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# **Fighting the unwanted customer**

**An exploratory study of the new controversial  
brand protection tools**

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## **Acknowledgements**

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First of all, we would like to thank Jon Bertilsson for his inputs and guidance throughout the whole study. We would also like to direct special thanks to the president of Stone Island, Carlo Rivetti, whom has gently agree to share very insightful thoughts and knowledge about our subject and his company.

We hope that our master thesis could have an eye opening effect for the subject that we are passionate about.

Lund, May 21<sup>st</sup> 2012

Markus Bergkvist and Niklas de Goys

# Summary

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<b>Title:</b>	Fighting the unwanted customer – An exploratory study of the new controversial brand protection tools
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<b>Course:</b>	Master thesis in business administration, 30 University Credit Points (30 ECTS).
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<b>Advisor:</b>	Jon Bertilsson
<b>Five key words:</b>	Targeting, Segmentation, Celebrity Endorsement, Brand Protection, Unwanted Customers
<b>Purpose:</b>	The purpose of this project is to propose new perspectives on theories within the scope of branding and segmentation literature. We intend to do this by exploring new types of controversial brand protection tools that have been highly debated in recent years.
<b>Methodology:</b>	The study has an abductive approach and qualitative empirical case studies have been conducted to collect relevant data.
<b>Theory:</b>	The study is based on theories within targeting, celebrity endorsement, brand purity, brand hijack and other brand management theories.
<b>Empirical data:</b>	The empirical data has been collected through case studies and semi-structured interviews with executives or brand managers from the companies that we have investigated. Additional data has been collected through documents and nethnographical studies.
<b>Conclusions:</b>	Our findings show that it can be a necessity to fight the unwanted customers in order to preserve the image and the associations of the brand. The cases we have studied bring up two ways of acting: ignoring or eliminating the undesirable customers. Our research indicates that actively distancing a brand from unwanted customers can be further divided into two categories we label inverted celebrity endorsement and inverted targeting.

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## Definitions:

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**Brand ambassadors:** Representatives that promote the brand and serve as the face of the company. Could for example be a group of customers that has naturally taken on this roll, or employees that have been selected by the company to embody the corporate image, appearance and values.

**Brand protection tools:** A collective term that refers to all of the different tools that can be used to protect the brands against undesirable associations and unwanted customers. In our study, our main focus will be on the tools we label as inverted celebrity endorsement and inverted targeting.

**Chavs:** A term for a group of ill-mannered and destructive customers who often use sportswear and are part of a low status society group.

**Hooligans:** Rough, lawless and young persons who are especially known for being violent in connection with football games.

**Inverted celebrity endorsement:** The act of paying a celebrity in order to disassociate him/her from the brand. In other words, the celebrity receives a payment in order to stop using and promoting the brand. Can be used in situations where a celebrity is associated with strong negative characteristics that could reflect on the brand image.

**Inverted targeting:** Consists of actions or strategies that are used to limit the usage of the brand by certain segments or groups of customers. Can be used for example by premium brands in order to make sure that potential “lower class” consumers do not adapt the brand and thereby weaken the brand image.

**Opinion leader:** A person with a high social visibility as well as a great amount of charisma. An opinion leader is often considered as an expert and is therefore able to influence other consumers’ perceptions and opinions about a specific brand.

# 1. Introduction

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*In this chapter, we will discuss the recent developments that have generated a need for new managerial tools used for brand protection. Also, we will explain the importance of Brand Associations, Segmentation and Sponsoring in order to achieve a certain desired Brand Image. Moreover, we set the subject into its actual context with the rise of social media and the increased power of consumers, in order to show its relevance. Hereafter, we discuss previous research that has been made within the area and explain the aim, as well as the limitations of the study.*

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## 1.1 Background

On the 22<sup>nd</sup> of July 2011, two very tragic events sent shockwaves through Scandinavia and the rest of the world. A 32-year-old Norwegian man, named Anders Behring Breivik performed one of the most horrifying acts in Norwegian history. Breivik first detonated a bomb at the Norwegian government buildings in Oslo, which killed 8 innocent civilians. After that, he went to the camp of the “Workers’ Youth League”, on the island of Utoya, where he shot and killed another 69 defenseless adolescents. In connection to the attacks, Breivik released a manifesto entitled “2083, a European Declaration of Independence” where he explains his ideology as well as the preparations for the attacks. In that document, the mass murderer refers to the French sports brand “Lacoste” in a few occasions, clarifying that it is his favorite brand. (www.affarsvarlden.se, 07-02-2012) Also, Breivik was pictured wearing a red jumper with the “Lacoste” label in clear view, when leaving the courthouse a few days after the attack. Since the event was very mediatized, the picture rapidly spread to millions of people. The Norwegian police has confirmed that they had been contacted by Lacoste. However, the nature of the discussion was not revealed. According to media and various specialists, there is no doubt that Lacoste wanted to make sure that Breivik immediately would stop wearing their label. (www.affarsvarlden.se, 2012-07-02). Of course, Lacoste’s reaction is very understandable. Breivik’s actions have made him far from an attractive endorser for the brand and it was therefore important that Lacoste rapidly affirmed a clear disconnection with Breivik and his horrible attacks in order to preserve the brand.

The type of action Lacoste implemented in this specific case can be seen as one of the newest tools within the Brand Management subject. By removing the Lacoste label from Breivik's clothes, the company actually uses itself of a tool that can be considered as the opposite to the usual celebrity endorsement branding strategy. The relatively extreme example above sets frames for the new possibilities within Brand Management. As an example, instead of paying a celebrity to represent them, a company can now also decide to pay someone they would absolutely not want to be represented by. That way, a company can fight against the hostage situations, when someone decides to wear a brand and harms its image, with or without purpose. The same way celebrity endorsement is an important tool used for branding (Kotler & Keller, 2009), to actively distance customers from the brand may also become an important tool in order to protect the way a brand is associated with certain people or characteristics, and therefore also the way companies segments and targets the market.

Today, with the rise of social media, it is getting increasingly difficult for companies to control and adapt to the consumers using the products. On Facebook or Twitter, thousands of consumers have the possibility to post messages and share opinions about brands that can be seen by many others. For that reason, the need for tools that enable companies to control the brand and the way it is perceived are becoming increasingly important. A critical part of this is the way firms are seeking to segment and target the customers, in order to reach the group that is the most suitable for the image and the values associated with the brand. Some brands have a clear vision of the customers that they want to avoid and would therefore want strategies to make sure that these "wrong customers" do not harm the Brand image. A company could therefore attempt to prevent the usage of the brand by certain undesirable customer segments or celebrities. The strategies used are rather controversial since it may be considered as a direct or indirect form of discrimination.

It is reasonable to question if it can be considered ethical for a company to actively counteract the usage of the product by certain groups of people. Obviously, the customers should be allowed to make their own decisions and decide themselves what products they want to own. Also, the purchased products and brands are an important part in the creation of the customer's identity (Edström, 2010; Belk, 1988). It would therefore be logical that customers should be able to decide for themselves about who they want to be and how they want to be perceived by others. However, the very basics of marketing is to push customers to buy certain goods (De Pelsmacker et al, 2010), and therefore to change and affect their identities.

