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# the good the bad & the (un) woke.

**A STUDY ON WOKE WASHING  
ADVERTISING AND THE IMPACT ON  
PERCEIVED BRAND AUTHENTICITY**

**MSc Brand and Communications Management**

**Master's Thesis**

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**“Courage  
is what it takes to  
stand up and speak.  
Courage is also  
what it takes to sit  
down and listen.”**

Winston Churchill

# ABSTRACT

**Title** The Good, the Bad & the (un)Woke: A Study on Woke Washing Advertising and the Impact on Perceived Brand Authenticity

**Keywords** *brand social activism, woke washing advertising, perceived brand authenticity, woke communication*

**Background** Several researchers have covered consumers' quest for authenticity and brands that escape conventional commercial intentions by addressing social causes with activist messages. In a realm where brands have started to take a stand on societal issues, it is still yet to cover the sham side of this approaches and how it affects so desired brand authenticity.

**Objective** This study aims to understand how consumers identify woke washing advertising and the impacts of woke washing advertising on perceived brand authenticity. The thesis at hand contributes to the literature on brand social activism, woke washing advertising and brand authenticity within Brand and Communications.


**Research Design and Method** This thesis embraces a social constructivism standpoint and addresses the research questions with an inductive and qualitative approach. The data collected from ten semi-structured interviews allowed to gain a thorough understanding of the topics under study.

**Findings and Conclusion** Woke washing is socially constructed through social interactions, and it is perceived as inauthentic and phoney. This study presents six cues that make consumers identify woke washing advertising - incoherence, timing, storyline, shallow perspective, tone and branding. Being exposed to a woke washing advertisement makes consumer change their perception of brand authenticity, which can be impacted in two levels – inauthentic brand or inauthentic communication, based on their expectations and meanings attributed to a brand.

**Managerial Implications** Creatives and marketers can use these findings and the (un)Woke Advertising Canvas to avoid falling into woke washing by considering the six cues as critical aspects in identifying traces of woke washing in advertising and further protecting perceived brand authenticity.

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CHAPTER

01

introduction

“

**changing your  
logo to a  
rainbow ... is  
not enough”**

Maxime, Interview 1.



# 01 INTRODUCTION

We live in an era where taking a stand is vital to stand out (Holt, 2002). Consumers are no longer mere recipients of communication messages; instead, they are now constant participants in reinventing the meaning of brands while continuously in search for brands that escape the mainstream commercial intentions and with which they can develop a personal identification (Arnould & Thompson, 2005; Holt, 2004; Fournier & Alvarez, 2019). For that to happen, brands need to show that they are real and fight the ambivalence by standing for what they care about beyond the commercial intentions. In a realm where human rights and social justice worries are constantly scrutinised, brands emphasise their socio-political voice by taking a stand to show that they are woke. Being 'woke' stands for being "*aware of and actively attentive to important facts and issues (especially issues of racial and social justice)*" (Merriam-Webster, n.d.a). This opened-eyed perspective to societal matters can be part of an integrated and consistent effort of brand social activism or a reactive affirmation to the social environment surrounding a brand (Sarkar & Kotler, 2018). Brand activism has become an emanant topic in the marketing field. It can assume different forms, but, in its essence, this phenomenon emerges when a brand embraces the cause and, based on its core values, addresses societal, cultural, or environmental issues through its marketing and advertising channels (Moorman, 2020; Shetty, Venkataramaiah & Anand, 2019). Considering today's paradigm, in which the act of consumption has the same weight as a vote, the room for neutrality seems to be squeezed as consumers demand brands to act as citizen activists and to be part of the dialogue in social polemics and movements (Koch, 2020; Young, 2017). To comply with this, some brands adopt woke advertising as their new strategy to break up with a conservative corporation appearance and answer the thriving demand for wokeness, authenticity, and realism (Vrendenburg Kapitan, Spry & Kemper, 2020).

However, these approaches can frequently backfire. **Woke washing advertising** is the result of an obsession or immediacy to be woke in which there is a certain incoherence between brand message and practice (Vredenburg, Kapitan, Spry & Kemper, 2018). The concept emerged as an antonym for authentic and truthful brand social activism claims (Vrendenburg et al., 2020). From the well-known corporate names to the underground-trendy ones, brands have been often fiercely accused of woke washing when addressing gender inequality, racism, mental health,



LGBT+ and other social movements. In 2019, Gillette decided to reformulate the old motto ‘the best a man can get’ to ‘the best a man can be’, aiming to address toxic masculinity (Topping, Lyons & Weaver, 2019). The message went in the wrong direction, and consumers accused the brand of hypocrisy by pretending to be part of the #MeToo movement while benefiting from the so-called pink tax (Ritschel, 2019). A similar scenario was faced by the trendy brewer BrewDog when relaunching the best-seller Blue IPA to Pink IPA – ‘a beer for girls’ with a discount that represented the average gender pay gap, but it was perceived as a mansplaining message (Sweney, 2018). One could think that Nike’s campaign featuring Colin Kaepernick or the Pepsi callout to the anti-racism protests would be isolated examples, but in the past few years, a plethora of woke washing cases have been settling a battle between ‘to be’ or ‘pretend to be’ (Jones, 2019; Vredenburg et al., 2020). However, the concept seems to be highly subjective and full of grey tones. This line of thoughts raises the question if it is worthy for brands to gamble on social activism marketing while hoping to be on the right side of the limbo.

Holt (2002) affirmed that “*authenticity is becoming an endangered species*” (p.86), yet it seems that the same concern applies today. The side-effects of woke washing advertising cases are believed to be hijacking efforts to build authenticity in a natural, honest, and original way (Vredenburg et al., 2020). **Brand authenticity** is described in its most simplistic form as “*being true*” (Mourald, Raggio & Folse, 2016, p.422). The concept has been studied in multiple contexts and industries, including advertisements (Beverland, Lindgreen & Vink, 2008). The researchers found that advertising can effectively reinforce and communicate authenticity when cues for authenticity are present in the advertising (Beverland et al., 2008). Although consumers can recognise authenticity in some brand activism advertisements, they confess that more and more brands are now using societal issues as a marketing artifice for sales purposes (Edelman, 2019). Consumers seem to be increasingly sceptical in differentiating whether brands are ‘real’ or ‘fake’, and the same applies to what brands communicate (Napoli, Dickinson, Beverland & Farrelly, 2014).

Several studies in recent years have tackled the concepts of brand social activism advertising and perceived brand authenticity. However, fewer are the studies that build the bridge between the two topics and approach the sham side of these strategies. Although an advertisement piece runs through many hands before reaching consumers, they seem to be the first to notice signs of marketing phoney. In a realm where brands strive to transmit brand authenticity through varied

forms of advertising and claim to be woke by showing their support to some societal issues, it is still left to study how consumers identify woke washing advertising and what is the impact on the perception of authentic brands when their message goes wrong.

### 1.1. RESEARCH PURPOSE STATEMENT

Consumers' demand for brands that take a stand as involved parties in society proves the imperativeness of gaining further knowledge on how to do it correctly and avoid any forms of backlash. To a vast extent, literature has been published about brand authenticity and its connection to different branding concepts (Schallehn, Burmann & Riley, 2014; Napoli et al., 2014; Fritz et al., 2017). However, qualitative analyses of this phenomenon are still considerably sparse, considering the depth of the field. On the other hand, there is also considerable knowledge about consumer perceptions and behaviour towards brand activism (Manfredi-Sánchez, 2019; Moorman, 2020; Shetty et al., 2019). However, within this field, the concept of woke washing has emerged relatively recently and, to the best of present knowledge, research on its connection to brand authenticity from a consumer point of view is still inexistent.

The reason why the topics under study are highly relevant in the present context is twofold; firstly, within brand social activism, woke washing advertising brings newness to previous research developed in academia and requests further understanding. This seems to be especially relevant in an increasingly countercultural realm where resistance to a culture enforced by corporate brands is now seen as a part of the prevailing consumer culture; and where brands that dare to target contradictions in society inspire and stimulate consumer's identity (Arnould & Thompson, 2005; Holt, 2004). Secondly, it seems crucial to explore the connection between woke washing and perceived brand authenticity as a contemporary fallback of advertising campaigns, to develop best practices for brands when addressing social issues.

Based on this background, the research purpose statement of this thesis is:

**To understand how consumers identify woke washing advertising and the impacts in perceived brand authenticity after being exposed to forms of woke washing advertising.**

This twofold research purpose statement develops into the following research questions:

**RQ1** | How do consumers identify woke washing advertisements?

**RQ2** | What is the impact of woke washing advertising on perceived brand authenticity?

## 1.2. DELIMITATIONS

This thesis delimits the concept of brand social activism to the spheres of social, political and economic problematics (Sarkar & Kotler, 2018), leaving aside environmental causes that say respect to the concept of greenwashing. As the focus of the study is on woke washing, which is related to social issues and matters of race and ethnicity, traces of activism related to other causes will be excluded. The study is also delimited to participants who say to be woke consumers and belong to Gen Z and Millennial cohorts, due to higher demand among these generations for purpose-driven brands that live up to their promises (Pankowski, 2020). Lastly, this study will focus on a European perspective, as it is acknowledged that forms of meaning of the topics under investigation may vary according to geographical culture and behaviour.

## 1.3. STRUCTURE OF THE THESIS

The thesis structure is briefly outlined here to provide an overview of the chapters and their contribution to this study's aim. [Figure 1](#) provides a visual representation of the structure.

**Chapter 1. Introduction** presents the topic under study and the underlying interest that led to the chosen research purpose statement. Thereafter, the scope and delimitations of the research are defined and explained to demarcate boundaries.

**Chapter 2. Philosophical Statement** states the theoretical school of thought that shapes the cognition that underlies this study. This section discusses social constructivism and inductive reasoning, which will guide the research project as a structural pillar.

**Chapter 3. Theoretical Framework** presents a synthesis discussion of previous literature in the field that can provide a base of understanding as a point of departure to guide the research project. Therefore, this chapter is divided into three main subsections: brand authenticity, social activism and woke washing advertising.

**Chapter 4. Methodology** encompasses the methodological approach that aims to help answer the research question. According to the philosophical point of view and the study's objectives, it will be explained the choice of using a qualitative methodology and the intent to conduct semi-structured interviews, including a detailed approach to data collection and sampling process.

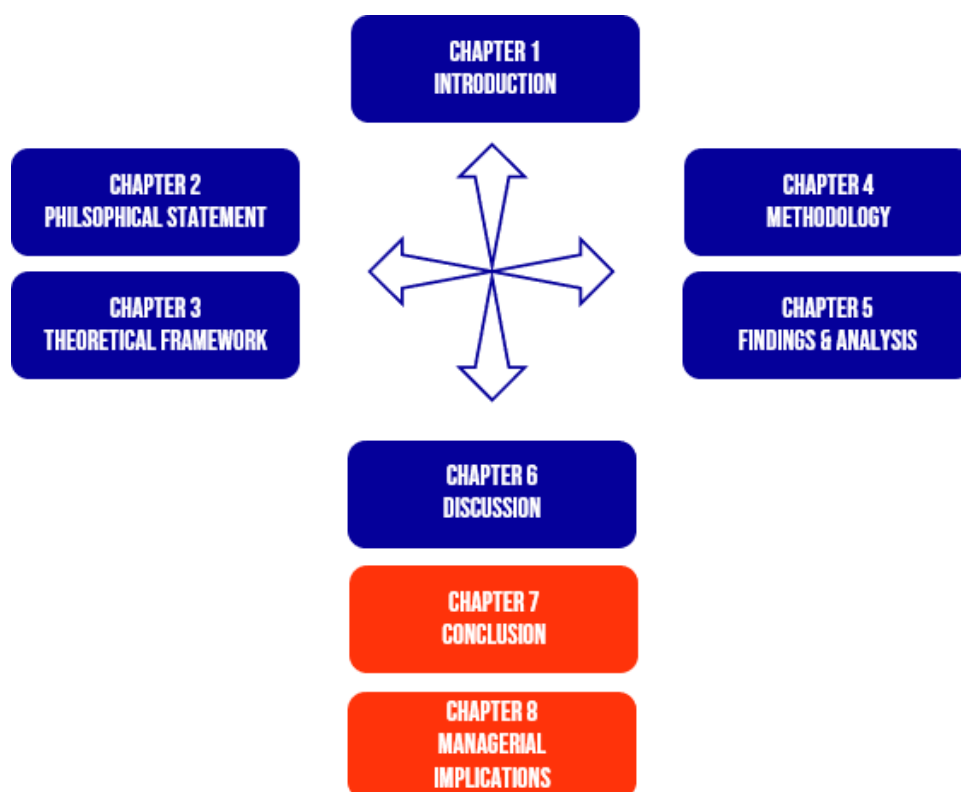


**Chapter 5. Findings & Analysis** assesses, interprets, and analyses insights with a focus on narratives that were obtained through the semi-structured interviews. For clarity, the thematic narrative analysis will include data preparation, immersion, coding, theming, and interpretation.

**Chapter 6. Discussion** elaborates on the overarching findings derived from the previous process and combines them in a discussion containing theoretical contributions. The main objective of this section is to provide leading arguments that can answer the research questions.

**Chapter 7. Conclusion** aims to answer the research questions and present overarching conclusions of this study. Furthermore, it encompasses the limitations of the findings and research project and includes suggestions for future research.

**Chapter 8. Managerial Implications** provides suggestions of how brands can better avoid falling into woke washing advertising and how they should protect perceived brand authenticity. Further, it is presented the (un)Woke Advertising Canvas as a tool to create woke advertisements and avoid being perceived as woke washing advertising.



**FIGURE 1.** Structure of the thesis. Own production.



CHAPTER

# 02

## philosophical statement

“

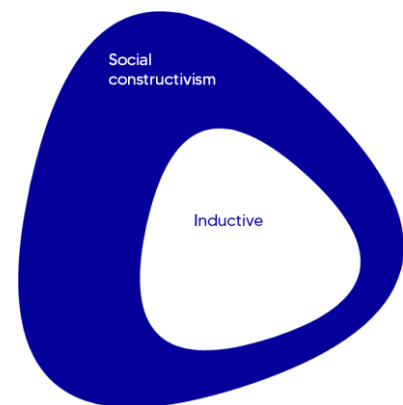
**a lot of brands  
... are getting  
a part of the  
conversation”**

Amelia, Interview 2



# 02 PHILOSOPHICAL STATEMENT

To ground this thesis in reliable and cohesive methods to generate knowledge, it is crucial to state the philosophical perspective that guides the process. It provides a basic understanding of the world and the basic view of cognition on which a theory is based (Justesen & Mik-Meyer, 2012). The philosophy of science and the approach to theory development are the first two layers of what Saunders, Thornhill & Lewis (2019) call the research onion (Figure 2). Therefore, this chapter will shed light on a comprehensive statement of the philosophical perspective and reasoning that underlies this paper. As the aim of this research is to uncover how consumers identify woke washing advertising and its impact on perceived brand authenticity, social constructivism is the most relevant and intertwined philosophical approach, both in connection to the assumptions driven by the existing body of knowledge and to the envisioned outcome of this thesis.



**FIGURE 2.** Philosophical layers of the Research Onion. Own production, inspired by Saunders et al. (2019).

## 2.1. SOCIAL CONSTRUCTIVISM

The underlying cognition of social constructivism is embedded in the idea that reality is constructed through meaning attributions and social agreements that result from social interactions (Burr, 2015). In other words, we build knowledge to understand the world, and knowledge is a product of the human mind. Further, it is co-constructed with other social actors through experiences, interactions and perceptions. Symbolic interactionism is core to this philosophical approach because *“people construct and negotiate identities for themselves and others through their everyday social interactions with each other”* (Burr, 2015, p.222).

The social constructivist paradigm defends that reality is rooted in three main pillars: communicating, interpreting and legitimating, and acting (Pfadenhauer & Knoblauch, 2018). First, communicating enforces language as the utmost *“system of socially shared symbolic meanings”* (Burr, 2015, p.222) in human society and a core tool to understand reality (Berger & Luckmann,



1967). Even though language can only depict reality as a metaphorical artifice, it is believed that reality gains meaning through social constructions expressed via communication and narratives; therefore, language is the vehicle that allows us to construct the world (Holm, 2018). Second, interpreting and legitimating refers to the idea that the process of interpretation and creation of meanings is conducted based on relevancy and knowledge as to be assessed according to judgements and valuations (Pfadenhauer & Knoblauch, 2018). This means that knowledge is interpreted and legitimised by others who “*define, categorise, measure, compare, value and evaluate situations, actions and institutions*” (Pfadenhauer & Knoblauch, 2018, p.53) according to the social context. Third, acting rests on the point that “*social reality always originates in meaningful human actions*” (Berger & Luckmann, 1967, p.222). Social actions and interactions are the ground base to raise and disclose knowledge that will afterwards influence other social actions, and for that reason, social interactions are inseparable from the concept of social constructivism (Pfadenhauer & Knoblauch, 2018).

Social constructivism is time and place situated because the value of social interactions is embedded in the culture and social-economic idiosyncrasies and the power relations that surround the actors (Burr, 2015). Once these conditions change, social knowledge will also be reviewed and transformed. The same is assumed to apply to social justice and equality matters, as the meaning of these phenomena fluxes according to the specific time and space in which people interact. This philosophical paradigm stands for understanding a plurality of worldviews, and critical pursues “*how and why certain constructions come into being*” (Burr, 2015, p. 223) and what lies behind these meaning attributions. Once more, it reflects the best fit for this study because it is assumed that woke washing and brand authenticity are a product of social constructivism.

To better frame the stand for this philosophical approach, it is highly relevant to present the assumptions on the nature of reality in which knowledge is constructed and the nature of that knowledge.

## 2.2. ONTOLOGY

The ontological standpoint for social constructivism lies in the notion that the judgment of reality is based on subjective interpretations, hence the relativistic character. Reality is constructed by social interactions where social actors exchange perceptions and subjective opinions in a specific

context (Saunders et al., 2019). Despite existing per se, the value of reality resides solely in the meaningful attributions developed through social interactions (Egholm, 2014). The subjective facet comprehends the interest in varied opinions and forms of meaning amongst the different social actors, leading to complex interpretations rather than narrowed views that fit specific categories (Saunders et al., 2019; Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Thus, the focus is not on the nature of phenomena but on how it is created in a given context (Egholm, 2014). Consumer's different views of the world and narratives condition their perceptions and interpretations of perceived brand authenticity and woke washing. This emphasises that social reality is continuously submitted to revision because social interactions are a repeated process. Therefore, it is relevant for this research to comprehend the socio-cultural contexts and respect the focus on how it is constructed in tandem with them (Egholm, 2014; Saunders et al., 2019; Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 2011). Consequently, this ontological lens views brand authenticity and woke washing advertising as social constructs whose meaningful existence derives from interactions between consumers, brands, advertising, and the social environment.

