

BRAND ACTIVISM: HELPING OR HARMING THE 2SLGBTQ+ COMMUNITY?

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By

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## ABSTRACT

As younger generations demand corporate responsibility and sociopolitical issues are at the forefront of consumers' minds, companies are increasingly speaking out in support of sociopolitical issues and marginalized groups. Despite modern consumers demanding that companies engage in activism, they are highly critical of how companies choose to engage and whether their actions seem genuine. In line with consumer demands, much of the current literature on brand activism focuses on drivers of authenticity and consumer responses to activism based on varying consumer and activism characteristics. Among all the variables that researchers have explored, scholars have yet to consult with consumers who belong to the marginalized groups at the heart of modern sociopolitical issues and brand activism. This study used interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) and semi-structured interviews with 2SLGBTQ+ individuals to explore perceptions of helpfulness in pride-related activism. The major findings show that companies attempting to advocate for the 2SLGBTQ+ may operate at one of four levels of activism: (1) Unintentionally Harmful Activism, (2) Public-Focused Activism, (3) Community-Focused Activism, and (4) Internally-Focused Activism . Unsuccessful activism attempts may actually cause harm to the queer community, while Internally-Focused Activism has the most potential to help the community. This study adds to brand activism literature by demonstrating that brand activism can be perceived as authentic even when it is not helpful to the community, and conversely, activism can be perceived as helpful to the community even when it may not be authentic.

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## CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

As modern consumers demand corporate responsibility and sociopolitical issues are at the forefront of consumers' minds, companies are increasingly speaking out in support of sociopolitical issues and marginalized groups (Shetty, et al., 2019; Moorman, 2020). These actions are becoming more commonly known as brand activism, corporate allyship, or corporate sociopolitical activism. Despite consumers' demand for brand activism, they are highly critical of how companies choose to engage (Shetty et al., 2019; Vredenburg, et al., 2020; Mirzaei, et al., 2022). When a company's intentions do not seem pure, actions may be deemed to be performative allyship or "woke washing" (Vredenburg et al., 2020).

In line with consumer demands, brand activism literature emphasizes the role of authenticity: its importance, antecedents, and outcomes. Authenticity has long been studied by marketing scholars following a call from Barbara Stern (1994) to consider the topic of brand authenticity. In the early 2000's, its importance became clear as authenticity began overtaking other purchasing criteria, such as cost or quality (Gilmore & Pine, 2007). Around the same time, corporate social responsibility (CSR) was becoming a mainstream business practice. Scholars quickly began studying CSR through the lens of authenticity, positing that authentic CSR impacts consumers' attitudes, purchase intent, and loyalty towards a firm (Alhouti et al., 2016).

As social issues and movements such as #MeToo, BLM, and Pride Month became part of regular discourse on social media, companies began publicly engaging with these topics. While CSR may have focused on uncontroversial social issues, brand activism is marked by companies taking a stance on polarizing sociopolitical issues (Moorman, 2020). As brand activism emerged, so did a wave of studies exploring the antecedents of authenticity and concepts such as performative allyship and wokewashing. This body of research highlights the importance of authentic brand activism (ex. Shetty et al., 2019; Spielmann et al., 2022) and attempts to determine what leads to consumer perceptions of authenticity (ex. Mirzaei et al., 2022; Schmidt et al., 2021; Vredenburg et al., 2020; Morhart et al., 2015).

Another body of recent literature on brand activism studies consumer responses to activism based on varying consumer, activism, and company characteristics. Consumer characteristics under study include whether they (dis)agree with the company's stance (Mukherjee & Althuisen, 2020; Wannow et al., 2023, Atanga et al., 2023), self-esteem (Spielmann et al., 2022), and political efficacy (Weber et al., 2023). Activism and company characteristics that have been studied include commitment type (Ahmad et al., 2022; Schmidt et al., 2022; Spielmann et al., 2022) and perceived issue controversy (Weber et al., 2023; Atanga et al., 2023). These studies focus on consumer responses using outcomes such as brand attitude, brand loyalty, and purchase intentions.

Among all the variables that researchers have explored, it is notable that few scholars have narrowed a study to focus on the marginalized communities at the core of brand activism. Further, to the best of my knowledge, none of the outcome variables focus on perceptions of activism being helpful or supportive to the targeted community, and do not address potentially harmful outcomes of activism. In planning my thesis, I questioned why it would matter if brand activism is perceived as authentic if it fails to provide real support to the community it is

standing up for. Finally, very few brand activism studies have taken a qualitative approach. If brand activism is meant to advocate for marginalized groups, it is necessary to ask group members directly how they feel about activism and what role, if any, brands should be playing in the conversation. Only then can companies implement activism that achieves its goals and makes a meaningful impact. Focusing on these research gaps and narrowing my focus to 2SLGBTQ+ activism, my thesis aims to answer the following research questions: (1) *is pride-related activism perceived as helpful or harmful by members of the 2SLGBTQ+ community?* and (2) *what characteristics of pride-related activism allow 2SLGBTQ+ individuals to perceive they are being supported?*

## CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

### 2.1 A Brief History of Authenticity in Management and Marketing Literature

In 2024, the term “authenticity” is used so much in marketing research and practice that it has become something of a buzzword with unclear meaning. Authenticity’s history in the marketing discipline is, however, remarkably long. Fifty years ago, seminal work on the topic of authenticity predicted its rise in response to modernization (Lehman et al., 2019; Trilling, 1972). McCannell’s (1976) theory of sight sacralization revealed the importance of perceived authenticity in tourist attractions, and McCannell’s work influenced Holt’s (1998) findings on the importance of marketing goods and services as authentic versus mass-produced to high-cultural-capital consumers. As critics in the 1980s rebuked advertising for being inherently inauthentic, Barbara Stern began exploring how advertising may be authentic within its own context of consumption (1994). Stern then called for more work to study consumer responses to authenticity. Finally, the concept of authenticity became commonplace in branding with Aaker’s concept of brand personality (1997) including a dimension called sincerity, which overlaps in many ways with the idea of authenticity.

In the following decades, management and marketing scholars postulated that a lack of authenticity in the world around us is causing us to value it more (Lehman et al., 2019). In the early 2000’s, its importance became clear as authenticity began overtaking other purchasing criteria, such as cost or quality (Gilmore & Pine, 2007). Throughout the 2010’s, the number of articles on authenticity published in management journals more than doubled (Lehman et al., 2019). Most scholars defined authenticity as real, genuine, or true, though the precise meaning remained ambiguous (Newman & Smith, 2016; Lehman, 2019) with no clear measurement strategy (Morhart et al., 2015).

Researchers have made several attempts to critically review literature and conceptualize authenticity in the realm of business. I will briefly highlight two recent studies with interesting conceptualizations. One study posited that consumers judge authenticity on six components: accuracy, connectedness, integrity, legitimacy, originality, and proficiency. (Nunes et al., 2021). Each component plays a different role depending on the consumption context. Consumption context varies by product versus service consumption, hedonic versus utilitarian consumption, durable versus consumable product consumption, and the level of coproduction in service consumption (Nunes et al., 2021). Another study identified three perspectives of authenticity based on consistency, conformity, and connection (Lehman et al., 2019). Authenticity may mean consistency between internal values and external actions, conformity to social categories, or connection to a person, place, or time as claimed. There are similarities between all three meanings wherein authenticity references the intangible, perceptions of authenticity involve a threshold, and most significant to the current study, authenticity is highly valued (Lehman et al., 2019).

In literature on leadership, authenticity has also been discussed as a gendered concept with unclear results. Authentic leaders are those who know their own values and beliefs and act accordingly while communicating transparently with their followers (Avolio et al., 2004). However, as Eagly (2005) points out, leadership is two-sided and the authenticity of a leader

must be acknowledged by their followers to produce positive outcomes. For women and members of groups who do not traditionally hold leadership positions, this evaluation of authenticity is difficult to achieve (Eagly, 2005). If a woman leader attempts to convey characteristics of a traditionally masculine leader, such as being authoritative or competitive, her followers may see her as challenging traditional gender norms and disapprove. However, if a woman leader displays traditionally feminine characteristics, followers may not trust that their values will best serve the community and will not deem her an authentic leader (Eagly, 2005). Further studies posit that authenticity in leadership positions exists to the degree that a leader acts according to gender norms (Liu et al., 2015). The idea of authenticity being a gendered concept exists more clearly in other fields, such as music studies. For example, in the extreme metal music scene, masculine traits are valued and seen as more authentic (Hutcherson & Haenfler, 2010). In rock music, women have been historically presented as outsiders and female artists have often adopted masculine traits to justify their status as authentic rock musicians (Leonard, 2007). Further, “indie” rock music that utilizes a lower production value is seen as more masculine and authentic whereas carefully produced pop music is attributed more feminine characteristics and less authenticity (Leonard, 2007).

Despite a universal definition of authenticity in business still not existing, scholars have moved forward studying authenticity in specific realms of marketing and management. For example, the role of authenticity has been researched in advertising (ex. Johar, 2016), brand management (ex. Södergren, 2021), social media marketing (ex. Lee & Eastin, 2021), and CSR (ex. Alhouti et al., 2016). The concept of (in)authentic marketing has become ubiquitous, with terms such as greenwashing, rainbow washing, and clickbait being used in both academic literature and public discourse. Two of these terms – greenwashing and rainbow washing – refer to inauthenticity within brand activism. Literature on authentic brand activism forms the base of this study and will now be explored, beginning with a definition of brand activism.

## **2.2 Defining Brand Activism**

Brand activism, also referred to as corporate sociopolitical activism (CSA), has been clarified over the past few years. Shetty et al., (2019) define brand activism as a company supporting a social, economic, environmental, cultural, or social issue and aligning that issue with its core values and vision of the company. Moorman (2020) discusses and defines brand activism through a political lens, recognizing that most social, environmental, and political issues today are divisive and politicized. She defines *brand political activism* as “public speech or actions focused on partisan issues made by or on behalf of a company using its corporate or individual brand name” (p. 388). According to Moorman (2020), an essential feature of this activism is the partisan nature of the issues on which the activities focus. Vredenburg et al. (2020) draw on Moorman’s work to define authentic brand activism as “a purpose- and values-driven strategy in which a brand adopts a nonneutral stance on institutionally contested sociopolitical issues, to create social change and marketing success” (p. 446). According to Vredenburg et al. (2020), brand activism has four defining characteristics: (1) the brand is purpose- and values-driven, (2) it addresses a controversial sociopolitical issue, (3) the issue may fall on either side of the political spectrum, and (4) the firm contributes to the issue through both messaging and internal practices.

Although brand activism has only recently been studied and defined within academic literature, the idea has existed for decades. The early beginnings of and potential for brand activism can be seen emerging in past literature on social marketing and CSR. While not everyone saw the prevalence of socio-politically activist brands coming, some researchers, notably Patrick Murphy and Gene Laczniak, recognized its importance early on. In 2013, Murphy et al. proposed a broadened concept of CSR that comes much closer to modern brand activism. First, they propose changing *society* in Corporate Social Responsibility to *societal* to represent firms' obligations to society as a whole (Murphy & Laczniak, 2013). Second, they encourage companies to take a full stakeholder perspective, recognizing everyone who may be impacted by the company's actions. They also highlight the importance of internalizing social causes, embedding them within the organization and its partners. At the time, Murphy and Laczniak (2013) saw this internal commitment as a broadened conceptualization of CSR, while recent works consider it a unique characteristic of brand activism (Vredenburg et al., 2020; Mirzaei et al., 2022).

When comparing brand activism to CSR, the primary difference that researchers highlight is that brand activism carries more risk than CSR activities. If a company speaks out on a controversial topic, it must pick a side and either challenge or defend the status quo, risking the support of certain stakeholder groups (Moorman, 2020). The inherent risk and controversial nature of brand activism set it apart from CSR, which typically focuses on accepted prosocial issues (Mukherjee & Althuizen, 2020; Mirzaei et al., 2022). Vredenburg et al. (2020) echo this point and discuss another point of differentiation between brand activism and CSR. They posit that CSR activities are oriented around actions and outcomes, while activism initiatives are built on higher-purpose values that are internal to the company. While CSR activities require minimal internal practice, brand activism carries expectations of message-practice alignment and an internal commitment to the issue (Shetty et al., 2019; Vredenburg et al., 2020; Mirzaei et al., 2022).

In 1978, Murphy, Laczniak, and Lusch highlighted three levels of social marketing with corresponding levels of potential for controversy. At the base level, beneficial social marketing shares messages focused on enhancing quality of life. This is the area that many early social marketing and CSR activities targeted. The causes, such as preventative healthcare, are uncontroversial and apolitical (Drumwright & Murphy, 2014). The second level is protest social marketing. It is change-oriented, issue-centred, and representative of one segment of society (Murphy et al., 1978). Therefore, the potential for controversy and ethical abuse is higher. The third, revolutionary social marketing, takes extreme and uncompromising viewpoints on sociopolitical issues (Murphy et al., 1978). Causes under this category are highly controversial, with lots of potential for backlash. The controversial nature of brand activism noted by researchers (Moorman, 2020; Vredenburg et al., 2020; Mirzaei et al., 2021) suggests that most brand activism activities align with protest and revolutionary social marketing.

It is worth noting that a cause can move between Murphy et al.'s (1978) categories of social marketing as public sentiment and consensus change. For example, Drumwright and Murphy (2014) consider abortion to fall under protest social marketing. Since 2022, the issues of abortion and women's reproductive rights likely fall under revolutionary social marketing, given the overturning of *Roe v. Wade* in the United States. Today, many sociopolitical issues are

similarly at the forefront of societal conversations. Movements such as Black Lives Matter (BLM) and #MeToo have polarized consumers across the globe. It is not unusual for North American companies to hang Pride flags in their storefronts during the month of June, and yet debates over whether Qatar, a country that does not protect LGBTQ+ rights, should have been allowed to host the 2022 World Cup flooded social media. This is the current state of the world, and it is the landscape companies are attempting to navigate. Murphy, Laczniak, and Lush (1978) warned about the dangers and difficulties of navigating within protest and revolutionary social marketing. Moorman (2020) highlighted the divisiveness of political activism and risking the support of certain stakeholder groups. Given the current circumstances, why is brand activism booming in research and practice?

### **2.3 The Importance of Activist Brands**

Given the risk of potential controversy, why are so many companies taking a stand? The primary reason is that modern consumers are demanding it. Gen Z and Millennial generations are widely recognized as being socially conscious, caring a lot about environmental and social issues, and pressuring companies to positively impact society (Deloitte, 2021). In a study of 149 firms across 39 industries, researchers found that while investors view corporate sociopolitical activism as a threat to profit-oriented objectives, other stakeholders expect companies to take a stance on sociopolitical issues (Bhagwat et al., 2020).

Shetty et al.'s (2019) survey of 286 millennial consumers in India found that millennials prefer brands that support a cause or higher purpose than non-activist brands. They suggest that millennials are more socially, culturally, politically, and environmentally conscious than past generations, and brands can no longer afford to be neutral spectators to contentious issues. Schmidt, Guzman, and Kennedy's (2022) experiments with college students in Germany and the United States similarly revealed that consumers perceive activist brands more positively than non-sociopolitically active brands. Not only do young consumers prefer activist brands, but they are also willing to pay a premium price to support them (Shetty et al., 2019). As these trends occur, companies are being pushed to rethink their role in society (Wettstein & Baur, 2015).