One could also question if the marketing actions as a whole can be considered as ethical. A difficult question is thereby set for the brand manager: how to balance between a profitable well positioned brand and actions that may be perceived as unethical by the consumers.

Through this paper, we analyze and dissect these different topics and situations. We find the subject particularly relevant since the act of working against unwanted customers is a very recent and unexplored subject. It could therefore become an interesting contribution to Brand Management. Also, we perceive the subject as very relevant with regard to the increased power of social media and also the very mediatized events (for example the Breivik shooting), that occurred in recent times. Today, information can circulate faster than ever through an important variety of different channels of information. We therefore believe in the necessity for brand managers to have an up-to-date toolbox that enable a greater control of the way the brands evolve and are being perceived by the consumers.

## **1.2 Problem discussion**

As previously discussed, the rapid development of social media has enabled a faster exchange of information, thoughts and opinions. Through web pages, such as Facebook, Twitter and various Blogs, people can share pictures and thoughts with thousands of others consumers. This means that companies now have less control over the values associated with their brands since they cannot fully control the information flow on the Internet (Wippenfürth, 2005).

If a company fails to rapidly act against a threatening brand development, the desirable associations that are connected to the brand may be changed forever. There are numerous examples of brands that have been forced to take a different rout than originally intended because a new collective opinion has formed about the basic brand image and values. A well known example is the controversial development of the Stone Island clothing brand. In the end of 1970 hooligans in United Kingdom adapted this rather expensive brand in order to avoid attention from the police. The decision to wear a more expensive type of clothing also made it easier for hooligans to enter pubs as well as infiltrate other rivalry gangs ([www.casualhoolbrands.wordpress.com](http://www.casualhoolbrands.wordpress.com), 20-02-2012).

Almost 40 years later, Stone Island is still closely related with hooliganism despite the high prices of the products. However, the characteristic compass label is detachable from the

clothes. This has made it possible for some parts of the brands customer base to avoid being associated with hooliganism by simply removing the label from the clothes.

It is arguable that an unpredicted brand development, like the one Stone Island and other similar brands have experienced, calls for new drastic types of protection tools that focus on actively dissociating the brand from the unwanted customer or customer group in order to protect the brand. New tools have been used by a number of companies in the past few years. The ethical aspect of these tools makes them a controversial subject that many companies may want to keep quiet about. We want to examine why and how these strategies are used and justified.

Today, consumers have more possibilities than ever to influence the way brands are developed. Consumer psychologists' have shown that the consumers themselves play a big role in forming the brands characteristics when they consume the brand (Sheff, 2011). A major reason for this is the rise of social media and an urge to identify oneself with the characteristics of certain products (Belk, 1988). At the same time, brands are inviting the customers to help them co-create their brands (Arvidsson, 2005). Some brands are completely driven by the consumer communities and their opinions of the brands (Wippenfürth, 2005; Sjödin, 2008). Companies are loosing control over their brands development and the characteristics they represent. We therefore question the lack of research covering the way brands may protect themselves from undesirable customers that can lead to a negative brand development.

This problem discussion can be summarized into following question:

- *Why and how do companies distance themselves from unwanted customers?*

### **1.3 Previous Research**

Segmentation is a widely used tool that many companies use to establish a profitable customer base. By dividing the market into smaller parts, it is possible to concentrate marketing efforts towards a particular type of customer or customer group (Dibb et al, 2001). This is a rather effective way of attracting desirable customers to the company and consequently also a way of controlling the brand image (Raulerson et al, 2009). Through the use of targeted marketing, such as sponsoring, companies often select a specific type of clientele for their products. Brands are being linked with certain celebrities, events and other contexts that seem appropriate to achieving the desired brand image (Kotler & Keller, 2009). Tremendous amounts of money are being spent on this matter every year. As historically proven, obtaining the right brand image can make the difference between a boundless success and a bankruptcy.

Extensive research has been implemented to prove the effectiveness of using segmentation and sponsoring as a tool for brand building. Sponsoring is a well known strategy where an origination is provided with money and other resources in exchange for exposure that help the sponsor to build awareness and brand image (De Pelsmacker et al., 2010). Research suggests that we often identify ourselves through our possessions and the products that we consume (Ekström, 2010). This contestation gives an explanation to why we prefer certain brands and why we would like to be associated with the values that they represent. Equally important to mention is that we repel the brands that we do not want to be associated with (Gad, 2000).

Most of the previous research in this field treats the preventive strategies companies implement to gain the right associations connected to the brand. Celebrity endorsement is a popular tool used by many companies to acquire the right type of associations to the brand. With this tool, companies aim to connect the brand with the desirable characteristics and credibility the celebrity provides when promoting the brand (Spry et al, 2011). As much as one out of four ads in US use celebrities to promote products and in United Kingdom one out of five promotion campaigns uses this tool (De Pelsmacker et al., 2010). A strategic choice of a certain celebrity may help the brand to attract a specific clientele and at the same time exclude those who feel that their congruency with this celebrity is weak (Kotler & Keller, 2009). There are many other documented preventive strategies that can hinder these types of negative associations to occur in the first place, such as clever targeting and sponsoring

strategies. Through targeting, the companies focus their efforts on the consumers they believe are the most appropriate and profitable for the brand (Iyer et al., 2005).

However, there is another side of this area of research that hasn't been thoroughly explored. There is limited information to be found about reactive strategies that companies are using to actively distance themselves from certain types of customers that have a negative impact on the brand image. In other words, there is limited research on the conscious and direct actions companies implement to dissociate from certain celebrities, other than getting rid of those who are used for celebrity endorsement in advertisement. There are also few established strategies to be found that actively deal with disassociating the brand from regular customers or whole customer groups.

The action of distancing the brand from unwanted customers or customer groups could be just as important as attracting new customers. For that reason, we find it strange that there is a lack of research addressing this subject. One explanation is that the need for these kinds of tools is a relatively new phenomenon that has been generated by the massive expansion of social media during the last few years. We argue that the accelerating speed, of which of opinions spread online, calls for new drastic methods to protect the brands. For example, a picture containing a brand in an inappropriate context has the possibility to spread to millions of Internet users in the blink of an eye, as with the Breivik example described in the Background of the paper.

Another major reason for the lack of research in this area might depend on that the nature of the subject is rather sensitive. Since this field of research can be considered as a direct or indirect form of discrimination, it might sometimes be smarter to avoid talking about the strategies used to dissociate the brand from the undesirable customers. An active and outspoken distancing from a specific type of customer may, more often than not, infer a negative reaction from mass media and the general public. Imagine if your favorite brand did not want to have you as their customer because of your appearance or personality. We have studied numerous cases where outspoken strategies of this kind have had a negative effect on the way the market and clientele perceive the brand. Companies like Olive Garden, Cristal and Mettel have struggled with the aftermath of unconsidered actions and statements aimed towards certain undesirable celebrities and customer groups. Consequently, we have a situation where the company can lose potential customers because "the wrong" people are

using the brand, but at the same time loose customers because the companies use unethical ways to counteract the unwanted clientele.