### 2.3. EPISTEMOLOGY

The epistemological approach is rooted in assumptions that assess the knowledge contribution of this research (Saunders et al., 2019). Social constructivism's epistemological position is that knowledge is relativistic and changeable. Therefore, the research approach must focus on narratives, perceptions and interpretations to understand and make meaning of social constructs (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Constructs such as brands, authenticity, or woke washing would not be meaningful without the social interactions that assign meaning to them; thus, this research also seeks to shed light on how these constructs emerge and the social process behind them. Therefore, the epicentre of this research is based on language and symbolic meanings, which are common tools used during social interactions (Burr, 2015; Egholm, 2014).

The researcher aims to create a sense of the meanings others have about reality, yet it is recognised that the researcher's system of beliefs can shape the interpretation process (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). To avoid an exacerbated extent of personal bias, the research and leading analysis will be guided by best practices that ensure the quality of the study. Moreover, as social constructivism renounces the idea of one single explanation of phenomena, there are concerns about entering relativistic vertigo where the question 'what is knowledge?' will never be answered. The vital aspect to keep in mind here is that there can be "*potentially as many different*

*versions of events and things as there are people in the world*” (Burr, 2015, p. 223). Ergo, this research aims to understand the formation process of these constructs in a specific social context and contribute to the existing body of knowledge in these matters, rather than finding absolute knowledge. This also supports the importance of developing a theoretical framework to avoid hyper-relativism and adopt an inductive analysis process that reflects on the findings in parallel with theories and constructs in existent literature.

For these reasons, this thesis stands for social constructivism as the philosophical approach that composes the ultimate ground base for the researcher’s work. Reality is seen as constructed through social processes and interactions based on language and symbolic meanings negotiated in social-economical and historical contexts. In this sense, the constructs of woke washing and perceived brand authenticity are believed to be co-constructed outcomes of human actions and social processes.

## 2.4. INDUCTIVE REASONING

Following social constructivism, the aim of this thesis is better aligned with an inductive approach to knowledge building due to the intention of generating meaning and unpacking social constructs such as woke washing and perceived brand authenticity. Rather than aiming to present a hypothesis and anticipate, predict, and control the phenomenon, the purpose of this research is to dive into a specific context and conclude with general insights to provide theory about a phenomenon (Saunders et al., 2019). With inductive reasoning, the arguments of a research study are made up of premises and conclusions, and the gap between them is filled by an inferential link (Saunders et al., 2019). This means that the conclusion derives and is supported on the outcomes of the empirical observations (Saunders et al., 2019). As opposed to deductive reasoning, an inductive approach benefits from understanding how humans make meaning of social reality, which is deemed a strength in social sciences (Saunders et al., 2019). The basic logic behind this approach implies that the primary purpose is not to test arguments but rather to better understand a construct without the limitations of predictions (Leavy, 2017).

Inductive reasoning is profoundly connected to research on contexts in which phenomena or events take place, involving specific social, economic, and historical circumstances (Saunders et al., 2019). Hence, the alignment with the social constructivism research philosophy. These aspects do not allow broader generalisations due to being time and place-specific and investigated on a



smaller scale, and any generalisation can only be made from the specific to the general (Saunders et al., 2019).

The researcher's inductive work starts by understanding the phenomenon and afterwards leads to creating a framework or theory (Saunders et al., 2019). This aspect brings the possibility of unpacking alternatives in how knowledge is socially constructed that the researcher has not contemplated at first stance (Leavy, 2017). Nonetheless, academia emphasises the importance of possessing a comprehensive body of knowledge within the field to avoid entering a loop of ambivalence (Saunders et al., 2019). For this reason, it is deemed crucial for this research to assume a moderated degree of inductive logic and benefit from a primary body of knowledge to provide initial guidance.

CHAPTER

03

theoretical  
framework

“

**words are really  
beautiful, but  
they don't show  
commitment”**

Miguel, Interview 3



# 03 THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Placing side by side the three concepts that underly this study - brand authenticity, social activism and woke washing advertising, seems to be incredibly relevant not only for the purpose of this thesis but also to understand the world outside. Authenticity has been for long a characteristic that individuals seek in their lives and the world surrounding them (Grayson & Martinec, 2004); ergo, the same applies to brands and their communication. It seems logical that when brands express their social activist stances and advertise an activist messaging, they should do it authentically. However, the recent rise of the term woke washing advertising in society has proven the relevance to understand authenticity in brand social activism advertising or the lack of it in a new light.

This chapter will present the theoretical body of knowledge that supports the initial stage of this thesis, and it will outset the understanding of brand authenticity, brand social activism and woke washing advertising. Research on existing literature that comprehends these concepts allows acquiring insights of great importance that can guide and support the process of the study. The choice of literature aims to discuss relevant theories and models. In the last section, a self-developed theoretical model will be presented to visualise the existent body of knowledge surrounding the study.

## 3.1. BRAND AUTHENTICITY

Authenticity is said to be one of the buzzwords of this decade (Becker, Wiegand & Reinartz, 2019). Understanding authenticity seems to be relatively straightforward, yet its definition has been a stage for diverse interpretations throughout history due to different philosophical standpoints, contexts, and relevancy for people. The philosophers Heidegger and Sartre firstly approached authenticity as being intimately connected with moral behaviour where individuals are said to be authentic if they are “(..) *sincere, assume responsibility for their actions and make explicit value-based choices*” (Fritz et al., 2017, p.326). Later, authenticity was considered an intrinsic quality of museum objects with history and heritage that only experts could evaluate (Trilling, 1972 in Morhart, Malär, Guèvremont, Girardin & Grohmann, 2015). More recently, authenticity was deemed crucial to the post-modern consumer in a countercultural reality where brands are often

perceived as hallow despite being quasi-omnipresent (Holt, 2002; Young, 2017). Authenticity then became a multidimensional construct. Brands responded to the consumers' quest and started to see authenticity as the antidote for this dominant faithless and a tool for positioning (Grayson & Martinec, 2004; Holt, 2002). The countereffect is that authenticity has allegedly slowly become a catchall word that increases the scepticism amongst consumers and marketers (Becker et al., 2019). Authenticity is now a complex jigsaw, to the point that *"when it comes to the modern search for authenticity, the irony is that the only way to find what we are really after might be to stop looking"* (Potter, 2010, p. 271).

In an endeavour to understand the contemporary meaning of authenticity to consumers, scholars have studied the concept of brand authenticity in a plethora of different markets, such as tourism attractions (Grayson & Martinec, 2004), consumption subcultures (Leigh, Peters & Shelton, 2006), luxury wines (Beverland, 2006), advertisements (Beverland et al., 2008), fast-moving consumer goods (Dwivedi & McDonald, 2018).

The following sections seek to shed light on the conceptualisation of authenticity and outline the current understanding of brand authenticity. Moreover, calling something authentic does not make it so; therefore, it is relevant to outline brand authenticity cues and dimensions and further understand why consumers search for authentic brands.

### 3.1.1. PERSPECTIVES ON AUTHENTICITY

Authenticity is generally associated with the words 'realness', 'truthfulness' and 'genuineness' (Grayson & Martinec, 2004; Morhart et al., 2015). However, this basic understanding leaves much more to explain and does not entirely depict the concept of authenticity. Despite the relevance for academia, researchers' definition of brand authenticity is still fragmented according to their philosophical views of the concept (Morhart et al., 2015).

The objectivistic perspective defines authenticity as a quality of an object whose evaluation is based on indexical authenticity (Morhart et al., 2015). Hence, the objective lens assigns authenticity to a brand according to verifiable aspects, namely history, origin and performance, leaving no space for interpretation (Morhart et al., 2015). The existential perspective sets the contrast by affirming authenticity as inherent to an individual's self-identity (Morhart et al., 2015). When framed in a marketing context, a brand is perceived as authentic if it helps consumers to discover their true selves (Morhart et al., 2015); therefore, it is closer to a psychological process.



The constructivist perspective sees authenticity as a social or personal construct determined by consumers' interpretations, meaning formations, knowledge, and interests (Morhart et al., 2015; Oh, Prado, Korelo, & Frizzo, 2019). Constructs do not have one sole definition or two opposite poles, such as authentic or inauthentic, because their subjective nature allows an array of attributions (Leigh et al., 2006). Following the subjectivistic character, it is believed that authenticity, as a socially constructed phenomenon, is linked to expectations (Carroll & Wheaton, 2009 in Fritz et al., 2017). Within the branding context, for brands to be perceived as authentic, they must comply with consumers' mental frames of what is to be authentic (Grayson & Martinec, 2004).

The definition of authenticity is still contested and negotiated amongst scholars, but based on the interplay between the above-mentioned perspectives, authenticity can be described as being genuine, transparent, and true to oneself and others. Considering the social constructivist stance of this thesis, it is still relevant to reinforce the assumption that authenticity is subjective and social constructed.

### 3.1.2. WHAT IS PERCEIVED BRAND AUTHENTICITY?

For as long as the concept of authenticity is a matter of discussion, the definition of brand authenticity will be quite volatile according to the scholars' point of view. Perceived brand authenticity *"emerges to the extent to which consumers perceive a brand to be faithful and true toward itself and its consumers, and to support consumers being true to themselves"* (Morhart et al., 2015, p.202). Despite the different conceptualisations, as presented in [Table 1](#), there seems to be a common notion that to be authentic. To be so a brand has to, first and foremost, be intrinsically driven, eagerly passionate and consistent about what it does and its organisational values, rather than being blindly motivated by commercial outputs (Mourald et al., 2016). Nonetheless, consumers evaluations of brand authenticity may differ based on the mediation of the meanings attributed to a brand (Pattuglia & Mingione, 2018). Consumers co-create perceived brand authenticity based on their own interpretation of genuineness, realness and truth (Beverland & Farrelly, 2010). However, as a time and space-specific social construct, perceived brand authenticity is also dynamic and ever-shifting because it is based on social negotiations and abstract impressions (Leigh et al., 2006; Morhart et al., 2015).

| AUTHORS                   | CONCEPTUALIZATION  | CONTEXT                 |
|---------------------------|--|-------------------------|
| Grayson & Martinec (2004) | Authenticity is based on terms of indexical and iconic authenticity.   | Tourism attractions     |
| Beverland (2006)          | The brand authenticity in luxury wines is judge based on heritage, pedigree, stylistic consistency, quality commitments, relationship to place, method of production and downplaying commercial considerations.              | Luxury wines            |
| Leigh et al. (2006)       | Brand authenticity is a three-folded concept that involves constructive, objective and existential elements.   | Consumption subcultures |
| Beverland (2008)          | Consumers perception of brand authenticity is divided into pure, approximate, and moral authenticity and their judgment is based on indexical or iconic cues.  | Beer advertisements     |
| Bruhn et al. (2012)       | Brand authenticity relies on a brand's continuity, originality, reliability, and naturalness   | Various brands          |
| Morhart et al. (2015)     | A brand is authentic when is faithful and true to itself and its customers and supports consumers authentic identity projects. Brand authenticity is perceived in terms of continuity, credibility, integrity and symbolism. | Various brands          |
| Dwivedi & McDonald (2018) | Consumers perceive authenticity in brands that have a clear philosophy, have a sense of what they stand for, live up to promises and are true to themselves.   | FMCG                    |

**TABLE 1.** Brand authenticity conceptualizations. Own production.

Although the conceptualisation of brand authenticity might differ according to the context, four dimensions are believed to be core to a broader set of markets and contexts (Morhart et al., 2015). First, **continuity** says respect to the timeless nature of a brand and its ability to prevail with a clear and steady vision and values (Bruhn et al., 2012; Morhart et al., 2015). Thus, continuity resonates both with keeping a consistent alignment between identity, vision, values and practices (Schallehn et al., 2014) and being historical and stable to prevail in the future contexts (Morhart et al., 2015).

**Credibility** relates to a brand's trustworthiness and its ability to commit to keeping its promises and fulfil them (Morhart et al., 2015). This dimension is in line with reliability (Schallehn et al., 2014), brand transparency and honesty about a brand's promise (Morhart et al., 2015). Moreover, in Morhart et al.'s (2015) research, a brand is credible and consequently authentic when it does not break when consumers need it and does not betray them.

**Integrity** is based on virtue, reflected in the intentions, passion and values a brand communicates (Morhart et al., 2015). Accordingly, Beverland & Farrelly (2010) argue that virtuousness and integrity are the quality of being honest and guide behaviours according to moral principles. Therefore, integrity embedded in acting ethically and being correct (Morhart et al., 2015).

**Symbolism** refers to when a brand's values are a reflex of the values consumers believe are essential to themselves (Morhart et al., 2015). In other words, it is linked to contributions for consumers' self-identity projects and the quality of delivering value. Consequently, an authentic brand based on symbolism is the one that works as a resource or a source of inspiration for

consumers when creating their identities (Morhart et al., 2015). This is also attested by Beverland & Farrelly (2010) in regard to existing a connection benefit when brands are perceived authentic, which can be related to a brand-self connection associated with brand attachment (Park et al., 2010 in Morhart et al., 2015). Oh et al. (2019) also analysed this connection between the self and brand authenticity, and both studies see brand attachment and brand connections as a consequence of perceiving a brand as authentic.

Thus, brand authenticity is derived from consumers' subjective projections and constructions of a brand and shaped by a brand's marketing efforts and communications (Morhart et al., 2015). The authors also argued that brands are perceived as authentic to the extent they fulfil these four dimensions (Morhart et al., 2015). From a critical point of view, it is important to denote that although these four dimensions have been used further in academia and can be generalised to different brand context due to posterior quantitative research, it is acknowledged the subjective nature of consumers' perception of a brand; thus, every context is unique.

### 3.1.3. WHAT DO AUTHENTICITY CUES MEAN IN THE BRANDING CONTEXT?

Following the perspectives and dimensions in which brand authenticity is assumed to be grounded, the complementary work of Grayson & Martinec (2004) and Morhart et al. (2015) pointed three different types of cues that lead to the formation of perceived authenticity. In marketing and communication, it is deemed essential to understanding how the authenticity cues are conceptualised in the branding context.

**Indexical cues** are evidence-based and consequently related to verification and trustworthiness, which legitimises what is real and what is a copy (Grayson & Martinec, 2004). In the branding context, indexical cues for brand authenticity can be based on, for example, history, origin, production methods or ingredients (Morhart et al., 2015). Morhart et al. (2015) also refer that these cues are transmitted through brand behaviour, where ethical brand scandals can be considered misconduct (Gilmore & Pine, 2007 in Morhart et al., 2015).

**Iconic cues** refer to the qualities of an object that match with a person's mental projection of how it should look like; hence there is a subjective character that includes feelings and emotions in these sensory interpretations (Fritz et al., 2017; Morhart et al., 2015). Brand authenticity is suggested by iconic cues when referring to marketing and promotional aspects, namely advertising, image, design, and communication style (Leigh et al., 2006; Morhart et al., 2015).

Moreover, the influence of iconic cues on perceived brand authenticity is moderated by consumer's scepticism to marketing approaches (Morhart et al., 2015).

**Existential cues** express the notion of the inner self; thus, they are said to be self-referential because they contribute to constructing one's identity (Morhart et al., 2015). In the branding paradigm, brand authenticity is a resource for consumers, and it is assessed based on the premise of a brand being true to itself (Morhart et al., 2015). Moreover, in a consumer-brand relationship, existential cues can be transmitted via brand anthropomorphism to make it easier to perceive brand values and message (Morhart et al., 2015).

Although all these three types of cues represent brand authenticity from a different perspective, this paper takes advantages of authenticity as a multidimensional concept. This study embraces the assumption that perceived brand authenticity emerges from the conciliation between indexical, iconic and existential cues.

### 3.1.4. CONSUMERS' QUEST FOR BRAND AUTHENTICITY

Authenticity is deemed a crucial concept of contemporary life due to consumers' increasing perception of artificiality, lack of genuineness, and the meaningless of markets (Grayson & Martinec, 2004; Bruhn et al., 2012; Leigh et al., 2006). Post-modern consumers embraced the countercultural movement by asking brands to be more than just a logo stamped in every corner of their lives (Holt, 2002). Instead, consumers hope that brands can support and contribute to *"their identity projects by providing original and relevant cultural materials with which to work"* (Holt, 2002, p. 87). From an advertising perspective, Young (2017) linked Holt's thoughts on authenticity to the imminence of cultural impressions and aspirational brands. Consequently, consumption is more than a consumeristic activity; instead, it is a mean of assigning meaning to life through symbolic interactions between products, brands and consumer expectations (Østergaard & Jantzen, 2000). Therefore, consumers perceive authentic brands like the ones that transmit value (Napoli, Dickinson, Beverland, & Farrelly, 2016).

This shift in consumer culture led to brands enter a loop searching for authenticity (Young, 2017). Arnould & Price (2000) affirmed that post-modern markets are dominated by a branded battlefield where consumers struggle to know what is 'real' and 'fake'. Therefore, consumers' quest for authenticity is an imperious response to the times we live in (Fritz et al., 2017; Guèvremont, 2018; Pattuglia & Mingione, 2018). Consumer culture theory interprets it as a



juxtaposition to the degree of standardisation and homogenisation of products, brands and experiences (Arnould & Thompson, 2005; Arnould & Price, 2000). Therefore, authenticity resonates with consumers who seek genuine and differentiated claims in various consumption contexts (Guèvremont, 2018).

### 3.1.5. AUTHENTICITY AND ADVERTISING

In a landscape where consumers increasingly search for traces of authenticity in brands, marketing communications can be a suitable vehicle to transmit authenticity and inspire them in their identity projects (Young, 2017). Brand advertising influences consumers' expectations and opinions; consequently, it can impact perceived brand authenticity (Dwivedi & McDonald, 2018). It follows both ways as marketing and creatives advocate that developing an authentic ad is crucial for effective advertising (Becker et al., 2019). Another bonus on the interplay between authenticity and advertising is that conveying authentic brand image through marketing communications *"cushions the effect of negative brand-related information"* and scandals (Guèvremont & Grohmann, 2018, p.330).

Cues, messages, and symbols representing the unique, genuine, and true side of a brand are deemed relevant to directly influence perceived brand authenticity and reinforce brand positioning through mediated mechanisms (Dwivedi & McDonald, 2018). According to Becker et al. (2019), when transmitting authenticity through an advertisement, there are four critical dimensions: preserving the brand essence, honouring brand heritage, showing a realistic plot, and presenting a credible message. Therefore, these dimensions should be considered when developing the creative process of an advertisement and included in the communication platform words, tagline, logline and storytelling (Henriksen, 2018). However, it is essential to not forget about transparency and realness as the motto of an advertisement due to high consumer scepticism concerning marketing tactics (Campbell & Kirmani, 2000 in Becker et al., 2019).