The significance of brand activism is in its ability to shift consumer attitudes towards controversial social issues. An experimental study with university students found that corporate communication on a controversial issue changed consumers' attitudes towards the issue, particularly when the company's statement was deemed authentic (Parcha & Westerman, 2020). When a company spoke on an issue that was relevant to participant's goals, attitude change was more significant with perceived low-fit issues and a larger number of companies speaking out on the same issue. When a company spoke out on an issue that was less related to participants' goals and values, attitude change was more significant when fewer other companies spoke out on the issue (Parcha & Westerman, 2020). The study demonstrates how brand activism can shift consumer attitudes towards social issues, with different approaches being more effective depending on whether consumers already care about the issue.

Spielmann et al.'s (2022) consumer studies highlight the importance of authentic brand activism for marginalized groups. Data was collected from 284 participants (136 Black or African American, 148 White) to study the effects of true versus performative allyship within the

context of the Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement. Participants were introduced to a fictional shoe brand and shown a photo of a pair of sneakers. They were also shown a statement from the company indicating support for the BLM movement. Finally, participants were shown a photo of the company's "Board of Directors." The Board photo showed more racial diversity in one condition than the other to manipulate true versus performative allyship. Participants in the true allyship condition indicated greater self-esteem and self-brand connection, which ultimately led to higher purchase intention than in the performative allyship condition. The effects of self-esteem and self-brand connection were larger for Black participants than for White participants. These results show that consumers can notice the difference between true and performative tactics (Spielmann et al., 2022) and will make different purchasing decisions in favour of authentic brands. Further, internal representation of marginalized groups increases positive outcomes for consumers belonging to those groups. So now we must ask ourselves, what makes brand activism (in)authentic?

## **2.4 Authenticity in Brand Activism**

Although researchers generally agree that brand activism is important to younger generations of consumers, there is one factor that can make or break consumers' perceptions of brand activism: authenticity. Vredenburg et al. (2020), Schmidt et al. (2022), and Mirzaei et al. (2022), all posit authenticity as a key determinant of positive responses to brand activism. Schmidt et al.'s (2021) focus groups with college students in Germany, the United Kingdom and the United States found that authenticity was a key factor for brands speaking out on sociopolitical issues. As soon as a brand takes a sociopolitical stance, young consumers will assess it based on perceptions of authenticity (Schmidt et al., 2022). According to Shetty et al. (2019), young consumers are used to being bombarded with advertising and are more marketing savvy, so they tend to be skeptical of claims made by brands. They have a heightened sense of awareness, frown upon deceptive marketing strategies, and value transparency.

Today's young consumers acknowledge that brands may have differing motivations for practicing sociopolitical activism. On the one hand, the brand may truly support the issue and recognize that it owes value to all stakeholders (Schmidt et al., 2022). On the other hand, brands may simply be responding to consumer demands as an opportunity to build shareholder value (Schmidt et al. 2022) and remain in business. Because consumers are aware of marketing ploys and the complexities of capitalism, they seek out authenticity. However, consumers can also accept the coexistence of commercial and cause when a brand is genuine. If a company truly embraces and believes in a cause, consumers do not mind the company profiting off their activism (Morhart et al., 2015).

Brand activism can lead to negative consumer perceptions and reactions, including backlash on social media or even boycotting if it is not perceived as authentic. If a company's activism does not align with its core values and internal practices, it may be seen as a marketing ploy to drive sales (Shetty et al., 2019; Mirzaei et al., 2022). Vredenburg et al. (2020) use the term "woke washing" to describe brand activism with no aligned prosocial purpose, values, or practices. When a brand's activism is perceived as being profit-oriented or opportunistic, it may be accused of woke washing. Not only does woke washing lead to consumer skepticism and negative attitudes, but it can also cause harm by diverting attention and funding away from

legitimate entities and causes (Vredenburg et al., 2020). On the flip side, authentic brand activism increases positive consumer responses (Vredenburg et al., 2020; Mirzaei et al. 2022) and may even lead to enhanced brand love (Ahmad, Guzman, & Kidwell, 2022).

Other terms commonly used to describe inauthentic brand activism are “performative allyship” and “performative activism.” Performative allyship is the practice of symbolically or outwardly speaking out about social justice causes through words, posts, and shallow gestures but doing little to improve the conditions that plague marginalized groups. In contrast, true allyship refers to the proactive measures that organizations take to attempt to improve the lives of those marginalized groups (Spielmann et al., 2022).

## **2.5 Drivers of Authenticity in Brand Activism**

In the literature on brand activism, researchers have thus far proposed internal commitment as a key component of authenticity (Shetty et al., 2019; Vredenburg et al. 2020; Mirzaei et al., 2022). So far, few researchers have gone beyond the general idea of commitment to determine what specific factors drive authentic brand activism. Commitment has been studied with varying conceptualizations, including supporting the same issue over time (Morhart et al., 2015; Schmidt et al., 2022; Mirzaei et al., 2022), participating in prosocial practices aligned with company values (Vredenburg, 2020), and translating values and beliefs into meaningful internal practices (Kalina, 2020; Schmidt et al., 2022).

First, brand authenticity emerges to the extent to which consumers perceive a brand to be true to itself. Brand commitment to an issue must persevere both over time and throughout company practices. Schmidt et al. (2022) state that brands that support a cause and carry it through everything they say and do over time build a feeling of connectivity and trust with consumers. Similarly, a company’s response time when speaking out on a sociopolitical issue or event impacts perceptions of authenticity. When a company suddenly speaks out on an issue because it is popular, it is seen as opportunistic woke washing (Kalina, 2020; Mirzaei et al., 2022). Conversely, being one of the first companies to tackle a sociopolitical issue makes the stance appear more genuine and meaningful (Parcha & Westerman, 2020). When speaking out on sociopolitical events, company response time serves as a cue for authentic commitment to the issue (Nam et al., 2022). It is important to note, however, that perceived authenticity does not always lead to positive brand outcomes. If a company speaks out on an issue early, both consumers who agree and disagree with the stance will deem that the company is being genuine. If the issue is highly divisive, the negative responses from consumers who disagree with the stance may outweigh any benefits in positive sentiment and purchase intentions (Nam et al., 2022).

Second, brands communicating activist marketing messaging must also engage in prosocial corporate practice to be deemed authentic (Vredenburg et al., 2020). Values and beliefs must be translated into actions that have meaning for consumers (Schmidt et al., 2022). For example, if a company speaks out on racial equality but does not analyze its hiring practices, its activism will be meaningless to consumers (Kalina, 2020). Vredenburg et al. (2020) propose four types of activist brands based on the degrees of activist marketing messaging and prosocial corporate practice. If a brand does not use activist marketing messaging or engage in prosocial



practices, it is not an activist firm. If a firm embraces sociopolitical causes as part of its core mission but does not speak out about its efforts, it is practicing silent brand activism. Conversely, a company that uses activist marketing messaging but lacks prosocial corporate practices shows inauthentic brand activism and is perceived as deceptive and insincere. Finally, a company that has both activist marketing messaging and prosocial corporate practices that align with its purpose and values is an authentic activist brand. Authentic brand activism is the only type that can serve as a catalyst for true social change while enjoying enhanced brand equity from positive consumer responses (Vredenburg et al., 2020).

A third conceptualization of commitment in brand activism refers to the type of contribution the brand is making (Ahmad et al., 2022). Companies may engage in three types of commitment to an issue: financial, non-financial, and rhetorical. Rhetorical commitment refers to “supporting any particular sociopolitical issue without taking any tangible initiative” (Ahmad et al., 2022). In line with previous discussions of commitment, Ahmad and his colleagues find that rhetorical commitment is ineffective. They also find that non-financial commitments are the most likely to lead to perceptions of authenticity. However, for companies with high levels of brand equity, financial commitments may be the most effective, as consumers view them as more financially capable (Ahmad et al., 2022).

So far, few researchers have gone beyond the general idea of commitment to determine what specific factors drive authentic brand activism. Mirzaei et al. (2022) made an initial effort to do this by conducting a content analysis of social media comments on two viral brand activism campaigns. In total, they analyzed over 80,000 social media comments to identify six dimensions of woke activism authenticity: social context independency, inclusion, sacrifice, practice, fit, and motivation. First, social context independency is the extent to which a woke campaign is independent from topical and trendy social issues. This finding stems directly from previous discussions around commitment over a long period (Kalina, 2020; Mirzaei et al., 2022). Second, inclusion is the extent to which the target audience finds the woke message neutral. Mirzaei et al. (2022) suggest that companies should use neutral and inclusive messaging to avoid alienating certain consumer groups. This finding directly contradicts the existing definitions of brand activism, wherein companies are expected to take a stance on sociopolitical issues (Moorman, 2020; Vredenburg et al., 2020).

Mirzaei et al.’s (2022) third dimension of woke activism authenticity is sacrifice. Companies willing to forego profit to support a sociopolitical issue are viewed as more authentic. This dimension disputes their dimension of inclusion; alienating certain consumer groups and risking losing their business is a significant form of sacrifice. The fourth proposed dimension is practice, or companies practicing what they preach. The fifth dimension is fit, or the extent to which the sociopolitical issue aligns with the brand’s current or past core business, meaning image, positioning, and culture. In these fourth and fifth dimensions, we again see internal commitment as crucial to authenticity. Finally, the sixth dimension of woke brand activism is motivation. Consumers may perceive the intentions of woke brands as profit-seeking and corrupt or other-centred and genuine. Based on the literature on brand activism, it seems that perceived motive is directly informed by a firm’s perceived level of commitment. It is also clear that more work needs to be done to discover and clarify distinct drivers of authentic brand activism.

## 2.6 Consumer Responses to Brand Activism

As researchers have begun to understand brand activism more, they have started to study how consumers respond to brand activism. Consumer response studies are based either on characteristics of the consumers exposed to the activism or characteristics of the brand or activism itself. Many of the activism characteristics researchers have studied are related to consumer perceptions of authenticity. One of these activism characteristics is contribution type, looking at whether the contribution is financial, non-financial, or rhetorical (Ahmad et al., 2022; Atanga & Matilla, 2023). Message design is also important to consumer responses and authenticity, including selecting the right framing (Ahmad et al., 2022) and source (Mukherjee & Althuizen, 2020), and ensuring the message aligns with the brand's values and actions (Schmidt et al., 2022; Spielmann et al., 2022; Pöyry & Laaksonen, 2022).

A key activism characteristic that determines consumer responses is the level of controversy attributed to the issue a brand is speaking out on. Generally, high-controversy issues lead to more negative and polarized consumer responses, mediated by consumers' own stances on the issue (Atanga, Xue, & Mattila, 2023; Mukherjee & Althuizen, 2020). Further, while a quick response in speaking out on sociopolitical events generally leads to positive sentiments and increased purchasing intentions, these benefits are limited when the issue is highly divisive (Nam et al., 2023). Along with issue controversy, the perceived novelty of the issue (Atanga et al., 2023) and the perceived appropriateness of the issue (Weber et al., 2023) determine how consumers will respond. When a company speaks out on a new or novel issue, the brand attitudes of consumers who disagree are negatively impacted (Atanga et al., 2023). Table 2.1 below summarizes the company and activism characteristics that have been studied thus far.

Authors	Activism/Company Characteristics	Study Type
Atanga & Matilla (2023)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Contribution type (in-kind; monetary)</li> </ul>	Experimental design
Atanga et al. (2023)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Perceived issue novelty</li> <li>• Perceived issue controversy</li> </ul>	Experimental design
Nam et al. (2023)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Response time</li> <li>• Issue divisiveness</li> </ul>	Netnography/semantic analysis
Wang & Bouroncle (2023)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Perceived company motives</li> </ul>	Survey
Weber et al. (2023)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• CSR vs CPA</li> <li>• Perceived appropriateness and controversy</li> </ul>	Netnography/semantic analysis; experimental design
Ahmad et al. (2022)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Commitment type (financial; non-financial; rhetorical)</li> <li>• Message framing (hope; frustration)</li> <li>• Brand equity (high; low)</li> </ul>	Text mining analysis; experimental design
Chu et al. (2022)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Brand-cause fit</li> <li>• Self-serving motive</li> </ul>	Survey
Pöyry & Laaksonen (2022)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Field infringement</li> <li>• Political Accusations</li> <li>• Perceived Impact</li> </ul>	Content analysis; correspondence analysis
Schmidt et al. (2022)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Long-term commitment</li> <li>• Alignment with company strategy and values</li> </ul>	Focus groups, interviews, experimental design
Spielmann et al. (2022)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• True ally (words and actions)</li> <li>• Performative ally (words only)</li> <li>• Neutral (silent)</li> </ul>	Experimental design
Hong & Li (2021)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Magnitude of public support</li> <li>• Perceived credibility of public support information</li> </ul>	Experimental design
Li (2021)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Message source (LGBTQ vs non-LGBTQ)</li> </ul>	Experimental design
Hydock et al. (2020)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Market share</li> </ul>	Experimental design
Mukherjee & Althuizen (2020)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Relationship between brand and message source</li> <li>• Level of issue controversy</li> </ul>	Experimental Design
Vredenburg et al. (2020)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Activist marketing messaging (high; low)</li> <li>• Prosocial corporate practice (high; low)</li> </ul>	Conceptual paper

Table 2.6.1 – Activism and Company Characteristics

In terms of consumer characteristics as determinants of brand activism responses, consumers' level of (dis)agreement with the company's stance has been the most common. Mukherjee and Althuisen (2020) found that brand activism for controversial issues negatively influenced consumer attitudes, behavioural intentions, and actual behaviours in those who disagreed with the company's stance and did not provide significant rewards from those who agreed with the stance. Wannow, Haupt, and Ohlwein (2023) explored consumers' emotional responses to brand activism based as a mediator between (dis)agreement with the brand's stance and the outcomes of brand attitude and issue advocacy. They determined that consumers who disagree with a brand's stance are more motivated to advocate for their side of the issue after seeing the brand activism.

Demographic characteristics such as age, race, and income have also been examined (Shetty, Nagendra, & Anand, 2019; Spielmann, Dobscha, & Shrum, 2022). Findings suggest that age is important in how consumers respond to brand activism. Mukherjee and Althuisen (2020) conducted five experiments with consumers ranging between 18 and 74 years of age across studies. The mean age for each study is as follows: 36, 24, 29, 41, and 37. Overall, they found that brand activism on controversial issues negatively influenced consumer attitude, intention, and behaviour for those who disagreed with the company's stand and did not provide significant rewards from those who agreed with the stand. Studies focusing on slightly younger consumers, however, have found significant positive results of brand activism on consumer attitudes (Shetty et al., 2019; Schmidt et al., 2022). Other consumer characteristics that have been studied for consumer responses to activism include political efficacy (Weber et al., 2023), self-esteem, and self-brand connection (Spielmann et al., 2022; Wannow et al., 2023). Table 2.2 below summarizes the consumer characteristics that have been studied.

Authors	Consumer Characteristics	Study Type
Atanga et al. (2023)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Agree / disagree with company's stance</li> </ul>	Experimental design
Wannow et al. (2023)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Moral emotions</li> <li>• Consumer-brand identification</li> </ul>	Experimental design
Weber et al. (2023)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Political efficacy</li> </ul>	Netnography/semantic analysis; experimental design
Spielmann et al. (2022)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Self-esteem</li> <li>• Self-brand connection</li> <li>• Race</li> </ul>	Experimental design
Hong & Li (2021)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Agree / disagree with company's stance</li> <li>• Brand attitude</li> </ul>	Experimental design
Fernandes (2020)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Political views (liberal vs conservative)</li> </ul>	Survey; experimental design
Mukherjee & Althuizen (2020)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Agree / disagree with company's stance</li> </ul>	Experimental design
Shetty et al. (2019)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Age (Millennials)</li> <li>• Income</li> </ul>	Survey

*Table 2.6.2 – Consumer Characteristics*

## 2.7 Summary of Literature Review

Though the ideas of corporate responsibility and brands taking a stand on social issues have existed for decades (Murphy et al., 1978), current political climates, a new generation of conscious consumers, and the age of social media have altered the landscape of socially responsible marketing. Taking a stance on sociopolitical issues is now of critical importance for companies of all sizes, and scholars have rightly sought to discover how companies can go about sociopolitical activism in the right ways. The literature review demonstrates the focus on authentic activism to garner the most positive consumer responses. It also highlights key studies on consumer responses to activism based on consumer, company, and activism characteristics. So far, brand activism research has primarily focused on outcomes that solely benefit companies engaging in activism.