We have found few examples of companies who openly admit that they are discriminating certain persons or customer groups to protect the brand image. The method used in these cases can be described as the opposite of celebrity endorsement. Instead of paying the celebrities to promote the brand, the company has offered a specific person a large sum of money to never use, or be seen in the same context as the brand again. In the case we are referring to, the company was hoping to get rid of the negative association before it would stick to the brand, through this rather aggressive type of action. It is a method that might be considered unethical but necessary in this specific case. Therefore, this unexplored field can be described as a grey zone where ethical values have to blend with strategies aimed for maximal brand protection and profits. We have found very limited research addressing this new breed of protection strategies and it is therefore interesting to research on the usage of the tools. Consequently, there is a lot of unexplored information that constitutes an appealing platform for further studies.

#### **1.4 Aim of the Study**

The aim of this study is to propose a new perspective of the branding and segmentation literature. Our goal is to reveal *why* the brand protection tools are used by companies. Ultimately, we also want to demonstrate *how* the act of working against the usage of the brand, by certain celebrities or groups of people, can be an important action used to preserve the brand. Also, we want to describe *how* the different tools can be used and if there are any risks attached to their usage.

#### **1.5 Limitations**

The subject that we are investigating may be considered rather sensitive due to several different reasons. First off all, the ethical aspect of actively excluding customers may easily offend people and should therefore be treated with caution. We do not expect that all off the contacted companies will willingly share information about ethical questionable brand building strategies. Due to time restriction, this research will be limited to a handful of different cases, which will be thoroughly analyzed and compared to each other. Since

different types of tools are implicated in different industries we examine cases that are fairly similar to each other. Minor generalizations may be used to successfully analyze the tools that will vary slightly from one situation to another. The negative brand associations that we are investigating will be focused to celebrities, consumers and consumer groups since we want to examine the ethical aspect of the tools as well. In other words, negative brand associations caused entirely by a specific incident or event, are beyond the scope of this study.

## 1.6 Disposition

### **Introduction**

*Presentation of the Background, Problem discussion, Previous research, Aim of the study and Limitations.*

### **Method**

*Presentation of the abductive qualitative method we are going to use, Presentation of the case studies and the way the data was collected. Discussion of the methods used and the method of analysis.*

### **Theory**

*Presentation of the theories we base our study on.*

### **Empirical Study**

*Presentation of the empirical cases, the interviews, the documents and netnographical research.*

### **Analysis**

*Analysis of the empirical cases through the lenses of the different theories brought up.*

### **Conclusion**

*Presentation of the results, Answer to the initial problem formulation, Contributions and Additional findings.*

## 2. Method

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*In this chapter we describe the different methods we will use for our study and elaborate on how we will collect the empirical data. The abductive approach is the method of choice, enabling us to benefit from previous research, as well as our own observations and findings. The explorative nature of the subject of this thesis calls for a qualitative method that will enable a more thorough analysis of brand protection tools. Moreover, we also describe the objects we are researching in our empirical study. Finally, we explain the way the data is collected and we address the trustworthiness of our methods.*

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### 2.1 Research design

Throughout our study, we have mainly used an abductive approach to respond to the problem formulation of our study. We find this approach suitable since the nature of our study may require a mixture between the deductive and inductive research design (Patel & Davidsson, 2003). Initially, when we started researching the phenomenon of fighting unwanted customers, we thought that the deductive research approach would be the most appropriate design leading our work. In this theory, hypotheses are formed based on existing knowledge about the concerned field of study. The hypotheses are then tested in an empirical examination to see if the theory can be revised (Bryman & Bell, 2010). We thought that this method would be suitable in our study because we believed that there would be a lot of previous research in related areas that we could benefit from. Accordingly, we wanted to base our study on existing theories about segmentation and targeting as well as theory on celebrity endorsement. Through a profound analysis of these theories, we wanted to formulate hypothesis about the “other side of the coin”. In other words, through existing theory about how brand managers work with targeting and celebrity endorsement, we wanted to draw conclusions about the unknown aspects of the brand protection tools that we later on in the study label as “inverted targeting” and “inverted celebrity endorsement”. Through data collection, different theories and case studies we attempt to confirm our hypotheses and thus fill the theory gap with another perspective on how brand managers can work with brand protection. However, since the prior research about the topic of our study is very limited, we feel that there is a need for additional research approaches. Therefore, we have also used methods that correspond with the inductive research design. This method can be described as

the opposite to the deductive method and is suitable in research of areas that have a very limited previous research (Bryman & Bell, 2010). In other words, we have sometimes drawn conclusions based on generalized observations instead of having theory as our starting point (Backman, 2008).

During our research on inverted targeting and inverted celebrity endorsement, we have studied and evaluated previous research on regular segmentation and targeting. Using this literature as a lens, we have moved on to analyze various cases to test our hypothesis before returning our focus on theory again. The abductive research design coheres with our goal to prove a deeper understanding about how inverted targeting and inverted celebrity endorsement is used and justified. This research design seems appropriate since we use rather extreme cases as a foundation for our study. In line with the abductive design, we also make hypothesis about patterns that can help explain our area of concern. Our theories are then further verified with help of several cases. (Alvesson, 1994)

## **2.2 Qualitative and Explorative study**

The method we have used for the data collection was of qualitative nature. By first bringing up existing theory within segmentation and celebrity endorsement theory, we wanted to illustrate with different study objects how some important protection tools (for example inverted celebrity endorsement or inverted targeting) have been left out of existing literature. Since the paper focuses on unexplored parts within segmentation and brand management, the study has an exploratory approach. The case study method has been particularly relevant in our study since the cases have enabled us to explain “how” and “why” the phenomenon of inverted targeting and inverted celebrity endorsement work (Yin, 2009). Robert E. Stake (1995) explains that qualitative case study research enables researchers to treat the uniqueness of individual cases and contexts. This thought is very similar to what we are trying to achieve in our study: the study of particular cases within segmentation and celebrity endorsement that point towards new tools and opportunities within the area. By describing and analyzing the empirical data, we wanted to explore these relatively unknown brand protection tools and ultimately contribute with new thoughts and theories about these new fields. The qualitative method is particularly appropriate since it enables a more thorough analysis of the relevant cases, and that way also leads to a better understanding of the rather uncommon brand protection tools (Backman, 2008).

The quantitative method would have been more appropriate if the protection tools had been more commonly known and used (Bryman & Bell, 2010). However, we think that it could be interesting for future studies to research on how common the use of the tools are, which would require a quantitative approach. Moreover, we have spotted trends pointing towards the fact that the use of inverted targeting and inverted celebrity endorsement could be considered unethical by the public and especially by the consumers. Therefore, we could also see the necessity of carrying out a quantitative study through surveys in order to evaluate if the defense tools carry risks that are associated to their use. This would permit an even more complete overview of the brand protection tools than we explore in this study.

