA. There was a noticeable trend of referring to an employee with more extensive knowledge. A reason for referral to another employee can be found in the unfamiliarity regarding this new, emerging topic. Hence, this implies that stakeholders actually seem to rather reject interviews and remain silent, than deem it an opportunity to display their SBA efforts. The organization seems to think that they are simply referring to another employee to facilitate the best information, rather than seeing what is really going on, namely their carefulness around the topic. According to Legitimacy theory by Dowling and Pfeffer, legitimacy is conferred upon the organizations by externals. Therefore, the employees might have been frightened to reduce their individual, as well as organizational legitimacy by conducting an interview. Another reason for a referral might be the large size of Company X, making it difficult to ensure adequate education amongst all employees regarding SBA efforts. Hence, employees might be nervous that their answers will decrease the legitimacy of Company X by revealing the respective employee's lack of detailed knowledge.

Nonetheless, it is still evident that SBA is becoming progressively important within the whole industry, and the topic is being viewed in a new light. Company X highlights how an increasing number of their sponsored athletes are voicing their opinion on certain controversial topics, with a projected continuation of the behavior in the future. According to Legitimacy Theory, organizations continuously try to ensure that they carry out activities in accordance with societal boundaries and norms. Furthermore, O'Donovan highlights the importance of considering

congruence to maximize Area C (Figure 3). In this case, it can be advocated that Company X are sensing pressure from society, along with their sponsored athletes to begin enacting SBA. Hence, Company X feel that they are deemed to follow to remain legitimate or to potentially increase their existing legitimacy. Therefore, remaining legitimate can be lifted as a reason why Company X prioritizes SBA efforts and emphasizes its importance for their long-term strategy. However, Company X is engaging in actions that can be categorized as SBA efforts but has chosen to be careful when discussing their efforts.

6.1.1 Concluding Remark

SBA is a delicate topic where organizational members act with caution. However, SBA is crucial for organizations to adapt according to the societal demands for SBA efforts. Therefore, it is important that organizations do not suppress the external shift that is occurring, but rather consider their current navigation process and prioritize SBA efforts.

6.2 Differing Behaviors between Listed and Unlisted Organizations

A publicly listed organization faces strong demands regarding a continuous information flow, to ensure transparency for shareholders. Not only is it a strong demand, but a requirement by regulatory actors in numerous stock exchanges. Moreover, the contrasting demands from shareholders and stakeholders, as well as their increased quantity, are likely to have a higher delta compared to an unlisted organization. Therefore, the pressing demands from multiple stakeholders make it complicated for Company X to mitigate several demands simultaneously since the organization has a larger quantity of stakeholders who ought to observe them. Hence, according to Legitimacy Theory, it will be more complex for the organization to adapt to all societal boundaries and norms since there is a wider spread of stakeholders who possess the power to confer or retract their disposal of legitimacy.

Furthermore, the societal boundaries associated with a publicly listed organization differ from unlisted organizations due to the increased requirements of transparency from listed organizations.

The need for external disclosure limits the possibility to alter social perceptions in a radical or accelerated process since Company X needs to mitigate internal as well as external communication. Hence, Company X might not be able to announce a statement as fast or as controversial as competitors, meaning that society will deem it as “following the stream” or “giving in to external pressure”. Company X does have the option to rapidly or radically adjust to a societal norm. Nevertheless, it is likely to decrease congruence and Area C in the model by O’Donovan (Figure 3), since employees may suffer from information asymmetry or confusion. Furthermore, rapid SBA efforts can lead to the company being perceived as a more volatile stock, possibly leading to shareholders selling their ownership, or the removal of Company X in certain portfolios. Hence, the longer lead times can be viewed in a new light, namely that Company X simply cannot make rapid decisions to risk unstabilizing their equity.

Nevertheless, an unlisted organization is likely to be affected by internally developed societal norms to a higher degree since fewer members co-create the organizational norms, where the internal societal norms can differ significantly from external norms. Furthermore, Legitimacy Theory emphasizes the process of conferral. Therefore, it is important to assure that the internal and external cultures do not differ substantially, to ensure that initiatives are in accordance with the external demands. Moreover, a danger with less external pressure on an unlisted organization can be the lack of detection of external societal changes. Legitimacy theory explains how the external environment is a common force for change. However, a partly isolated environment can make the detection of changes complex, and complicate the possibility to take suitable actions. Hence, it is of key importance for an organization to carefully monitor the changes in SBA to sustain or increase legitimacy.