When conducting my literature review, I noted two gaps in the literature that combined to inform my research questions. First, and most significantly, I noted a lack of research focusing on *positive outcomes for the group(s) the activism is targeting*. I questioned why studies had not yet aimed to discover how activism can provide needed support to marginalized communities. Further, why studies had not yet samples from marginalized communities directly to understand their perceptions of and responses to activism. Second, I noted a lack of qualitative research on the topic. If brand activism is meant to advocate for marginalized groups, it seems necessary to ask group members directly how they feel about activism and what role, if any, brands should be playing in the conversation. Focusing on these research gaps and narrowing my focus to 2SLGBTQ+ activism, my thesis aims to answer the following research questions: (1) *is pride-related activism perceived as helpful or harmful by members of the 2SLGBTQ+ community?* and (2) *what characteristics of pride-related activism allow 2SLGBTQ+ individuals to perceive they are being supported?*

## CHAPTER 3: METHODS

### 3.1 Author Positionality

Positionality describes both an individual's worldview and the position they adopt within or about a research task (Holmes, 2020; Savin-Baden & Major, 2013). My individual worldviews are informed by my philosophical assumptions, including my approaches to ontology, epistemology, which are shaped by my personal values, beliefs, and experiences. I hold an interpretivist worldview — I believe that everyone experiences a different reality of our world, shaped by their unique life experiences. Thus, I feel knowledge comes from developing a rich understanding of how different groups or individuals perceive and experience reality. Further, I believe that humans have the power to change their lives and construct a better world through shared efforts.

With regard to my research topic, I hold an etic perspective — I am a straight, cisgender woman and do not identify as part of the 2SLGBTQ+ community. In conducting this research, I adopted the position of being an ally to the community. This position requires maintaining an open mind to my participants and allowing their voices to primarily inform my data analysis. While my personal views and experiences inspired my research questions, I engaged in bracketing to ensure that participants' words and experiences were at the core of the data rather than my preconceived ideas about how they might feel towards pride-related brand activism. My position as an ally to the 2SLGBTQ+ community was present throughout my study as I made my goals and intentions clear to participants prior to conducting interviews, with an emphasis on listening to participants, allowing for free-flowing conversation, and clarifying any unclear points or early interpretations with participants during interviews. My data analysis process closely followed those laid out by Smith et al., (2022) to further ensure that all findings were rooted in the data and not my own ideas.

### 3.2 Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis

A quantitative approach has most often been taken to investigate perceptions of brand activism, with more focus on what consumers think and feel as opposed to why they think and feel this way. To determine how brands can engage in activism in ways that are genuinely helpful, a deeper understanding of queer individuals' lived experiences with and perceptions of 2SLGBTQ+ brand activism is required. While this appeared to be a clear research gap, I also recognize that my choice to approach the topic qualitatively is informed by my researcher positionality and my beliefs about the origins of knowledge.

My investigative process was a qualitative approach of interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA). IPA is an approach to qualitative, experiential research that is committed to understanding and examining how people make sense of significant life experiences (Smith et al., 2022). IPA is built on knowledge from phenomenology, hermeneutics, and idiography (Smith et al., 2022). Phenomenology is primarily concerned with understanding complex issues that people experience as phenomena (Goulding, 2005). When people engage with one of these major

experiences, they reflect on the significance of what is happening and IPA engages with these reflections (Smith et al., 2022). The rise of 2SLGBTQ+ brand activism is certainly a significant life experience for queer individuals and something that is worth exploring. Using a structured IPA approach Phenomenological approaches consider language to be the central medium for transmitting meaning (Goulding, 2005), influencing the choice of semi-structured interviews for this study.

Hermeneutics is the theory of interpretation, and hermeneutic phenomenology aims to provide both a description of participants' experiences and an interpretation of the meaning of the lived experiences (Creswell, 2013). The hermeneutic circle is a core concept in IPA and demonstrates the dynamic relationship between the part and the whole where non-linear thinking is required. To understand any one part, you must look to the whole; to understand the whole, you need to refer to the parts. (Smith et al., 2022). In the case of interview data, "parts" include single words, sentences, or interviews where the "whole" would be the whole sentence, complete transcript, or entire dataset, respectively.

Influences from idiography makes IPA concerned with the particular, or focused on details (Smith et al., 2022). In contrast to most psychology, IPA places an emphasis on thorough, structured analysis that attempts to interpret each case in its own right. Additionally, IPA stresses the importance small, purposively selected samples to understand the experiences of a particular group (Smith et al., 2022). Further, small, homogenous sample sizes all ensure the research can interpret each individual's experiences with the phenomenon before drawing similarities and differences across cases. Therefore, IPA is well-suited to explore perceptions of authenticity and helpfulness in pride-related brand activism with members of the queer community.

### **3.3 Participants and Interview Format**

#### **3.3.1 Participants**

When using IPA, the goal is to recruit a relatively small sample of homogenous participants who have the lived experiences at the centre of the research question(s) (Smith et al., 2022). Participants for this research were fourteen young adults between the ages of 18-28 who self-identified as members of the 2SLGBTQ+ community. Identifying as a queer individual was required for this study to determine the perceptions of pride-related brand activism from the perspective of the individuals the activism is meant to support. Participant age was an important consideration given that younger consumers within the Millennial and Generation Z cohorts have demonstrated a demand for brand activism, are critical of how companies engage in social issues, and are willing to pay a premium to support activist brands (Schmidt, et al., 2022; Mukerjee and Alhuitzen, 2020; Shetty et al., 2019;). Further, most brand activism seems to be targeted to these age demographics.

It was also important to ensure representation from a variety of sexual orientations and gender identities under the 2SLGBTQ+ umbrella to understand where similarities and differences occurred in some detail, a key component of IPA (Smith et al., 2022). This decision was made as public discourse and political events throughout 2022-2024 highlighted differing levels of controversy attached to different sexual orientations and gender identities. For example,



the strong public backlash to Bud Light’s partnership with transgender TikTok influencer Dylan Mulvaney combined with the introduction of anti-trans legislation throughout Canada and the United States indicated the relative lack of public acceptance compared to topics such as gay marriage.

A table of key participant demographics is in Table 3.1 below. Participants were not required to disclose their ethnicity, so it is not included in the table. However, many participants volunteered this information as it played a significant role in painting the picture of their worldviews and experiences with marginalization or privilege, and therefore, the importance of intersectionality in these conversations.

Participant Pseudonym	Age	Sexual Orientation	Gender Identity
Paige	24	Pansexual	Cisgender
James	26	Gay	Cisgender
Dwayne	23	Gay	Trans-masculine
Lucy	21	Bisexual	Cisgender
Raine	22	Queer	Transgender
Cass	25	Bisexual	Cisgender/Non-binary woman
Taylor	19	Bisexual	Cisgender
Cole	18	Asexual/aromantic	Cisgender
Josh	24	Queer	Non-binary/Gender fluid
Wren	25	Pansexual	Non-binary
Alex	21	Asexual	Agender
Sam	29	Queer	Non-binary
Noah	23	Bisexual	Transgender
Becca	21	Queer	Cisgender/non-binary woman

Table 3.3.1 – Participant Demographics

### 3.3.2 Selection and Recruitment

Participants were recruited in various ways, primarily using convenience and snowball sampling. After the research was approved by the University of Saskatchewan’s Behavioural Ethics Research Board (see Appendix A), I posted an Instagram story on my personal account prompting anyone interested to contact me via email or Instagram direct messaging (see Appendix B). Personal contacts were asked to share the post with anyone they thought might be interested. Conversations originating on Instagram were moved to email at the earliest opportunity. After this initial recruitment, I posted a bulletin to the University of Saskatchewan’s student intranet and reached out to queer student societies to help disseminate the details of the study and provide my contact information. Finally, snowball sampling occurred when participants referred their contacts to me after participating.

All recruitment materials included the selection criteria of being between the ages of 18-30 and identifying as a 2SLGBTQ+ individual. All prospective participants who met the selection criteria were sent a consent form (see Appendix C) outlining the purpose of the study,

data collection procedures, and confidentiality details. They were also sent a document outlining the purpose of the study and the background of how it originated in more detail (see Appendix D). Since I am not a member of the queer community, I felt it was important to explain to my personal motivations behind this research and what I was hoping to achieve. This message was received positively by participants, with responses sharing excitement to see this research being undertaken with a goal to help the community rather than just studying it. Positive responses affirmed my approach to conducting research with a marginalized community I am not a part of. Everyone who was interviewed received a \$25.00 gift card to Indigo.

### 3.3.3 Interview Format and Materials

Fourteen semi-structured interviews were conducted either via Zoom or at a convenient location on the University of Saskatchewan campus. Every interview was one-on-one, and I was the sole researcher present. The interview guide was amended after the first interview to increase the length of the conversation and draw more detailed insight. Each subsequent interview used the same guide (see Appendix E) and lasted approximately one hour. At the beginning of each interview, I provided an overview of the consent form, reiterated my motivations behind the study, and gave participants the chance to ask any questions.

The interviews began by asking each participant to share a bit about themselves, who they are, what they do, and what they like. Casual dialogue was used in the beginning to build rapport and comfort before diving into the research topic. Participants were then asked how they like to refer to themselves in terms of sexual orientation and gender identity, and whether they were comfortable with me using the term “queer” throughout the interview. Members of the 2SLGBTQ+ community have commonly reclaimed this word, which was once derogatory, as an umbrella term to refer to themselves. Participants were asked to share about their journey as a queer individual, including their “coming out” story if they had one. This conversation lent itself to learning more about each participant and the individual experiences that may impact their feelings towards pride-related activism. Then, participants were asked whether they typically participate in any Pride Month events and if they consider themselves to be active in the 2SLGBTQ+ community through advocacy or events outside of Pride Month. The key prompting in this section of the interview was to ask participants for their motivations to either participate or not participate.

Next, the conversation focused in on pride-related brand activism. Participants were asked if they have noted any brands that seems to be particularly involved during Pride Month, either in-person or online. Then, they were asked about their overall impressions towards these activities. Often, this discussion revealed a combination of both liked and disliked activism and differing impressions. Once we had discussed a few examples of pride-related activism, I asked participants whether they felt that brand involvement was overall helpful or harmful in advocating for the queer community’s rights. Participants were then asked to think of any brands they feel are particularly helpful to the 2SLGBTQ+ community and any brands they feel are particularly harmful to the 2SLGBTQ+ community. As participants shared examples, they were prompted to explain what specifically they saw the brand do and why it made them think or feel that way. This section of the interview was often less structured with free-flowing conversation, and I did not always have to ask each question outright.

At this point in the interview, four visual examples of pride-related activism were used to guide the discussion. Examples of activism were selected to represent a variety of company and activism characteristics. They took the form of a news article, company messages, or event advertisements. The companies used in examples were TD (see Appendix F), Patagonia (see Appendix G), Vizzy (see Appendix H), and Amigos (see Appendix I). Each example was provided to participants to read one at a time. For Zoom interviews, a PDF copy of the example was sent via chat. For in-person interviews, printed copies were provided. For each example, participants were asked to read the article and then identify their initial feelings using Plutchik's Wheel of Emotion (see Appendix J; Plutchik, 1980). Participants were then prompted to identify what aspects of the activism made them feel that way, whether it was characteristics of the company, the actions being taken, or both. The same process was followed for each example. Then, participants were asked to consider all four examples together to consider which, if any, of them felt helpful, harmful, supportive, unsupportive, authentic, and inauthentic. Probing questions were again used to here to determine what aspects were leading to their perceptions.

After finishing with the examples, the next set of questions had participants consider a hypothetical business they might want to own. Many participants already had an idea for a business they would like to run, whether it was an actual plan they have for the future or something they thought they would enjoy. Participants were asked for additional details, including possible business locations and names, to emerge them in the task. Then, participants were asked what they would do as a business owner to advocate for and support the queer community. Following this activity, participants were asked whether there was anything else they wished businesses would start doing and anything they wished businesses would stop doing in relation to Pride Month and general support for the queer community. To wrap up the interview, they were asked if there was anything else on the topic they wished to discuss or thought I should have asked. Overall, participants enjoyed the format of the interview, felt that my questions covered the key points on the topic, and expressed that they enjoyed the conversation and felt it was important. During each interview, I wrote down any ideas I wanted to return to or have the participant clarify while we were talking as well as key ideas and items of importance from each participant.

### **3.4 Coding and Analysis**

Each interview was audio recorded and then auto-transcribed using either Zoom's or Microsoft Word's transcription tools. The transcripts were then reviewed while listening to the recordings to ensure accuracy. Participants who requested to review their transcript had the opportunity to add, clarify, or remove any data from the cleaned transcripts. The approved transcripts were then used for data analysis.

Data analysis followed the steps outlined by Smith et al. (2022). The transcripts were thoroughly read during the cleaning process to build familiarity with the data. Printed copies of transcripts were then used to begin exploratory noting (Smith et al., 2022). According to Smith and his colleagues (2022), exploratory noting further ensures familiarity with the data and allows the researcher to note anything of interest while beginning to "identify specific ways by which the participant talks about, understands, and thinks about an issue." Not focusing on the

development of codes or themes while making these initial notes, I noted instances where participants used passionate language or seemed hesitant, any recurring thoughts or feelings, and areas where the participants' precise meaning was not immediately clear. Examples of my exploratory notes include words and phrases such as, "mentioned community again," "'not blatantly homophobic' is interesting statement," "what does it mean to be inclusive?"

As I worked through an individual transcript, I would automatically move into more interpretative noting as I became more familiar with the participant's lived experiences, or the "context for their concerns" (Smith et al., 2022). I began to realize that the conversations throughout each interview provided a picture of what queer pride means to each participant and how that impacts their thoughts and feelings towards activism. This seamlessly moved me into taking what Smith et al. (2022) call experiential statements, the next step of data analysis. Having the full context of a single interview in mind, words and phrases said by a participant took on new meaning, reinforcing the hermeneutic circle of IPA (Smith et al., 2022). Examples of experiential statements include "pride means appreciating diverse identities" and "'supportive' is the most surface-level descriptor."

When developing and naming Personal Experiential Themes (PETs), I deviated from Smith et al.'s (2022) suggested process. Using a participant's interview notes, exploratory notes, and experiential statements, I wrote out a summary of the key concepts arising from their interview, drawing stars and arrows to connect or emphasize any ideas. These notes essentially told the story of how a participant's experiences as a queer individual impacted their perceptions of harm and helping in brand activism, and what aspects of activism were most important to them. This process occurred for each interview, with some of the steps occurring simultaneously as I grew more comfortable interpreting the transcripts and recognizing significant factors.

Throughout the entire analysis process, I kept typed memos to keep track of my ideas. Memos included early ideas for codes or themes, how I thought certain concepts might be related to one another, and any details I wanted to remember to investigate in more detail. When it was time to develop group experiential themes across cases (Smith et al., 2022), I began using NVivo. My memos influenced my initial coding structure, and codes were added, expanded, or discontinued as I went through each transcript again. I continued to memo during this process to explore which codes might be distinct concepts and which were interrelated, and again note any ideas I wanted to revisit.