### **2.3 Objects of study**

The study follows a Multiple-Case Design because it enables us to perform a more thorough analysis and gives a better chance of performing a good study than with a Single-Case Design. The Multiple-Case Design permits us to test and analyze the use of the protection tools on different situations, which strengthens the chance of identifying clear patterns (Yin, 2009). Also, since we have looked into the tools of both inverted targeting and inverted celebrity endorsement, we wanted to have illustrations of both tools in order to obtain a good overview of these protection strategies, which only a Multiple-Case Design could permit us to do.

When we started to look into the subject of brand protection tools, we came across many different situations and cases where the tools, or similar methods, were used. It was therefore important that we performed extensive research on the brands, as well as the situations that called for the use of the brand protection tools. By analyzing online newspaper articles, we were able to make a selection of companies where we could clearly identify the use of the tools. In some situations, the cases had caught a lot of “media attention” and were thoroughly analyzed, which set the base for very rich secondary data. Our research showed a clear pattern that many situations, involving the protection tools, were in fact taken from the fashion industry. Therefore, we decided to focus on cases from the fashion world, which also would permit us to more easily compare and draw parallels between the cases. The final decision of the studied objects was made based on the companies that were in an evident situation that undeniably called for the use of brand protection. Also, we chose our cases so that we could be able to illustrate both tools and test our hypothesis regarding inverted celebrity

endorsement and inverted targeting. Thus, we decided to choose two cases dealing with inverted targeting, since we found two situations where fashion brands that got adopted by hooligan groups and where brand managers reacted completely differently, which is an interesting base for comparison and analysis. We chose the case of Abercrombie & Fitch and Michael Sorrentino (inverted celebrity endorsement), because it was a very open case, and therefore a lot of secondary data was retrievable. Also, the case is very recent and has been thoroughly discussed by both media and the public, which makes it particularly interesting for us.

To summarize, the objects chosen for our empirical study are:

- *Abercrombie and Fitch*: American casual wear brand, targeting 18-22 years old people. The brand is today considered as very young and “fun” and is expanding strongly internationally. (United States Securities and Exchange Commission, 2011) The brand got adopted by the reality show character Michael Sorrentino (from Jersey Shore), which created vivid reactions throughout the public.
- *Burberry*: British luxury fashion brand, targeting especially higher-class consumers. (/www.bbc.co.uk, 06-03-2012) The brand has had an increased popularity among hooligan groups, which has called for a reaction from the company. (www.casualhoolbrands.wordpress.com, 06-03-2012)
- *Stone Island*: Italian designer and sportswear brand, targeting men. Just like Burberry, the Stone Island brand has been adapted by an unattractive customer groups, consisting of chavs and hooligans. (www.casualhoolbrands.wordpress.com, 06-03-2012)

## **2.4 Data collection**

### **2.4.1 Documents**

The nature of the subject we have chosen has had an important impact on the way data has been collected. The “fight against the unwanted customers” and the controversial discriminating tools associated to that, push companies to keep quiet about their practices. This makes the gathering of information directly from companies very difficult. For that reason, we have been obligated to base some of our empirical studies on secondary data. The gathering of secondary data, mainly through research within articles and other documents (newspapers, blogs, etc), has been an essential step for the paper as a whole. Actually, since the subject of brand protection tools is new and unexplored, it has been a critical step to search as many articles as possible that bring up situations where brand protection tools have been used. Also, since some of the studied cases have caught a lot of media attention (e.g. Breivik and Lacoste), there are many articles available that analyze the situations. For that reason, important amount of information and sources are available in order to create a good base for the empirical study and a deep analysis of the situations. For the case of Abercrombie & Fitch, Burberry and Stone Island, we have used dozens of different online newspaper articles and marketing blogs (for each case) to create our empirical study. Even if only a few of these sources were actually referred to in our text, the documents were important for the preparatory work and to triangulate all the information to make sure that the data in hand was valid and credible.

### **2.4.2 Netnography**

We have also used ourselves of netnographical studies in order to get a good overview and additional input regarding the popularity of the subjects in the different cases (for example Michael Sorrentino). That way, we were able to assess if they constituted potential threats for the brands. A netnography permits a researcher to obtain insight from consumers about a brand, product or person, by studying internet forums (Bryman & Bell, 2010). For the Abercrombie & Fitch case, we used a netnography by collecting data from four forums where people shared their thoughts on Michael Sorrentino, which could permit us to evaluate “The Situation’s” characteristics and image. The same type of netnographical research (by using

one forum for each case) was performed for Burberry and Stone Island in order to gather information on the way consumers perceive and relate to the brand and its associations.

### **2.4.3 Interviews**

In some cases, the gathering of primary data has been crucial. In the situations where companies have successfully hidden the use of the brand protection tools, there are often very little articles and other secondary data available for dissecting the cases. Also, there are situations where the secondary data is simply not sufficient to create a case that can be thoroughly analyzed. Information that is crucial for this paper is to know *how* and *why* the different brand protection tools have been used. Since that information is not always available in the secondary data (e.g. articles), we have, when possible, used ourselves of interviews with important representatives in order to get as accurate primary data as possible.

In order to gather all the appropriate data for the Stone Island case, we performed an interview with the president of the company; Carlo Rivetti. We also carried out an interview with a person working with the management of the Burberry brand, who desired to remain anonymous and that we will refer to as “X”. Due to time and location constraints (Stone Island and Burberry having their headquarters outside of Scandinavia), the interviews were done over the telephone. Despite our efforts, we did not manage to get an interview with Abercrombie & Fitch. However, we compensated that hole by basing ourselves on a statement released by the company in connection to the use of their protection tool. Also, the important amount of documents and netnographies available for the Abercrombie & Fitch case, made up a solid foundation for a detailed empirical data. The interviews followed a semi-structured methodology in order to maintain a flexible process and make sure that all important areas were covered. This kind of interview has also enabled our interviewee to talk freely about the subject, which can further enrich the data (Bryman & Bell, 2010).

## **2.5 Method of analysis**

Robert K. Yin (2009) describes four general strategies to treat case study data: *relying on theoretical propositions*, *developing a case description*, *using both qualitative and quantitative data* and *examining rival explanations*. We have found the first strategy to be the most appropriate for our study. The reason for that is the nature of our study. Since we used

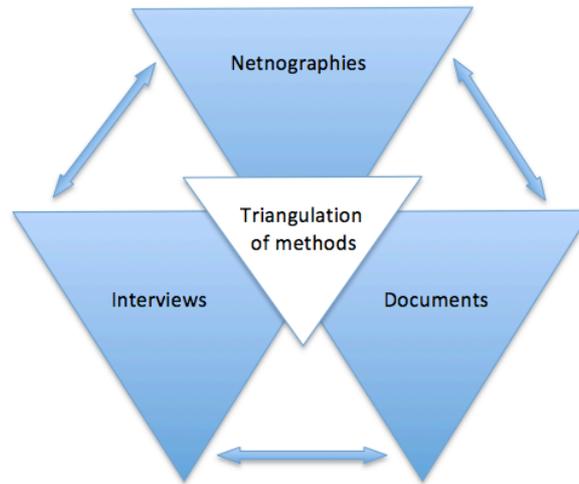
ourselves of an abductive approach, the theory becomes a very central part of the paper as a whole. The abductive approach has permitted us to contribute with new knowledge and perspectives on this already very researched area of regular targeting and celebrity endorsement. Therefore, it was essential that theories also stay central in the analysis of the empirical data, which “*relying on theoretical propositions*” enabled us to do. That way, we used the different theories we brought up in the theoretical chapter as “glasses” through which we analyzed the empirical data (case studies). We then investigated how well the existing theories explained the different situations at hand, as well as if the theories can be changed and adapted into new theories that can explain *how* and *why* the brand protection tools are and should be used. The procedure we want to use was therefore to process the cases using the theories (that are relevant for the cases) methodologically in order to thoroughly analyze the cases.