## 3.2. SOCIAL ACTIVISM

Along with the call for authenticity, the branding and advertising fields have witnessed increasing activism statements and brands getting involved as citizen-activists (Koch, 2020). In its simplest form, activism is described as *"a doctrine or practice that emphasises direct vigorous action especially in support of or opposition to one side of a controversial issue"* (Merriam-Webster, n.d.b). Sarkar & Kotler (2018) stressed the importance of brand activism as a key milestone for

brands in post-modern markets because positioning no longer is sufficient to differentiate. Pressing societal issues about inequality, social justice and discrimination have sparked a reaction in individuals, and progressively, the term 'woke' gained its weight in society. As brands are supposed to address consumers' needs and mirror their thoughts, consumers started to see brands taking a stand on controversial socio-political issues and leaning towards forms of brand social activism. Consequently, a plethora of marketing practices and communication strategies have emerged in the interplay between socio-politics, brands and activism (Manfredi-Sánchez, 2019).

To understand what brand social activism is and what it entails, the following sections will address brand activism, to be woke, and brand social activism from a consumer and a branding perspective.

### 3.2.1. TO BE WOKE: A CONSUMER PERSPECTIVE ON SOCIAL ACTIVISM

To be woke is to be concerned with societal causes that are regarded as imperative and defying in contemporary times. In this sense, the concept of woke citizenship refers to *"having compassion and an ethic of caring; believing in democracy, an equal society, and the social institutions that keep the extremes of poverty and wealth under control"* (Grant, 2018, p.329). This is embedded in the idea that individuals are constantly building their identity projects and, as consumers, hope that organisations can relate to people's values by helping them be true to themselves and to what they believe in (Grant, 2018; Castells, 2010). As a reflex, woke consumers purchase based on their beliefs, praise and advocate for brands that are aligned with their values and vouch for brands that care about societal and controversial issues that they care about (McKinsey, 2019).

Therefore, in parallel with the consumption-self, it emerges the concept of citizen-consumers where individuals consider their consumption as a vote that either supports or advocates against organisations or social-political stances (Stolle & Micheletti, 2013). Political consumption goes one step further than satisfying needs and expresses consumers' ethical and political preferences and affirmations. This idea links to the theory of the extended self by Belk (1988), in which consumption is a mechanism that helps define one's own identity and the sense of who one is. According to the author, consumption and possession of goods work as markers that build a narrative that shapes consumer's identity projects and further serves as cues that shape others'

impressions of us. Thus, brands became “*reference points rooting it within the consumers’ self-identities*” (Palazzo & Basu, 2007, p.337 in Manfredi-Sánchez, 2019).

Consequently, citizen-consumers are often tied with lifestyle commitments and strong moral values that orient their behaviour and shape their identity; further, they expect brands to partake in this process. Nonetheless, putting in practice this ‘we consciousness’ of citizen-consumers is not always an easy task or an attainable process for them (Stolle & Micheletti, 2013). For that reason, there is an overarching gap between consumption-self and citizen-self. Manfredi-Sánchez (2019) adds that brands are perceived as symbolic frames with solid meanings when this calibration between consumer and citizen is in place. However, it is up to individuals to process and rearrange these meanings under their social determinations and cultural projects, which are part of their identity projects (Castells, 2010).

Individuals redefine their role in society by reaching holistic meaning in their experiences and seeking social transformation (Castells, 2010). Therefore, identity projects may emerge from resistance to sources of crisis. Hence, there is certain courage and revolutionary character associated with the desire for social transformation and, consequently, it is also present in being a woke citizen (Sobande, 2019). In this transformation process, the new power emerges in networks by codes of information and images representation, which constitute material upon which a society organises and creates meaning and new behaviours (Castells, 2010). Thus, there is a sense of togetherness in this social transformation. In connection, Grant (2018) defends that woke citizens believe in educational spaces where they connect to those who are not woke to raise awareness and co-create new meanings of emergent issues. Therefore, the collectiveness in activism is rooted in social movement behaviours rather than individual behaviours (Manfredi-Sánchez, 2019).

### 3.2.2. WOKE BRANDS & BRAND SOCIAL ACTIVISM

If there are woke consumers, there is a need to exist woke brands. Drawing on the definition of woke, woke brands can be defined as the ones that take a stand on societal issues and “*match activist messaging, purpose, and values with prosocial corporate practice*” (Vrendenburg et al., 2020, p.444). Therefore, the concept of woke brands is connected to brand social activism.

Taking a step back, the introduction of Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) in a brand’s value chain was the first step towards the perception that contributing and preserving the well-being of the economic and social spheres of the market is also part of doing business (Clemensen, 2017).

Later, brand activism started to be raised as a bandwagon for marketing and branding practices. Sarkar & Kotler (2018) explain that although brand activism is inherent to CSR, the latter is corporate-driven, while brand activism is society-driven and has a more immediate effect in answering in-time pressing issues in society (Sarkar & Kotler, 2018).

Brand activism is made 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”* (Sarkar & Kotler, 2018, p.570). In other words, brand activism emerges when, following its core values and vision, a brand stands for an issue that is polemic in a society (Shetty et al., 2019). From a perspective closer to marketing purposes, brand activism is *“a strategy that seeks to influence citizen-consumers by means of campaigns created and sustained by political values”* (Manfredi-Sánchez, 2019, p.343). Sarkar & Kotler (2018) divided brand activism into six categories, one of them being brand social activism. Brand social activism says respect to societal matters such as equality, culture, immigration, race, gender, and discrimination (Sarkar & Kotler, 2018). Therefore, drawing on the concept of woke and authenticity, this study follows the definition of authentic brand social 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”* (Vrendenburg et al., 2020, p.446).

Brands engagement in social activism responds to consumers’ call for brands to get involved in social movements and discussions and act as citizen-activists (Shetty et al., 2019; Koch, 2020). In a realm where counterculture behaviours show the need to rethink brands’ role in society, brands progressively lost the right to stand neutral (Young, 2017). Sarkar & Kotler (2018) go a step further and affirm that branding with a purpose is not enough; it is necessary that the message becomes a practice and that, overall, the way of doing business should be aligned with societal objectives.

In line with this, it seems necessary to distinguish between proactive and reactive brand activism. While some brands see brand social activism as part of their core mission and proactively raise the topic in society, draw consumers’ attention to the issue, and engage with solutions; others merely keep neutral sympathetic by responding to said social issue (Sarkar & Kotler, 2018; Koch, 2020). Consequently, woke brands can also be divided into two groups: one where they inspire consumers and incite social change, acting as what Koch (2020) denominates citizen-activists; and one where brands respond in time to the social movements and share advertising statements



that only show support or condemn what is happening in society. Such distinction can also be briefly seen in the typology model of brand activism proposed by Vredenburg et al. (2020). Silent brand activism is characterised by low activist marketing messaging, and authentic brand activism is defined by a high activism marketing message (Vredenburg et al., 2020). One can be seen as more authentic than the other based not only on a balance between consistency and relevance, but also on the degree of intensity and proactiveness with which the brand addresses or advertises the social-political issue (Vredenburg et al., 2020). Thus, being a woke brand goes back to the concept of authenticity, meaning that to be a woke brand, it needs to be honest, consistent, coherent, and truthful (Vredenburg et al., 2020).

### 3.2.3. WHAT IS WOKE ADVERTISING?

Woke advertising follows some of the principles of cause advertising and brand activism advertising; however, it focuses on controversial topical tensions in society related to woke issues, and it is more direct to the point (Riley, 2020). Following the literature on brand activism advertising, it can be argued that woke advertising also *“pursues the creation of an intangible good of a reputational nature, with cognitive and emotional values”* (Manfredi-Sánchez, 2019, p.348). Thus, it is usually disassociated from brand products, despite being imperative to make it transversal to all marketing Ps (Sarkar & Kotler, 2018). Young (2017) proposes the Big Ideal model, which intersects two realms: a brand’s best self with a cultural tension present in society. To do so, marketers should complete the phrase *“Brand X believes the world would be a better place if ...”* (Young, 2017, p.60). The result of this intersection is a system of beliefs that expresses the brand manifesto about a social issue (Young, 2017). An effective woke advertising could potentially emerge from this intersection because *“nothing summed up a cultural aspiration more than a manifesto”* (Young, 2017, p. 56).

An activism campaign in principle targets consumers who are already engaged and believe that a brand’s voice can have an impact (Manfredi-Sánchez, 2019). It is not exclusive digital, but often it has roots in digital or hybrid channels, where brands make use of language, logos and symbols (Manfredi-Sánchez, 2019). Woke advertisements express more than just feelings and recur to different elements to transmit what a brand stands for: montages that set to inspirational music, social experiments that give voice to the social issue and the potential solution, or focus on identity aspects as gender, sexual, racial or political (Riley, 2020). In this matter, there seem to be two general approaches to communicate brand activism through advertising: promotional, in

which the advertising message merely shows what a brand stands for; and participatory, in which the advertising message seek for audience engagement and ask consumers to partake with the brand (Kim, Cheong & Lim, 2015). This can be seen as a reflection of the previous distinction between proactive woke brands and reactive woke brands. Participatory communications are said to drive stronger support from the audience and more favourable perceptions towards the relationship between brand and social cause (Kim et al., 2015).

In this sense, it seems relevant to understand how consumers respond to brand social activism and woke advertising. By giving an advertising platform to topical issues, brands spark controversy because they address sensible and bickering problems, and they can only take one side of a polarising discussion – it is either ‘to be’ or ‘not to be’ (Manfredi-Sánchez, 2019). Thus, woke advertising cannot please everyone and might be subject to different interpretations. It is vital to notice that, both for woke and non-woke consumers, scepticism towards marketing tactics and claims is increasingly present (Bae, 2018), which also supports the aim to look for authenticity in woke advertising. In line with this, Riley (2020) argues that although woke advertising is created to mirror consumers' values, they see reasons to scrutinise a brand's intentions. This scepticism results from the perception that brands sometimes use it as a marketing tool; thus, the motives that underly a brand's intentions may be perceived as suspicious or at least subject of second thoughts (Bae, 2018). Highly sceptical consumers develop strategies to cope with brand social activism claims and question whether a brand's support for a social issue is genuine or to serve a benefit (Bae, 2018). Therefore, the notion of risk present in being a woke brand is twofold: there is the inherent risk of the limbo between a well-done and a phoney advertisement, and there is also the risk of what consumers see beyond the communication piece that is subject to scrutiny and scepticism in a counterculture society (Vredenburg et al., 2020; Holt, 202).

Consumers' reaction to brand activism can either follow both ways. The response might be in the form of positive viral word-of-mouth and boycotting; or, on the opposite, backlash, boycotting, culture jamming, and ultimately anti-brand activism movements (Kam & Deichert, 2020). On a more demographic consideration, it should be noticed that the response to woke advertising may vary according to the audience. Brand social activism tends to engage better with younger generations (Shetty et al., 2019). However, the reactionary character can follow both ways, meaning that they also embrace boycotting and anti-brand activism to a greater extent if they perceive that a brand is behaving unethically or against their values (Shetty et al., 2019).

### 3.3. WOKE WASHING ADVERTISING

The ongoing crisis of social issues and leading public outburst of activism affirmation have propelled brands to show what they stand for in these matters, *“at least in terms of verbal pledges”* (Moorman, 2020, p. 392). This last quotation reflects what Riley (2020) says to be the explanation for consumers’ cynicism towards woke advertising. As discussed in the previous section, in the last few years, woke advertising conquered space in the marketing paradigm to respond to consumers’ social justice concerns and project identities, assuming that brands do it with truthful purposes rather than commercial or corporate-driven. The downside of it is that while addressing a time and context-specific issue or social movement, brand activism can often suffer from short-term vision, meaning that brands want to react and stand for a cause in the immediate time, but they lack the expertise to address the problem with a long-term solution that is aligned with all they do (Sarkar & Kotler, 2018). For that reason, the concept of woke advertising has been often involved in scandals due to brands’ moral violations when addressing these causes (Romani et al., 2015). This led to the emergence of woke washing as a mismatch between brand and consumers in regard to the perception of authentic brand social activism (Vredenburg et al., 2020).

However, the conceptualisation around the term ‘woke’ is still unquestionably new. Despite the scarcity of literature about the concept, two aspects seem to be common when characterising woke washing: lack of genuine purposes and authenticity, and incoherence (Vredenburg et al., 2020).

#### 3.3.1. PERCEPTION OF WOKE WASHING ADVERTISING

Consumers perceive woke washing when *“a corporation, institution or individual says or does something that signals their advocacy for a marginalised cause but also continues to cause harm to vulnerable communities”* (WokeWashing.com, n.d.). Although brand activism must be society-driven and undressed of commercial intents, consumers’ perception of woke washing advertising can result from a brand’s use or misuse of societal concerns with commercialised notions of the topic (Sobane, 2019). Consequently, brands are believed to use societal issues as marketing phoney and their behaviour is regarded as inauthentic (Vredenburg et al., 2020).

Vredenburg et al. (2020) are pioneers in the study of this concept and affirm that brands that decouple their activist messaging from their purpose and practice are boosting inauthentic brand

activism. Thus, woke washing advertising is associated with inauthentic brand activism, which mirrors low engagement with practice, lack of coherence and genuine intentions, as well as deceptive, selfish or opportunistic decoupling (Vrendenburg et al., 2020). Therefore, advertisements that illustrate content or claims that are unsubstantiated according to a brand's practices can result in a negative impression of the ad in consumers' mind (Vrendenburg et al., 2020). However, it is vital to notice that consumers perceive incoherence based on their expectations and relevancy (Maille & Fleck, 2011). Vrendenburg et al. (2020) suggest that consumers judge the coherency of a woke claim according to its fit with a brand's mission, attributes, and intentions. However, the degree of perceived coherency is the outcome of a comparison and a judgment of similarity (Maille & Fleck, 2011). As these judgements rest on people's knowledge, mental schemas and standards, the subjective essence of perceived incoherence makes it sometimes unstable and subject to reconsiderations (Maille & Fleck, 2011).

Vrendenburg et al. (2020) also point the need to exist a fit between the brand and the cause to avoid the consumers' perception of marketing phoney. Drawing on cause advertising, Roy (2010) suggested that a brand's fit with a cause can be established based on an obvious connection between brand and cause and build on shared characteristics between the brand and the target of a cause. Moreover, and specifically in terms of advertising, must have in consideration the tone, intent, and frequency of display to avoid being perceived as incongruent (Roy, 2010).

When consumers perceive the falsehood or the generalist-trendy approach in a brand's woke statement, the result might end up being more harmful than not getting involved with the social issue, and can *"potentially misleading consumers with their claims, damaging both their brand equity and potential for social change"* (Vrendenburg et al., 2020, p.444). Further, Vrendenburg et al. (2020) emphasise that untruthful signalling incurs unethical practices that threaten consumer trust. This is a matter of crucial importance in advertising because brands already need to overcome consumers' scepticism to advertising campaigns, and, in such cases, they are less prone to overlook inauthentic elements (Guèvremont & Grohmann, 2018). In this sense, Beverland et al. (2008) suggested that authentic advertising must link indexical and iconic cues to the product it is being advertised. Thus, the negligence of reinforcing authenticity cues on an advertisement connected to a woke issue may lead to woke washing crisis.



### 3.4. SUMMARY OF THE THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

After addressing a considerable range of theories and knowledge developed in academia around the concepts of brand authenticity, social activism and woke washing, it seems relevant to sum up and discuss the main points to create a visual model of the theoretical framework, which represents the body of knowledge that will guide the first steps of this research study to give it some background.

Authenticity has become a vogue word in the post-modern countercultural world. Consumers seek authenticity due to an imperative need for realness that escapes the standardised conventional frames. They perceive authentic brands when these are faithful to themselves (continuity), honest and correct to consumers (credibility), driven by care and responsibility (integrity), and help consumers to be real to their identity (symbolism) (Morhart et al., 2015). Thus, authentic brands are deemed as the ones that are truthful to themselves and to consumers' identity projects, helping them by delivering value (Castells, 2010; Holt, 2002; Morhart et al., 2015). For this reason, Young (2017) calls them 'brands that do', embedding in their transformation and active nature. This raises the discussion of the role of brands in society. In a realm where a 'we consciousness' and the citizen-self gained their weight in identity projects, which is further expressed in consumption choices, consumers seek brands that authentically dive into the social context and take a stand on matters of inequality, race, gender, and discrimination. Put simple, consumers desire brands that march along with social movements they identify with. They are woke consumers and they expect brands to be so.

In this endeavour to engage in social activism and take a stand on woke issues, brands express their shortcomings through communication and advertising to better connect with consumers. However, from the knowledge gathered from previous theories, there are arguably different positions regarding brand social activism and wokeness. Consequently, it can also be plausible to say that consumers perceive and react differently. Brands can proactively draw consumers' attention to social issues, authentically inspire and be self-referential to their identity projects, drive solutions and express their wokeness through [proactive woke advertising](#). This can take the form of inspirational storytelling, social experiments or a focus on the identity aspect of said social issue; while considering authenticity cues and dimensions.

Brands can also be responsive to the social context and take a stand by showing support or condemn when social movements emerge through [reactive woke advertising](#). When facing the

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perceived risk of taking a stand on a controversial topic or solely due to lack of wokeness, brands can opt not to be part of the conversation and show an **absence of woke advertising**. Lastly, brands can fail to prove the authenticity of their wokeness and fall into **woke washing advertising**. Consumers perceive woke washing when they believe that a brand sees a social movement as a marketing tool that they can opportunistically use for commercial-driven purposes; thus, their activist stance is inauthentic (Vredenburg et al., 2020). While the model present in **Figure 3** depicts how woke washing is framed within woke communication, the theory covered in this chapter does not entirely depict how the perception of woke washing advertising is constructed and the cues that allow consumers to identify it. As stated before, the newness of the concept leaves much to explore, especially regarding how consumers take a woke washing advertisement.



**FIGURE 3.** Theoretical Framework. Own production.

As outlined throughout this chapter, authenticity seems to be the persistent root in marketing and advertising practices. Drawing back on its importance and considering that woke washing advertising is argued as inauthentic by Vredenburg et al. (2020), the discussion of theory raises the question of the impacts woke washing can have on perceived brand authenticity. Guèvremont

& Grohmann (2018) argued that perceived brand authenticity cushions the impact of scandals and negative information about said brand. However, the literature also indicates that citizen-consumers are deeply embedded in this 'we consciousness' and invested in having self-referential brands by their side. Moreover, backlash, boycotting, and culture jamming are part of consumers response when brands fail in their activist claims can be contradictory to using brand authenticity as a cushion in a woke washing crisis. Therefore, it is plausible to wonder how woke consumers perceive an authentic brand when in the presence of a woke washing advertising and how it impacts that perception.



# CHAPTER **04** methodology

“

**I want to buy  
from brands  
that show who  
they really are”**

Lucia, Interview 4



# METHODOLOGY

The fourth step in this research project is to define a methodological approach that is both coherent with the objective of the study and assures coherence throughout the research process (Saunders et al., 2019). This chapter will elaborate on the methodological choice, the research strategy, the time horizon of the research, and dwell on the procedures for data analysis.