Framework development took many iterations. I began by using PowerPoint to create boxes with my parent nodes from NVivo with their child nodes underneath. I initially sorted ideas on a continuum from harmful to helpful, with concepts and characteristics that weren't distinctly one or the other in the middle. I thought about how different codes could be grouped into themes to tell a coherent story. Once I had a basic idea of what my framework could look like, I started writing my findings section. As I wrote, I tweaked the framework based on how the writing flowed and where concepts made the most sense to be discussed. Feedback from mentors and peers played a significant role in finalizing a framework that would clearly communicate my ideas to an audience.

## CHAPTER 4: FINDINGS

### 4.1 Emergent Findings Framework Summary

The emergent findings from the study are shown in Figure 4.1 below. The framework depicts participants' personal meaning of queer pride around the periphery, since this plays a key role in shaping their perceptions of harmful, helpful, and authentic activism. The framework includes four types of brand activism that are represented in a step-wise fashion, with activism being more positively received by participants as one moves up the steps.

The bottom step in this framework is *Unintentionally Harmful Activism*. Note that this study did not focus on anti-2SLGBTQ+ activism, only companies who are aiming to show support. This activism is characterized by companies that may have good intentions, but miss the mark with activism. Members of the queer community may feel annoyed, irritated, or even hurt by certain attempts to show support.

The second step is *Public-Focused Activism*. This activism is characterized by actions that help normalize queer identities and lifestyles within the general public. This activism is not harmful and is generally perceived by participants as acceptable. Activism in this zone is harmless, but it does not feel directly helpful to members of the queer community. Additionally, Public-Focused Activism may be perceived as authentic.

The third step is labelled as *Community-Focused Activism*. These actions include financial contributions to the queer community, spotlighting voices in the community, engaging in activism on a local level. This type of activism feels more tangible and directly beneficial to queer individuals, especially to those in the community who may be struggling. Community-Focused Activism may be considered authentic, which is evaluated in the same way as it is for Public-Focused Activism. Additionally, Community-Focused Activism may also be perceived as helpful, again depending on other considerations.

Finally, *Internally-Focused Activism* in the form of continuous learning and change by companies seems to be the most tangible way to help the community. Implementing internal practices and being open to continuous learning makes a difference in the everyday lives of queer individuals who work for, purchase from, or interact with a company.

The figure maps authenticity and helpfulness onto the categories of activism. Activism that is on the public-focused step or higher may be seen as authentic, but only activism at the community-focused step or higher may be seen as helpful. There are additional considerations that lead to perceptions of authenticity and helpfulness that will be discussed below as they fit in within the framework. Each theme and its corresponding sub-themes will now be discussed in-depth.

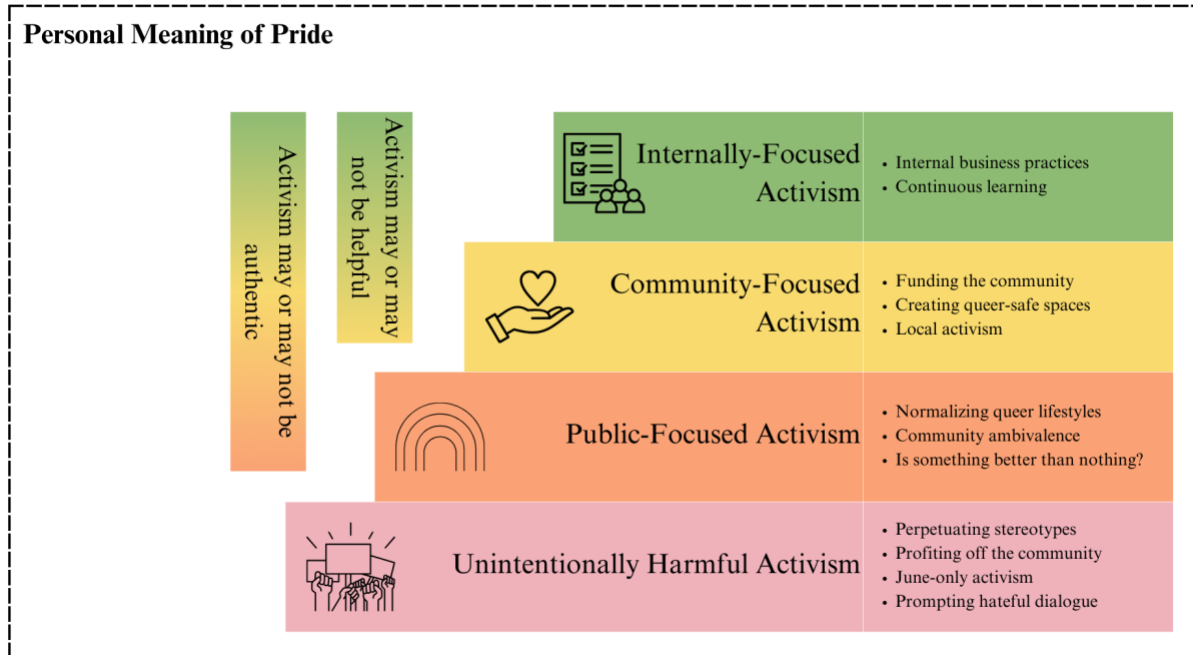


Figure 4.1 – Emergent Findings Framework

## 4.2 Personal Meaning of Pride

During early analysis of individual transcripts, it became clear that these conversations were centered around what queer pride and Pride Month means to each participant. Though I never asked participants directly what pride means to them, these ideas came out as they explained their coming out story, their motivations for attending Pride events, the ways they personally advocate for their community, and their thoughts and feelings towards particularly helpful or harmful activism. For some, the importance of supportive community was prevalent throughout the conversation. For others, recognizing and honouring queer history came up repeatedly. Yet for others, the journey of self-acceptance they went through to be able to feel pride in and express themselves seemed to drive the conversation. What it means to be a proud queer person will be different for everyone based on their experiences. Though there were many commonalities in what makes pride important to participants, it is ultimately a personal concept. This personal meaning of Pride is part of a queer person’s worldview and ultimately impacts the lens through which they view and judge brand activism.

For example, to Sam, queer pride is all about community. Sam discusses their journey of discovering their identity and coming out to friends and family. They did not realize there were other people who felt like them until university when they learned about different gender identities. Sam described this experience as “affirming and enlightening.” Coming from a less progressive small town, they quickly got involved with queer student groups on campus and leaned on community to provide support and understanding. Sam further describes not having to wear a mask when they are with their community. In regard to Pride Month and queer activism, Sam’s favourite way to advocate is by having conversations with family, friends, and coworkers

about issues of inclusion and acceptance impacting the queer community. Sam is not a fan of partying, but enjoys celebrating Pride with their community.

The importance of community to Sam continued to show as the conversation shifted to brand activism. They spoke passionately about wishing companies would sponsor or support more community-building events. Specifically, they expressed a distaste for parties and the desire for a place where queer people could gather as community.

*Parties, especially at bars, don't do a whole lot to build community within the 2SLGBTQ+ community. There's not a whole lot of tangible action that seems to result from Pride parties, other than having a party.*

Sam also wished companies would engage on a more local level that would benefit the queer community in their city. They value local businesses and organizations that help make their city a better, safer place for queer people. Further, Sam hardly talked about their personal experiences with harmful and helpful activism; rather, their focus was on how activism impacts the queer community as a whole. To Sam, pride means community, and this personal meaning impacted their perceptions of brand activism throughout our entire conversation. The personal significance of queer pride and Pride Month was clearer for some participants than others, but all of them had strong values that permeated our conversations and their feelings toward pride-related activism.

### **4.3 Unintentionally Harmful Activism**

The most basic criteria for brand activism to be helpful to the queer community is that it cannot be harmful to the community. The discussion of harmful activism was an important part of this study because it demonstrated that even when a company has good intentions, brand activism can cause harm to the queer community. This harm may derive from the way activism is executed, a notable lack of activism, or public responses to activism. Four types of activism that can bring harm to the queer community were raised by participants: (1) activism that perpetuates stereotypes, (2) activism that profits off the queer community, (3) June-only activism, and (4) activism that prompts hateful dialogue.

#### **4.3.1 Activism that Perpetuates Stereotypes**

Despite the vast number of identities and labels that fall under the 2SLGBTQ+ umbrella, the community is often reduced to a few common stereotypes. Many displays of brand activism play into these stereotypes, and these are not appreciated by participants. Reducing the community to its common stereotypes not only feels lazy, but also harmful in perpetuating stereotypes. Some participants immediately thought of stereotypes when asked if they had ever seen harmful activism:

*I saw this tote bag that said this thing on it, it wasn't "yas queen," but it was similar and it was Pride colours and it was just the most cliché thing that you think of like the gay caricature of a flaming queen. (Alex)*

*I hate [any company] that derives their products or messages off of very stereotypical things that queer people say or do. It's quite harmful because it's just reinforcing a narrative that every gay man is going to say "slay" and "yas" and love RuPaul's DragRace and like some of them do, some of them don't. Doesn't matter. (Becca)*

Participants continued to discuss these stereotypes and why they feel harmful. It is threatening to someone's identity to simply put them in a box when being gay or being non-binary is not just one specific thing. Participants explained that the stereotypes exist for a reason, but it is harmful to reduce an entire community to a handful of overused tropes.

*No one wants to be put into like one specific box. [...] There's like a billion people out there that can fall into those categories, it's not just one specific thing (Cole).*

Companies may try to use stereotypes as a way to bond with the group or demonstrate that they are "in" on the jokes, but it can come across as superficial and offensive rather than supportive. People outside of the queer community making jokes about stereotypes is inappropriate; for participants, it is inappropriate because these outsiders may not have even met people in the community but are simply thinking of common caricatures and promoting them. Finally, the use of stereotypes in brand activism simply feels lazy. If companies are trying to support the community, participants felt they should be able to put in the effort to come up with something original:

*You can celebrate a group, you can make references to the humans within a group without falling back onto lazy stereotypes. (Alex)*

#### 4.3.2 Activism that Profits off the Queer Community

During Pride Month, many companies sell rainbow merchandise, including clothing, accessories, home décor, food, and beverages. Designing and selling Pride-themed products is not inherently harmful, but when the support is limited to the month of June and is not paired with some other tangible action to help the queer community, such as a donation, it feels performative. Participants frequently discussed and were fully aware of changing social norms and consumer preferences to support activist brands. This understanding makes it difficult to determine a company's true intentions when that company engages in activism:

*I don't want to say it's the social norm to accept queer people, it's not like how it used to be kind of less, and I think part of me is like sees how much progress that is but a part of me is like, are they just trying to like profit if that makes any sense? (Lucy)*

Participants felt that many companies tend to engage in activism from June 1-30 and ignore 2SLGBTQ+ issues throughout the rest of the year. Limited-time activism is one of the quickest ways for a company to be labelled as performative, practicing rainbow-washing or rainbow capitalism. Participants also discussed social media discourse where queer communities and allies poke fun at these companies and point out how disingenuous they seem. Participants made it clear, however, that performative activism is not just a minor irritant, it feels exploitative:



*Sometimes it just feels like alright well it's Pride Month so we gotta get those gay dollars.*  
(Sam)

First, companies may take advantage of Pride Month as an opportunity to sell rainbow merchandise without doing anything to help the community in return. As Paige points out, companies can be confident that people will buy the merchandise so that they have something pride-related to wear throughout the month, whether to work, school, or a parade:

*What are you doing for the queer community? Nothing, you just want to profit because people are going to buy this stuff so then they have something rainbow for the month.*  
(Paige)

Second, companies seem to forget that Pride month is about celebrating the 2SLGBTQ+ community, not getting money from them. To participants, it feels like there is an exchange component wherein brands will support them, but only if they buy their product or attend their event. Therefore, it does not feel like genuine support for the community's rights, but something that is contingent on making a profit. Finally, participants typically mentioned large retail chains, like Target and Walmart, as those whose Pride activism felt exploitative. Companies who are very profitable and have the resources to make a tangible difference for the 2SLGBTQ+ cause harm when their only activism is in the form of selling merchandise to make more money.

#### 4.3.3 June-only Activism

Whether a company advocates for the 2SLGBTQ+ only during Pride Month or throughout the entire year, participants discussed a notable silence from brands outside of celebratory and joyful contexts. They feel that companies are only there when it is time to provide a parade float or when they can present themselves in a "happy go lucky" (*Lucy*) manner to boost their brand image. When the community is in need, that support disappears, and it feels harmful:

*I think it's harmful if you're an activist or a brand that advocates for activism, that says "we support this community, we stand by this community, we are for this community," and then when the community is in danger, when it's in jeopardy or when it's facing harm and it needs help you don't show up. I think that it's a huge problem for the queer community to see that they're being supported for one month out of a year. I think that it hurts. I think it's harmful.* (Noah)

The primary reason why this feels so harmful is because the concept of Pride originally began as a protest. Participants spoke passionately about the history of Pride, and for many, the meaning of Pride today is celebrating for those who could not in the past. However, protests and struggles for rights are not a thing of the past. Participants discussed countries where being openly queer means risking your life and where general attitudes have not changed. For participants whose families were originally these countries and who still have family and friends living there, this meant all the more reason to celebrate. Even in Canada, participants felt a strong pull to honour history, especially as 2SLGBTQ+ identities are becoming increasingly threatened.

A common time when the queer community comes together to honour history and those who came before them is on November 20, Transgender Day of Remembrance. Trans remembrance vigils are organized to honour gender-diverse individuals who have lost their lives to prejudice and hate. Participants expressed the importance of attending these events, whether it be honouring history or supporting their community. While it would be inappropriate for companies to set up booths and wave company logos at these events, the lack of representation at these more emotionally difficult events from typically supportive companies was noted.

As anti-2SLGBTQ+ legislation is being passed throughout Canada and the United States, the queer community and its allies have been protesting these laws with little support from the companies who frequent pride parades:

*We know that you're there because your logos are everywhere. Your companies are everywhere, right? You have people that are there that are telling you, "Hey, we support you and we're from said business." But none of those people, none of those brands, none of those companies are there during a protest, or during a rally, or during a trans rights movement. (Noah)*

Protest attendance aside, participants did not recall any examples of companies using their platforms to speak against harmful legislation and in support of the queer community. Further, participants expressed that action against anti-trans legislation was currently their top concern and where they felt 2SLGBTQ+ support should be focused right now.

Another way that June-only activism causes harm to the community is by causing undue stress on non-profit organizations and queer public figures to educate the public and have difficult conversations within a 30-day window. Only three participants could speak to the experience of working with a non-profit organization or in an advocacy role, but they spoke passionately about this issue and highlighted why it is a concern. Queer-focused organizations tend to struggle for funding eleven months of the year, only to be overloaded with requests for merchandise, educational sessions, and other resources during June. This creates difficulties for non-profits in allocating funds and providing services throughout the year and having the capacity to meet requests during Pride Month. Cass, who works in an advocacy role, mentions her inability to celebrate Pride herself as she is too busy with work in June:

*Everyone that I know that is doing planning during that event is not participating in as many things because they're just so busy planning stuff and doing education that they're exhausted by the time the weekend hits [...] now this is pride week, but I'm having to prep for what's happening on Saturday. (Cass)*

As one remedy to this issue, participants suggested that companies engage in educational opportunities throughout the year, not just in June.

