

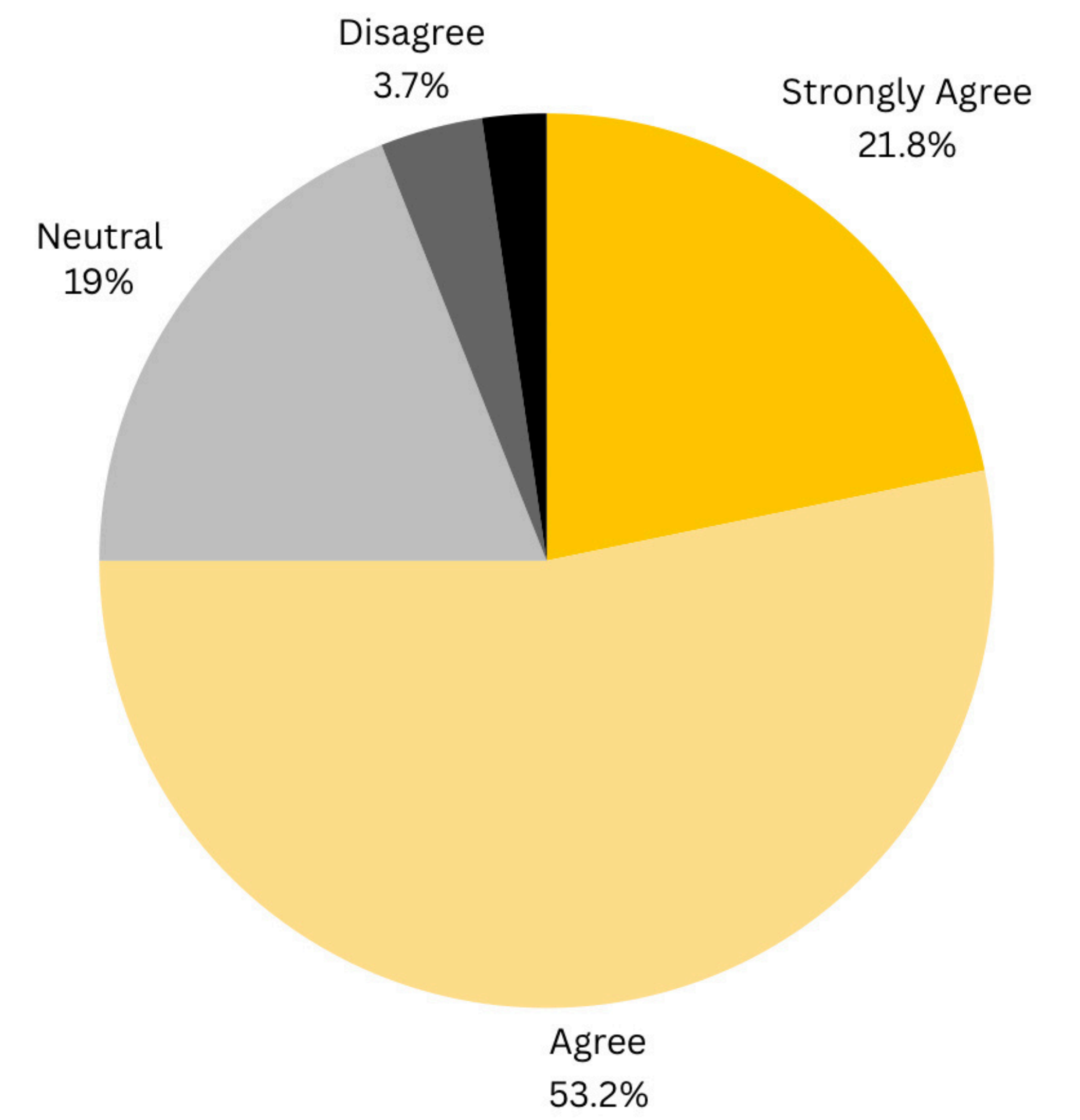
# REBELLIOUS SELF EXPRESSION? A SOCIAL HISTORY OF DR MARTENS

A simple black boot with yellow stitching. How did this seemingly innocuous shoe become the uniform of both the oppressors and the oppressed, the extreme right wing and the left, the upholders of the establishment and the actors of an anti-establishment movement?