This research aims to understand how consumers identify woke washing advertisements and the impacts on perceived brand authenticity after being exposed to forms of woke washing advertising. Therefore, this study's nature calls for a method that can interpret the phenomenon and lead to a greater understanding. The methodological technique should be parallel to the philosophical point of view that underlies the study (Saunders et al., 2019).

## 4.1. METHODOLOGICAL APPROACH: QUALITATIVE STUDY

To better answer the research questions and match the nature of this study, the research project will follow a qualitative methodological approach, as it is well suited to understand how social individuals construct and perceive the topics under study. Other methodological approaches, namely a quantitative, would not provide insights that would allow answering the research questions because such approaches are characterised by standardised answers and do not account for the needed exploratory character for the study at hand.

This thesis stands for brand authenticity, brand social activism and woke washing as social constructs and adopts ontological relativism linked with relativistic epistemology. Qualitative methods value in-depth understanding and the subjective character of meaning-making processes in their context (Leavy, 2017). Therefore, they show more significant potential to help answer the research questions. While quantitative methods tend to value highly structured data collection to prove or reject a theory, qualitative methods allow openness and a higher degree of flexibility which strongly reflects the essence of the research questions of this thesis. This means that a qualitative research design can further consubstantiate the needed coherence between the first and the last layers of the research onion (Saunders et al., 2019).

The choice of techniques for data collection and analytical practices inherent to the qualitative research method allow adding a theoretical contribution to the field of marketing and communications. Qualitative approaches tend to adopt inductive reasoning and correspondent research designs that generate meaning that is not locked by existing theory (Leavy, 2017). This means that knowledge will be raised from the data collection with qualitative methods rather than based on existing theories (Saunders et al., 2019). In this matter, it is also important to refer that knowledge derives from a specific context to broader and more generalist applications. This is well-aligned with the assumption that the concepts under study are time and place situated.

### Exploratory study

Following this consistent line of thought, exploratory techniques will be used to gain insights and understand phenomena between brand authenticity, social activism and woke washing advertising in a new light (Saunders et al., 2019). The exploratory nature of this study is also rooted in the 'how' and 'what' in the research questions. It reflects the aim to understand how woke washing is constructed in the consumer's mind, the process, and the impact of woke washing ads on perceived brand authenticity. In connection with the choice of inductive reasoning, exploratory research must benefit from flexibility and adaptability, meaning that new forms of meaning may emerge during the process and demand adaptation (Saunders et al., 2019). The knowledge generated is broader in the first stretch of the research but becomes progressively narrower towards the end (Saunders et al., 2019).

Exploratory qualitative research may be conducted through different research designs, yet the nature of the research questions calls for semi-structured interviews because the aim is to understand the construct in a new light by giving openness to new knowledge (Saunders et al., 2019).

#### 4.1.1. SEMI-STRUCTURED INTERVIEWS

An interview can be defined, in its simplest form, as a conversation between two persons about a common theme (Justesen & Mik-Meyer, 2012). Nonetheless, the scope of the research requires an appropriate setting, language and types of questions. Semi-structured interviews are well suited for this study because they are receptive to slight deviations that might provide new and unexpected insights (Saunders et al., 2019). This characteristic is especially relevant in regard to the concept of woke washing as there is not extensive empirical knowledge in academia and having in consideration that one of the pillars of the thesis at hand is to understand how an

advertisement is labelled as woke washing and how does that process work for the consumer. Throughout the interview process, considering the underlying social constructivist philosophy, both interviewer and interviewee actively interact and create a direction of the interview, to a reasonable extent (Justesen & Mik-Meyer, 2012). Thus, it can be argued that a certain ambience is created in semi-structured interviews allowing the participant to ‘think out loud’ and express his insights without having the restrictions of pre-defined standard answers. Moreover, qualitative research has a natural setting, meaning that the researcher collects data at the site where participants construct the concepts under study (Creswell & Creswell, 2018).

The semi-structured interviews incorporate various elements that give them a certain level of structure that keeps the scope focused on the aim of the study while allowing openness to unpredictable insights and forms. One of these elements can be using an interview guide (section 4.3.3.) in which the themes and key questions are written prior to the event (Justesen & Mik-Meyer, 2012). Despite following some elements that give a slight structure, semi-structured interviews can help the research with an in-depth understanding of participants’ perceptions and context. Moreover, it allows openness for new paths when conducting the interview (Saunders et al., 2019).

### 4.1.2. LIMITATIONS OF A QUALITATIVE RESEARCH

Qualitative research with semi-structured interviews as a method for data collection is the approach that better suits this study and brings several advantages, as argued before. Despite this, it also presents certain limitations and considerations that should be denoted for the sake of transparency and fairness.

When conducting qualitative research, the researcher should not be seen as a tool, especially in active interviews, but rather as an active part of the interplay that shapes the narrative of the interview (Justesen & Mik-Meyer, 2012). Thus, although an interview can be objective in principle, the researcher is responsible for collecting and interpreting the data collection outcomes, making both processes exposed to the researcher’s lifeworlds (Kvale, 2007). The researcher is to a certain extent influenced by her background, culture and past experiences when making interpretations, and that might induce a certain degree of bias in the direction of the study and later reflect on quality aspects (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Although this constitutes a limitation, it is an inherent characteristic of this approach because its interpretative and subjective character naturally accounts for a certain degree of bias. Additionally, despite being an active research interview,

there should be a certain power of asymmetry that assures the interviewer as the part that sets the stage for the interview and guides the narrative based on the interviewee's responses (Kvale, 2007).

As opposed to quantitative goals and linked with the subjective aspect, it is also important to consider that interviews do not attempt to provide broad findings that can be generalizable. Instead, the aim is to capture the subjective insights specific to a given context (Saunders et al., 2019). Further, the researcher must present the contextual relationship between her and participants' responses, including past experiences and how past experiences shape interpretations for transparency and understanding of the work (Dodgson, 2019). Therefore, qualitative research calls for a vow to reflexivity to guarantee the quality and validity of the study. Following the social constructivist stance, the ambition is not to produce 'one truth' but rather to produce knowledge embedded in the complexity, ambiguity, and instability of the social world (Justesen & Mik-Meyer, 2012).

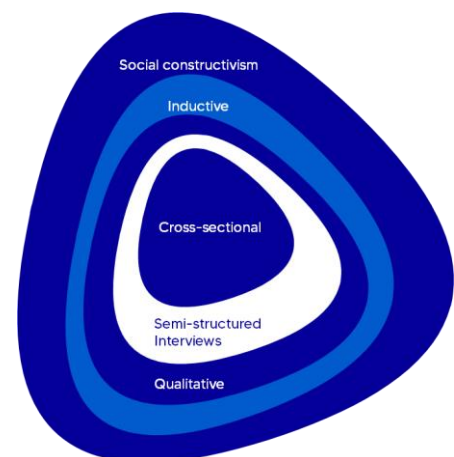
### 4.2. TIME HORIZON

The time horizon says respect to the timeframe in which the research study is conducted (Saunders et al., 2019). Based on the nature of the research questions, it is noticeable that the research aims not to capture how brand authenticity, social activism, and woke washing are constructed over time. Instead, the research questions and the philosophy of science that underlie this study lean towards analysing the context in a specific time and place. Therefore, the time horizon is deemed short, and this study is then categorized as a cross-sectional study because it only captures a snapshot of the phenomena (Saunders et al., 2019).

After elaborating on all layers of the research onion (Saunders et al., 2019), Figure 4 presents a visual summary of the methodological approach for this study before moving to the data collection.

### 4.3. DATA COLLECTION

To answer the research questions and gain a thorough understanding, primary data will be collected through semi-structured interviews, as described before. The interviews will have a



**FIGURE 4.** Complete Research Onion. Own production, inspired by Saunders et al. (2019).



subjective approach that is linked to the study's philosophy of science, meaning that the outcome of the interview will be perceived as being socially constructed and co-produced from the interplay between the interviewees' responses and the interpretations and analysis of the interviewer (Saunders et al., 2019). Concerning time and space, the interviews are expected to last for 40-60 minutes and will be conducted online via Microsoft Teams due to consideration for the ongoing pandemic situation. Concerning the naturalistic setting, this aspect is acknowledged in the sense that the interviewees will participate from a setting that is closer to their natural environment (e.g. their living room). Nonetheless, the social constructivist perspective recognizes that the context changes from the moment the participant accepts to be part of the interview (Justesen & Mik-Meyer, 2012).

To stimulate more detail in interviewees' responses, participants will be asked to provide an example of what they consider a woke washing advertisement before the interview. This can either be the name of a campaign, a video, image or other forms. The interviews will not be based on the example provided, but these can be helpful when used as a reference while participants elaborate on their discourse. Ultimately, the researcher can gain deeper insights from the narratives by using a case that is more concrete for the participant and brought from his social world.

Concerning the number of participants, the aim is not to attain a large group of people but rather to purposely gather participants who can contribute with knowledge related to the research (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Although there is no perfect number, Saunders et al. (2019) suggest that 5-25 participants are a considerable range that allows semi-structured interviews to benefit from data saturation. Thus, the number of interviews should be an equilibrium between covering the concepts under study to a satisfactory extent while simultaneously recognizing the time and accessibility limitations of the study. Considering this, the data collection process will consist of ten interviews. The participants must belong to Gen Z and Millennial cohorts due to higher demand among these generations for purpose-driven brands that live up to their promises (Pankowski, 2020; Shetty et al., 2019). The degree of homogeneity in terms of age group will allow interpreting brand and advertising concepts according to these generations' inherent values and cultural, economic, and political circumstances (Kotler et al., 2016). Moreover, participants should be living in a European country as it is acknowledged that forms of meaning of the topics under study may vary according to geographical culture and behaviour. These limitations were the first stones to put in practice the sampling process.

### 4.3.1. SAMPLING PROCESS

The sample is kept relatively small, yet the focus is on its quality. Non-probability sampling was utilized because it is well-aligned with the objective of this study, and there is not a statical requirement about the characteristics of the population. Following Saunders et al. (2019, p.316) schema for deciding on non-probability sampling techniques, purposive sampling seemed to suit the research better because it allowed selecting participants familiar with social activism and woke washing to provide richer findings. Within this, heterogeneous purposive sampling benefits from choosing diverse participants while meeting the criteria for familiarity with the themes. Thus, this technique allows the researcher to get a wider variety of data while covering the key themes, which means that any possible patterns that may emerge have a greater chance of particular interest and value while representing themes (Saunders et al., 2019). Using this technique, six interviewees were selected from two different settings: second-level connections of the researcher's social network related to social activism; and authors of posts related to woke causes and woke washing shared on LinkedIn. After the first contact by email, these participants showed interest in the topic and confessed to being familiar or engaged with the topic of woke washing.

The fact that this study looked for individuals who were familiar with concepts constituted a rather challenging task when it came to reaching participants that showed interest and commitment to the interview and met all criteria. Therefore, the snowball sampling technique was later adopted to select the remainder of the participants. Some of the first participants were asked to contact another individual with potential interest and relevance for the study. The snowball technique has the prejudice of the initial participants only contact individuals who are similar to themselves (Saunders et al., 2019). To overcome this, it seemed right to ask to contact only one person to keep an equilibrium between desired heterogeneity and homogeneity.

To meet the age and location criteria, all participants were asked to fill out a registration form with their socio-demographic information (i.e. age, country, occupation), where they also chose their preferred date and time for the interview. [Table 2](#) shows the social-demographic information of the ten participants selected for the research interviews. The last column indicates the example of a woke washing advertisement provided by the participant as a reference.

| PARTICIPANTS | GENERATION | COUNTRY | OCCUPATION              | EXAMPLE PROVIDED                        |
|--------------|------------|---------|-------------------------|---|
| Maxime       | Millennial | BE      | Project Analyst         | Formula 1 x #WeRaceAsOne                |
| Amelia       | Gen Z      | UK      | Master's student        | Sainsbury's x Gravy Song                |
| Miguel       | Gen Z      | NL      | Master's student        | Lowlands Festival x Blackout Square     |
| Lucia        | Millennial | IT      | Graphic Designer        | Victoria's Secret x Spring 2020 Preview |
| Kasper       | Millennial | DK      | Student Assistant       | Gillette x The Best Men Can Be          |
| Emma         | Millennial | MT      | Food Science Specialist | Tik Tok x Feroza Aziz                   |
| Olivia       | Gen Z      | PT      | Master's student        | M&S x LGBT Sandwich                     |
| Tomás        | Millennial | PT      | Digital Marketer        | Nike x Dream Crazy                      |
| Pedro        | Gen Z      | PT      | Master's student        | Coca-Cola x 5 by 20                     |
| Camilla      | Gen Z      | DK      | Marketing Manager       | Pepsi x Kendall Jenner                  |

TABLE 2. Participants and respective socio-demographic data. Own production.

#### 4.3.3. THE INTERVIEW GUIDE

The semi-structured interviews were based on an interview guide (Appendix A), which contains the flow of the interview and the main questions. Although semi-structured interviews are not subject to the strictness of following a detailed script, it brings two critical benefits for the study. First, it helps the research by assuring that the main themes are covered during the interview and that there is a rather similarity amongst all interviews (Justesen & Mik-Meyer, 2012). Second, it helps the interviewer by allowing her to listen to the respondent and pose relevant follow-up questions (Justesen & Mik-Meyer, 2012). Consequently, the interview will be more similar to a conversation rather than an inquire. The questions present in the guide were developed considering the research questions.

As illustrated in Figure 5, the interview guide was divided into three phases where the interviewer firstly gives an overview of the interview and a brief context, then poses the

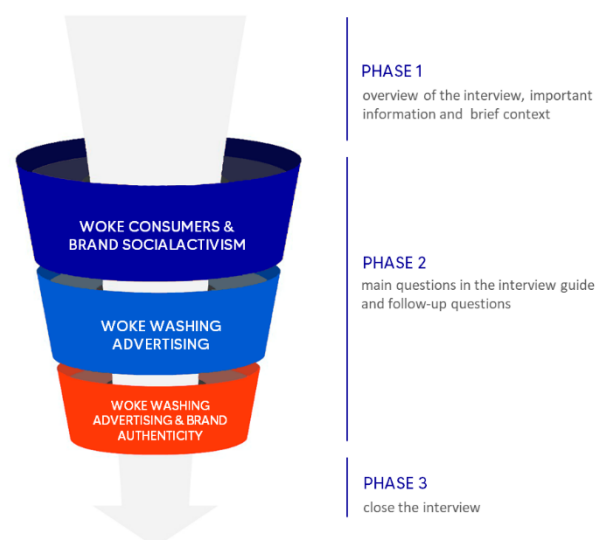


FIGURE 5. Interview funnel. Own production.

main questions, and lastly finalizes and the interview (Gillham, 2005 in Justesen & Mik-Meyer, 2012).

The second phase contains questions that are further divided into three parts according to the concepts under study. Three broad themes were defined based on the research questions to assign structure to the interviews: woke consumers & brand social activism, woke washing advertising, woke washing advertising & brand authenticity. Establishing these three themes helps to give a natural flow to the interview questions and allows the interviewer to construct questions that explore a narrative within a slightly structured scope. The presence of the themes does not contradict the exploratory and inductive approach in the sense that they are not derived from existing theory. The broader themes mirror the research questions behind the research project and only act as auxiliaries to conduct the interview.

### 4.3.4. TYPES OF INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

The type of interview questions must be aligned with the qualitative methodology and the study's explorative nature. Open-ended questions are the type that better suits the approach of this research project because they allow the interviewee to express himself more openly within a given broader theme implied in the question. Although the interviewee should get the opportunity to provide complete detailed answers and narratives where new topics are expected to emerge, it also of significant importance for the interviewer to ensure that the main times are covered and time limitations are respected (Saunders et al., 2019). The reason to opt for open-ended questions is also connected to the fact that it allows the researcher to understand the interviewee's point of view, process, and narrative, which is imperative for this study (Bryman & Bell, 2011). In alliance with the choice of open-ended questions, the exploratory approach introduces questions started by 'how' and 'what' to generated new knowledge (Justesen & Mik-Meyer, 2012).

The questions in the interview guide will be followed up with questions mainly started by 'why' or 'how' aiming to get into more profound layers of the narrative. Probes will also be used to explore in more detail relevant responses, along with clarifying questions in the case that the interviewee's response or reasoning is not clear for the interviewer. In fewer cases, slightly closed questions started by 'do you' or 'would you say' can be introduced to clarify the narrative or initiate the speech and then follow it up with 'why' and 'how' questions.



It is also important to note that the first question of the interview, also known as the opening question, asks the interviewee to think about an impactful advertisement. The idea behind this is to initiate the narrative within advertising in a way that he is familiar with. By doing so, the interview gains a more natural touch that is characteristic of active interviews (Justesen & Mik-Meyer, 2012).

### 4.4. DATA ANALYSIS

To proceed to the analysis and uncover findings, the ten interviews were transcribed to facilitate the process of data analysis (see Appendix B). For the sake of greater accuracy, signs of emotions and pauses were posteriorly added to each transcript. As expected, each interview generated a large extent of data that needed to be fragmented by processes of coding and organized into meaningful categories that helped to understand the narratives (Saunders et al., 2019). In doing so, statements were assigned to themes, which led to a coherent analysis and the identification of patterns among narratives (Saunders et al., 2019). This process was conducted through thematic narrative analysis so that the non-standardized data could be reduced, organized and categorized to then be analysed in search of findings.

#### 4.4.1. THEMATIC NARRATIVE ANALYSIS

Narratives give coherence to people's experiences and make them understandable by trying to put a point on how the world works. As we make sense of the world through the stories that we tell, the choice of narrative analysis seemed the right fit to develop an in-depth perspective of participant's experiences and constructs within woke washing advertising and brand authenticity. Narrative analysis is interested in social narratives and how shared conventions account for people's experience (Riessman, 2012). Therefore, the focus is on the context as the scope of this exploratory study. Further, causality is often a critical aspect because narratives glue together events, opinions and perspectives (Riessman, 2012; Saunders et al., 2019).

It is important to denote that narrative analysis is not a unified method; instead, it works as an umbrella approach that borrows techniques from other analytical techniques (Saunders et al., 2019). The choice of using thematic narrative analysis, drawing on the procedure for thematic analysis, was based on the benefits of identifying analytical themes and patterns within participant's narratives. Narratives were analysed separately to develop an in-depth understanding of the sequence and context of each of them before comparing and contrasting

findings across them (Saunders et al., 2019). This technique implied the researcher's involvement in the analysis because coding and creating themes are a matter of her interpretations (Guest et al., 2012). However, this subjective character is acknowledged by the social constructivist stance of this study and the choice of methodology. Following the inductive reasoning behind this study, an inductive approach to thematic narrative analysis seemed to be more suitable because by analysing specific parts of statements, categorize them with similar statements into emergent themes and then drive findings (Guest et al., 2012). As opposed to deductive analysis, where the aim is to confirm or deny hypotheses with theory-driven categories, the codes were derived from the data rather than be predetermined, allowing openness to all insights (Guest et al., 2012).