6.2.1 Concluding Remark

A listed organization usually faces demands from a larger quantity of stakeholders, resulting in longer lead times in SBA efforts compared to an unlisted organization. Furthermore, an unlisted organization does not have to consider regulatory or transparent requirements to the same extent, hence, the unlisted organization can engage in topics with higher controversy. Moreover, SBA

efforts are not automatically linked to rapid, emotional decisions, but can rather be processes where important consideration has occurred. Hence, consideration of legal and societal requirements and expectations is crucial for Company X to achieve authentic SBA efforts.

6.3 Communication and Transparency are Crucial for Success

Since the importance of firm ownership structure and firm size has been analyzed, further consideration of organizational visions, communication, and transparency is required to understand how sportswear organizations navigate SBA without risking the occurrence of woke washing.

6.3.1 Transparency Begins with the Organizational Vision

Company X seems to have clearly stated visions and goals within the organization, as well as regulatory systems to ensure that employees act accordingly. Otherwise, employees along with sponsored athletes will receive consequences. According to Legitimacy Theory, enforcing adequate consequences will increase the legitimacy of Company X, since it aligns the organization's operations with the external environment. Making a public statement, as Company X did, displays a transparent and clear standpoint which removes any confusion or doubts, thereby allowing consumers to confer additional legitimacy upon Company X. Hence, displaying their standpoint is not simply all that is going on, but rather Company X is aware of their potential benefits.

Nevertheless, the concretization of the vision seems to be lacking for Company X, or more precisely, the four selected communities entail a wide scope. Hence, topics with highly varying SBA characteristics could potentially fit within Company X's four communities. Furthermore, BC1 elaborated on their choice to include all societal groups, rather than targeting or segmenting specific groups. An eventual trade-off can be discovered, which can be further analyzed in a new light through Legitimacy theory. Firstly, both organizations might reduce their current legitimacy due to their wide visions, since the wide range of SBA efforts may dilute the intended purpose. Therefore, wide SBA efforts may confuse the intended audience, and the external environment

might doubt the sincerity of Company X. However, since Company X has decided to delimit their efforts, compared to BC1, Company X shall have mitigated the risk.

Nevertheless, the wide range of efforts can be viewed in another light, namely portraying organizations as inclusive and tolerant towards society in general. Thus, the external environment shall confer increased legitimacy upon the organization. According to this argument, BC1 would have a strategic advantage compared to the delimited vision of Company X. Moreover, the lack of concretization can be a strategy to mitigate conflicting stakeholders, thereby increasing Area C (Figure 3). Hence, the trade-off becomes important to acknowledge, yet difficult to manage.

6.3.1.1 Concluding Remark

The external pressure to adopt SBA efforts has led to wide organizational visions, encompassing many possible topics. However, it is important to acknowledge the existence of current efforts and their seemingly altruistic purpose. Furthermore, there is a trade-off between the width and depth of SBA efforts, which is important for sportswear companies to consider in their navigation process.

6.3.2 Substantiation of Visional Claims Result in Trust

Organizational transparency is deemed crucial for organizations enacting SBA. Company X requires their operations to be homogenous in communication and action, which shall continuously reflect its organizational vision. Furthermore, Company X displayed a previous, simultaneous, and future commitment to SBA, for example through annual reports and their website. Their disclosure can be viewed in a new light through Legitimacy Theory. Since Legitimacy Theory accentuates the importance of full disclosure, Company X enables their stakeholders to further understand how the organization works towards concretizing its vision, enabling an equal opportunity for internal as well as external stakeholders to understand their reasoning regarding SBA. Thus, when stakeholders develop an understanding regarding what Company X wants to achieve, legitimacy issues are mitigated or potentially removed according to

Legitimacy Theory. Furthermore, it also increases the congruence in O'Donovan's model (Figure 3), enlarging area C.

Other empirical evidence of substantiated legitimacy processes can be derived through Company X's involvement of their legal department when enacting SBA. Since SBA is not only a complex topic within society but also juridically, the involvement of the legal team signals dedication and expertise within SBA. Hence, Company X is viewed as more legitimate since they are conforming to societal norms, as well as managing legal regulations. It can also be viewed as an attempt from Company X to control the existing legitimacy conferred upon them, by displaying their adaptation to changes in the external environment whilst still mitigating demands by referring to legal constraints. Thus, consumers will still perceive Company X as legitimate, although their particular effort was not possible due to legal reasons.

However, Company X discusses their disclosure of quickly deciding to terminate a contract with their big profile, yet still facing criticism. What really happened amongst customers can be analyzed through Legitimacy Theory. The decision of termination was made quickly, meaning that some customers might not have followed along in the rapid decision process, creating confusion. When consumers did not fully understand the decision, they criticized the organization. There was a lack of understanding and transparency from the viewpoint of the consumers, which is important for Company X to consider in the future.