Finally, when brand activism only occurs during Pride Month, it feels like companies are taking up all the space at events that are meant to be for the queer community. It is finally their

time to celebrate and bond with their community, but all they see around them is brand logos, posts, and messages. Participants expressed that Pride Month is when they want to hear voices from their community sharing their stories and experiences. While shows of support are typically appreciated, online and physical spaces become so polluted with corporate messages that queer voices get lost in the clutter:

*If you don't have a meaningful thing to say, you're just taking up space for the people that do have meaningful things to say. (Becca)*

Further, it feels like companies are trying to control and contribute to Pride Month dialogue, when what they should be doing is listening and learning:

*You're invited to this conversation, you are not the leader of this conversation. (Josh)*

Engaging in activism throughout the year rather than making a flurry of statements in June would help return Pride Month to the queer community and give them the space to share their experiences in public spaces.

#### 4.3.4 Activism that Prompts Hateful Dialogue

Mukherjee & Althuizen (2022) stated that criticism and backlash to brand activism appears as a direct threat to the moral foundations of consumers who agree with the brand's position. For the research participants who not only agree with a brand's pro-2SLGBTQ+ stance but are living it, backlash and hateful dialogue can feel like a direct threat to their safety and wellbeing. When brand activism prompts a strong backlash, it feels harmful in two ways. First, it feels like it is creating a platform where homophobic dialogue becomes normalized. Many participants raised the example of Bud Light's partnership with Dylan Mulvaney that led to an explosion of homophobic comments and jokes being made online, in bars, and in casual social situations. Normalizing this type of dialogue feels dangerous to the community, as expressed by Taylor:

*I think it creates an open and normal space to hate on queer people [...] I will go to the bars and it's just a regular conversation there. Even if someone just orders one, even if it's a straight white man that's obviously ordering one. I think in other ways it just... it allows people to be able to openly hate on you and be aggressive.*

Second, activism that prompts fierce backlash leads to safety concerns within the queer community. Speaking about the Bud Light example, participants expressed concern over the safety of Dylan Mulvaney as she was harassed online and presumably in-person in ways that threatened both her physical and mental wellbeing. For queer individuals, seeing this type of dialogue play out within their own online and physical spaces also makes them question their safety:

*I see these effects that these words and these reactions have on my friends and my friends often are like, like recoiling, like maybe I don't feel as safe as I thought I did. If this is the reaction [to] a simple advertisement, maybe I don't feel as safe. (Paige)*

While intense criticism was labelled as a harmful byproduct of brand activism, participants differed in whether they felt companies could, or should, work to prevent it. Some participants thought companies should engage in more subtle or less divisive activism, for example, by presenting 2SLGBTQ+ lifestyles without making blunt statements in advertisements. Others felt that it ultimately was not a brand's fault if it received backlash and wanted companies to take strong stances of support. This seemed to come down to individual differences in personality and how each participant preferred to advocate for 2SLGBTQ+ rights in their own lives. Those who were not yet fully secure in expressing their identities preferred to only engage in dialogue with close friends, or simply seemed more conflict-averse and tended to favour subtle activism to avoid potential backlash. Those who were comfortable with and enjoyed engaging in challenging dialogue with broad groups of people were more willing to take on criticism. There is no right or wrong way to be a queer individual and advocate in your own life; each person is on their own individual journey. While queer individuals may have different capacities for handling hateful rhetoric, activism that was felt to put someone in danger was seen as harmful across the board.

Preference for subtle activism may also be explained in part by what tends to seem more authentic. In music, album covers or music videos that have a high production quality are likely to be seen as overproduced and less authentic (Leonard, 2007). This may relate to the hesitancy for some participants around activism that feels "flamboyant." It may be because flamboyancy is an old queer stereotype, or because it is a traditionally feminine representation that is unconsciously deemed as less competent and authentic.

The other unifying opinion of participants is how companies should respond to backlash. If, following a backlash, a company retracts its activism or stays silent in the face of controversy, participants feel it escalates safety concerns and does more harm than good by allowing harmful discourse to continue unchecked. Further, it is demonstrating that it is not a true ally that can stand up for the community during difficult times. If, however, a company stays firm in its stance and condemns hateful comments, it may be able to alleviate harm and prove itself as a trustworthy supporter of the community. For example, participants felt that Bud Light should have made a strong statement condemning harmful rhetoric and reinforcing its stance on queer rights.

#### **4.4 Public-Focused Activism**

Participants described Public-Focused Activism as that which is targeted towards allies or the general public rather than the community itself. Public-focused activism has three characteristics: (1) it normalizes queer lifestyles, (2) it triggers ambivalence in members of the queer community, and (3) it is the point where some activism feels better than no activism, and (4) it may be considered authentic. Because Public-Focused Activism is not causing harm to the community, it is generally regarded as acceptable if not appreciated. Public-Focused Activism, however, still does not reach the criteria of feeling helpful to participants.

Public-Focused Activism that came up in conversation included things like Pride Month merchandise, media depicting queer characters, and rainbow flags being hung up in store windows. While these forms of activism can feel harmful and exploitative, they can also be appreciated as some form of effort. Typically, if it was a smaller business selling pride-themed products or the company showed originality in its messaging or design, participants felt it was acceptable. They tended to be more wary of large retail chains and department stores who were deemed as having the capacity to do more than sell merchandise with a rainbow flag.

#### 4.4.1 Normalizing Queer Lifestyles

Public-Focused Activism serves as a way to put queer identities and lifestyles in the public eye and, hopefully, help them become increasingly normalized. When discussing these types of activism, participants would initially state that they were not helpful to the queer community. Upon further discussion, they would share the sentiment that although it doesn't seem to be doing much to help the community, at least it is doing something. Participants then landed on the notion that the "something" it is doing is promoting awareness of queer lifestyles:

*I think overall it is helpful with normalizing that hey, queer people exist. They're here. They're people just like everybody else. (Sam)*

Participants discussed these types of activism as an entry point to prompt important conversations that eventually lead to public acceptance:

*Having more people talk about it means more outreach, which even at first people are very receptive. Eventually there's progress. (Becca)*

*It just kind of starts that discourse that allows for conversation to happen, and usually the start of certain things is to have a conversation in the beginning. (Josh)*

A few participants used the example of RuPaul's Drag Race to explain their attitudes towards Public-Focused Activism. The TV show has put drag performers in front of audiences who otherwise would not have been exposed to that specific subculture. The show acts as an entry point for those who might find learning about it on their own intimidating. Further, it creates a base level of understanding within the public and an opportunity for allies to relate with the queer community. Even if the show is a "sugar-coated, surface level" (*Wren*) depiction of drag, it is a starting point.

Although participants were typically more critical of how large corporations choose to engage in activism, they felt it was the most important for large (as compared to smaller) companies to engage because of the potential for normalization. The example of banks came up in every interview because they tend to be very present at pride events in addition to TD being used as an example as part of the interview protocol. While participants frequently expressed annoyance towards banks' activism, they ultimately found value in their activism because essentially everybody uses bank services. When significant industries or companies are involved in activism, the public does not have much choice in whether they see the activism or continue to

support the company. The activism may not feel helpful to the community, but the increased visibility is valuable.

#### 4.4.2 Community Ambivalence

While participants spoke about the importance of representation and visibility, they still felt frustrated by activism that didn't seem to be targeted directly to the queer community. When discussing *Public-Focused Activism*, all fourteen participants said some variation of the phrase, "Okay that's fine, but what are they actually doing?" They wrestled with wanting companies to take more tangible action to help the community while wanting to appreciate any level of effort. Not only was the frustration of these contradicting ideas present in participants' use of words such as "double-edged sword" (*Paige*) and "duality" (*Dwayne*), but it was also expressed through physical and verbal cues. Long pauses, sighs, and backtracking on previous statements was common as participants tried to express their thoughts clearly.

The primary source of mental conflict stemmed from participants trying to discern a company's intentions behind its activism:

*What is their objective behind it? Is it to get the support of like the queer community, and therefore...? Or like, come across as progressive because that's kind of what our society is moving towards is more of a progressive viewpoint? (Paige)*

This mental struggle was exacerbated by participants' recognition of historical and current struggles for 2SLGBTQ+ rights and a sense that they should be happy that queer brand activism exists at all. Participants further recognized that there is some empowerment in the fact that the queer community has become a desirable market for companies to target. Becoming a community that collectively has the power to shift business practices is significant; however, this point quickly led participants to acknowledge that maybe all they are is a profitable consumer group, circling back to the question of companies' intentions. *Wren* describes this experience of seeing queer iconography and shared experiences being used to sell products as "disconnecting."

#### 4.4.3 Is Something Better than Nothing?

Discussions around the dichotomy of Public-Focused Activism ultimately led to the question, "is something better than nothing?" Despite all the contradictory thoughts circling through participants' minds, they all ultimately stated that, yes, some activism is better than none. Some more wholeheartedly expressed this sentiment, while others hesitantly arrived at their conclusion:

*I don't know. I don't know. I kind of am like, something is better than nothing, but to what extent? (Paige)*

Participants expressed the boundary that this statement only applies if the activism is not hurting anyone or causing harm to the community. Overall, they felt that brand activism, regardless of being authentic or helpful, is a step in the right direction:

*The ones that are at least vocal in some way help rather than ignoring it all together.  
(Becca)*

#### 4.4.4 The Role of Authenticity in Public-Focused Activism

Though Public-Focused Activism does not feel directly helpful to the queer community, it can be perceived as authentic. Participants described activism as authentic when they felt that the company genuinely believed and stood for the message it was sharing. While participants' evaluations of authenticity among the four examples used in the interview protocol differed, there were common criteria used in explaining their evaluations. The most common factors contributing to participants' evaluations of authenticity included messaging and word choice, evidence of action, originality, and company history of activism.

Participants evaluated the companies' messages based on whether they perceived each to be intentional or lazy. Most participants criticized Patagonia's message for seeming superficial and using too many buzzwords without a lot of meaning. While some felt its statement recognizing past shortcomings was admirable, others felt it was a blanket statement and wished Patagonia had expanded on what its past shortcomings were. Participants also felt that the statement could be improved with a more personal explanation of what specifically the company believes in and values. Participants appreciated TD's clear statement of commitment to the 2SLGBTQ+ community and noted that its messaging sounded more personal. Additionally, TD's recognition of the current "erosion of rights" and "rise in harmful rhetoric" across the globe was received well. Participants felt that this demonstrated the company is in-tune with the queer community, enhancing perceptions of authenticity.

Evidence of action was critical to perceptions of authenticity. Without any examples of how Patagonia planned to advocate for the community and protest laws, the message felt inauthentic. In contrast, Amigos' and Vizzy's activism included concrete information about their plans to donate money, how much they would donate, and where the funds would go, which enhanced perceptions of authenticity. Although the examples, in the online interviews, were sent in PDF format, participants noticed that TD's article linked to the TD Ready Commitment, the bank's corporate citizenship platform. Many participants clicked the link and quickly browsed the page that outlines TD's corporate values and current initiatives. This tangible proof of how the company is contributing to society made the original article seem more authentic.

In addition to its transparent donation, participants that found Vizzy's Pride Pack to be authentic also commonly cited its creativity in designing the can and packaging. Rather than simply putting a rainbow flag on the can, Vizzy used bright colours to create a unique design. Those who did not feel Vizzy was being authentic were primarily concerned with the fact that the product was a limited time offer during the month of June.

The importance of a history of 2SLGBTQ+ activism in perceptions of authenticity was seen in discussions of the TD and Amigos examples. Though many participants did not find TD's activism to be helpful, most felt it was authentic. TD has long been vocal about its support of the queer community, so participants were confident that it was a genuine commitment. Amigos, a local restaurant, is not the loudest 2SLGBTQ+ advocate, but participants familiar with the

business recalled seeing pride flags in the window or attending concerts or drag shows at the venue. The restaurant's reputation as safe place for members of the queer community caused participants to immediately trust its Pride Month event. Those who were not familiar with Amigos tended to find its activism authentic solely based on it being a local business.

Notably, a company's commitment to other issues did not translate into assumptions of authenticity when the company spoke out during Pride month. The discussions around the Patagonia example showed that participants who were familiar with the company's longstanding commitment to sustainability did not blindly trust that its commitment to the queer community would be genuine. Further, this lack of automatic trust seemed more notable for participants who were already familiar with Patagonia and its commitments. They tended to be less trusting of the authenticity of Patagonia's messaging. Upon being told about Patagonia's environmental commitments, participants who were not familiar with the company had slightly improved perceptions of authenticity but ultimately wanted to do more research into the company.

## 4.5 Community-Focused Activism

### 4.5.1 Funding the Community

As participants questioned what companies were actually doing and what tangible effort was being put in to help the queer community, donations and funding for organizations that support the 2SLGBTQ+ emerged as the most concrete way to help. Some were hesitant to state that money is the most important factor, but ultimately everyone expressed that money is what makes things happen. During the discussions of the activism examples, participants expressed positive sentiments towards Vizzy's \$1 million donation to the Human Rights Campaign and Amigos' donation of proceeds to OUTSaskatoon. After reading the examples embedded within the interview protocol, participants expressed emotions of interest, optimism, hope, and even joy.

*It definitely would because my emotions reading through the article, it went like really happy when I saw the donations. (James)*

*Yeah, I mean I am... a lot more welcoming of this because, you know, they're actually putting money towards it and towards the community. I am a lot more hopeful about it. (Wren)*

While these emotions were also related to other characteristics of the promotion (Vizzy) or event (Amigos), the strongest contribution to positive emotions was from the donations. Contributing money to queer causes was a tangible cue in that companies were 'putting money where their mouth is,' and it ultimately made their activism seem less superficial. Lucy expressed the fact that Pride Month promotions, whether in the form of rainbow merchandise, advertisements, or promotions, take money to execute and pay the people involved. Instead, companies could just donate that money.

*I feel like putting money into what they're, or like, having things like tied to donations and putting money into things beyond like... because I'm like thinking, if you just like slap a rainbow on something, and that's it, the amount of money that probably took to like*



*come up with, like to pay all the people to do all the things, and I'm not saying that's bad, but like all of the meetings and like all of the resources that went into that. I'm like, if you're not gonna do anything beyond just slapping the rainbow on it, just do a donation, or do both like Vizzy did. But I think just putting money to it, and like giving money rather than just being like, 'we love rainbows.'* (Lucy)

Participants often selected the emotion of “interest” from Plutchik’s Wheel of Emotion (1980) to express their desire to research more into the company and the donation itself. There are several other considerations that can increase or decrease the favourability of a donation. The frequency with which participants expressed and discussed this feeling of interest further emphasized the dissonance that the queer community experiences when faced with brand activism and the strength of their convictions that while any help is appreciated, there is a right way to do it.

The amount of money donated and the recipient of the donation make a difference in how it is perceived. First, having a clear purpose and transparency around the donation amount and recipient leads to more favourable attitudes.

*In particular I like that they're naming who they're working with and where they're working and why, and complete transparency and what they're doing.* (Wren)

From there, participants questioned or wanted to do more research into companies’ decisions. Vizzy’s donation of \$1 million was much appreciated, but participants wondered how they came up with that number. They questioned what would happen if Vizzy made more than \$1 million in sales of their pride pack, in which case they would ultimately be profiting off the promotion. Some participants even took to Google during the interview to look up Vizzy’s financial information to see if the donation felt proportional to the size and success of the company. Ultimately, the financial power and capacity of a company plays into perceptions of their financial contribution, wherein companies with greater capacity should be doing more. Amigos’ donation of proceeds from their pride event felt appropriate and admirable for a small, local restaurant. Further, the examples of TD’s and Patagonia’s activism were criticized for not including financial contributions. Participants were very familiar with TD’s 2SLGBTQ+ activism, as they are typically very present at pride parades and events in the form of sponsorship. Participants presumed that TD was likely making a financial contribution in addition to the example shown, but emphasized that if TD is not making a significant donation to cause it is very vocal about, it should be.