Although there must be a set of steps defined prior to the analysis, the open character of thematic narrative analysis allowed the researcher to adapt and revise initial codes later as new themes emerged within the narratives (Guest et al., 2012). Based on the four steps to conduct a thematic analysis proposed by Saunders et al. (2019), the process was the following:

**Step 1. Becoming familiar with data:** Firstly, the researcher immersed herself into the data to gain familiarity, which was acquired by reviewing and adjusting the interview transcripts and reading them multiple times the raw data. Further, keeping track of an interview journal helped in the process (Appendix D). Familiarity is key to proceeding with the next analytical steps because only knowing the data and context can generate relevant codes. When this was achieved, the research started the coding procedure.

**Step 2. Coding:** Coding categorises data that shares similar patterns (Saunders et al., 2019). The codes were defined and revised as they emerged throughout the transcripts, rather than being predetermined. The use of *in vivo* codes to the extent possible seemed to accurately depict the original terms used by participants, thus a more genuine portrait of reality. NVivo was the choice of software to help the data analysis for consistency and simplicity. In the end, the codes were rearranged and merged when needed before moving to the next step.

**Step 3. Searching for themes and recognising relationships:** Although searching for themes and recognising relationships is defined as a separate step that follows coding, the researcher noted down possible themes and plots along the way. As the narratives were analysed separately initially, the themes in each of them were registered under the participant's name code. After completing the search for themes in all transcripts, the themes were revised and rearranged based on evident similarities among them. For the sake of transparency, Appendix E presents the

final table of themes with the respective description, examples of codes under that theme, and an example of a narrative statement that depicts the theme. Further, Figure 6 shows, through a short example, how a theme emerged from a code.

|          |        | CODES   | THEMES   |
|----------|--------|---|--|
| 00:21:25 | MAXIME | <p>219 Yeah, I think that's also the example I gave beforehand. I think one of the obvious</p> <p>220 examples is Formula 1, because I think their slogan is "we race as one" meaning</p> <p>221 that, you know, everyone can be part of Formula 1 no matter your sexual</p> <p>222 orientation, race, belief, whatever. But then they do organize races in countries such</p> <p>223 as Saudi Arabia, Russia, China, that are sort of actively and openly against some of</p> <p>224 these people. And then, you know, I think it doesn't come across as very authentic</p> <p>225 to say "oh, we support everyone". But as soon as it would make you lose money not</p> <p>226 to, to not act that way, so I think, it's a bit hypocritical, and I think that is for me one</p> <p>227 of the most obvious examples of woke washing, because I think there you have the</p> <p>228 very obvious difference between what they're saying and what they're doing.</p> <p>229 They're almost opposite. But I think ... other ... you have a lot of other examples of</p> <p>230 companies who don't necessarily act contrary to what they are saying that they're</p> <p>231 also not actively pursuing to make things better. I think, for example, Nike has come</p> <p>232 to the media so many times for their use of sweatshops, for not properly vetting the</p> <p>233 people in their production. But in their advertising and in their social media</p> <p>234 presence, obviously, they're always going to present themselves as a ... positive</p> <p>235 company that is supporting everyone, that is there for everyone, and it seems like</p> <p>236 their messaging is not always in line with their actions. I think that's ... that's where</p> <p>237 your messaging and what you're saying should be in line with what you're also doing</p> <p>238 or [assertive tone] what you're doing, you should be in line with what you're saying.</p> <p>239 Yeah, so and I think there that's for me kind of the line where it becomes woke</p> <p>240 washing. If you're saying you're portraying one thing, but they're not actually pulling</p> <p>241 through on it as a company.</p> | <p>openly against</p> <p>lose money</p> <p>hypocritical</p> <p>doing the opposite</p> <p>not actively pursuing</p> <p>messaging is not in line</p> <p>doing in line with saying</p> <p>INCOHERENCE</p> |

**FIGURE 6.** Example of how a theme emerged. Own production.

**Step 4. Refining themes:** The constant review and refining of the thematic narrative analysis imply a final step of refining themes before moving to the actual analysis of findings (Saunders et al., 2019). Refining themes was a matter of evaluating the meaning relationships between coded data within a theme and further between themes and other themes to assess the necessity of diving or rearrange them. The researcher revised the coded data under each theme, having in mind the research questions and the narratives.

By following these steps and adopting a reflexive mindset, which allows reaching reliable and relevant quality themes, the thematic narrative analysis contributed to making meaning of raw data to provide a deep understanding of woke washing advertising and brand authenticity.

### 4.4.2. ENSURING QUALITY CRITERIA

When conducting research, it is primordial to set quality criteria that ensure the value of the study (Justesen & Mik-Meyer, 2012). The reality is multifaceted, and so are the quality criteria in studies that embrace the social constructivism standpoint (Justesen & Mik-Meyer, 2012). Trustworthiness is the main criterion that underlies assessing the quality of the data in qualitative studies (Saunders et al., 2019). Within trustworthiness, this study follows four aspects that must be accounted for: *credibility*, *transferability*, *dependability*, and *confirmability* (Lincoln & Guba,

1985). However, it should be noted that a methodology rooted in social constructivism, especially when conducting active interviews, should account for the interviewer's participation and changes in the interview context (Justesen & Mik-Meyer, 2012). Hence, this study also includes the criterion of *reflexivity*, which says respect to presenting findings openly while consciously reflecting on the role and position of the interviewer (Justesen & Mik-Meyer, 2012).

To assure *credibility*, the length of this research covered ten recorded interviews with different participants, using the same interview guide to reach data saturation within the main topics. Further, after the interview, the interviewees received a follow-up email to check the accuracy of the transcriptions, also known as response validation (Bryman & Bell, 2011). *Transferability* is assured by a high degree of transparency concerning methodology and conducting interviews that were not focused on the advertisement example provided by the participant but instead used as a tool that helps the narrative. It must be denoted that the concepts are studied in context, and the goal is not to achieve generalizations, for the same reason why Bryman & Bell (2011) argue that it is not possible to freeze a social context. *Dependability* says respect to keep records of all data collection so that it can be evaluated by others (Saunders et al., 2019) in the form of transcripts and audio recordings of the interviews (Appendix B). *Confirmability* is about maintaining a certain degree of objectivity when analysing data while acknowledging the subjective character of the study (Bryman & Bell, 2011). The transcripts are also helpful to emphasize confirmability, showing that findings are rooted in participants insights more than they are shaped by the subjective interpretations of the researcher. Confirmability is then linked to *reflexivity* because it recognizes the central character of the interviewer while it also acknowledges that the conscious process of reflecting on the interviewer's experiences and background (Bryman & Bell, 2011). To help this process, the interviewer kept a reflexive diary throughout the process, and the analysis was conducted having it at hand (see Appendix D). Moreover, the transcripts and respective thematic narrative analysis were revised in two different moments, one of them later in time to avoid recency bias.

Although these criteria for qualitative research were inspired by the traditional criteria used in quantitative research, they were adapted to embrace the characteristics of qualitative investigation (Bryman & Bell, 2011). Therefore, the choice of methodology and quality criteria do not compromise the social constructivist standpoint, giving space for interpretation and interaction between the interviewer, the interviewee and the social context.



#### 4.4.3. ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS

The social constructivist perspective defends that quality criteria are inseparable from ethical criteria (Justesen & Mik-Meyer, 2012). To secure the ethical considerations of this study, the process was conducted with full disclosure. Before the interviews, the invitation email sent to the possible participants contained a document ([Appendix C](#)) with a description of the study, length and format of the interview, and a statement regarding confidentiality and anonymity of the data collected. In the case of participation, the interviewees were requested to sign a consent form where it was explicitly asked for informed consent to participate in the research interview, to record audio and/or video, and to use anonymised quotes in the thesis at hand. To assure confidentiality of data and anonymity, immediately after the interview, all data files related to each participant were renamed following the code: first three letters of the fictitious name, generation cohort, country, occupation (e.g. MAX.M.BE.PA). Therefore, participants' anonymity remains secured throughout the process, and all insights provided are non-attributable (Saunders et al., 2019).

CHAPTER

# 05

findings &  
analysis

“

**we are partially  
responsible for  
the woke  
washing process  
as a whole”**

Emma, Interview 6



# 05

## FINDINGS & ANALYSIS

This chapter will present and analyse the findings of the data collected throughout ten semi-structured interviews to understand how consumers identify woke washing advertisements and what is the impact of woke washing advertising on perceived brand authenticity.

The flow of this chapter will be shaped by the narratives that emerged from data analysis to capture the reasoning underlying the findings. Firstly, the individual profiles will be presented to better understand the narrative and to whom the study findings apply. Along with the profiles, the focus will be on the themes related to woke washing advertising that emerged from each narrative and respective analysis. Associations are then drawn from the participant's narrative to the experiences of identifying and constructing woke washing advertising. This will provide insights into the first research question. The individual narratives will then be followed by a cross-narrative analysis of overarching themes covering the interplay between woke washing advertising and perceived brand authenticity. This will shed light on the second research question.

To assure the reliability of the study, all transcripts are part of [Appendix B](#), and all references will be presented as (I#, #). The first part of the reference code corresponds to the number of the interview and the second to the line.

### 5.1. INDIVIDUAL NARRATIVES & WOKE WASHING ADVERTISING

As mentioned in the previous chapter, the chosen participants were familiar or even actively engaged with the concept of woke washing and connected to social causes. It seems essential to explore their life narratives in connection to woke causes and woke washing advertising. This section will dwell on the individual narratives of the participants and how they identify traces of woke washing in advertising.

#### 5.1.1. MAXIME

Maxime is a Millennial with a diverse and quite international educational background, but he is now back in his home country – Belgium, to work in a banking corporation. He shared great attention to sustainable and ethical companies and likes to keep himself informed within these matters. He also feels that it is a “*moral obligation*” (I1-125) to voice social problematics and

extend it to brands. He sees his purchases as a vote and an incentive to companies whose values are in line with his; further, he shows a greater connection to smaller brands. He believes *“the more profit-driven it is, the less likely it is to act ethically”* (I1-266), and in that sense, smaller local companies have not been *“corrupted yet”* (I1-269). Maxime’s view on brands taking a stand is very focused on their actions and how they keep themselves accountable. One way to *“pursue them to follow”* (I1-121) is to choose where he spends his money. The theme that emerged in Maxime’s narrative was:

**1) Incoherence** is what Maxime expressed continuously when it comes to woke washing advertisements. He believes that woke advertisements often come across as hypocritical because brands do not follow through with their communication messaging.



Maxime (I1-165): (...) *it's such a clash between what you're saying publicly and what you're actually doing that it's ... it comes across as hypocritical.*

Despite showing a predilection for brands that support social movements, he feels that brands need to go further and *“back it up with actions and not just changing your logo to a rainbow logo”* (I1-201). Consequently, there is a need that brands extend their communication to the remaining of their marketing platform and internal sphere so that all efforts are aligned with the woke stance. Nonetheless, he believes that even if brands do not follow up their woke stances with actions, at least they are bringing *“conversations in the mainstream”* (I1-117).

Incoherence was also what he first signalled when he watched Formula 1's campaign ‘We Race as One’. As a fan of the race, he had previous knowledge that the brand was promoting events in countries where the social scene goes against the values shared in the ad. Although Maxime noticed this ad as woke washing, he only got that reading because he is very attentive to the brand; otherwise, the ad would look *“fairly authentic”* (I1-250). Thus, the perception of a mismatch between message and practice is based on his expectations from brands whose values and intentions he knows, and this is in line with Vrendenburg et al. (2020). Therefore, it is easier to identify woke washing in advertising pieces of brands that are familiar to the consumer.

In continuation, Maxime also mentioned that sometimes he just gets a *“gut feeling”* (I1-314) that an advertisement is woke washing him and later searches for information that supports it. This is connected to an intrinsic mechanism developed based on scepticism when one perceives a brand's actions as doubtful (Bae, 2018). Incoherence between woke message and practice is especially fracturing when it comes to brands he is really into and whose communication platform has



always been very focused on these topics. This is also a manifestation of his focus on accountability and links back to consumers' expectations of a brand.

### 5.1.2. AMELIA

Amelia is a master's student in Marketing in the United Kingdom but has a background in Fashion Styling. She confessed that due to her Asian origin, she is personally related to issues of racism and has experienced it first-hand. She works at John Lewis, a well-known department store where she made herself familiar with the *"behind the scenes"* (I2-314) of a brand that helps societal causes more silently. Amelia sees social media as a good place to address brands and to become more aware, but also as a place where brands are called out. She believes that social media is an important part of discovering woke washing advertising because people see an ad in different lights, which can change her perspective. She confessed not to watch many ads because she now prefers to watch Netflix, yet good and relatable advertisements are the ones that stick to her memory. Amelia's narrative led to two themes:

**1) Timing** says respect to a concern related to the moment when a brand addresses social issues as a response to what is happening in the social context. Amelia was referring to a case of a missing woman in London related to sexual harassment when she said that she understands why brands use that moment to speak about the topic, yet she believes that *"they do it for the wrong reasons, like just to make themselves look good"* (I2-135). Later in the narrative, she mentioned another experience connected to Caroline Flack's suicide when she saw that *"companies jumped on that and that blew out loads of merch"* (I2-278). Thus, it is acknowledged and comprehended the in-time response in woke advertising, which addresses a cultural tension that emerged in society (Sarkar & Kotler, 2018; Young, 2017). However, the aspect that makes it turn into woke washing is when a brand takes advantage of the social context to promote itself within a time when the focus is on the cause.

The timing was also what got her to think that a Sainsbury's ad that included black people in the time of the Black Lives Matter movement could be a woke washing advertising. This perception and the impression that she does not see black people in the brand's advertisements at any other time made Amelia think that the woke advertisement aimed to *"get more attention"* (I2-199) and cause tension. Once more, the timing in which an ad is displayed influences the participant perception of whether it is woke washing or not because the viewer gets the impression that a brand wants to be part of the hot topic in society.

**2) Storyline** reflects Amelia's concern with how an advertisement scene is set, the characters and the meanings. She mentioned that Sainsbury's advertisement had three parts with different families, yet the choice of message for the ad that included a black family revealed to be problematic due to the storyline attributed to it.



Amelia (I2-207): *So a lot of people were saying that it was racist, calling them out, basically saying why name that one ... why basically give that storyline to that family ... of The Gravy Song, obviously relating to their skin colour (...).*

As in any advertising piece, the content is a crucial part of it; thus, Amelia perceives that the meaning of a message can be up to become controversial when the whole storyline, including the characters, is not thought of. When addressing sensible and bickering topics, brands should acknowledge the sensitivity of the social causes and the meanings that can be behind an advertisement. In continuation, Amelia also confessed that an ad *"can be seen in so many different lights"* (I2-210), and when she first saw this one, she thought *"it was just normal people"* (I2-217). Later, when she went to Twitter and Youtube, others' comments made her see it from a different perspective.

### 5.1.3. MIGUEL

Miguel is 22 years old and is studying in the field of cultural economics. He shows interest in the art world, especially in music, and in connection, he mentioned being part of a webinar's organization team on diversity and inclusion in music festivals. Miguel does not consider himself an activist and is very discrete on social media about social activism, but he shares and discusses these topics in a private setting. However, he realized that his social setting is composed of lookalikes, and therefore it is *"polarized"* (I3-172). Miguel has a *"really hard time trusting brands"* (I3-374), which he finds very hypocritical. He sees transparency as a key value, and that was also what he noticed when he experienced a festival that he considers authentic. Despite believing the importance of brands talking about social issues, Miguel does not feel the need to be represented when brands address it because he considers himself privileged as a *"white male, cisgender, heterosexual"* (I3-189). Miguel's themes regarding woke washing were:

**1) Incoherence** contrasts with Miguel's desire for transparent intentions, which he confessed that often lack when brands address social causes – *"it's always very hard to determine the actual intentions of a brand"* (I3-55). When he saw a black square from the festival Lowlands on Blackout Tuesday, he believed that the brand did not do it out of intention but rather *"out of fear that they*

would be called out for not taking a stand” (I3-132). Thus, he perceived that the brand was not genuinely concerned with the cause, which is noticeable in how the brand presents its festival line-up. This links back to the lack of genuineness and coherence signalled when brands use the social issues as a marketing ploy to draw attention (Vrendenburg et al., 2020). In continuation, this theme also denotes a particular relation to traces of incoherence when Miguel stated that *“if they just communicate out of semantics, to just use words ... words are really beautiful, but they don't show commitment. Actions show commitment”* (I3-273).

**2) Timing** mirrors concerns with the moment the ad is displayed. Miguel shared that he was familiar with Lowlands before. Thus, he could almost immediately tell that when they took a stand on Blackout Tuesday, it was a matter of timing because the brand did it at that moment *“but never before and never again”* (I3-81). The lack of consistency transmits the impression that the woke stance is taken as a response to the context rather than something that the brand would take in the long term. Timing is also what makes him identify woke washing advertisements when *“a brand or several brands are communicating about an issue”* (I3-212) because it makes him *“sceptical about the realness of the intention of their message if everyone is talking about it.”* (I3-213).

**3) Shallow perspective** refers to the perception that an advertisement is belittling the social movement. Miguel mentioned this in respect to the moment he watched the Pepsi ad with Kylie Jenner, which he found *“absolutely ridiculous”* (I3-219). He figured that the advertisement shows a lack of comprehension of the social movement and presents a superficial view of what, in reality, the movement is about. The lack of understanding when showing an unrealistic plot that does not address the cause with plausible conversations and solutions does not contribute to brands being seen as self-referential because they do not capture the cause the way consumers perceive it.



Miguel (I3-221): *I think that's also maybe one thing that just goes to show that I'm being woke washed ... when they just tell one small side of the story and they show lack of ... lack of understanding of the overall issue and ... they just show a quick and shallow solution. I think, for this kind of matters ... there is no shallow solution. Solutions have to be given some thought, and they can't be scripted because they're very context-specific.*

**4) Storyline** shows Miguel's concerns on how the advertising is presented and the use of notable celebrities as characters that do not fit with the woke advertisement message. This theme also emerged within the narrative about the Pepsi ad, in which Miguel believed that including *“big*

*shots*" (I3-228) shows that it is an orchestrated and planned marketing effort that includes a larger budget. He believes that this is *"creating a product and not (...) conveying a message"* (I3-229). Therefore, the use of celebrities in woke advertising goes against the desire for transparency and naturalness when addressing causes that are close to the audience. This naturalness in the storyline crashes the realistic plot and credible message that Becker et al. (2019) defend as crucial for an authentic advertisement. In short, the choice of using a celebrity who does not share a background with cause makes *"it easier to spot that they are just woke washing"* (I3-245).