## **2.6 Trustworthiness**

Our study is based on a rising subject within brand building. This means that there are a limited number of similar cases that we can draw generalized conclusions from. As explained earlier in the paper, the brand protection tools may be considered as unethical because of the discriminative aspects associated to them. For that reason, it is difficult to know with absolute certainty that the explanations for the use of the discrimination tools, found in documents or through interviews with concerned companies, are valid. By using an abductive approach, we have tried to get around the trustworthiness issue. By having existing theories as starting point to analyze the cases in hand, we hope to thoroughly be able to dig into the situations. By having these theories as reference point for our study, it is easier for us to methodically go through the cases. That same methodology will later enable us to modify and create new theories about *how* and *why* the brand protection tools are used by companies.

According to Lincoln and Guba (1985) and Wallendorf and Belk (1989), there are five criteria to assess trustworthiness: credibility, transferability, dependability, confirmability and integrity. In order to make sure that the five criteria are attained, there is a technique that is particularly relevant for our study: triangulation (Wallendorf and Belk, 1989). Robert E. Stake (1995) brings up the notion of “methodological triangulation” as a very interesting protocol in order to confirm and strengthen the validity of the observations. It is specifically what we have tried to use throughout our study by combining interviews, documents and

netnographies in order to get as various and rich sources and perspectives as possible (see figure 2.1). By having these various sources (from different methods) pointing towards the same results, we can strengthen our study as a whole and prove its trustworthiness.



*Figure 2.1 Triangulation of methods*

## **2.7 Method Reflection**

In this final part of the method chapter, we want to reflect about potential weaknesses, problems and risks associated with the use of the methods we have chosen. By doing so, we will be aware of these constraints when working with our paper, and we will be able to improve the overall quality and validity of our study.

### **2.7.1 The abductive approach**

The abductive approach is often referred to as “the golden mean” between the deductive and the inductive approach. A weakness with only adapting the deductive method is that the approach is a bit speculative and disconnected from empirical findings. If we on the other hand would adapt only the inductive approach, it would be difficult to generate theory and our analysis would only consist of empirical summations. (Alvesson, 1994) With the abductive approach, we thereby aim to minimize the limitations that follow by using only one of the methods.

### **2.7.2 Qualitative case study**

When we chose to follow a qualitative case study approach, there were some aspects we had to take into consideration. As with any other method, there are weaknesses that are to be looked in to, in order to generate an as good report as possible. Sharan B Merriam (1988) argues that case studies can exaggerate the effect of factors in the situations, which can push the reader to draw the wrong conclusions. The author also brings up the issue of the integrity of the researcher, who is the prior collector and analyzer of the data, could impact on the result of the study if he doesn't keep his integrity. Also, Guba and Lincoln (1981) bring up the ethical aspect around the case study research. They argue that an unethical case study researcher can choose among the data available and could that way demonstrate almost anything. It is therefore important to be aware of the fact that authors could be biased or financed by external stakeholders, which could damage the validity of the research. Yin (2009) describes the "lack of rigor" as a potential risk for the case study method. He explains that some investigators don't follow systematic procedures, which lowers the quality of the study. Yin (2009) and Merriam (1988) both mention the difficulty of generalizing as a possible problem with case studies. However, both authors argue that case studies (especially multiple case studies) are generalizable to theories instead of populations (which is specifically what we are trying to achieve). By keeping all the risks associated with the use of a qualitative case study approach in mind, we hope to perform a study that will be as thorough and correct as possible.

### **2.7.3 Interviews**

In order to perform a good interview, it is important to be aware of the characteristics and risks that are associated with the practice. Björn Häger (2001) brings up many tricks and recommendations in order to perform an interview in the best possible way. He explains the importance of asking as open and broad questions as possible, which will push the interviewed to describe much more in his own terms. That way, the interviewer will get much deeper answers and description than, for example, by asking questions that only demand yes/no answers. Also, the author explains the importance of asking non-leading, concrete, focused and easy questions in order to get as good responses as possible. Merriam (1988) underlines the importance of being well prepared and to plan the way and orders the questions

should be asked in order to get all the information needed (and not forget any important questions).

Since we performed our interviews over the telephone, it was important for us to organize ourselves well before conducting the interview. For example, it was crucial that we had clear responsibilities during the interview. For that reason, we decided that only one of us should interview the interviewee, while the other one should take notes and eventually suggest additional questions that the interviewer could ask, depending on the answers of the interviewee. We also thought it was important that we presented our project and ourselves, in order to further let the interviewee into the context of our paper and get the most relevant answers.

#### **2.7.4 Documents**

The news articles and other documents that we use as secondary data for our empirical study also have risks and weaknesses that have to be taken into account. A recurrent problem is that documents are not written and produced in the aim of being used for a research paper (Merriam, 1988). This could become problematic in the way that the document could be incomplete from a researcher's perspective. For example, the document could involve terminology and theories that don't go in line with the one of a research paper. Also, Merriam argues that it is difficult to measure documents' validity and authenticity, since many involve some degree of subjectivity, which lowers the trustworthiness of the papers. It is therefore important that the researcher asks the right questions in order to control the validity and authenticity of the documents he/she is using. Moreover, Robert E. Stake (1995) argues that it is important that the right questions are developed in advance, in order to be able to find the appropriate information from documents that can later be analyzed correctly.

#### **2.7.5 Netnographies**

Similar issues arise with the use of netnographies as a source for data. None of the posts we found on the Internet were written in the purpose of a research study. Thus, the posts are not as thoroughly developed and fruitful as a regular interview. Also, since the respondents are writing from their own computers, it is difficult to have information about the characteristics of the respondents. However, the possibility of "hiding" behind a computer screen may also make the answers of the respondents more truthful, which could benefit the paper as a whole

(Malhotra, 2010). From the researchers point of view, this kind of analysis is also less time consuming and can be performed without the researcher affecting the research situation, which is a clear advantage in comparison with interviews for example (Bertilsson, 2009).