6.3.2.1 Concluding Remark

Organizations need to acknowledge the necessities of consumers and strike a balance between disclosure and timing to minimize the risk of being perceived as woke washing. Furthermore, substantiation of organizational claims through actions is of key importance to be perceived as engaging in authentic SBA efforts.

6.3.3 Organizations are Varyingly Apprehensive Towards Losing Customers

When examining respective companies' considerations regarding the risk of losing customers, there was a difference in attitude. Respondents from Company X declared how the organization is afraid to engage in topics deemed too controversial, fearing to create anger and lose valuable customers. Hence, Company X seems to actually be afraid of consumers invalidating their current legitimacy, and not only losing customers. Therefore, engagement in SBA efforts regarded as less controversial has been the adopted strategy. However, since the level of controversy in the external environment is progressively increasing, according to Legitimacy Theory, Company X should adopt a similar plan. Their current strategy might work in the present, but there is a risk that their strategy will contradict its current purpose, therethrough reducing legitimacy in the future.

Furthermore, BC1 declared their boldness when considering the risk of losing customers, where senior management rather deems SBA efforts as an opportunity to attract new customers or increase loyalty from existing customers. Once again, the previously discussed trade-off becomes relevant. Expressing their lack of interest in consumers whose values do not align with the organizational values might signal arrogance to the external environment, leading to reduced legitimacy. Hence, Company X would have a strategic advantage since its humbleness might be perceived as inclusiveness. However, BC1 might gain legitimacy since their disengagement from respective societal groups is viewed as authenticity and organizational integrity. Furthermore, B2 explains the importance of organizational culture and their primitive communication of SBA efforts, highlighting their risk-averse perspective on SBA efforts. Therefore, it is important for Company X to consider their current organizational personality traits, and whether they will be adequate to satisfy the external environment.

6.3.3.1 Concluding Remark

Organizations might deem a careful strategy where highly controversial topics are removed as a safe route toward success in SBA efforts. However, the external environment requires clear organizational standpoints and courage, which can be displayed through disassociation with undesired customer groups. However, disengagement can simultaneously be considered arrogant

behavior by customers who agree with the stance taken. Therefore, sportswear organizations need to consider which characteristics that shall determine their organizational communication in the future to ensure further legitimacy.

7. DISCUSSION

In the following section, an answer to the research question will be presented. Furthermore, a discussion of the strategic implications and limitations of the study along with suggestions for future research will take place. Finally, we highlight the importance of the study for management research.

7.1 Answer to the Research Question

The authors have conducted a qualitative study with a subjective ontology, along with an interpretive epistemology. Through the collection of data, the authors have analyzed the empirical material through the theoretical framework to receive a deeper understanding of the research topic. The empirical evidence was derived through a thematic process, and the analysis provided sub-conclusions that are essential to answer the research question. All collections of empirical documentation and analysis aim to provide the answer to the research question, namely:

“How do Sportswear Companies navigate social brand activism without risking the occurrence of woke washing?”

Firstly, sportswear companies navigate SBA with caution but seem to agree upon its progressing importance due to the crucial demands of society. Secondly, the navigation of SBA efforts depends upon firm ownership structure and firm size. A listed firm is likely to attempt to mitigate many societal demands simultaneously, whilst also having to consider regulatory requirements. Furthermore, a listed organization is likely to navigate slower whilst an unlisted organization is more likely to undertake rapid or radical SBA activities, without having to consider regulatory requirements to the same extent.

A common characteristic in navigation strategy seems to be the wide range of activities in which sportswear organizations engage. However, larger organizations are more likely to have narrowed down their SBA activities, compared to smaller sportswear organizations. Nonetheless, there is a trade-off between the width and depth of the organizational vision, where consumers are

increasingly demanding depth. Finally, organizations navigate without risking the occurrence of woke washing by trying to achieve a balance between the disclosure of information, timing, and execution of the activity. Execution in accordance with organizational vision is the key substantiator and reduces the likelihood of woke washing.

Nevertheless, the risk of losing valuable customers is handled with different approaches. Larger sportswear organizations adopt a discrete approach by navigating topics with low controversy. However, smaller organizations are likely to adopt a courageous approach where the benefits are perceived to be bigger than the negatives. Furthermore, involving legal experts enables substantiation of efforts or the mitigation of conflicting demands by referral to legal constraints.