Discussion around the recipients of donations also revealed strong preferences for funding to be allocated on a more local basis. Preferences for donations were stronger when it is going to a local organization where the impact of the donation may be felt within the local community. Further, participants expressed the importance for donations to go to a well-researched organization that is directly helping queer individuals. Overall, companies are expected to put in the effort to conduct their own research and allocate funds where they will be the most impactful, which may mean receiving input from queer communities in the regions they operate in.

Despite a number of other considerations that impact how favourably a donation is perceived, any money put toward the issue is generally appreciated. Even if a company is engaging in activism to bump profits, misplaced intentions can be excused if they are putting money to a good cause:

*Well, then it's like, okay they're - then they're actually like, they're not just using this to bump profits with a specific crowd they're doing, they're doing this... or even if it is, even if their number one concern is to bump profits, at least they're, at least some percentage of it is going to a charity or something. (Alex)*

While participants felt that larger companies should donate more, any donation was appreciated. Ultimately, donations made participants feel like companies were doing something about the issue rather than just pandering to a profitable consumer group. Further, financial contributions to the community are such a tangible form of activism that other considerations from authenticity literature, such as the length of commitment to the issue, was not important. To participants, it matters what the company is doing right now, and if they are doing something to tangibly help right now, it is deemed helpful.

#### 4.5.2 Creating Queer-Safe Spaces

While discussing participants' dream business and what they would do to advocate for the queer community, they passionately spoke about partnering with and spotlighting queer individuals. These partnerships would help in multiple ways, financially supporting queer artists, authors, or musicians, educating the general public, and gathering community in a meaningful way. Bookstores having a dedicated queer section focused on queer authors or queer history, galleries or businesses highlighting queer art, or venues hosting queer artists were all common dream businesses in the interviews. One way this could come to fruition would be for companies to partner with queer artists when designing their pride merchandise. While there was some discussion about online discourse calling queer artists who partner with large companies "sellouts" (*Wren*), they ultimately felt drawn to it because they are happy that a queer artist is being supported. It may not be supporting the community at large, but it is helping a member of the community and is therefore appreciated.

Often, I did not even have the chance to ask participants how their hypothetical business would support the queer community because their entire business idea was centered around amplifying queer voices. Business ideas from participants included queer-centric bookstores, art galleries, and videogames. Participants mentioned a lack of these types of businesses and the desire to see more exist. Spotlighting queer voices does not need to be a full-time commitment, however. While it could be the core focus of the business, just doing it in June or throughout the year was also deemed helpful.

*It's more prevalent during Pride Month, which is fine, that's fair. But I know lots of them do it like year-round or that kind of thing. Which is helpful for, you know, boosting up queer artists. (Paige)*

When it comes to activism that feels directly and tangibly helpful to the queer community, concerns over June-only activism were lessened. If a company's intentions are clearly focused on supporting and uplifting the community, their activism is perceived as meaningful.

Even without it being a dedicated queer space, a business can play a role in creating a safe place for the community to gather. Participants mentioned several local businesses who host events for the queer community and have welcoming signage up year-round. This creates a more naturally inclusive environment that lasts all 12 months of the year. Many participants emphasized the importance of building community and the significance when they found other queer people to connect with. Amigos was discussed as a great example of creating space for "queer-friendly engagement." Participants who were familiar with the restaurant appreciated that in addition to the bands and shows the venue has traditionally hosted for 30+ years, it regularly hosts drag shows and dance parties, creating a space for queer individuals to gather and bond in community.

*Amigos Cantina has done a really great space, a really good job of creating space for queer-friendly engagement and queer-centric and queer-forward as well when it comes to just setting space for people and making and making sure that queer patrons, from what I'm aware, not feel like they don't belong there. (Josh)*

Companies hosting or funding community-building activities was more often cited as an example of activism that participants do not currently see but would find helpful. A few participants pointed out that many Pride Month events are centered around drinking and partying which is not accessible or appealing to all members of the community. Others mentioned that they simply aren't big partiers, and so they don't gravitate to these types of events. These events can also be cost-prohibitive, further reducing accessibility.

*I see this on Twitter all the time [...], 'I wish there was a place for queer people to hang out that's not just in bars.' (Dwayne)*

*There's no in between, like "hey you can just chill here" kind of thing. (Wren)*

One idea from *Noah* was for restaurants or cafes to open their spaces to the queer community on days of pride events or protests. Putting out the message that it is a safe space where people can come in to warm up or cool off, get a coffee, or have a meal is a simple but meaningful way for companies to show that they support to the community. According to *Noah*, free coffee would be an added bonus, but not a requirement.

#### 4.5.3 Local Activism

Across all activism that is assessed as helpful, impact and favourability is enhanced when it is local. Participants expressed a strong local preference in two ways: (1) local companies inherently feel more helpful and (2) activism at a local level, regardless of company size, feels more helpful. The preference towards small, local businesses is primarily due to a feeling of relatability. It is easier to trust and relate to a local business owner making a statement on 2SLGBTQ+ rights than an unknown marketing team designing pride communications for a large

corporation. If the owner of a small business holds strong values, it also seems more likely that their employees will hold the same values. For example, participants felt more confident that an employee at a local bookstore would respect their identity than a teller at their branch of an international bank. Additionally, small business owners are part of the local community, so it makes sense that they would want to help improve the livelihood in their community.

*It feels like the business owners actually care about developing their communities and making them a better place for everyone. (Sam)*

Further, participants felt that small businesses were generally more transparent while large companies faced more opportunities to engage in unethical behaviours.

When activism is focused at a local level, regardless of company size, the impacts feel more tangible. Participants are familiar with the work that queer organizations in their community do, so donations to those organizations carry a concrete benefit. It also makes donations or other initiatives feel more transparent.

*You'll see something and you'll be like, what is this foundation? No that was local, I knew exactly where it was going. (Lucy)*

Additionally, they know that their own community will benefit from the initiatives. Participants felt that donations made to municipal or provincial organizations would be more effective in targeting their community's areas of need. The impact of local donations also feels more impactful because all the funds are going to the queer organization. If companies can put in the effort to research local organizations to donate to, their money goes further than it would using an intermediary.

*But if you donate it directly to the place, that 100% goes to the place. If you donate it to United Way, 75% goes to that place because they need like the management and the back-end, they take a percentage. (Josh)*

Finally, supporting local organizations and non-profits makes more of a statement regarding a company's stance toward a specific marginalized group. When a company provides support to a local queer organization rather than, for example, a national charity that focuses on human rights more generally, it demonstrates a stronger commitment to the queer community. Additionally, targeted activism ensures that each group is receiving the attention and support they deserve. Participants passionately spoke about the importance of advocating for individual marginalized groups to maximize impact and helpfulness.

*If they just stop boxing everyone into one thing, you can start focusing on the needs of every single community, which includes the queer community, and that's when I think they can actually do the real work. (Josh)*

## 4.6 Internally-Focused Activism

### 4.6.1 Internal Business Practices

In addition to the spotlighting of queer voices mentioned above, internal practices were the most common considerations when participants discussed their hypothetical businesses. Although brand activism, by definition, typically involves taking a public stance on sociopolitical issues, the most direct way for companies to begin supporting and helping the queer community is by analyzing their own internal practices. Every participant discussed some aspect of business practices that would be built into the core of their company. Things like fair hiring practices, staff education on topics such as pronoun usage and micro-aggressions, and zero-tolerance policies for discrimination were frequently mentioned. Additionally, these practices were brought up by a lot of participants as things they wish their own employers would implement. They shared experiences of themselves or friends who had faced issues at work due to a lack of internal policies and practices.

Representation of marginalized groups within companies felt like a helpful contribution to the queer community even though it did not impact participants directly. Participants wanted to know about companies' queer employees beyond basic statistics. They pondered about companies' promotion processes, retention of employees from marginalized groups, and overall culture and climate. Again, another company's internal practices did not impact participants directly, but it mattered to them because it has an impact on other queer individuals' day-to-day lives. Further, seeing queer representation and queer success within businesses just feels good, and it can act as a stronger statement than vocal activism.

*If they just have obviously queer and trans and an intersectional and diverse set of people working there... I get more excited for that versus when I see a rainbow sign somewhere.  
(Becca)*

### 4.6.2 Continuous Learning

Finally, companies need to be willing to continuously listen, learn, and change. Becoming complacent in being a 'good enough' company or having a good reputation hinders progress. When discussing Patagonia's activism example, several participants thought the message was superficial and lacked concrete evidence of how they are implementing their values internally. Participants wondered if a company like Patagonia that has a solid reputation as socially and environmentally responsible might forget to reflect on and analyze their own practices.

*I think they're just so content with like that the good that they already do, that there might be, they don't realize that they have a lot of blind spots when it comes to this. [...]. And they forget to do, like, training for their employees about how to use pronouns and stuff like that. (Josh)*

Aside from implementing education, training, and fair practices for employees, company executives need to engage in continuous learning. Being in-tune with queer consumers and

employees will help ensure that companies do not become stagnant in thinking they are doing ‘enough.’

## CHAPTER 5: DISCUSSION

The popularization of brand activism continues to prompt academic inquiry into how companies can best engage with sociopolitical topics. Often, the issues companies speak out on involve marginalized groups. With a lack of research on how activism impacts marginalized communities and how community members feel about brand activism, this study took a qualitative approach to ask members of the 2SLGBTQ+ how companies can engage in ways that are not only authentic but also helpful. The findings indicate that perceptions of brand activism differs between individuals, because they are shaped by each individual’s unique lived experience with their identity. The data also suggest that company activism attempting to advocate for the queer community may be categorized into four levels or steps. Activism may be unintentionally harmful, public-focused, community-focused, or internally-focused. Finally, pride-related activism beginning at the public-focused level has the potential to be deemed authentic and activism beginning at the community-focused level may be perceived as helpful by the queer community.

### 5.1 Implications for Theory

This study extends the conversation on brand activism to show that researchers’ emphasis on authenticity may be overlooking some important pieces. While authenticity still played a role into how the activism was perceived, the findings ultimately demonstrate that brand activism can be perceived as authentic even when it is not helpful to the community, and conversely, activism can be perceived as helpful to the community even when it may not be authentic. This demonstrates that they are two distinct concepts, though the precise boundaries between them are still unclear.

One area in which we see the difference between perceptions of authenticity and helpfulness is in the length of a company’s commitment to an issue. While commitment to an issue over time has been posited as an important factor in enhancing perceptions of authenticity (Mirzaei et al., 2022; Schmidt et al., 2022), it is not required for perceptions of helpfulness. Rather, a company doing something tangible to help the 2SLGBTQ+ in present-day can still be seen as helpful even if that same company has not historically been helpful. Commitment to an issue over time did seem to enhance perceptions of authenticity, with participants but it did not impact whether a specific action felt helpful. This was primarily seen in the example of Vizzy, where participants did not have any knowledge of the company having a history of 2SLGBTQ+ activism but found its donation to the Human Rights Campaign to be helpful. For a company’s activism to be helpful, all that matters is if they are doing something helpful right now.

Commitment to an issue may also appear as an alignment between a company’s activism and its core values which enhances authenticity (Mirzaei, et al., 2022; Ahmad et al. 2022; Vredenberg et al., 2020; Kalina, 2020;). While this idea of fit or alignment was not discussed much in regard to helpfulness, it was discussed in perceptions of authenticity. Though we may be

tempted to believe that a company that generally holds progressive views would be seen as authentic across sociopolitical issues, this was not the case. Participants were clear that a company's dedication to one issue does not directly translate into authenticity or trust when the company is speaking on a different issue. This suggests that the alignment between a company's core values and activism must be specific for it to impact perceptions of authenticity.

Finally, there were noteworthy differences between perceptions of authenticity in previous studies and perceptions of helpfulness regarding contribution type. Previous studies have found that financial commitments enhance authenticity for high equity brands, while non-financial commitments enhance authenticity for low equity brands (Ahmad et al., 2022). Further, rhetorical commitments, or those that do not demonstrate any tangible action, should be avoided (Ahmad et al., 2022). Atanga and Mattila (2023) suggest that in-kind contributions, such as products, are seen as more authentic than monetary contributions due to greater perceived impact. This may be because larger sums of money feel less concrete, and actions that feel tangible enhance perceived impact (Atanga & Mattila, 2023). In this study, any financial contribution helped to bolster perceptions of helping, regardless of whether or not participants perceived them as authentic. In-kind contributions tended to fall in the range of being helpful in the sense of normalizing rather than directly helping the community, though perceptions differed based on other characteristics of the company and activism. This study demonstrated that perceptions of helpfulness and perceptions of authenticity align regarding rhetorical commitments, wherein proof of tangible support is required for activism to feel both authentic and helpful.

This study also contributes to knowledge around the level of issue controversy and novelty. Brand activism is thought to lead to more negative and polarizing response than CSR due to the controversial nature of the issues (Weber et al., 2023). The more controversial an issue is, the more likely it will lead to negative brand attitudes (Atanga et al., 2022). Additionally, taking a stand on newer, more novel issues leads to more negative brand attitudes for consumers who disagree with the company's stance (Atanga et al., 2022). These outcomes were reflected in the study, where conversations highlighted the backlash to activism advocating for transgender and gender-diverse issues, which are generally viewed as more controversial than gay rights. Not taking a stand on controversial, novel issues and remaining silent when things get difficult reduces favourable attitudes for 2SLGBTQ+ individuals. Not only does it decrease brand attitude and perceptions of authenticity, but it also feels harmful.

## **5.2 Implications for Practice**

The differences in consumer responses to brand activism when comparing perceptions of authenticity versus helpfulness and responses from the general public versus members of the community at the centre of the activism lead to several important implications for practitioners. Finding where authentic and helpful activism overlap is likely to be the sweet spot where both companies and consumers can reap benefits. In some situations, however, companies may need to decide whether they are attempting to appeal more to the general public or the marginalized communities and their allies. Ultimately, they need to decide what they want the outcomes of their activism to be.

If companies are genuinely concerned with making an impact, they should focus on mitigating potential harm and showing support in ways that directly help the community. If they are wanting to take a stand on an issue in an authentic manner that appeals to allies but are less concerned with the direct benefits to the queer community, they may consider Public-Focused Activism. Pride month events, product lines, or merchandise can help achieve these results, but companies must be careful to avoid directly or potentially harmful actions to make the most positive impact. While it will not produce as many direct benefits to the queer community, activism that normalizes queer lifestyles is a valuable step in spurring conversations and moving public sentiments forward. For large companies, the ability to make an impact with Public-Focused Activism is particularly pronounced.

Although companies may hesitate to join the conversation if they have been silent in the past for fear of being labelled as performative and ‘jumping on the bandwagon,’ if they are doing something tangible to make a meaningful difference, they could be perceived positively. Companies may face some initial hesitation from consumers, but if they are doing something to help the community, it is ultimately a positive decision. Further, companies should be aware that a longstanding commitment to one sociopolitical issue will not garner automatic trust when speaking out on a new or different issue. Companies need to ensure that they show evidence of what they are doing to help and explain in clear terms why a particular issue is important to them. They cannot rely on their past commitments or positive brand reputation to garner positive responses to new activism.

This study also emphasized the crucial consideration that despite good intentions, activism can ultimately be harmful to the targeted community. If a company wants to engage in activism, it should only do so if it is willing to put in the effort to implement a well-planned initiative. This means avoiding stereotypes and superficial messaging, considering how to engage in activism outside of Pride month, and ensuring a tangible positive outcome for the community. Further, companies need to be prepared to respond to potential backlash and minimize further harm to the community. If a business is not willing to stay firm in their stance in the face of backlash, they should not engage in activism.