### 5.1.4. LUCIA

Lucia is a Millennial who has been *"jumping from country to country"* (I4-8). She works in graphic design and confesses that sometimes her clients just want her to follow what is trending in society, and she believes that generally, brands do the same. Lucia was a volunteer when she was younger, which made her consider that to be aware and care is a *"duty"* (I4-125). She looks for brands that can inspire, involve, and make her learn something new, and that is also why she runs her purchases with the old lady at the local market. She expects brands to be like friends who support her values and create open conversations as a *"school of learning"* (I4-163) where everyone can learn more about social issues. The two themes that emerged in Lucia's narrative were:

**1) Tone** refers to the way brands communicate in advertisements through the message content, both the words and the sound. When Lucia was scrolling on her phone, a Nike's woke advertisement got her attention not only because of the message but because *"the tone of voice also, like, surrounds"* (I4-75). She compared it to the feeling of watching a commercial at the cinema. However, later, she confessed that the tone of the communication could also be something that makes her point to woke washing when *"it sounds a bit like, condescending or their tone is insensitive"* (I4-262). When she came across Victoria's Secret ad with plus-size women, she noticed *"a distinction or a tension in the ad and the tone"* (I4-321) because it sounded *"superficial"* (I4-323).



Lucia (I4-317): *One of the new models, I think it's the Asian girl, even says something like I think they are all so funny [mimicking voice]. And it sounds like she's only referring to the old or the normal Victoria's Secret models.*

This is linked to Lucia's desire for brands that inspire her and share a more humane connection with her. The tone of the advertisement is often a form of anthropomorphism that delivers emotion

and the message's meaning in an easy way (Chang, 2019). When there is a dissonance between the message and the tone, an advertisement lacks authenticity (Roy, 2010). In this case, Lucia perceives it as woke washing because the advertisement is out of tone with the message it attempts to transmit.

Further, Lucia does not like when a brand's tone gives the impression that *"they put themselves higher than all of us, like as if they know all the game"* (I4-358). In connection, she said never to take that approach when talking to friends about a social issue, so she wonders *"why are brands doing that?"* (I4-362). This is linked to her belief that brands behave as friends and have open conversations *"just one to one, not in a superior tone"* (I4-164). This consumer-brand relationship shows the need for a more personal, natural and evolving tone that in her perception lacks in these advertisements and makes them fall into woke washing.

**2) Timing** refers to the impression that brands do not continue their woke stances over time, especially when their past communication drastically contrast with what they communicate in the present. Lucia said to believe and appreciate when brands change for the better, but she confessed to be *"very critical or even sceptical when it comes to brands doing all wrong and then simply starting to be the heroes and the good players"* (I4-208). The lack of consistency mirrors what Vrendenburg et al. (2020) identified as a message that it is not carried on throughout time, not in the form of communications nor actions. This was also what made her identify Victoria's Secret ad as woke washing, and she makes the same connection with other examples during Pride Month. As part of this, she commented that *"brands that never had a transgender person in their advertisements cannot all of a sudden throw a party on social media when the Pride Month approaches"* (I4-237). Thus, Lucia sees this as a reaction to a social context marked by momentary topics in society, and she is naturally aware that when these times come, woke washing practices are quite trivial.

**3) Shallow perspective** says respect to Lucia's concern that brands are sometimes belittling the problem when presenting their product as the *"miracle solution"* (I4-295). She finds that *"insensitive"* and *"rude"* (I4-295), which is also connected to the use of a superior tone. She believes it happens because brands do not look at the problem from a broader perspective while *"consumers see the full spectrum of the social problem because we talk about it"* (I4-292). This is also linked to what she perceives as the need for reflection, both from the consumer and brand



sides - “we all need to do a bit of research and inner reflection before we act or before we say things” (I4-259).

### 5.1.5. KASPER

Kasper is a student at CBS and works in product management. He confessed that most of the ads he gets on social media are related to sustainability and small brands because the “algorithm” (I5-106) has figured him out. He also does not watch many ads on TV because he does not own one. Kasper confessed that his attention to social issues and sustainability started a couple of years ago, and he tries to buy from brands that share the same values as him. His first reaction to brand social activism is sceptical because some brands “capitalize on that to make a few more bucks” (I5-124). He only shares on social media posts he can relate to, and the rest he saves to talk with friends. Woke washing ads are delivered to him as woke washing without him being the one to think about it that light in the first place.



Kasper (I5-238): (...) kind of like it comes already delivered to me as woke washing. So, what I mean by this is that I usually don't get to the source where it's like oh, this ... you know, I see the ad itself. But it's more like I hear the buzz about ... oh, have you heard this ad? That's woke washing.

Kasper usually hears other people commenting on woke washing advertisements or becomes aware through sources such as Instagram, certain newspapers, and talk shows that share a “social conscience” (I5-258). He trusts these sources, and that squeezes the chances of him formulating an opinion driven by himself. Linked to this, Kasper does not feel “woke washed directly” (I5-189) because he only comes across the ads later; nonetheless, he believes “they're woke washing society and like all their consumers” (I5-187). Kasper’s theme regarding woke washing advertising was:

**1) Timing** refers to Kasper’s perception that some brands address societal issues when a trendy social movement is in vogue. The first question that arises in Kasper’s mind is “did they ever stand by these values before?” (I5-195). He confessed that he finds it “obvious” (I5-210) that an ad is woke washing when the social cause is being talked about by the majority of people and the brand behind the ad has never put efforts into that, “even if it's just (...) through their CSR policy” (I5-196). The mention of CSR is further in line with Sarkar & Kotler’s (2018) distinction between CSR as a long-term corporate-drive practice that englobes activism, and brand social activism as a more immediate response to societal issues. Time is a bittering aspect in woke advertising

because brand social activism needs to be a response to an issue in-time (Sarkar & Kotler, 2018), yet when it becomes a trendy topic that response is seen as less genuine or interested. In connection to his preference for smaller brands, Kasper assumed not to recall any case in which a smaller brand had jumped on a trendy movement, and that might be because they show support in a *“more organic and more humane”* (I5-288) way.

### 5.1.6. EMMA

Emma comes from a somewhat different professional background as she works in food science. She always tries to take something positive from a message and feels that it is necessary to keep talking about social issues because *“it is never too much”* (I6-83). Although it is acknowledged the trendy side of these woke campaigns, she shows that there is a positive side in it that linked to cause awareness. Emma sets a lot of constructive contrasts – *“where I draw my line”* (I6-184). She described that sometimes she only feels impacted by an advertisement because she can place herself in those *“shoes”* (I6-299). Emma also shared that brands are not the only ones responsible for raising awareness for social issues. She believes that *“we are held accountable as well”* (I6-115), so she tries to carry on with the message within her social setting. This is in line with woke consumers attempt to create educational settings where they raise cause awareness near non-woke consumers (Grant, 2018). In connection, Emma can take the good message of an advertisement and *“separate that from the brand”* (I6-146). This was what happened with Nike’s commercial about women empowerment because she found the message to be inspiring, even though she is aware that the brand does not always follow through with that message.



Emma (I6-145): *I've watched this commercial and to me, it was like ... [long pause] ok, this is a good topic and this is a good commercial. But to me, I can separate that from the brand. Even if I know that ... when I was looking for it on the Internet and doing like research, I think that the things that I found out don't make me believe that. Even though that Nike says ok, girls can be anything they want, I think that it doesn't make me believe that Nike pays, like, good money for their female employees, you know what I mean?*

This is once again linked to Emma’s impression that the right thing to do is *“using the message by itself to talk to each other and to raise awareness”* (I6-307) if the message is good. In connection, she said to believe that, when in the presence of woke washing, the *“effective thing you can do is not to go directly against them”* (I6-328) but rather to use the message to reach out to other consumers. Emma’s narrative was centred on one theme:

**1) Incoherence** is where Emma's draws her line with woke washing advertising. She said to find it hypocritical when a *"brand says something and then they do the opposite"* (I6-184). That was what made her signal that the social media Tik Tok was woke washing her when she noticed that, after a woke post on Blackout Tuesday, the company banned a girl report on Uyghurs' genocide. Emma also denotes that *"if the problem still exists, it's because some people that are saying it are not taking the actions according to it"* (I6-279). This sets woke consumers side by side with woke brands and denotes the need for a 'we consciousness' that implies collective activity to improve the cause and ultimately provide solutions. In continuation, she believes that it is never enough to talk about social problems while they persist in society. She stated that when brands take a stand and *"do nothing"* or *"do too little"* (I6-190), she finds it *"acceptable"* (I6-195) because at least the message is being carried out. In this regard, a distinction between acting against the woke messaging and low engagement with the cause after a woke messaging is noticeable. Thus, Emma believes that when there is a low engagement with prosocial practice, as defined by Vrendenburg et al. (2020), it is consumers chance to revert the situation and use the message to spread their social consciousness. This is also linked to Emma's narrative about the importance that consumers have in spreading the message and raise awareness for the social cause.

### 5.1.7. OLÍVIA

Olívia is studying at a Danish university but lives in Portugal now. She feels that people look for brands as role models in a world that she describes as *"corrupt"* (I7-299). Olívia sees courage in brands when they speak about social issues, especially when there are polemics and social division of opinions in that regard. This is in line with the role of brands as self-referential and co-constructors of consumers' identity projects (Castells, 2010; Manfredi-Sánchez, 2019). Although she does not see herself as a member of the LGBT+ community or other social movements, she likes when brands embrace them because it shows that they share the same values as her. She confessed to being familiar with woke washing because she knows about the topic and, in some cases, discusses it with her boyfriend. However, it is not part of her life as much as greenwashing, for example. In continuation, Olívia shared that Portuguese and European brands *"don't have the necessity of being woke"* (I7-54) because the focus of social problems is often in America. Although she said that there are a few social movements in her context, it is not *"that big of a problem"* (I7-52) compared to other realities. For that reason, she said that *"brands like kind of stay low"* (I7-52) in that regard. Olívia's theme was:

**1) Timing** refers to a concern that woke advertisements become woke washing advertising with the spacing of the events in time. Olívia firstly refers to Nike's ad with Kaepernick as a *"bold statement"* (I7-50) because there was tension around the issue, and it caused controversy. However, about Blackout Tuesday, she said that even though it was good to see support to the cause, *"it didn't have much meaning because everybody was doing it"* (I7-84). This is a manifestation of her impression that some brands merely react when they see a trend and *"hoped it would work"* (I7-175). This mirrors the perceived risk of adopting a generalist approach that follows trends when it comes to making a woke statement that can easily fall into woke washing (Vredenburg et al., 2020). She also refers to this in a larger time frame, meaning that a woke ad can be perceived as woke washing depending on the timing of the social context regarding the progression of the societal cause.



Olívia (I7-138): *Imagine if it was in twenty fifteen and nobody was talking about it, then at the time it could have been like woke maybe, but imagine if ... I don't know, if it was released like last year. It's just like woke washing.*

This goes back to the necessity of woke statements as an in-time response to a cultural tension emerging in society (Sarkar & Kotler, 2018; Young, 2017). However, cultural tension is not a synonym of a trend (Young, 2017). Thus, it comes across as woke washing when a brand displays an advertisement that it considers to be woke, perhaps even a pioneer step, in a cause that progressed to the point of no longer being perceived as a cultural tension in a specific context.

### 5.1.8. TOMÁS

Tomás is a Millennial who works in digital marketing, and he enjoys when advertisements are relatable in the sense that they capture what society is experiencing. He describes himself as an open-minded person who feels compassion towards minorities and social issues, even though he says to not be part of any - *"I don't have, like, any kind of those problems"* (I8-137). He also shared that he always *"takes a step back"* (I8-59) when brands use advertisements to address a social problem so that he can analyse whether brands are using it to promote themselves. Tomás says to recall many bad examples of woke advertisements because they *"tend to stick much more than the good ones"* (I8-102). He also has different reactions to woke washing depending on the severity and how he sees a brand. He confessed that it is often challenging to identify woke washing advertising because *"sometimes they are not so evident"* (I8-151). In this process, there is both the need to reflect and to *"see behind the point of the campaign"* (I8-148).

On the other hand, he admitted that *“sometimes there are even stronger cases”* (I8-159) that he considers being *“explicit”* (I8-78) that is woke washing. He perceives these as *“totally fake or totally used as an advantage for the company”* (I8-197). The theme that emerged in Tomás’ narrative was:

**1) Branding** is about promoting a particular product or brand by focusing on a branded symbol in a woke advertising. Tomás felt this was the case when we watched Nike’s woke ad with Kaepernick with *“that Nike logo underneath him”* (I8-120). The presence of logos and branded symbols are acknowledged in cause marketing (Manfredi-Sánchez, 2019). As a marketer, Tomás confessed to recognize that the brand logo needs to be part of the ad for brand awareness, but he felt that the brand was taking advantage of picking up a polemic character involved in a societal cause.



Tomás (I8-122): *But at the same time, I feel that's really ... [pause] they were putting more in their bag than, really, the cause, the social cause of the Black Lives Matter or the black community. I think they took advantage of that more than the movement itself and that I consider some example of woke washing, for example.*

This links back to Tomás’ scepticism when brands address social causes, and it resonates with the promotional messaging, in which the advertisement only transmits a brand’s stance and is often brand-focused (Kim et al., 2015). He also remembered another case when branding symbols were the cue for labelling it as woke washing. In this case, he called it *“product placement at its finest”* (I8-175) when the brand used *“a perfect Pepsi can in the middle of a riot”* (I8-174). The focus on the product contrasts with authentic brand social activism principles, which should be disassociated from branded products (Sarkar & Kotler, 2018). The focus on the product is then fading the importance of the societal issues, making the viewer identify it as woke washing advertising.

### 5.1.9. PEDRO

Pedro is a master’s student who has just started an Erasmus in Berlin. He has been involved in charity projects and has recently organized an event about gender inequality to drive practical solutions. He likes to keep himself constantly informed and mentioned specific social situations. However, he confessed to finding it *“weird”* (I9-361) that his friends do not read the news. Pedro places a great deal of attention on the optimal solution because he is aware of certain polemics in the brands he likes. However, he finds it challenging to be deterred from continuing purchasing



from them because he says to be a “*brand lover*” (I9-459), so instead, he tries to moderate the consumption. Pedro’s themes regarding woke washing were:

**1) Storyline** is about the storytelling presented in the ad and the type of message transmitted. Pedro believes that storytelling works as a “*hook*” (I9-311) because it is what gets the “*attention throughout the advertising*” (I9-79). As part of this, he confessed that storytelling is “*one of the most important things*” (I9-82) in woke ads because it also helps to inform about the social cause and explain how consumers can help. The focus on a solution is linked to Pedro’s focus on a conversation that drives practical and constructive solutions. This was later backed up when he said that it can be challenging to present a “*good and constructive and well-organized storytelling*” (I9-312). In connection, he confessed that sometimes what makes him identify woke washing advertising is when the storytelling comes across as “*cringe*” (I9-314). This is the case when he watches advertisements that are “*just spitting all the facts*” (I9-317) when communicating messages that seem to be obvious and only present the broader picture to the viewer.



Pedro (I9-321): *If it's a commercial that just says, you know, racism is bad, so you shouldn't do racism, you know, and you kind of go well, yeah. So, I mean, it's not really ... I mean, racism is a big issue.*

The use of plain messages that only show what a brand stands for and what is ‘right’ and ‘wrong’ reflects a promotional message. Such an approach focuses on what a brand wants to say rather than engaging the audience on a more complex discourse involving collaboration and solutions (Kim et al., 2015). In continuation, Pedro believes that it does not add much because he already knows what is wrong, so he would prefer to have a constructive perspective and “*use actual people that suffered from those problems or actual footage from those problems*” (I9-347).

**2) Incoherence** is about advertisements that do not represent a brand’s practices and therefore are signalled as woke washing. Pedro confessed that “*there's companies that do incredibly well-done commercials with incredible storytelling ideas and yet, you know, it's not really representative towards what they actually do*” (I9-76). The best approach he uses to detect that is to be as much informed as possible, which links to his concerns regarding people who do not read the news. Pedro also mentioned social media as a source that helps to formulate his opinion on woke washing advertising when it is “*being talked*” (I9-450), yet he believes social media is a “*two-edged sword*” (I9-446) due to the spread of misinformation. He also focused quite often on the idea that brands need to “*first fix your own issues and then you can advertise about those*

topics” (I9-147), which is a manifestation that mirrors the demanding coherence between what a brand does internally and what it communicates externally (Sarkar & Kotler, 2018).

### 5.1.10. CAMILLA

Camilla is studying marketing and takes the role of a marketing manager, where she sometimes writes content about diversity and inclusion. Personally, she confessed to be struggling with her body weight for the past few years. Although her perspective has changed over time due to a body positivity discourse in society, she still has many insecurities. Thus, she feels that it is essential that brands talk about it and include other social issues. Camilla shared that it is complicated for herself to *“stay true to the message”* (I10-66) because of her mindset and schemas. She believes that it can be even more challenging for brands to make that change in their mindset, despite good intentions. She also confessed that sometimes she uses the term woke as a joke when someone is strongly pro or against something because *“we all have those biases within ourselves”* (I10-73).

Camila is concerned that smaller brands that are doing woke advertisements *“in such a nice, honest way”* (I10-186) often lack visibility and resources. She feels sad about it because these might be the brands that *“have a real conversation about it”* (I10-188). She further substantiates this opinion when expressing that more prominent companies can take advantage to promote themselves and can lack the coherence needed beyond the advertisement, which in her perspective might make it *“tricky for us to trust them again”* (I10-284). She also shared that she reached out to small brands and creators a few times that give voice to social problematics to show appreciation for their work. Camilla’s narrative led to the following theme:

**1) Branding** mirrors her impression that some woke advertisements are meant to show a brand’s products and branding symbols. She founds it *“nonsense”* (I10-265) that brands use these types of claims without *“even talking about how to solve a problem”* (I10-265). She believes that the focus is shifted to put the *“brand in front”* (I10-266) and the product rather than presenting a constructive conversation about the social issue.



Camilla (I10-268): *Like, if you pretend to support or if you are supporting equality, diversity, inclusion ... if you want to support these things, then you shouldn't put your brand in front of that.*

Thus, the intention of the advertisement is perceived as promotional rather than a genuine concern with the cultural tension that is emerging in that context. This is linked to her *“gut*

*feeling*” (I10-277), which guides her unconscious process of identifying woke washing advertising when *“it's all fake”* (I10-275). It is noticed here a certain scepticism towards these marketing approaches.

### 5.2. CROSS-NARRATIVE ANALYSIS: PERCEIVED BRAND AUTHENTICITY

Through the interviews, participants naturally mention aspects in their narratives about woke washing linked to the concept of authenticity. Across narratives, woke washing was described with words such as *“fake”* (I2-271), *“hypocritical”* (I6-131) and *“fabricated”* (I5-229). This mirrors Vrendenburg et al. (2020) categorization of woke washing as an antonym of the general conceptualization of authenticity. The approaches that brands take on woke advertising are also scrutinized, having in mind an ‘authenticity lens’.