7.2 Discussion and Strategic Implications

To receive a deeper understanding of the implications of the thesis, it is necessary to revise back to previously referred literature. Firstly, Vredenburg et al. mention their absence of analysis regarding the decision-making process of SBA as a necessary contribution to further deepen management research. Our study has examined an organization's decision-making process in detail, ranging from the initiation of activity to analysis after an effort has been executed. Bhagwat et al. identified a similar limitation in their research, requesting a further investigation of the decision-making process within the top management team. Our study centralized around the decision-making process of top management in some of the world's largest sportswear organizations, hence, enabling a new perspective to the execution of SBA efforts and enriching current literature.

Secondly, Carmo et al. suggested research of large, unlisted companies and their relationship to SBA disclosure. One of the benchmarking organizations in our study was a large, unlisted organization. Hence, the limitation that Carmo et al. mentioned has been filled through our study. Examining a large, unlisted organization was an essential contribution since its organizational culture usually does not allow for externals to gain insight into strategic operational decisions. The study also shed light on the differences in SBA disclosure depending on the geographical position of the organization. Furthermore, it is possible to link back to Vredenburg et al, who mentioned a

desire for research regarding if larger brands can achieve SBA efforts as effectively as smaller brands. Our study supplies a possible answer to this question, discovering that the answer seems to lie more within firm ownership structure and the associated formal decision-making processes, rather than firm size.

Thirdly, Atanga, Xue, et al. encourages field research regarding SBA efforts, to validate their findings. Since our study was conducted in a real-life setting, it enabled a new perspective regarding how large organizations reason around consumers and their expectations of SBA. Furthermore, our study investigates how organizations try to enable congruence between their communication, disclosure, and actions. Hence, our study complements the previous work by Atanga, Xue, et al. Moreover, this study confirmed the importance of perceived issue controversy in SBA activities. Nevertheless, little substantiation for perceived issue novelty could be discovered. It seems as though controversy has a significant impact on the navigation process of organizations, but there was little emphasis on the novelty of a topic when navigating SBA. Additionally, Atanga, Xue, et al. mention their absence of investigation regarding the perceived sincerity of firm motives. Our study enabled examination regarding firm motives by analyzing organizations from the inside, hence, contributing to management research. Furthermore, our study did not allow for a further understanding of the firm's motives, but rather how they choose to present their motives to the external environment.

Finally, the emerging importance of SBA in management research has been substantiated through our study. The thesis contributes to existing projections of its importance. However, our study highlighted that SBA efforts are seemingly more important than previously anticipated, hence, organizations need to shift further attention to SBA. Moreover, organizations need to consider a navigation strategy and its connection to their organizational vision. Therefore, this study is highly relevant to management research to provide clarifications, as well as possible actions that organizations can undertake to navigate social brand activism without risking the occurrence of woke washing.

7.3 Limitations of the Study

Limitations for the study are present and need to be acknowledged. First of all, an interpretive perspective has been used, and hence the empirical data is influenced by the author's interpretations. This could in turn result in biased material in the empirics since the authors have sifted the material regarding what shall be included or not. Moreover, Company X presented prudent answers, where many answers seemed formulated for marketing purposes. Nevertheless, the findings of the study are built upon the respondents in the study. It is important to consider that the respondent's answers could be biased depending on their position and expertise. Finally, only one interview with respective benchmarks was conducted, which is important to highlight since it may lead to a lack of dynamic perspectives in the study.

7.4 Suggestions for Further Research

This study has developed a generic answer to how sportswear companies navigate when choosing social brand activism topics without risking the occurrence of woke washing. A further contribution would be the conduction of a quantitative study, where it would be particularly enriching to investigate the internal and external communication of SBA. Conducting a KNN analysis could be a choice of research method, enabling observation of the frequency of SBA discussions, along with discovering which terminologies are usually associated with SBA. Hence, the result might align with our findings, but may also shed new light on how organizations view SBA.

Furthermore, the study was conducted within the sportswear industry. Nevertheless, other retail industries which may be characterized by struggles in the navigation of SBA, for example, the fast fashion industry, would be interesting to observe to substantiate or contradict our findings. There also seems to be a high demand from consumers, but also from organizations to develop research within the fast fashion industry. Moreover, a further exploration regarding the difference in SBA disclosure depending on geographical position, or organizational culture, would also enable new dimensions to SBA.

Finally, an interesting topic to explore would be a deeper study of the difference between listed versus unlisted organizations and their respective navigation processes, particularly in a quantitative setting. Furthermore, the abductive approach has limited the maximization of information retrieved from interviews, since realizations occurred whilst collecting empirical data, for example, the importance of firm ownership structure and geographical position. However, further research would add a dynamic to management research. Hence, a suggested method could for example be an OLS regression investigating correlations between SBA statements and stock price fluctuations.