Finally, this study confirmed the importance of prosocial internal practices that have been posited by previous researchers. (Mirzaei et al., 2022; Vredenberg et al., 2020; Shetty et al., 2019; Murphy et al., 2013). Internal organizational change is where companies have the opportunity to enhance perceptions of both authenticity and helpfulness while creating real positive change within their communities. Implementing fair hiring practices, incorporating workplace education on topics such as micro-aggressions and pronoun usage, and striving for representation throughout all levels of the company are great places to start. Ensuring that these practices are present and communicated within the company year-round rather than only during Pride month will further enhance perceptions of authenticity, helpfulness, and safety for queer employees and consumers.



### 5.3 Limitations and Future Research

Although I attempted to remain objective and follow procedures closely to exclude any of my own preconceived notions from my findings, it is important to note that my positionality as a 2SLGBTQ+ ally could have influenced my results. The exploratory nature of this study lends itself to several future studies. First, determining the relationship between authentic activism and helpful activism and the boundaries between these two concepts is crucial to inform future practice. Specifically, determining how contribution type, length of commitment, and company values impact perceptions of helpfulness to members of marginalized communities should be solidified. The real-world examples used in this study did not allow for full control of company and activism characteristics despite the diverse examples and that participants were prompted to share their prior knowledge and opinions on each company. Future empirical testing should concretely measure attitudes toward the brand and brand reputation and clearly define the messaging style and contribution type. Additionally, it should attempt to determine what causes backlash and why some types of activism, such as Pride Month merchandise, sometimes feel harmful and sometimes feel acceptable.

Future studies may focus on different marginalized groups and the activism that is targeted towards them as well as different geographical locations. Narrowing the research to a relatively homogenous group of queer individuals was a strength using IPA to explore similarities and differences of their experiences (Smith et al., 2022). Different marginalized groups with differing histories of oppression, obtaining rights, and public consensus may lead to different results. To further identify differences in the experiences of queer individuals, research that segments groups of the 2SLGBTQ+ community to consider transgender, gender-fluid, asexual, or aromantic consumers specifically may be warranted. These groups tend to face either higher levels of controversy or lower levels of understanding among the general public.

Exploring the question of when some activism is better than none or when silence on a topic may be the best approach for a company is a further point of research interest. Further exploration of what types of activism feel overall harmful to the targeted group or what—if any—types of companies should not participate in brand activism would be valuable. These struggles seem especially pertinent for larger companies, and further research into multinational corporations and how they should approach brand activism would clarify two questions that arose as a result of this study. First, participants appreciated when larger companies engaged in activism as it normalized or even forced acceptance in non-queer consumers who access these businesses. If members of marginalized groups are pushing for stronger activism on controversial issues, how will this impact the rest of a company's consumer base and how might they decide what route to take? Second, a popular point of conversation revolved around companies who operate in countries with differing stances on 2SLGBTQ+ rights and how they approach Pride Month. Because this study did not focus on a specific company size, I was not able to reach sufficient depth to answer these questions for larger companies. Small businesses, however, start at a baseline of seeming more authentic and helpful than larger businesses, and with their actions being less criticized, the best ways to engage in activism were clearer.

## CHAPTER 6: CONCLUSION

This qualitative study highlighted the significant ways in which pride-related brand activism can impact members of the queer community, producing important theoretical and managerial contributions and paths for future research. Academics should continue to pursue the outcome of helpfulness to the community in activism research. To achieve the great shared benefit to companies, allies, and community members, researchers should further investigate where perceptions of helpfulness and authenticity align. This study also provides guidance for business owners and managers in avoiding activism that is unintentionally harmful and engaging in activism that benefits the targeted community. While this study provides important contributions, it is exploratory in nature and leaves several research paths open. If the trend of brand activism is to continue, we should also continue striving to find how it can lead to the greatest positive outcomes for marginalized groups, engaged companies, and society at large.

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## APPENDICES

### Appendix A – Behavioural Research Ethics Board Certificate of Approval



Behavioural Research Ethics Board (Beh-REB) 17-Nov-2023

### ***Certificate of Approval***

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Application ID: 4343

Principal Investigator: Maureen Bourassa

Department: Department of Management and Marketing

Student(s): Erika Polishchuk

Funder(s):

Sponsor: University of Saskatchewan

Title: Brand Activism: Helping or Harming the 2SLGBTQ+ Community

Approved On: 17-Nov-2023

Expiry Date: 17-Nov-2024

Approval Of: Behavioural Research Ethics Application

Consent Form

Interview Guide and Articles

Recruitment Message

Transcript Release Form

Acknowledgment Of: TCPS2 Core Certificate (Polishchuk)

Review Type: Delegated Review

#### **CERTIFICATION**

The University of Saskatchewan Behavioural Research Ethics Board (Beh-REB) is constituted and operates in accordance with the current version of the Tri-Council Policy Statement: Ethical Conduct for Research Involving Humans TCPS 2 (2022). The University of Saskatchewan Beh-REB has reviewed the above-named project. The proposal was found to be acceptable on ethical grounds. The principal investigator has the responsibility for any other administrative or regulatory approvals that may pertain to this project, and for ensuring that the authorized project is carried out according to the conditions outlined in the current approved protocol. This Certificate of Approval is valid for the above time period provided there is no change in experimental protocol or consent process or documents.

#### **ONGOING REVIEW REQUIREMENTS**

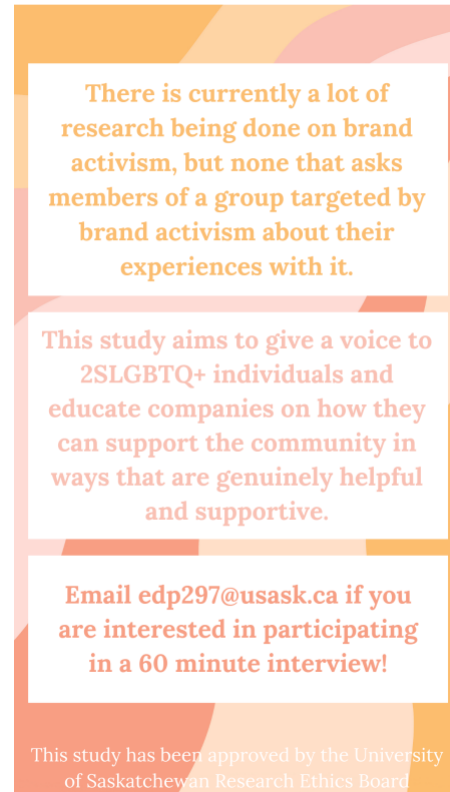
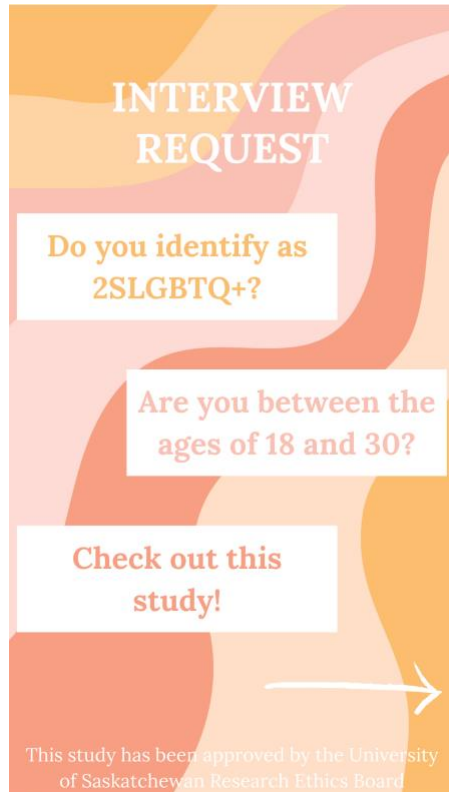
Any significant changes to your proposed method, or your consent and recruitment procedures must be reported to the Chair through submission of an amendment for Beh-REB consideration in advance of implementation.

To remain in compliance, a status report (renewal of closure form) must be submitted to the Beh-REB Chair for consideration within one month prior to the current expiry date each year the project remains open, and upon project completion. Please refer to the Research Ethics Office website for further instructions and current forms.

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***Digitally Approved by Olga Lovick***  
***Vice-Chair, Behavioural Research Ethics Board***  
***University of Saskatchewan***

## Appendix B – Instagram Story for Recruitment





## Appendix C – Participant Consent Form



### Participant Consent Form

You are invited to participate in a research study entitled *Brand Activism: Helping or Harming the 2SLGBTQ+ Community*

Our research team would like to invite you to participate in this study as a key member that would inform the research project. As someone who identifies as 2SLGBTQ+, your participation and insights will provide a better understanding of how pride-related brand activism can help and support the 2SLGBTQ+community in Canada.

This consent form requests your participation in this research project which will take place in an in-person or Zoom interview. If you have any questions or concerns, please contact the researcher or the research supervisor at the numbers or email addresses below.

**Student Researcher:** Erika Polishchuk Graduate Student, Edwards School of Business.  
Email: [edp297@usask.ca](mailto:edp297@usask.ca)

**Research Supervisor:** Maureen Bourassa, Associate Professor, Edwards School of Business.  
Phone: (306) 966-2119  
Email: [bourassa@edwards.usask.ca](mailto:bourassa@edwards.usask.ca)

Please take your time to review the following information contained within this consent form. If you agree to participate in this research study, please return a signed copy of the consent form to the email address of Erika Polishchuk, student researcher.

**Purpose and Objective of the Research:** The purpose of this project is to better understand how companies can engage in brand activism that is helpful and supportive to the 2SLGBTQ+ community. Brand activism refers to companies taking a stand on social issues and movements, and includes things like social media posts, sponsored events, decoration of storefronts, and donations. Brand activism has been increasingly studied in academic literature, with a focus on the authenticity of activism and consumer responses to activism. Researchers have yet to focus on the groups that are targeted by brand activism to gauge how they think and feel about it. This study focuses on pride-related activism with the goal of informing companies and academics on how brands should engage in activism to make a positive difference for 2SLGBTQ+ consumers.

#### Procedures:

- If you agree, the interview will take up to 60 minutes.
- You can choose to have your interview in-person or via Zoom.

- The interview will be audio recorded only and you may request that the recorder to be turned off at any time without giving a reason.
- You may request to withdraw from the interview at any time or refuse to answer any questions.
- You will be asked at regular intervals and at the end of the interview if you are feeling uncomfortable. Please let us know at any point if you are and we can take a break or end the interview.
- At any time, you are free to ask any questions regarding the procedure and goals of the study or your role in the study.
- Your interview will be transcribed at a later date by the student researcher, Erika Polishchuk.
- You will be asked to decide whether you want to be sent a copy of your transcribed interview where you will have one week to add, delete, or clarify any part of the transcript. ***If you choose this option:***
  - You will be able to withdraw your data any time before the end of the one-week period, beginning on the day you receive your transcripts.
  - The reviewed and approved transcript will then be released back to the researchers with a signed Transcript Release Form.
  - The signing of the Transcript Release Form gives the researchers permission to use quotations from the reviewed, edited, and approved participant transcripts.
- If you do not choose to review your transcript, or do not return the Transcript Release Form within one week, the interview will be used as is. ***If you choose this option:***
  - You will have one week after your interview date to withdraw your data.

**Potential Risks:** This interview presents no known or anticipated risks to you by participating in this study. Your participation is voluntary, and you have the right to withdraw within the guidelines presented. If you do experience negative emotions during or after your interview, please look into or contact the following resources:

Wellness Together Canada: Call 1-855-585-0445 or text WELLNESS to 741741

SK Healthline: 811

**Potential Benefits:** Your participation in this research will add to the growing field of knowledge on brand activism. Your insights will help build an understanding of how members of the 2SLGBTQ+ think and feel about pride-related activism. With this insight, we may be able to inform companies and larger society how to advocate for the Canadian 2SLGBTQ+ community in ways that are truly helpful and supportive. While these benefits are not guaranteed, any additional research informing effective brand activism is important and valuable.

**Compensation:** As a thank-you for your participation, you will receive a \$25.00 gift card. If you choose to withdraw from the study and do not complete the interview, you will still receive the full value of the gift card as an appreciation for your time.

**Storage of Data:** In accordance with university guidelines, the transcript and other recording files will be securely stored. They will be in the care of the supervising researcher, Maureen Bourassa, in a password protected OneDrive folder during analysis. Physical files (ex. signed consent form) will be immediately scanned and uploaded to the OneDrive folder, and then the physical copy will be destroyed. The consent form, transcript, and the master list of participants names with the corresponding unique identifiers/pseudonyms will all be stored separately to further safeguard your privacy. The master list with identifying information will be destroyed once the project is complete. The data without identifiers will be stored in a University of Saskatchewan system for a minimum of five years post-publication. After the minimum five years, all traces of online data will be securely destroyed. Any physical copies of the data attained from the interviews will be shredded. Any personal information collected as a record of honorarium payment will be stored separately from the data by the Principal Investigator, Maureen Bourassa, and may be kept for 7 years in case the University of Saskatchewan is subjected to a financial audit.

If participating in a Zoom interview, the link to a password-protected Zoom meeting will be sent to your email or phone. The audio of the interview will be recorded. Per the University of Saskatchewan's agreement with Zoom, all data will be stored on servers in Canada. The recording of your interview will be stored in a password-protected OneDrive folder. Participants are not permitted to make any unauthorized recordings during the interview. Please note that we cannot make a guarantee of privacy of data through third-party platforms and refer to Zoom's privacy policy for additional information:  
<https://explore.zoom.us/en/privacy/>.

**Confidentiality:** We will make every effort to ensure your confidentiality is maintained throughout each stage of our research. In-person interviews will be conducted in a private space on the U of S campus. Zoom interviews will be conducted from the student researcher's private home office. It is recommended that you also find a private location where you feel comfortable to speak freely. Your identity will be protected using unique identifiers/pseudonyms in place of your name and any identifying information will be removed from the transcripts. Any quotations used will be for the purposes of explicating a research theme. Before your transcripts are used, you will be asked to provide consent through the Transcript Release Form. The quotations will also be presented in a manner that will not permit identification for further assurance of participant confidentiality.

After your interview has been transcribed you will have one week to add, delete, or clarify any information. Only the researchers will see the interview transcripts. The research will be presented in a form of a report and digital presentation for educational purposes. These materials may be further used for purposes of publication in an academic journal or conference presentations. In all publications, the data will be presented in a way that protects your confidentiality.

**Right to Withdraw:** Your participation is voluntary. You may request to withdraw from the interview at any time or refuse to answer any questions. If at any time you feel uncomfortable, please let us know and we can take a break or end the interview. If you *do not* request to review your transcripts, you will have the right to withdraw your data within one week of your interview date. If you *do* request to review your transcripts, you will have the right to withdraw your data within one week from the date you receive them. After this date, some form of data dissemination may have already occurred, and it may not be possible for the data to be withdrawn. Should you choose to withdraw within the time specified, your data will be deleted from the research project and destroyed.

**Follow-up:** You will have access to published versions of the completed study. You may also request a summary of the findings from the researchers, Maureen Bourassa and Erika Polishchuk. A findings summary should be available approximately six months after the interviews. You will be notified of any new information that may influence your decision to participate.

**Questions:** Any questions can be directed to the researchers by contacting them at the telephone numbers or email addresses provided on page 1. This research project has been approved on ethical grounds by the University of Saskatchewan Behavioural Research Ethics Board. Any questions regarding your rights as a participant may be addressed to that committee through the Research Ethics Office: [ethics.office@usask.ca](mailto:ethics.office@usask.ca); 306-966-2975; out of town participants may call toll free 1-888-966-2975.