Maxime described that from his perspective, it feels *“less authentic and less impactful”* (I1-209) when a brand takes a stand on a cause in which there is no perceived risk of backlash because it is already *“largely acceptable to show support”* (I1-206). This is in line with responsive brand social activism, as brands address movements that have already been established in society (Sarkar & Kotler, 2018). In connection to authenticity, Miguel exclaimed to feel bizarre when a brand lacks authenticity in its communication. This is related to a lack of iconic authenticity in the advertising because it did not correspond to the mental projections the consumer had in mind (Morhart et al., 2015).



Miguel (I3-219): *I just found that absolutely ridiculous because it just shows that there is no authenticity in that ad, in their communication.*

Therefore, an interplay between authenticity and woke washing advertising was noticed even before the participants were asked about this concept.

When asked about a brand that participants perceive as authentic, most of them showed the need for some reflection time before answering. Miguel, for instance, confessed that naming an authentic brand can be a challenging task because he is *“very sceptical”* (I6-366). Even if the iconic cues for authenticity are present in a branded advertisement, consumer’s scepticism moderates the perception of authentic brands (Morhart et al., 2015). The eminent scepticism perhaps was increased by making participants reflect and tell stories about woke washing and then asked them to think about something they connote as positive.

The reason that underlies their choice of authentic brand was slightly diverse across narratives, which further shows that perceived brand authenticity is a subjective construct (Fritz et al., 2017). Participants named brands that they feel as unique, traditional, handcrafted and pioneers in what they do. However, a common standpoint amongst narratives was that they perceive these brands as honest and true to their values and mission. This is in line with the conceptualization of authenticity (Grayson & Martinec, 2004; Morhart et al., 2015). Kasper shared that the brand he chose as authentic keeps an alignment between its values and actions with the communication message. Lucia, for instance, shared that her perception of the authentic brand has to do with *“being good, and telling the truth, and being transparent”* (I4-494). These motives are once again opposite to what consumers have described in their experiences with woke washing advertising. For example, one of the themes that emerged from Miguel’s narrative was timing, and then he identifies an authentic brand based on the commitment to its values rather than following trends.



Miguel (I3-447): *I think that's for me, that's the definition of authenticity, it's when a brand sticks to its values and they're authentic. If they swing wherever the wind blows, then they're not authentic.*

In search for insights on the impact of woke washing advertising on perceived brand authenticity, participants were asked to imagine that their chosen authentic brand would display an advertisement that they perceived as woke washing. It is important to denote that the overall first reaction was surprise. Camilla said to be surprised because she has *“certain expectations of the brand”* (I10-437). Thus, consumers draw mental schemas that tell them what an advertisement from a particular brand would look like based on authenticity cues (Morhart et al., 2015). In connection, Lucia confessed to find this a *“tricky twist”* (I4-476) because woke washing is something consumers do not expect from a brand they identify and agree with, and for that reason, she would be *“caught out of the guard”* (I4-477).

Another common point was that their reaction would depend on the level of severity of the woke washing ad, and their forgiveness would also depend on that. As part of this, when asked about how they would feel about it, the overall emotion expressed was sadness and disappointment. However, two distinct reactions lead to the appearance of two themes related to the impact of woke washing advertising in perceived brand authenticity: inauthentic brand due to a personal attachment; separate ad message from the brand.

### 5.2.1. INAUTHENTIC BRAND DUE TO A PERSONAL ATTACHMENT

The first overarching theme is marked by an emotional and personal connection to a brand. Participants who shared a self-referential connection to the authentic brand they mentioned said to be highly impacted by a woke washing advertisement. This personal attachment is motivated by the perception of a brand that consumers can identify with, a brand that they have experienced throughout their lives or even a brand that closely motivates them to be better. This is in line with the role of existential authenticity cues as self-referential resources that help construct one's identity project (Morhart et al., 2015). Pedro named a brand that has been part of his childhood; Maxime and Camilla named brands that share the same values as them and are committed to helping them to contribute to a social change; Lucia, Amelia, Kasper and Miguel referred brands whose values align with theirs, and they experienced that in first-hand.

These participants showed to deposit high trust in these brands and build certain expectations around what these brands should communicate and how they should act, which is in line with Morhart et al. (2015) findings. They would feel *"betrayed"* (I1-371; I4-485) if such a brand displayed an ad that they would perceive as woke washing. They would stop perceiving them as authentic because the brand would show a flaw in the motives that make them perceived as authentic. In this sense, there would be disharmony between consumers' mental projections and the brand's behaviour. In connection, Kasper confessed that he would no longer perceive the chosen brand as authentic because *"they are not actually fighting for those values"* (I5-440). This impacts one of the dimensions of brand authenticity – credibility, which is related to trust and commitment to keep promises (Morhart et al., 2015).

Further, Miguel commented that if the brand he is personally connected to felt the need to woke wash him, he would not perceive them as authentic, nor the brand would be honest with him. Moreover, in between laughs, Olívia said that she would think that the brand has been *"hacked"* (I7-278) because it is not following its values. In both narratives is denoted a break in integrity, which is a dimension of brand authenticity related to being honest and follow moral principles (Morhart et al., 2015).

There is also a manifestation of general distrust of everything these brands would communicate in the future. Miguel confessed that *"everything they say in the future will be up for an extra layer of scepticism"* (I3-336). Lucia expressed the same concern and added that this is becoming quite common for other topics beyond woke causes.





*Lucia (I14-435): I feel distrust honestly, because ... it feels like we're always playing a game of beliefs and disbeliefs with brands.*

This scepticism and distrust after a woke washing advertisement add to the already existent consumers' difficulty in seeing realness in branded communications (Becker et al., 2019). Further, concerning participants reaction to the brand, Maxime shared that his relationship with the brand is based on trust; thus, if the brand lied or showed incoherence between message and practice, he would stop buying the product and stop wearing the ones he already owns.



*Maxime (I11-384): But Allbirds because I feel so personally connected to the brand and because I'm like I trust them, I trust that you're doing the right thing, if I found out that they were lying, I just wouldn't buy their stuff anymore. Maybe I wouldn't even wear the shoes by them that I own anymore, because I would feel like personally betrayed.*

The same was shared by other participants who had similar narratives about perceived brand authenticity and said to stop supporting a brand if a woke washing advertising would come in place. This is in line with a tendency for backlash and boycotting when brands incur moral violations (Kam & Deichert, 2020). On the other hand, Kasper and Lucia showed interest in waiting to see “*what is going to happen from here on*” (I15-428) rather than taking an immediate choice on their consumption even if they perceived it as inauthentic.

Participants who shared a personal attachment to the authentic brand also showed more engagement in trying to reach out to the brand to draw attention to the flaw. Although they shared to not be so active on social media to call brands out in any other situation, in these cases, they confessed that they would be more predisposed to comment and share either on social media or in private sets. Kasper said that he would be determined to “*really try to understand*” (I15-412), and Camilla would take a step further and reach out to the brand to understand the reason behind the woke washing and perhaps try to help the brand to the extent possible. This shows that their connection with the brand would make them change their perception of brand authenticity, yet they would be slightly reluctant to lose this brand as a self-referential without battling.



*Camilla (I110-467): (...) maybe I would also feel responsible in helping the brand to go back on track and just make sure that this type of mistakes doesn't happen in the future. So, that's the difference between the instant reaction to a huge corporation or something and to the brand that I was following and trusting already.*

In short, participants confessed that the impact of woke washing advertising on perceived brand authenticity would be more substantial with brands to which they are personally attached and share a social consciousness. Thus the brand would become inauthentic.



*Lucia (I4-505): Maybe after watching an ad that is woke washing me, I would consider them inauthentic in a stronger way ... not sure if I could say that ... but, yeah, in a stronger way because I have that connection with Veja and therefore I think that shift in my point of view is more impactful for me than if it was just another brand that I don't feel so attached to.*

This manifestation goes back to interviewee's expectations about brands that they perceived as authentic. Further, it is linked to the absence of iconic cues that sustain the mental projections that they have constructed about the brand's advertising, image, and communication style throughout the relationship (Leigh et al., 2006).

### 5.2.2. SEPARATE AD MESSAGE FROM THE BRAND

The second overarching theme is connected to a separation between the ad message and the brand when an advertisement is perceived as woke washing; consequently, the impact on perceived brand authenticity does not affect the brand as a whole. Participants who expressed this named brands that they perceive as authentic and share a connection with it, but not to the same extent as others.

Tomás confessed that *"it would be tough"* (I8-28) to deal with a woke washing advertising from a brand he believes to be authentic due to its unique and high-quality pioneer products. This resonates to brand heritage, uniqueness and differentiation, which are deemed important for authenticity (Fritz et al., 2017). He further said that it would not impact his consumption of that brand because he believes in the product. Even though his perception of the brand would slightly change, he would just perceive it as bad and inauthentic communication, but would not extend that to the product, for example.



*Tomás (I8-288): I would not sell anything I have because, all in all, it's good hardware, good material, but it would hurt me a bit.*

*Tomás (I8-295): I don't think that I would stop buying a guitar from them if I really wanted it because of that.*

Emma would also face this situation with a similar perspective. She confessed to trying to balance her good impression of the brand with this potential woke washing advertisement without forgetting *"all the good things that I have seen"* (I6-414). If the advertisement was not severe,

Emma would try to see it as a “*slip*” (I6-447) on the brand’s actions and communication and not something that would hijack the whole brand. This is linked to her narrative on how she can separate the ad message from the brand and use it for good and for bad, depending on the case.

This separation between what is generally perceived as two intertwined spheres was also commented by Tomás, who said that the brand would not be perceived as authentic as before, but only the brand image and communication would be affected. Connected to the level of severity of the woke washing ad, he said that in some instances, the ad demands that he takes the message more seriously and allow to “*separate the message from the messenger*” (I8-327). In such cases, he would weigh more the message and only then reflect on how he sees the authentic brand. Emma also confessed that she does not see authenticity as an “*on and off button*” (I6-447), and although the overall perception of brand authenticity would slightly decrease due to watching a woke washing ad from this brand, it could later increase with time or a proper apology.

Both interviewees said previously in their narratives to not be very active on social media when it comes to addressing a brand, and this would also be the situation where they would not “*expose them publicly*” (I8-309). Instead, they would only comment on the advertisement with friends without intending to “*cancel that brand or put them away*” (I6-484). This is also a manifestation of how they would considerably keep their overall perception of the brand and not be deterred from appreciating it.

### 5.3. SUMMARY OF FINDINGS

The first section of findings presented an understanding of how these woke consumers identify woke washing advertising and their life narratives that shape that process. The themes related to woke washing advertising that emerged from the individual narratives and their manifestations in their personal experiences are summarized in [Table 3](#). The participants revealed that spotting woke washing advertising can either be easy or a challenge depending on their knowledge about the brand behind, the social buzz around it and what their friends and other people on social media think about the ad. Participants also shared that woke washing advertising is often more commonly driven by more prominent corporations, which leads to a layer of increased scepticism.

Focusing on advertising, it was found that participants identify woke washing advertising based on *incoherence, timing, storyline, shallow perspective, tone, and branding*.

| THEMES              | INDIVIDUAL NARRATIVES                 | DESCRIPTION   |
|---------------------|---------------------------------------|---|
| Incoherence         | Maxime, Miguel, Emma, Pedro           | Narrative related to being illogical, unclear, lack of cohesion, not forming a unified whole, and not matching words with practice.   |
| Timing              | Amelia, Miguel, Lucia, Kasper, Olívia | Narrative related to the moment the ad is displayed within the spacing of events and social movements in time, as well as a lack of continue behaviour in relation to woke stances over time. |
| Storyline           | Amelia, Miguel, Pedro                 | Narrative related to the storytelling of an advertising, how the scene is set, the characters, the meanings, and the narrative threads experienced by each character or set of characters.    |
| Shallow perspective | Miguel, Lucia                         | Narrative related to lack of understanding, insensitive approach, and belittling the social issue.  |
| Tone                | Lucia                                 | Narrative related to the way a brand communicates through the intentional use of sound and wording to create a specific tone for an advertisement.  |
| Branding            | Tomás, Camilla                        | Narrative related to the promotion of a particular product or company by means of putting the focus on a branded symbol in a woke advertising.  |

**TABLE 3.** Summary of themes related to the identification of woke washing advertising. Own production.

The second section presented findings related to the impact of woke washing advertising on perceived brand authenticity. Two dominant themes emerged from participants narratives that differentiate the impact on perceived brand authenticity: *inauthentic brand due to personal attachment* and *separate ad message from the brand*. Participants who showed to perceive a brand authentic due to its brand-self connection, which is based on self-referential power and leads to a personal attachment, believe that they would change their perception of that brand. If exposed to woke washing advertisements, they would drastically consider the brand inauthentic, but would be more invested in calling attention to the ad and understanding the reasons behind it because they would feel personally harmed. On the other hand, participants who showed to be able to separate the ad message from the brand said that the woke washing advertisement would slightly impact their perception of brand authenticity, but only perceive it as an inauthentic communication that does not impact the brand as a whole. For these, a woke washing advertisement would still have a negative impact, yet it would be seen as a slip in the brand's communication.



CHAPTER

# 06

discussion

“

**a bad advertisement  
decision, especially  
in relation to these  
social issues, leaves  
a stain”**

Tomás, Interview 8



# DISCUSSION

This chapter will elaborate on the discussion and evaluation of the findings presented in the previous chapter, focusing on providing arguments that can answer the research questions. The analysis will dwell on a combination of the new knowledge from the overarching themes and insights that emerged in participant's narratives with the existent literature.

## 6.1. CUES OF WOKE WASHING ADVERTISING

The analysis of this study highlights the controversy in woke washing advertising and the importance of praise carefulness and transparency when taking a stand on societal causes. The identification of woke washing can sometimes be an immediate process when the ad presents explicit cues for that, but more often, it involves social activity, such as discussing it with others, looking at others' comments on social media, and being exposed to it by the media. This thesis argues that the identification of woke washing advertising is a subjective process that mirrors consumers' societal stances and in which consumers co-create that label collectively. The identification of woke washing advertising has many vertices. It can be seen from different lights, yet one unifying point is that woke washing advertising is associated with inauthenticity, falsehood, hypocrisy, and lack of genuineness, which match with what has been highlighted in the scarce existing literature (Vredenburg et al., 2020; Sobane, 2019). To complement this knowledge, the findings of this study suggest six cues that make consumers identify woke washing advertising.

### 6.1.1. INCOHERENCE: THE CRASH ON WALKING THE WALK

Incoherence between communication and brand practice towards the social cause that is being focused on the ad is one of the aspects that allow consumers to identify a woke washing advertisement. Consumers see it as hypocritical when a brand communicates and advertises without supporting its message with pro-cause actions, which is well in line with Vredenburg et al.'s (2020) conceptualization of woke washing as inauthentic brand activism. Thus, incoherence in woke washing advertising arguably touches on the perception of integrity and credibility of a brand, which Morhart et al. (2015) suggest as an essential dimension for brand authenticity. The

findings imply that incoherence leaves an open gap that boosts consumers scepticism and gets them to question the legitimacy of a brand's socio-political stance, leading to perceived woke washing. The dichotomy between ad message and practice is a font of dissonance in what consumers expect from a brand that claims to be woke and how such a brand shows to be so. The subjective character embedded in the expectations they set is based on mental schemas that consumers build around their perception of a brand, which was also underscored in previous literature (Maille & Fleck, 2011). Consequently, the incoherence denoted in an advertisement is perceived differently based on the expectation that consumers have of a brand and the evaluation of how well they believe a brand follows through the advertising message.

### 6.1.2. TIMING: THE LIMBO BETWEEN TRENDS AND LACK OF CONSISTENCY

Naturally, any form of advertising needs to be context-relatable and social activist marketing is seen as an in-time response (Young, 2017; Sarkar & Kotler, 2018). However, the findings demonstrate that timing is also an aspect that makes consumers identify woke washing advertising due to the perception that, due to the pressure to be an in-time response to the social context, brands often react by following trends and lack consistency over time. Thus, consumers see a questionable woke stance as a hallow response given that it is less organic and less proactively driven. This undoubtedly contrasts with Sarkar & Kotler's (2018) conceptualization of proactive brands. Moreover, the findings show that Blackout Tuesday and Pride Month are deemed as examples of timings that brands use to show what they stand up for without giving continuation to such claims in other timeframes. Thus, when the timing of an advertisement suggests woke washing, it is reflected on a lack of continuity that contrasts with the authenticity dimension (Morhart et al., 2015). Consumers expect that brands evolve their perspective on societal issues in a progressive way that accompanies social evolution, which is in line with the notion that consumers see brands as co-creators of their identity projects (Castells, 2010).

### 6.1.3. STORYLINE: A TAIL OF HOW THE SCENE IS SET

The storyline is also found as an important aspect in the identification of woke washing advertising because the plot impacts consumers' perception of the ad. The choice of characters, storytelling message and meaning connotations in the ad are deemed as decisive components that are open for consumers' scrutiny when a brand addresses bickering social tensions. Becker et al. (2019) state that building a realistic and credible plot is critical for authentic advertisement, and this study goes one step further and argues that it is crucial to unpack the meanings of every

aspect of the storyline, from the characters to any symbolic items, to avoid falling into woke washing advertising. Such aspects of the storyline might fail to be congruent with the message or even disrespectful to the social cause or the culture that is being addressed in an ad. Therefore, the findings imply that storyline is likely to lead consumers to process the overall advertisement more analytically and set it up as woke washing.

### 6.1.4. SHALLOW PERSPECTIVE: SIT AND READ THE ROOM

The empirical findings depict shallow perspective as another cue that helps consumers identify woke washing, which refers to showing a lack of understanding, belittling the social cause that is being addressed and presenting an unrealistic plot that does not favour the social movement. The plot of an advertisement should correspond to the narrative prototypes that consumers share (Chang, 2019). Without being able to read the room, a brand fails to provide self-referential advertisements that deliver value and support woke consumers' identity projects. A shallow perspective in woke washing advertisements goes against the symbolism in brand authenticity, as Morhart et al. (2015) suggested. Thus, rather than communicating constructive solutions and plausible conversations relatable to the consumer and that deliver value, brands communicate at the level of ideology and signals.

### 6.1.5. TONE: THE WRONG WALTZ

Based on the findings, this study also presents the tone of voice of an advertisement as a susceptible to be a cue for consumers' perception of being woke washed. The tone can be expressed by the words and sound used to transmit a brand's stance on societal issues. In woke washing advertising, this is signalled by a mismatch between the tone consumers naturally use when speaking about societal tensions in their setting versus the one a brand uses in an advertisement that claims to be woke. This is in line with Roy (2010) statement that the tone of communication can lead to incongruency. Further, this study adds that woke washing advertisement can also bring up the perception of brands using a condescending and incentive tone that lacks legitimacy and harms consumers perception of the ad. Consequently, this also resonates with a flaw in symbolism (Morhart et al., 2015), as the tone does not resemble consumers.