### 3. Theory

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*In this chapter we describe the theories we base our study on. We start by describing basic notions within brand management like segmentation, targeting, opinion leaders and celebrity endorsement in order to set the study into the right context and have a strong foundation for further analysis. After that, we bring up the notions of “brand hijack”, “dirt” and “brand purity” in order to further explore the ways consumers and brands interact. Finally, we explore the ethical aspects of branding, permitting us to bring up the notion of ethics further on in the analysis.*

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Most of the theories about brand building and brand association work in a preventive way to avoid a negative brand development from occurring in the first place. As previously mentioned, there is not much research to be found about strategies that can be used as a direct response to a negative brand development. Since we want to examine the more reactive form of brand protection tools, we sometimes have to look at the existing type of theory from another perspective. We form hypotheses based on the parts that are implied, but have been left out in the theories about segmentation, targeting and celebrity endorsement. In order to further enrich our theoretical base, we also bring up more recent theories within the area of brand purity and brand hijacking. By combining well-known theories with more recent ones, we hope to be able to bring wide and various perspectives on the subject. We therefore start with the broad notions of “segmentation” and “celebrity endorsement” and then go into the more specific notions of “brand purity” and “brand hijack”. The abductive approach that we use suggests a very essential role for the theories in the study as a whole. This is why we have put particular emphasis on finding theories that we can use to improve our understanding of the protection tools and the empirical cases. Moreover, we also want to test our hypothesis and see if the theories can be inverted and adapted to fit the brand protection tools, which we want to do by testing the theories on the cases at hand.

#### 3.1 Segmentation and Targeting

In order to understand *how* and *why* companies may want to distance the brand from certain customers groups or celebrities, it is essential to examine the fundamental tools that are used

by marketers today. Market segmentation has been called the panacea of modern marketing and is by many considered as a vital tool for achieving success (Hooley et al, 1993). It is very costly for a company to reach the whole market with advertisement and other communication about a brand. Many companies therefore focus their efforts on the most valuable and profitable customers and target certain community and customer groups (Brahim et al, 2010). Through segmentation, the market is divided into relatively homogenous groups that can be processed with various marketing and advertising tools. This type of customer classification is preferred since the traditional type of mass marketing is considered ineffective and therefore demanding in terms of recourses (Dibb et al, 2001).

There are many different types of targeting strategies that can be used to reach the desired customers. Iyer et al (2005) explain that companies can now target their efforts on certain segments in ways that are much more efficient compared to previous years. The authors ascribe this development to two major changes in the marketing environment. The first major change refers to the increased information companies have about their customers, their lifestyles and preferences. The second change is attached to the development of new media on the Internet, which we have previously discussed (Iyer et al, 2005). A company can choose to concentrate their efforts on one or a few segments that seem attractive. Premium brands, for example, often aim their advertising to customer groups with a higher income since they may be considered more likely to buy expensive products (De Pelsmacker et al., 2010). There is a rather well-known list among marketers of criteria that the segments should be successfully matched to in the segmentation process (Dibb et al, 2001). According to Kotler (1994), segments should be substantial, measurable, sustainable, stable and actionable.

As described above, targeting is mostly used to avoid wasting resources on the parts of the market that are less likely to be interested in the products the company has to offer. However, we argue that targeting can be used to eliminate certain types of customers. If we look at targeting strategies from another perspective, one could say that when a certain group of customers is targeted, another group is excluded. In other words, it could be questioned if there actually are types of targeting strategies that can indirectly be considered as a tool for rejecting the unwanted customers from the brand. A clear example of this can be observed in the fashion industry where the sizes of many premium brands exclude the sometimes unwanted plus sized customers. We will elaborate on this thought later in the paper with help of a few different cases in the empirical part of our study.

## 3.2 Opinion leaders

The discussion above describes the importance of focusing the company's efforts on the most appropriate customers, which leads us to the next subject. Research indicates that we consider personal sources as our most important sources of information (Chaney, 2001). Insecure consumers, with little knowledge about a product, are very likely to seek opinions from others (Beatty et al, 1987). The same fact applies for younger and less experienced consumers who often base their decisions on opinions of those who are more experienced (Alba et al, 1987). Kapferer (2008) explain that opinion leaders have a high social visibility as well as a great amount of charisma. They are often considered as experts and are therefore able to influence other consumers' perceptions and opinions about a specific brand. It is therefore very important part of brand building is to attract opinion leaders to the brand. If the opinion leaders can be successfully divided into segments, a company has the possibility to target them with information that will pass on to others through word of mouth (Chaney, 2001). The opinion leaders are often found within specific community groups (Kapferer, 2008). One of the first problems in brand building is therefore to identify the group of customers that will carry the brand. There are several different types of customer segments reaching from the worst imaginable customers to the best and most valuable ones. The ultimate challenge for the brand manager is to create a strong core of brand ambassadors that represent the brand in a positive manner. (Kapferer, 2008)

By looking at this traditional theory about the importance of opinion leaders from a different perspective, we believe that we can form hypotheses about *how* and *why* discriminating tools are used in brand building. To reconnect to the previous paragraph, it may be just as important to distance the brand from the opinion leaders and brand ambassadors who represent the brand in a negative manner. In other words, we mean that a certain amount of effort should be devoted to distance the brand from the unwanted brand ambassadors. As we will demonstrate through empirical examples later on, this opposite approach should perhaps be given an equal amount of attention as the regular segmenting and targeting strategies.

By choosing and managing the companies' own brand ambassadors and managing these effectively, a company can decide what kind of characteristics they want to associate with their brand. By doing so, they can also decide which groups they want to reach and how they want the brand to be perceived. Moreover, we argue that the same way segmenting strategies enable companies to target a specific customer group, other tools and strategies can in fact

enable companies to distance themselves from the undesirable customers. We will return to this thought and discuss it further on in our study. As previously mentioned, opinion leaders have a high social visibility and a great amount of charisma. These characteristics often correspond with celebrities, which in turn make them attractive in the brand building process. This leads us on to the next part where we examine celebrity endorsement.

### **3.3 Celebrity endorsement**

Celebrity Endorsement is a tool that has been analyzed and discussed in many marketing and branding books. Its use is getting progressively more common and it is today one of the most effective instrument used by companies to associate a certain personality and character to their brand (De Pelsmacker et al., 2010).

In order for the tool to be used effectively it is important that the right endorser is chosen to represent the brand. The literature covering the subject of Celebrity Endorsement points out a variety of different factors that have be considered when choosing a celebrity. For example, according to Amos, Holmes and Strutton (2008), there are 9 key predictors to take into consideration when choosing a celebrity endorser: celebrity performance, negative information, celebrity credibility, celebrity expertise, celebrity trustworthiness, celebrity attractiveness, celebrity familiarity and celebrity/product fit. Kotler and Keller (2009) argue that the credibility is the most important attribute to have. In order to attain that, the authors describe likeability, expertise and trustworthiness as the most important factors. Spry, Pappu and Cornwell (2011) also bring up expertise and trustworthiness as the relevant factors for choosing an endorsement, but they also add attractiveness. The different models used within the subject often bring up the same criteria that could be summarized into 4 factors that will determine the extent to which the celebrity would constitute a good endorsement for the brand (also brought up in (De Pelsmacker et al., 2010)):

- *Credibility*: Is the celebrity trustworthy? Does he/she have expertise in the area?
- *Attractiveness*: Is the celebrity known (awareness and familiarity)? Is he/she physically well perceived? Does the target group like him/her?
- *Appropriateness of fit*: How well do the endorsers' image, personality and lifestyle fit with the product or brand?
- *Behavior of the celebrity*: Is there a high probability that the celebrity acts in a way that it could hurt his own and the brand's image?