**“Our strategy is grounded in  
Rebellious Self Expression.”**



1. I believe that fashion, such as the wearing of Dr Martens, can be interpreted through a sociopolitical lens.



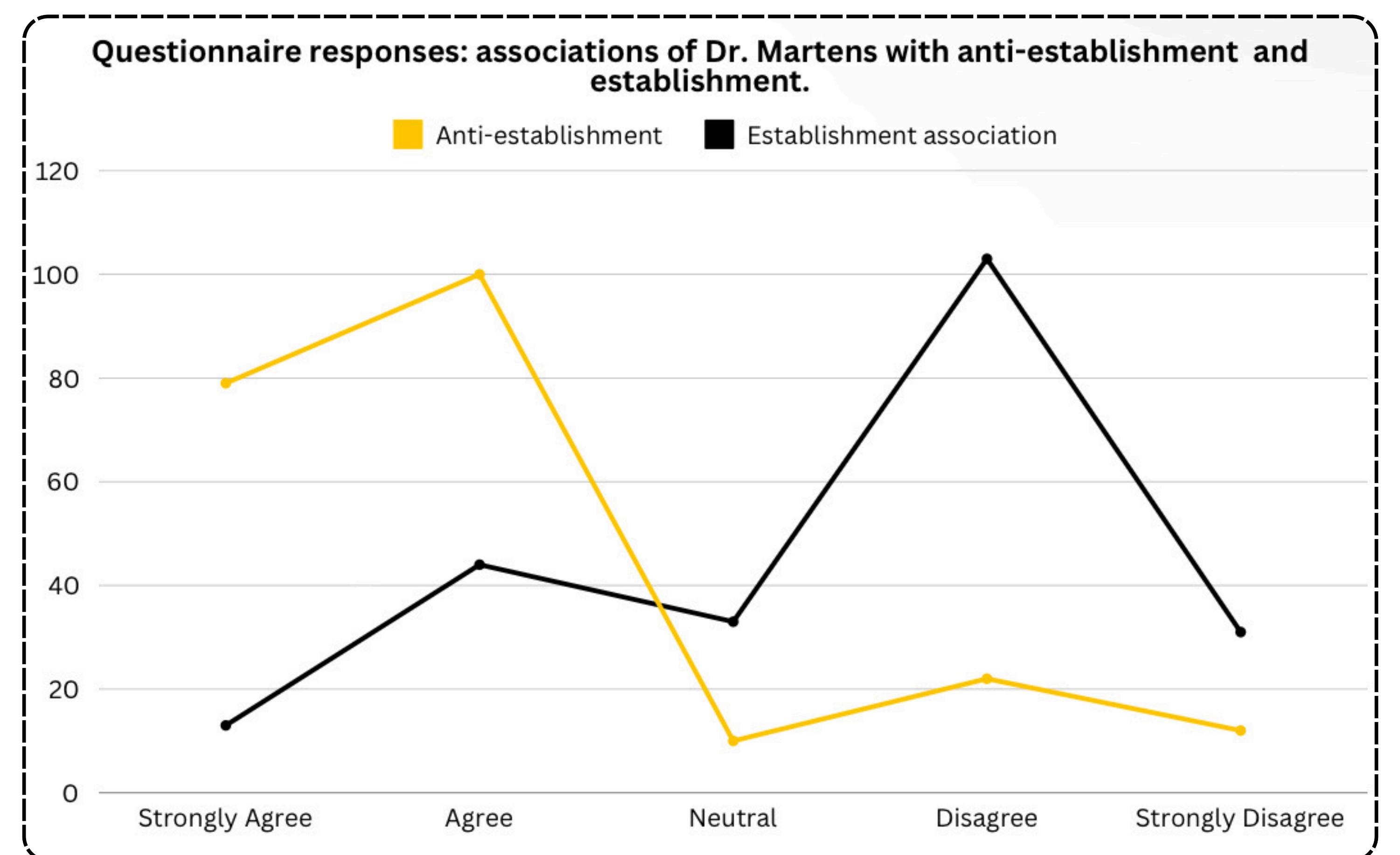
## 01 HISTORY

The first Dr Martens boot, the 1460, was created on April 1st 1960. The boot was manufactured by the Wollaston family business R. Griggs & Co, established in 1901, following their acquisition of the patent for the ‘Dr Martens Luftpolster-Sohle’, manufactured in 1945 by German manufacturers Dr Klaus Maertens and Herbert Funck. The 1460 was an amalgamation of working-class determination Dr Martens were a comfortable and sturdy shoe, advertised to the working man in Shoe & Leather News as ‘revolutionary... air-cushioned soles put an end to this foot-breaking torture’. The first subculture to adopt the boots, skinheads, which did so due to the boots’ working-class connotations and uniform appearance, which reinforced a powerful ‘gang mentality’. Following the skinhead adoption of the boots, Dr Martens became significant markers of subcultural capital in resultant postwar subcultures. The continuity of Dr Martens through skinhead, punk, 2-Tone, Oi!, goth, psychobilly, grunge, and indie subcultures demonstrates their interconnectedness and common heritage. These ostensibly diametrically opposed groups and their common adoption of Dr Martens are united by a common theme: a desire to communicate working class pride.

## 02 METHOD

The social history of Dr Martens was examined within the framework of subcultural and fashion theory—namely that fashion represents a tangible manifestation of intangible social change, specifically in a postwar working-class setting. Dr Martens have uniquely complicated connotations within feminist, racist, LGBTQ+, anarchist, and working-class movements, and act as an effective form of subcultural communication. This research was considered through a material and marketing historical lens, considering the impact of Dr Martens held in different archives and collections. For example, the Dr Martens displayed in The Postal Museum exhibition ‘Uniform’ were shown to complement, rather than contrast, the Dr Martens featured in the Victoria and Albert Museum punk fashion display ‘Deconstructing Fashion 1975–1985’. Punk and music magazines featured in the Manchester Pop Archive and subcultural photographs in the British Culture Archive also proved useful in examining the different identities expressed through Dr Martens, and sources displaying Dr Martens engagement or disengagement with certain parts of its history included the corporate histories of Dr Martens by Martin Roach and the 1997 Dr Martens press release in the Young V&A archive.