### 6.1.6. BRANDING: ANOTHER LOGO ON EVERY CORNER

The study's findings reveal that consumers identify woke washing advertising when the flagrant presence of logos, products and branded symbols overtakes the focus of the social tension that is being addressed in an ad. This is connected to the impression that a brand promotes itself and takes advantage of a social movement for marketing purposes. In this sense, woke washing advertising highly contrasts with Sarkar & Kotler's (2018) argument that successful brand social activism needs to be undressed of product-related content. Thus, the focus on branding elements is especially fracturing in a countercultural realm where consumers resist seeing another brand logo on every corner (Holt, 2002). When consumers perceive that the ad message says more about the advertiser brand than the social cause, it is denoted as promotional marketing. Kim et al. (2015) argued that this approach drives a lack of support from consumers in regard to the brand-cause relationship. Consequently, branding-focused woke washing advertisements make consumer deterred to believe in it due to a connotation as promotional communication. Thus, this study points down the exacerbated presence of branding symbols as a cue to identifying woke washing advertising.

### 6.2. THE IMPACT ON PERCEIVED BRAND AUTHENTICITY

In line with the above discussion, the empirical findings set woke washing advertising as opposed to authenticity. Consequently, the lack of fulfilling the authenticity dimensions has a deemed negative impact on perceived brand authenticity. This complements existing literature on woke washing and inauthentic brand activism messaging (Vrendenburg et al., 2020). However, the findings imply that the impact of woke washing can be divided into two different layers of brand authenticity. This is embedded in the notion that consumers perceived brand authenticity differently according to their own expectations, experiences and relationships with a brand, as also seen in the literature by Fritz et al. (2017) and Morhart et al. (2015).

Consumers who see a brand as self-referential because it assists them in creating their identity projects share a personal attachment and a strong link with that brand. If in the presence of a woke washing advertising, these consumers feel that it negatively impacts their overall perception, making them perceive it as an inauthentic brand. The fact that consumers hold this brand-self connection makes them believe that such a brand would never break its commitment or betray them (Morhart et al., 2015). This is in line with the fact that consumers evaluations of brand authenticity differ based on the mediation of the meanings attributed to a brand (Pattuglia

& Mingione, 2018). However, previous literature state brand-self connection and brand attachment as consequences of being perceived as authentic (Beverland & Farrelly, 2010; Park et al., 2010 in Morhart et al., 2015; Oh et al., 2019).

In contrast, this study argues that existent brand-self connection is why consumers perceive it so drastically as an inauthentic brand after a woke washing advertisement. Consequently, this perception of brand inauthenticity is extended to the brand as a whole. Thus, a woke washing advertisement would impact the holistic perception of brand authenticity and make them reconsider their attachment to the brand.

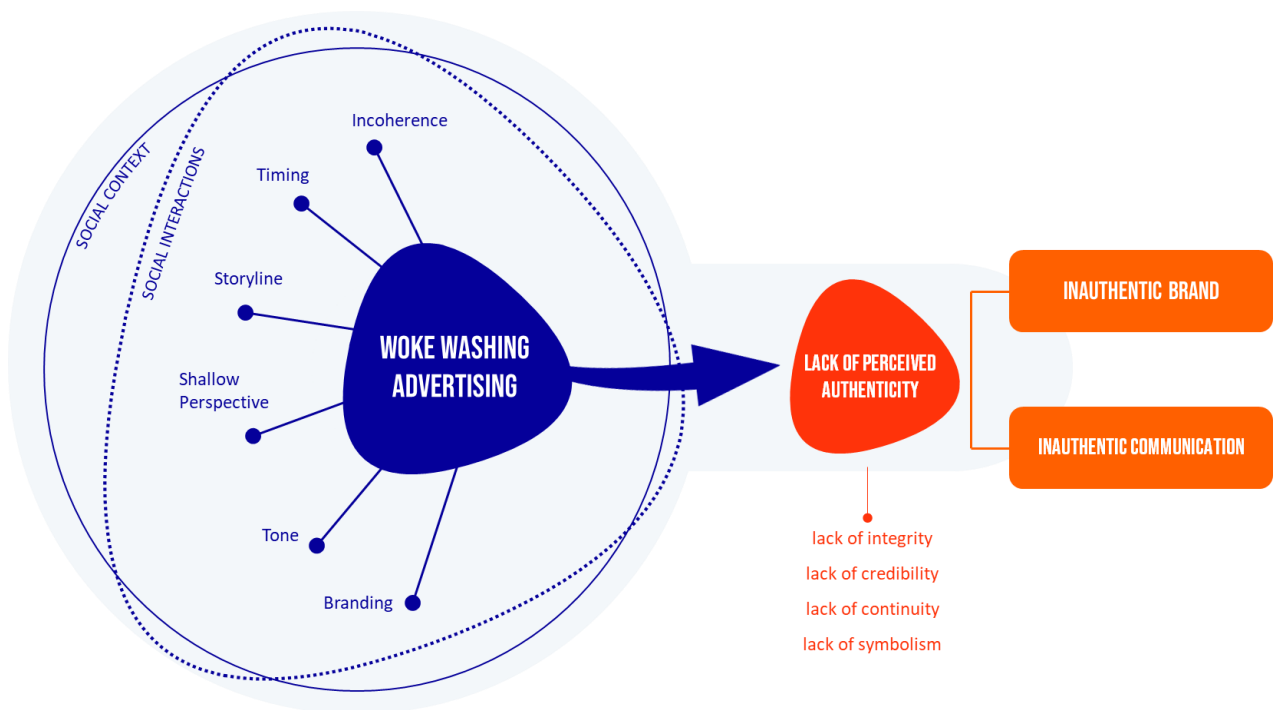
On the other hand, this study also argues that there are consumers whose perception of woke washing advertising makes them perceive a brand's communication as inauthentic but does not impact the brand as a whole. Based on their meaning attributions and expectations, these consumers see a woke washing ad as poor communication that lacks authenticity. Consequently, a woke washing advertisement would not make them deterred to buy from the advertiser brand nor make them feel revolted. It does not mean that their perception of authenticity would not be impacted; yet, the impact would be less drastic and even momentary in some instances. Therefore, perceived brand authenticity can also lay in a deeper layer from this perspective. This brings newness to the existing knowledge on the field because, to the best of present knowledge, such distinction has never been pointed, especially in connection to woke washing advertising.

### 6.3. TOWARDS THE CREATION OF A FRAMEWORK

Based on this discussion and the presented findings, the thesis at hand advocates that woke washing advertising is embedded in the social context, and consumers' perception of it is socially constructed through diverse social interactions. Through this process, consumers identify woke washing advertising based on six cues: *incoherence*, *timing*, *storyline*, *shallow perspective*, *tone* and *branding*. These cues can be explicit or ambiguous in an advertisement that attempts to be woke, albeit social interactions help them in this process. Woke washing advertising is perceived as inauthentic and phoney. Consumers perceive a lack of authenticity when exposed to woke washing, meaning that it constitutes inauthentic brand social activism (Vrendenburg et al., 2020). It fails to show integrity, credibility, continuity and symbolism; thus, it makes consumers reflect and reconsider how they perceived the brand as authentic.



The lack of authenticity rebounds on perceived brand authenticity, yet consumers can either perceived the brand as inauthentic or merely perceive the communication as inauthentic. In other words, the impact of woke washing advertising on perceived brand authenticity differs according to expectations, meaning negotiations and relationships they establish to a brand behind an ad. The framework below (Figure 7) captures how consumers identify woke washing advertising through the six cues found in this research study and the impacts on their perception of brand authenticity.



**FIGURE 7.** Framework for woke washing advertising and perceived brand authenticity. Own production.



# CHAPTER 07 conclusion

“

**there are companies  
that do incredibly  
well-done commercials  
... yet, it's not really  
representative towards  
what they actually do”**

Pedro, Interview 9



# CONCLUSION

This thesis intended to understand how consumers identify woke washing advertising in a realm where this practice has become more eminent, and consumers are increasingly sceptical about marketing communications. As part of this objective, this thesis also sought to uncover the impact of woke washing advertising on perceived brand authenticity from a consumer-based perspective.

Based on the empirical findings and the body of knowledge developed through a theoretical framework, woke washing advertising is as a result of this presented as an emerging concept in the brand communication paradigm that causes notorious controversy among consumers and is connoted as phoney communication of brand social activism. By uncovering how consumers identify woke washing advertising, this study has shown that woke washing is socially constructed in symbiosis with the social context and consumers' social interactions. Consequently, woke washing advertising has a subjective nature, meaning it can be seen in different and dynamic lights according to the context and the expectations consumers set on how they desire to see brands taking a stand. In connection, and to answer the first research question, this study concludes that woke washing advertising can be identified through perceived incoherence, timing, storyline, shallow perspective, tone and branding. Thus, it seems to be a line that when crossed makes consumer perceive being woke washed, although there can be different levels of how harmful a woke washing advertisement can be. Therefore, this thesis clearly states these six cues for woke washing, but it raises the question of the different severity levels of woke washing advertising.

This thesis also concludes that woke washing advertising is perceived as inauthentic brand social activism because it fails to be in line with the dimensions of brand authenticity. Consequently, and to answer the second research question, woke washing advertising negatively impacts perceived brand authenticity. However, the study has shown that this impact can be felt at different levels as if it was an iceberg. Consumers can either perceive the brand behind it as an inauthentic brand or merely as an inauthentic communication, based on how the brand is self-referential to them and on the expectations that they have attached to it.

To conclude, the presented framework for woke washing advertising and perceived brand authenticity visually illustrates the outcome of this thesis. The framework captures how woke washing advertising is understood as a socially constructed concept embedded in the social context, how the six presented cues make consumers identify it in advertisements, and how it can impact perceived brand authenticity differently by leading to the impression of an inauthentic brand or an inauthentic communication.

### 7.1. THEORETICAL CONTRIBUTIONS

This study contributes to academia by extending the understanding of woke washing advertising and inauthentic brand social activism communication, which are both deemed contemporarily present in today's social and branding realms. In line with Manfredi-Sanchez (2019), the findings show that brand activism communication is mainly associated with scepticism and perceived inauthenticity from a consumer-based perspective. However, this study needed to go one step further and understand why it is perceived as such. Vrendenburg et al. (2020) were, until recently, one of the few researchers presenting empirical findings concerning the woke washing standpoint, and although they propose it as inauthentic brand social activism, they did not explore why and did not uncover the interplay with brand authenticity. The thesis at hand further complements existing literature on the concept by presenting cues that make consumers identify woke washing advertising and uncover the social interactions that make this issue a social negotiated and constructed label, and presents the impacts of woke washing advertising on perceived brand authenticity. Moreover, the study contributes with valuable insights on post-modern brands, or what Young (2017) calls 'brands that do', and consumer perception of sham marketing strategies involving societal issues.

### 7.2. LIMITATIONS & FUTURE RESEARCH

Undoubtedly, this thesis contributed to a thorough understanding of a new emergent concept – woke washing advertising; and provided valuable insights into its interplay with perceived brand authenticity. There are, however, certain limitations of the findings of the study. As it is of the utmost importance to be critical and reflexive, this section presents the limitations of this study and suggest approaches to overcome them with possible future research.

First, the use of the social constructivist standpoint and qualitative methodological approach introduced the first layer of subjectivism needed to understand the concepts under study; thus,

the study aimed not to allow greater generalization of findings. Further, the focus on the social narratives and contexts in which these concepts are constructed increases the subjectivistic stance of this research. Therefore, the findings do not aim to apply to all woke washing advertisements nor represent the overall woke consumer, even if the participants consider themselves as woke. To better support the findings of this research and allow greater generalizations, future research on this field should include a quantitative experiment approach. To do so, a wider sample would face different advertisements that manipulated the cues for woke washing advertising to provide more objective insights about how they identify woke washing advertising and how it impacts perceived brand authenticity. In line with the question raised when concluding this thesis, it would also be relevant to use this experiment to uncover the different severity levels of woke washing advertising perceived by consumers.

Second, the data collection sample was kept considerably small because the focus was on the quality of the participants' narratives and their lifeworlds. In connection, this sample was constituted by woke consumers, and it can be interesting to understand the perspective of non-woke consumers to consubstantiate a more holistic framework. The study is further restricted by a limitation imposed right at the beginning of the research – a focus on Gen Z and Millennial from European countries. Throughout the data collection, some participants mentioned that woke washing is the most incident in America, where social problems are said to generate a greater buzz. It can be of high relevance to extended future research to America to perhaps uncover deeper or newer findings about woke washing advertising.

Third, and in connection to the previous point, the research is highly aware that participants' narratives were often focused on two advertisements: Nike 'Dream Crazy' with Kaepernick and Pepsi 'Live for Now Moments Anthem' with Kendall Jenner. Although other cases came up as references in their narratives, these emerged almost across all interviews. The purpose of the study was never to work with case studies; on the contrary, asking participants to send an example from their lifeworld aimed also to bring diversity to the study. Therefore, it is recognized as a limitation of the findings, which can be linked to the mention of these advertisements to a certain degree.

Lastly, when researching under social constructivism and focusing on active interviews, the presence of the research in the study is inevitable. The subjective character of the research already envisioned this, and keeping a reflexive journal and research journal helped to attenuate



this effect. Nonetheless, the researcher played an active role in the interviews and within some participants' narratives emerged experiences and examples of woke washing to which the researcher was familiar. This was also documented in the reflexive journal to avoid biasing findings to the extent that would lower this study's quality.

To sum up, following best practices to ensure the quality of the study helped to overcome expected limitations, but it is acknowledged that certain limitations surround the findings of this thesis. Future research should consider non-woke consumers to get an integrated representation of consumers and be conducted in America searching for different perspectives and, ultimately, backed up with a quantitative method for objective insights that allow greater generalizations.

# CHAPTER 08

## managerial implications

“

**there could be so many things done in a different way and maybe it would be an impactful message”**

Camilla, Interview 10



# MANAGERIAL IMPLICATIONS

The findings of this research study provide various managerial implications related to how consumers identify woke washing advertising and the impact on perceived brand authenticity. Woke advertising is never a dreadful idea if it is well aligned with a brand and strategically thought and executed. However, the findings of this thesis suggest that it can be relatively easy for an advertisement to fall into woke washing. This research acknowledged that each woke cause is context-specific; consequently, every creation of an ad that attempts to be woke is a particular case. Despite this, overarching conclusions of this study can help to support creatives and marketers' work to avoid falling into woke washing advertising.

Firstly, this study argues is that woke washing advertising is perceived as inauthentic and phoney; thus, a brand should avoid by all means launching advertisements that are susceptible to be perceived as such. To do so, a brand should first and foremost be genuinely involved with the social cause and take a stand as a desire for social change. In the optimal scenario, being involved means being proactively engaged with the woke cause rather than responding to the social context with a bold advertisement that is merely in line with the social movement. Thus, brands should see it as a holistic transformation that pushes society forward instead of just a marketing campaign that follows trends. Consumers feel that it is more natural when this type of advertisement involves them, shows real images of the social movement, and shares a partake message rather than promotional. Consequently, brands can benefit if they co-create these advertisements with consumers and other stakeholders as an open space for conversation and societal learning where there is a sense of 'we' consciousness.

A key finding of this study is that consumers identify woke washing advertising through perceived incoherence, timing, storyline, shallow perspective, tone and branding in a brand advertisement. Thus, it is of extreme importance that both the creative agency and the marketing department apply a critical lens on these cues when developing an advertisement that aims to be woke. As showed in the findings, woke washing advertising can be more explicit in some cases than others. Therefore, it is of great benefit to have an external consultant, who should be knowledgeable on the social cause, assist in the advertisement's creative process and guide the brand when taking

a stand. This thesis suggests a canvas model that aims to avoid falling into woke washing and was developed based on a combination of the findings uncovered in this study and the theory developed by Sarkar & Kolter (2018) on brand activism and by Henriksen (2018) on advertising and communication campaigns. The (un)Woke Advertising Canvas (Figure 8) proposes several steps that concern both the brand and the social cause and ends with a checklist that evaluates whether the advertisement contains any cue that might be up to be perceived as woke washing by consumers.

| Brand & Social Cause       | Advertising Strategy   | Creative Advertising | (un)Woke Checklist   |
|----------------------------|--|----------------------|--|
| BRAND WOKESTANCE           | TARGET DEFINITION  | CALL TO ACTION       | <b>INCOHERENCE</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><input type="checkbox"/> The brand is walking the walk</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Practice matches the advertisement content</li> </ul>   |
| BRAND VALUES               | STRATEGIC OBJECTIVE  | COMMUNICATION WORDS  | <b>TIMING</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><input type="checkbox"/> The ad is not following trends</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> The ad is consistent with brand's past and future campaigns</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> The ad is not insensitive to the timing of the social context</li> </ul>                    |
| BRAND PAST SOCIAL ACTIVISM | ADVERTISING APPROACH <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Reactive advertising</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Proactive advertising</li> </ul> | TAGLINE              | <b>STORYLINE</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><input type="checkbox"/> The storytelling is realistic and represents the social cause</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> The choice of characters and/or celebrities is appropriate</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> All symbols and meanings have been well thought</li> </ul> |
| SOCIAL CAUSE VALUES        | FORMAT & CHANNELS  | LOGLINE              | <b>SHALLOW PERSPECTIVE</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><input type="checkbox"/> The ad plot is not unrealistic nor shallow</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> The ad shows understanding and comprehension</li> </ul>  |
| SOCIAL CONTEXT             |  |                      | <b>tone</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><input type="checkbox"/> The tone is not authoritative nor condescending</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> The tone suggests an open conversation</li> </ul>  |
| COST/BUDGET                | RETURN   | METRICS              | <b>BRANDING</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><input type="checkbox"/> The ad does not promote the product as the solution</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> The focus is on the social cause, not the brand</li> </ul>   |
|                            |  |                      | <b>AUTHENTICITY</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Does it show integrity?</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Does it show credibility?</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Does it show continuity?</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Does it show symbolism?</li> </ul>                                  |

FIGURE 8. (un)Woke Advertising Canvas. Own production. (see Appendix F for full-size image)

Finally, regarding the impact on perceived brand authenticity with woke washing, it is essential to avoid including these cues in an advertisement; and include elements that resemble authenticity dimensions to further develop that perception in consumers' minds. Thus, when creating an advertisement that claims to be woke, creatives must question if the ad piece is placed with a brand's integrity, credibility, continuity and symbolism to assure perceived brand authenticity. This thesis also agrees with Beverland (2009) suggestion of inviting consumers in to co-create authenticity. Consumers' 'authenticity lens' can be of great value in this process, mainly because they believe it is easy for brands to fall into woke washing advertising. Including elements that attest authenticity dimensions is especially relevant when it comes to showing wokeness

because while a woke washing ad might not profoundly impact some consumers, those who share a personal attachment with the brand and find it deeply authentic quickly change their perception of brand authenticity. Consequently, marketers should be primarily concerned with the impact of woke washing advertising on the overall perception of brand authenticity.

To finalize, this thesis strongly suggests that although it takes courage to stand up and speak about woke issues, brands should also have the courage to sit down and listen to avoid falling into woke washing practices.



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