The factors above are fundamental when choosing a celebrity endorser. Since the use of a celebrity endorser is very expensive, it is important that the right endorser is chosen. A misvaluation of one of the above factors could result in the choice of a celebrity that could harm the brand and its associations.

Grant McCracken (1989) brings a different perspective to the theory of Celebrity Endorsement. He criticizes the fact that existing models only focus on the degree of persuasiveness of the different celebrity endorsers (based on factors brought up above like “attractiveness”, “expertise” or “trustworthiness”). He argues that Celebrity Endorsement actually depends on a more sophisticated “meaning transfer” model (see figure 3.1). The model is based on the cultural perspective, in which “Celebrity endorsement and the marketing system are cultural undertakings in which meaning is constantly in circulation” (McCracken, 1989). The model therefore underlines the importance of “the meanings” that are transferred from the celebrity to the consumer through the purchase of the product. The choice of the endorser therefore has to be done by deciding what kind of meanings the companies want to transfer to the consumers. Furthermore, the choice of the celebrity has also to be in accordance to the meaning of the product that is sold to the customers, a similarity that has to be shown in the advertisement. Finally, the celebrity serves as a model for how the consumers can take the meaning from the product and appropriate it into their own culture. That way, McCracken explains that the celebrity endorser is a key player in the whole “meaning transfer” process. (McCracken, 1989)

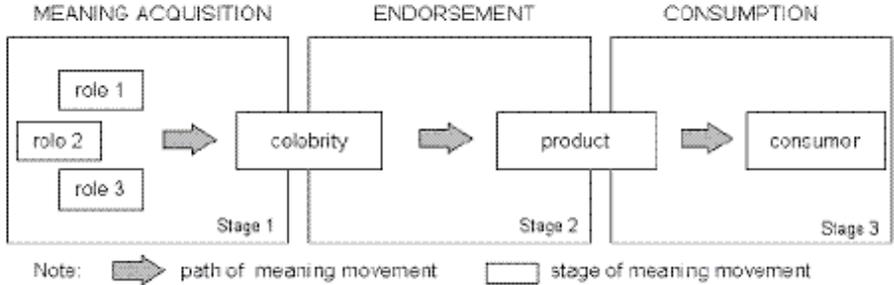


Figure 3.1 The meaning transfer model (McCracken, 1989)

Through the analysis of cases in the empirical part of the study, we would like to test if similar factors could be used in an inverted version of celebrity endorsement. We would

therefore like to explore if certain factors could help companies to spot celebrities that are (or will) hurt the brand. By doing so, companies could take appropriate measures in order to try to distance the celebrity from the brand, and that way also protect the brand image. Thus, the theory we would like to test is if inverted celebrity endorsement should become a part of the celebrity endorsement theory.

### **3.4 Extended Self**

“We are what we have” is a commonly used expression that infers the fact that our possessions compose a major part of our identities. Belk (1988) suggests that this may be the most powerful fact of consumer behavior. Our belongings can of course extend our abilities but they can also extend our characters. In his article called “Possessions and the extended self”, Belk presents many evidences supporting this fact. A weapon, for example, can extend our physical abilities and make us powerful but a uniform can extend our personal characteristics and make us powerful in another kind of way. We invest a lot in our belongings and they sometimes become strongly attached to us. Loss of possession is an experience most of us are familiar with. If the loss is unintentional and the possession is valuable, we often feel like a part of us is missing. This phenomenon can also explain why we sometimes find it hard to get rid of belongings, that we feel might come in handy some day, but in reality never use. (Belk, 1988)

Since we identify ourselves with and through our possessions, it is justifiable to be picky with the brands we chose to use. Brand associations are used to construct and communicate the extended self towards others and a connection is formed between the brand and the customer (Sheff, 2011). Young people are constantly looking for products that can help them create or maintain their identity or membership of a certain group (Hebdige, 1979). Our possessions can help us gain attention and feedback from our surroundings in a way the unextended self would not achieve (Belk, 1988). This phenomenon can help explain why customer groups have adopted certain brands and made them a part of their own identity. We will elaborate on this kind of brand hijacking in the next paragraph.

### **3.5 The Serendipitous Hijack**

The meanings of brands are changing. As explained above, we now use brands as a part of our self-expression. Wippenfürth (2005) explains how the consumers now are in charge of the brands, rather than the brand managers. He clarifies how the consumers shape the brand meanings as well as they endorse it to others, through a phenomenon called brand hijacking. This type of hijacking can be used to a company's advantage, since it can result in free advertising from the customers. Starbucks is a good example of a success story that can be attributed to the brand hijack phenomenon. The customers have created the meanings and values behind the brand and advertise it frequently through their social networks. However, the brand-hijack can also have the opposite effect on a brand. Brands are now at risk of being hijacked by undesirable customer groups that use the brands as a part of their personal identity (Wippenfürth, 2005). If this happens, the values and meanings that are attached to the brand may change forever. Therefore, Wippenfürth claims that it can be necessary to reclaim your brand if it has been captured by unwanted customers. In reality, this is not always an easy task and one has to be careful to avoid upsetting your customers. Mettel, the creator of the Barbie doll, is a good example of a company that failed miserably in their attempt to protect the brand from being ridiculed by their customers. Mettel pressed charges against everyone who used or depicted Barbie dolls in an undesirable way, in order to protect and preserve the brand. However, this strategy backfired horribly since they went after their most devoted customers, consisting of collectors and fan clubs. Mettel thought that the threat of a lawsuit would prevent an undesirable development of the brand. Instead, they scared away the core customers and gained a bad reputation in the process. As we have stressed in previous parts of the study, it is therefore necessary for companies to evaluate their brand protection tools before implementing them. (Wippenfürth, 2005)

The case concerning the development of the Stone Island clothing brand, which we briefly discussed in the problem formulation, is a good example of a brand that has gained undesirable associations due to a brand hijack. We will further elaborate this case in the next chapter of our study. Another similar case, concerning Burberry, will also be brought up for discussion to provide a different approach on how an undesirable brand hijack can be handled more successfully. The fact that these companies and major parts of their customer base want to distance themselves from other customer groups that have adopted the brand can be

explained by another theory. We will therefore elaborate additional terms, such as “brand purity” and “dirt”, in the next paragraph.

### **3.6 Brand Purity**

*Purity and Danger*, by Mary Douglas (1966) is an anthropological book that brings up different perspectives on pollution, taboo and fear. By analyzing different cultures, the author explores subjects like hygiene, moral values and social roles and puts them in relationship with the ideas of order and disorder. As an example, Douglas explains how the notion of “dirt” is very subjective and may vary considerably from one situation to another. According to her, people tend to have very different reactions when they come in contact with things that are different from their own cultural values or that they consider as dirty. The author also brings up different ways of handling these anomalies: ignore them, condemn them or try to accept them into their own reality. Even if Mary Douglas’ book has often been used for analysis within subjects like racism, gender roles and religion, we believe that her theories could be beneficial for our study.