8. CONCLUSION

The importance of SBA has led to sportswear organizations adapting different navigation strategies, aiming to contribute to society whilst not being perceived as conducting behavior equivalent to woke washing. Organizations still exhibit wariness around SBA but are slowly realizing its future importance. Firm ownership structure and size are eminently likely to affect the navigation process. Nevertheless, substantiation of efforts is crucial for all organizations, achieved through the execution of claimed efforts. This thesis has contributed to management research by intensifying the importance of SBA. Furthermore, the study has provided concrete elements for sportswear organizations to consider before engaging in SBA, viewed from a new perspective through Legitimacy Theory. In itself, the thesis has contributed to existing work by enriching research within what previously was faced by limitations, as well as substantiating several findings, mainly the importance of perceived issue controversy presented by Atanga, Xue, et al. Finally, the study has contributed to a deeper understanding of the decision-making process amongst top management regarding SBA efforts, and how sportswear organizations navigate social brand activism without risking the occurrence of woke washing.

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APPENDIX

Appendix 1: Email to potential interviewees

Dear [respondent name],

Our names are Lovisa and Miranda, and we are currently conducting our Bachelor's Thesis at Stockholm School of Economics where we are doing a study within the sportswear industry. Since you are working at [company name] and your company is of importance to the industry, we would love to have an interview with you!

Our research topic relates to social brand activism conducted by companies in the sportswear industry, and how companies can undertake such activities without risking being perceived as "woke washing", i.e. simply how companies remain legitimate during these practices.

We will of course ensure your anonymity, it is of high priority to us! We will also reach out to you closer to the interview explaining what kind of questions we are going to ask, for you to feel prepared.

Kind regards,

Miranda Sjöqvist | 25206@student.hhs.se | +46 70-650 47 71

Lovisa Bivstedt | 24982@student.hhs.se | +46 70-336 55 36

Appendix 2: Interview guide

Hi [respondent name],

As promised, we will ensure that you feel prepared for our interview. Therefore, we will now give you some more insights into our project.

The scope of our project is limited to social brand activism and social sustainability, within the sportswear industry. We have decided to exclude environmental and governmental actions within brand activism. To ensure that the project was feasible, we decided to conduct the thesis in a case study format. We are interested in observing how companies within the industry can take certain actions, without risking being perceived as inauthentic, i.e. "woke washing".

Our interview questions will therefore be circumstanced around this topic. If there is any question

that you feel uncomfortable with, we'll simply move on to the next question. We will most likely have follow-up questions to the topics down below, but here are a few examples of questions that will be asked;

Introductory questions

- Could you please briefly describe your role and responsibilities in [Company X]?
- What is your area of responsibility?

Social sustainability & brand activism

- According to [Company X], what does social brand activism stand for?
- How does the sportswear industry look overall regarding social brand activism?
- Does [Company X] use social brand activism as a strategy?

Communication

- Who are the decision makers in social brand activism at [Company X]?
- What does the process of choosing topics look like?
- How are the initiatives communicated internally?

Organizational culture

- Is the organizational culture top-down or bottom-up in terms of initiatives?
- Is there any intended discrepancy between internal and external culture to simplify communication towards customers?
- How do you work with symbolism to communicate internally and externally?

Strategy

- How does social brand activism play a role in your strategy? Short-term and/or long-term?
- When engaging in social brand activism, there is a big risk of losing customers. Do you consider that when/if engaging in social brand activism?
- Where do you draw the line for what to engage in?

Don't hesitate to reach out if anything is unclear!

Kind regards,

Miranda Sjöqvist | 25206@student.hhs.se | +46 70-650 47 71

Lovisa Bivstedt | 24982@student.hhs.se | +46 70-336 55 36

Appendix 3: Table of interviews

| Respondent | Time (minutes) | Date | Language * |
|------------|----------------|------------|------------|
| R1 | 60 | 2022-10-05 | English |
| R2 | 46 | 2022-10-10 | English |
| R3 | 52 | 2022-10-20 | English |
| R4 | 36 | 2022-10-21 | English |
| R5 | 55 | 2022-10-26 | Swedish |
| R6 | 40 | 2022-11-03 | Swedish |
| R7 | 40 | 2022-10-14 | Swedish |
| B1 | 60 | 2022-10-11 | Swedish |
| B2 | 54 | 2022-10-10 | English |

Average Value: 49 minutes

Median: 52 minutes

*Interviews held in Swedish were translated to English