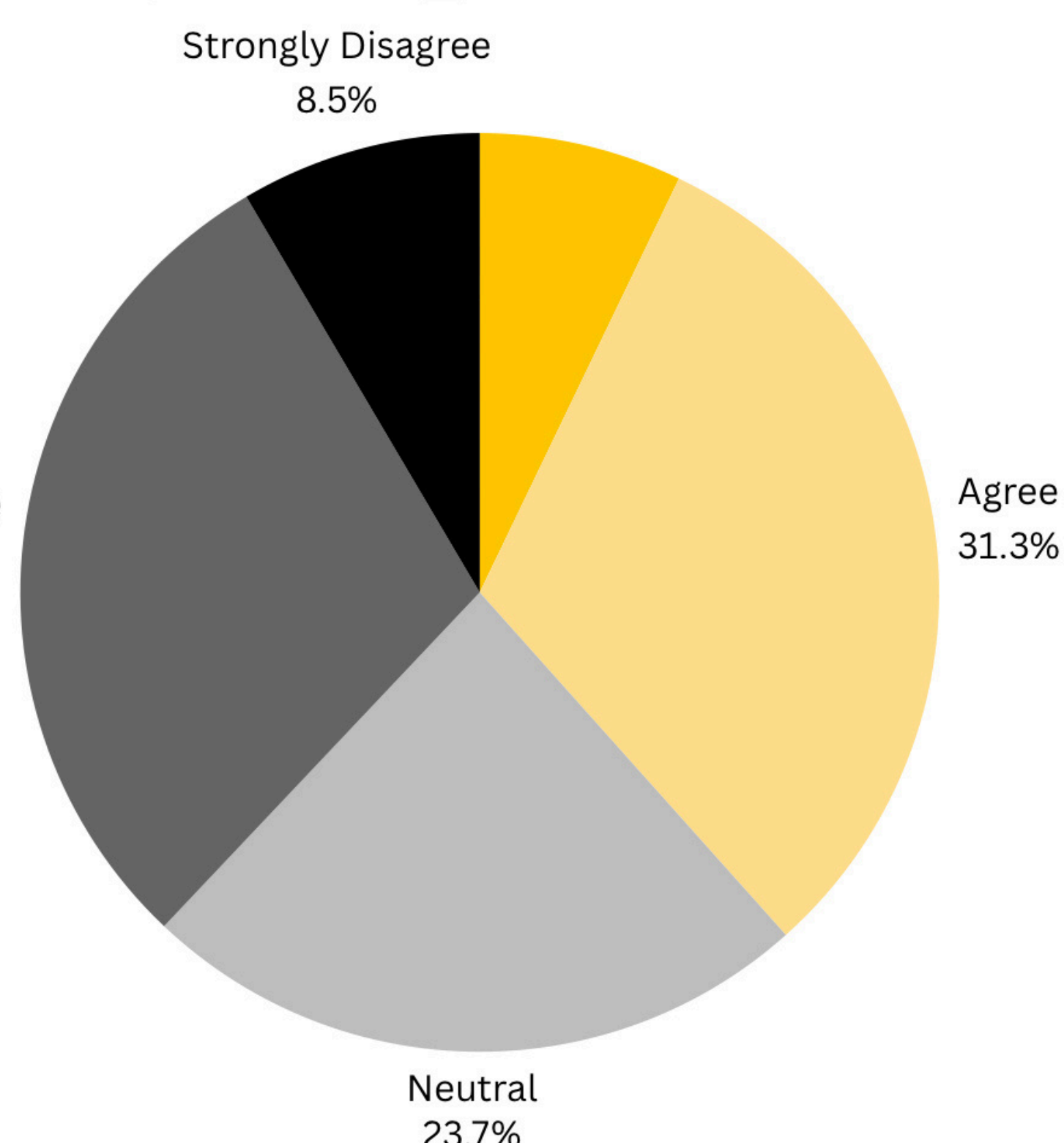
## 03 DATA



A questionnaire including 10 questions regarding Dr Martens was completed by 225 individuals— 63.4%, 28.6% and 8.0% of whom identified as female, male and ‘other’ respectively. 19.2% were 18 or under, 41.5% 19–24, 17.9% 25–34, 7.6% 35–44, and 13.8% 45–65. 11 respondents had worked for Dr Martens, including at the Glasgow, Liverpool, Cambridge, Wollaston and Portland warehouse branches. The survey was circulated around students and staff at the University of Cambridge, Dr Martens UK stores and social media. The data collected showed a general trend in awareness and association of Dr Martens history as an anti-establishment fashion item, but less awareness and association as an establishment workboot, as shown by the graph above. This project delved into the reasons behind this association and non-association, analysing Dr Martens campaigns and organic extra-corporate adoption, concluding that a commodification and emphasis of some aspects of its history, and non-emphasis on other aspects, is a marketing strategy employed by the company. 38.4% of respondents believe that Dr Martens brand association with social rebellion and antiestablishment ideals is still applicable, and 38.0% disagree with this statement— despite 45.1% agreeing, and 16.0% disagreeing, that Dr Martens strategy is grounded in rebellious self expression. This demonstrates that while respondents recognised that Dr Martens have a marketing strategy based upon the commodification of rebellion, a significant proportion do not believe that this association is genuine in 2024.

8. I believe that the Dr Martens brand association with social rebellion and anti-establishment ideals is still applicable.