**Consent to Participate:** If participating in an in-person interview, your signature below indicates that you have read and understand the description provided. If participating in a Zoom interview, a verbal statement indicates that you have read and understand the description provided: “I have had an opportunity to ask questions and my questions have been answered. I consent to participate in the research project. A copy of this consent form has been given to me for my records.”

Would you like to be given a copy of your transcripts to review?

- Yes
- No

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*Name of Participant*

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*Signature*

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*Date*

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*Researcher's Signature*

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*Date*

## Appendix D – Study Background

### Study Background

Any time a company takes a position or makes a statement on a pertinent issue, such as 2SLGBTQ+ Pride, Orange Shirt Day, or Black Lives Matter, it is known as brand activism. Brand activism encompasses a wide range of activities, including things like posting on social media, hanging flags or posters in storefronts, and event sponsorships. While consumers demand that more companies make public statements on sociopolitical issues, they also question the authenticity of these actions.

Going into my Master's program, I was inspired by family and friends to look more into brand activism that targets marginalized groups. I focused my course projects on the topic, and I found that academic literature primarily focuses on two areas: activism authenticity and consumer responses to activism. Essentially, the research on authentic activism talks about things we are all familiar with, like performative allyship and "wokewashing," and asks what makes activism seem genuine. The research on consumer responses to activism either looks at different consumer characteristics (ex. demographics and whether they agree with the company's stance) or activism characteristics (ex. length of commitment and messaging) to see what results in a positive response.

Going into my thesis, I found it quite shocking that no research had yet to ask whether anything companies are doing to support marginalized groups is *helpful* to the targeted community. These things are widely discussed but do not yet exist in academic literature. None of the studies have sat down with group members to ask how they feel about brand activism. My goal for this study is to give a voice to 2SLGBTQ+ individuals and inform companies on how they can advocate in ways that are genuinely helpful and supportive.

## Appendix E – Interview Guide

**Introduction & Consent:** Thank you for agreeing to participate in the research study entitled: Brand Activism: Helping or Harming the 2SLGBTQ+ Community?

**Purpose and procedures of study:** The purpose of this project is to better understand how companies can engage in brand activism that is helpful and supportive to the 2SLGBTQ+ community. This is a qualitative study involving an interview that will take approximately 40 minutes.

**Overview of consent form:** The interview will be audio recorded with your consent. Your name will not be used in any of the research reports or presentations and any quotations used in the final report will be introduced in general terms, and without your name to protect your confidentiality. Your participation is voluntary, and you can answer only those questions that you are comfortable with. You may withdraw from the research project for any reason, and at any time during the interview without explanation or penalty of any sort. You will have the right to withdraw your data within one week after your interview. If you choose to review your transcript, you will have the right to withdraw your data within one week from receiving your transcript. After this date, some form of data dissemination may have already occurred, and it may not be possible for the data to be withdrawn. Should you choose to withdraw within the time specified, your data will be deleted from the research project and destroyed. Do you have any questions or concerns before we sign the consent form? [Participant signs consent form or gives verbal consent. Interview begins along with audio recording once consent is granted].

Before we begin, I want to tell you how I became interested in this topic because I personally am a straight cis woman. Throughout the past couple years, I've had lots of conversations with me queer sister about Pride Month and Pride events in general. While she appreciates and likes to post about her own experience during Pride Month, she talks a lot about concepts like 'rainbow capitalism' and the darker side of Pride Month that feel more like tokenism than genuine support. When I started my Master's program, I got to dive into the literature on brand activism and explore different ideas of authenticity and what makes brand activism feel either genuine or disingenuous. I also found a growing number of studies that look at consumer responses to brand activism based on a number of consumer characteristics like age and income, how much they agree with a company's stance, and how connected they feel to the brand. It was shocking to me that researchers had yet to consider people's responses to brand activism based on whether or not they were a member of the group targeted by the activism. I asked myself, why should it matter if a company's activism is seen as authentic if it fails to provide real support to the community it is targeting? Because my sister inspired this line of research for me, I decided to focus on Pride activism for my thesis and I want to talk to members of the 2SLGBTQ+ community to see how brands and society as a whole can advocate for you in ways that are actually helpful and supportive. Enough about me, do you have any questions before we dive into the interview?

### Interview Questions

1. Tell me a bit about yourself. Who are you, what do you do, what do you like?

- How old are you?
2. How do you like to refer to yourself in terms of gender and sexual orientation?
    - Queer, gay, lesbian, two-spirit, transgender, etc.
  3. If you feel comfortable, can you tell me a bit about your journey as a 2SLGBTQ+ individual?
    - How long have you been out to friends and family?
    - Briefly, what was the process of coming out like for you?
      - o If needed suggest descriptors: Long, difficult, gradual, automatic, easy, casual
    - What has your experience been like since coming out? Do you feel like your identity has been received in an overall positive or overall negative way?
  4. Do you typically participate in Pride Month events?
    - Why or why not?
    - Which events?
    - Would you consider yourself to be active in advocating for the 2SLGBTQ+ community outside of pride Month events?
      - o In what ways?
  5. Have you noted any brands that seem to be particularly involved during Pride month?
    - Online or in-person?
    - In what ways have these brands been involved?
  6. What are your overall impressions towards these activities?
    - What do you think or feel when you see brands showing support? What makes you think/feel this way?
    - Do you think or feel differently about some brands than others? What are the reasons you might think/feel differently?
  7. In your opinion, is brand involvement in Pride Month and activism overall helpful or harmful in advocating for your rights?
    - Why? Ask to explain.
  8. Can you think of an example of a brand(s) that is particularly helpful to the 2SLGBTQ+ community?
    - What have you seen or heard about the brand doing?
    - Why do you think or feel this way about their actions?

Can you think of an example of a brand(s) that you consider to be harmful to the 2SLGBTQ+ community?

- What have you seen or heard about the brand doing?
- Why do you think or feel this way about their actions?
- What makes it feel harmful?

So now, I have 4 short articles for us to look at and discuss together, I'll send them over the Zoom chat. I'm going to send them one at a time and let you have a look so you aren't totally overwhelmed with information. After you read each one, I'll have a couple of questions for you.

9. Looking at this list of emotions here, can you tell me how reading this article makes you feel? You don't need to overthink it, and it's okay if you can only identify one emotion or if there's a bunch of them that you can relate to.
  - Why do you feel this way?
  - What part of the article made you feel this way?
  - Was it the action the company took, the company itself, or both?

Okay, now I'm going to pull this screenshare down. Still focusing on the articles, I am going to ask you some questions and I want you to consider all four of them. If you need to have them open on your computer or take a minute to re-read or refer back to anything that is totally fine.

10. Out of these four companies – TD, Patagonia, Amigos, and Vizzy – which (if any) of their actions feel:
  - Helpful? Harmful?
  - Supportive? Unsupportive?
  - Authentic? Inauthentic?
  - [Ask to explain responses, and offer possible factors if they are having trouble coming up with some]
    - o Type of action taken, perceived impact, brand reputation, amount of publicity

Great, we are done with those articles now, and I just have a few more questions for you.

11. If you could open any business, what type of business would you want to own?
  - If needed: could be a restaurant, store, activity, hotel,
  - What would you call it?
  - Where would you want your business to be located?
  - Okay so as the founder and owner of \_\_\_\_, what would you do to advocate for and support the 2SLGBTQ+ community?
    - o During and outside of Pride
  - Why would you do this?
  - What impact would you want to have?
12. Is there anything you can think of that you wish brands would do to show support for the 2SLGBTQ+ community?
13. Is there anything that you wish brands would stop doing in relation to Pride Month and general support for the 2SLGBTQ+ community?
14. Is there anything else I should have asked you, or that you would like to talk about? Do you have any questions for me?



# Appendix F – TD Example

12/12/23, 9:40 A.M

Pride events 2023 | TD Stories | TD Stories

## TD Stories



June marks the start of Pride season in Canada, which marks an opportunity to celebrate the many contributions made by members of the 2SLGBTQ+ community.

TD has a long-standing commitment to the 2SLGBTQ+ community. This month and every day, TD is proud to support a range of initiatives and Pride events that highlight this diverse community through the [TD Ready Commitment](#) (the Bank's corporate citizenship platform).

At a time when we're seeing an erosion of rights and protections across the globe and a rise in harmful rhetoric targeting the most vulnerable members of society, TD remains unwavering in its support for 2SLGBTQ+ people.



<https://stories.td.com/ca/en/article/pride-events-2023>

1/6

12/12/23, 9:40 AM

Pride events 2023 | TD Stories | TD Stories

## TD Stories

### [Halifax Pride Festival \(July 20-30, 2023\)](#)

In 1988, approximately 75 people marched through Halifax's North End in the city's first-ever Pride March. Today, Halifax Pride boasts more than 100,000 participants throughout its 11-day festival, which features more than 150 events at the end of July.

### QUEBEC

### [Fierté Montréal Pride \(August 3-13, 2023\)](#)

The Montreal Pride festival is a massive, city-wide event. Various local organizations, clubs, businesses and more join together to highlight the realities of 2SLGBTQ+ communities and celebrate together. The festival includes numerous events, including marches and a parade along Boulevard Rene-Levesque on Sunday, August 13.

### [Fête Arc-en-ciel de Québec \(September 1-3, 2023\)](#)

Fête Arc-en-ciel, or the Rainbow Party, is the Pride Festival in Quebec City. Along with hosting this annual Pride event, the Alliance Arc-en-ciel de Québec works to fight homophobia and protect the rights of people of sexual diversity and gender plurality (DSPG). In addition to organizing the International Day Against Homophobia and Transphobia in Quebec City (May 17) and Pride, the Alliance is developing several projects to help educate the public about the issues and realities facing people of DSPG.

### ONTARIO



<https://stories.td.com/ca/en/article/pride-events-2023>

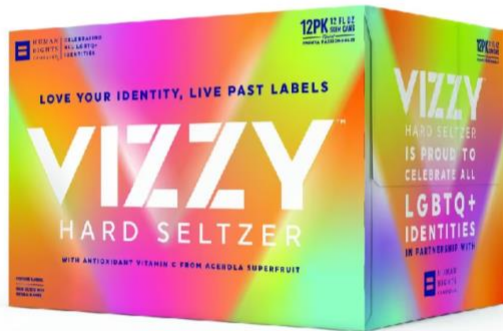
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## Appendix G – Vizzy Example

### FOOD & DINING

#### Vizzy Hard Seltzer releases Pride Pack supporting LGBTQ+ community

Updated: May 20, 2021, 12:30 p.m. Published: May 20, 2021, 12:30 p.m.



Vizzy Hard Seltzer will release a limited-edition pride pack on June 1 for Pride Month. The Pride Pack features the new papaya passionfruit flavor.



By [Deb Kiner | dkiner@pennlive.com](mailto:dkiner@pennlive.com)

[Vizzy Hard Seltzer](#) will release a limited-edition Pride Pack on June 1 in support of the LGBTQ+ community.

The company also has partnered with the [Human Rights Campaign](#) and committed to donating \$1 million.

The Pride Pack is 12 cans of Vizzy's new flavor, papaya passionfruit. Each 12-ounce can has 100 calories and is 5% alcohol by volume. Cost is \$15.99.

The Pride Packs will be available through June.

Vizzy said, "The new can stands as a symbol of our broader commitment to support the LGBTQ+ community as it proudly boasts our partnership with the Human Rights Campaign (HRC).

Since launching in 2020, the hard seltzer brand committed \$1 million to HRC to support its mission of creating a world where lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and queer people are ensured equality and embraced as full members of society at home, at work, and in every community."

Vizzy is one of several companies releasing products for Pride Month. Lego today announced its ["Everyone Is Awesome" set](#), UNO released a [Play with Pride deck](#) of cards and [Skittles removed its rainbow colors](#), saying "only one rainbow matters" during Pride.

## Appendix H – Patagonia Example



*Through activism, allyship and love, Patagonia proudly commemorates Pride.*

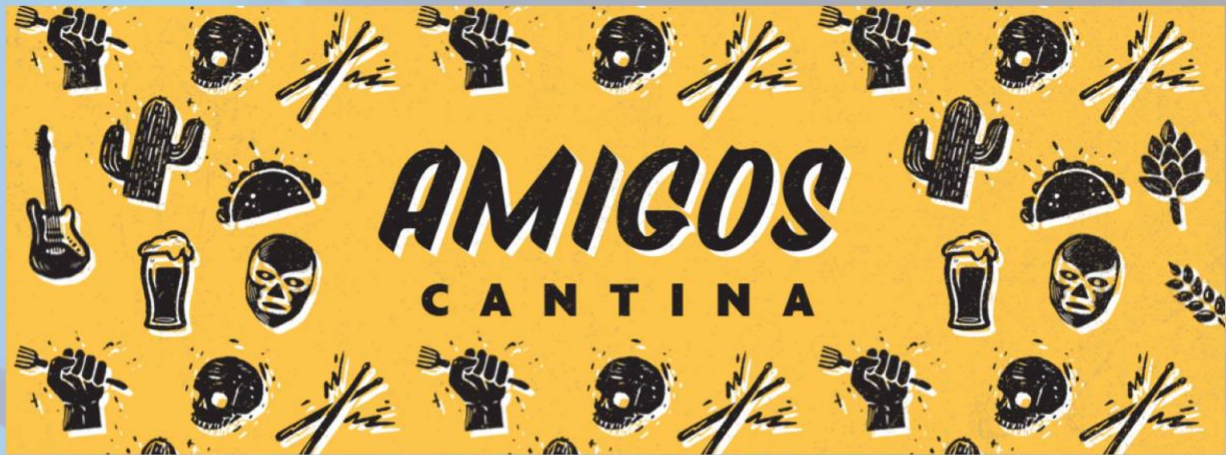
*With humility and in recognition of our shortcomings, we celebrate Pride and the right for each of us, including members of the LGBTQ+ community, to live a life of dignity and authenticity.*

*We will raise our voice as advocates and will protest laws that discriminate against LGBTQ+ individuals and sow hate and division within society.*

*We will work toward equality in our company and the places and communities where we work, so that we can all live proudly and openly as we are.*

*We're in business to save our home planet—and to succeed means creating a future that is fair, just, equitable and inclusive for all.*

## Appendix I – Amigos Example

The image shows a promotional poster for 'Amigos Cantina'. The top half features a yellow background with a repeating pattern of black and white icons: a raised fist holding a fork, a sombrero, a cactus, a guitar, a beer mug, a sombrero mask, and a sombrero. In the center, the text 'AMIGOS' is written in a large, bold, black, sans-serif font with a white outline, and 'CANTINA' is written below it in a smaller, black, sans-serif font. The bottom half of the poster has a grey background with white text.

**Burrito Night and Live Auditions 4 Pride!**  
Monday, April 30, 2018 at 6pm

Saskatoon Pride Festival and OUTSaskatoon bring you:  
Burrito Night Fundraiser w/ Live Band Auditions for Pride!  
All proceeds to go towards Pride Home.

Burritos will be served from 6-9pm for \$20  
Your choice of Beef, Chicken, or Veggie  
All burritos come with rice and beans.  
Tickets will be sold at the door.

Auditions for Pride in the Park will be held from 7-11pm

For your band to audition for Pride in the Park happening June 22nd and 23rd, please email  
[auditions@saskatoonpride.ca](mailto:auditions@saskatoonpride.ca)

Appendix J – Plutchik’s Wheel of Emotion