Strongly Agree Agree Neutral  
Disagree Strongly Disagree



## 05 OUTCOMES

Perhaps the complaint of Steve Cundall at the beginning of the punk movement, ‘its like Rotten, he sings about Anarchy, but really he’d like a big nice house in the country’, is similarly applicable to the Dr Martens brand. Having established that there is an association between Dr Martens and the phrase ‘rebellious self-expression’, originally forged authentically following the adoption of the boot by the skinheads and subsequent subcultures, this genuine association is continued and altered, rather than completely manufactured, through Dr Martens marketing. Dr Martens have, understandably, distanced themselves from the more negative aspects of their ‘bovver boot’ history. Previously emphasising the original 1460 price of £2 (roughly £39, adjusting for inflation), and the large second-hand boot market by which they were adopted by subcultures, a pair of Dr Martens now cost £170; suggesting their entrance to high fashion and success within a neoliberal market while utilising and commoditising anti-establishment ideals.

Today, Dr Martens is a public listed company with profits of £877.1 million in 2024, no longer solely owned by the Griggs family, sold in 2013 to private equity ‘giant’ Permira. Although this may be the reality of operating a successful multinational corporation in the twenty-first century, Dr Martens claim of innate rebellion against the ‘system’ has been questioned by M45–65, who stated ‘I think the present company... is more concerned with profits... even though it likes to tout that history as something important to them’.