Henrik Sjödin (2008) brings up the notions of purity, impurity and disorder in his book *Tensions of Extensions* and shows that Mary Douglas’ study can even be used within the area of Brand Management. As he explains in the study of a brand extension done by Porsche when the company decided to introduce a sports utility vehicle (SUV) bearing the Porsche label. In result to that action, many Porsche users reacted very negatively and criticized the launch of the extension. Sjödin uses similar notions as the one described by Douglas to explain this reaction. He explains that the negative feedback can be justified by the fact that the brand extension is not in line with the “brand purity” of the Porsche brand. The SUV launch can therefore be considered as “dirt” that doesn’t fit with Porsche’s “brand purity”. Sjödin also argues that the brand extension cause such strong reactions because of the cultural values that the Porsche owners associate with the brand.

We find the notion of Brand Purity very interesting in the way that it describes the way a brand is perceived by a customer and the way customers want the brand to be positioned. It also shows that customers are very protective with their brand and don’t want its image to be harmed. As explained in the prior theory, our consumption habits are an important part of our culture and identity. It might therefore be important in some situations, that the brands

consumers identify themselves with are not harmed by other consumers that may not suit the brand image.

### **3.7 Ethical aspects of branding practices**

Ethical branding and social responsibility play a big roll in building and maintaining the brand reputation. An ethical brand will improve the reputation and therefore also strengthen the brand. The interesting part of this statement is that the opposite applies as well. In other words, an unethical brand may ruin the corporate reputation and therefore also the brand itself (Fan, 2005). There are numerous examples of brands that have been damaged due to unethical methods in their production and advertising. Nike is a well known brand that was damaged when such information about child labor surfaced during the 90's (Independent Digital (UK) Ltd, 2001). Dolce & Gabana is another well known brand that was brought up for discussion due to a sexist depiction of woman in one of their advertising campaigns (El Hattab, 2008).

In our study, we want to bring up the ethical aspect of inverted targeting and inverted celebrity endorsement for a deeper discussion. However it could also be questioned if the regular forms of targeting and segmentation should be regarded as ethical or not. As stated earlier in the text, segmentation and targeting can be used to focus communication efforts and reach the most probable and appropriate customers. However, the same strategies can be used to discriminate against certain customers or groups (Brenkert, 2008). Brenkert briefly mentions a strategy he labels “defensive targeting” in his book about branding ethics. This strategy includes rejection of segments that may harm the brand by using the products in a inappropriate way or context. According to Brenkert, a strategy may be considered unethical when it is intended to classify or discriminate against potential customers for morally unjustified reasons. A question that must be answered is therefore: When should a strategy be considered as morally unjustified? Is there a difference between excluding a murderer and a celebrity with undesirable characteristics, like in the Lacoste and Abercrombie & Fitch cases? We will elaborate these examples and return to these questions later on in the paper.

### **3.8 Theoretical summary**

In this part of the study we have discussed theory within Brand Management in order to better understand *how* and *why* companies would want to distance themselves from certain customers, celebrities and customer groups. We started by describing the widely recognized theories about market segmentation and targeting. These theories form a theoretical starting point for our study. Due to the lack of research regarding brand protection strategies, we also discussed the possibilities of looking at these theories from another perspective. We have suggested the possibilities of inverting the theories in order to better understand how companies protect their brands. Supplementary theory about opinion leaders and celebrity endorsement has been examined in order to understand the importance these groups have on the brand development. We briefly discussed the possibilities of looking at these theories from another perspective as well. Additional theories about Brand Hijacking and Brand Purity have been examined in order to contribute to the understandings about the ways customers can harm and interact with brands. Finally, we have also brought up an ethical perspective of brand protection to highlight the risks associated with the use of the brand protection tools. The theories that we have examined in this chapter will function as an important support for the study and help us interpret our collected data. The theories will be connected with different parts of the empirical findings that we will present in the next part of the study.

## 4. Empirical studies

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*In this chapter, we will describe and elaborate a number of cases we have found useful and suitable for our study. We will draw parallels between some of the cases in order to find similarities and differences in the tools that we can further analyze. The case studies will be composed of interviews, documents and netnographies in order to provide a complete picture of the different situations. Our findings will then be analyzed and compared to previous theory in the next chapter.*

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### 4.1 Abercrombie & Fitch

In December 2009, one of the most controversial shows in North American history premiered on MTV: Jersey Shore. This reality show follows a group of young American-Italians, spending their summer together in New Jersey. Among other activities, the audience can follow the group while they tan, drink, fight and make fools of themselves (www.statepress.com, 20-02-2012; www.nytimes.com, 04-04-2012). While many people have been shocked by the very low-level of television offered by MTV, the audience numbers for the show has been very good, having already showed 5 seasons of the show and a 6<sup>th</sup> season is already scheduled. However, the show has been qualified as “a disgrace” by the National Italian American Foundation and others have said that the show actually promotes idiocy (www.dailycaller.com, 08-02-2012). We have collected some views from the public in order to show the controversy and reactions that the show Jersey Shore has created (www.answers.yahoo.com -a, 13-04-2012):

#### *theskyisfalling*

I think just when we thought reality shows couldn't go any lower into the slime to find a more gross, ugly group of no-talent lowlifes to throw on tv, they come up with these morons. Ugh.

#### *Mari rose*

I think its retarded.

It has no meaning, its all staged and the show in general is just plain stupid.

One of the characters, who is considered as one of the biggest partier and troublemaker of the gang, is Michael Sorrentino (see Appendix 1). As an example, Michael Sorrentino has decided to call himself and his muscles for “The Situation”, which shows the very special personality that Michael Sorrentino has ([www.jerseyshore.mtv.se](http://www.jerseyshore.mtv.se), 14-02-2012). He has caused a lot of vivid reactions from viewers because of his trouble-causing and arrogant personality. The netnographical studies that we have performed, also illustrate the way Michael Sorrentino is perceived by the audience. The following quotes are responses to the question “do you think “The Situation” on Jersey Shore is attractive?” ([www.hubpages.com](http://www.hubpages.com); [www.answers.yahoo.com](http://www.answers.yahoo.com) -b, 15-04-2012; [www.answers.yahoo.com](http://www.answers.yahoo.com) -c, 25-04-2012):

***Michelle L.:***

As we say here in Jersey, he looks rode hard and hung up wet. Basically he looks rough. Too much tanning and partying aged him. He looks like a leather bag. He is not at all attractive

***Georgiecarlos:***

No way! I don’t even understand why he (and the whole Jersey Shore cast and the show) is so popular. I tried watching one episode out of curiosity and after a few minutes I had to switch channels because I found myself, in a sense, “getting stupid”.

***Jasper420:***

I agree I don’t think he is attractive at all, and I also agree the whole “The Situation” is sad.

***Lowkeyed:***

The guy is a typical arrogant douchebag...

The extract above presents only a few opinions but shows that the character of Michael Sorrentino is not very popular among the viewers.

When Abercrombie & Fitch realized that Michael “The Situation” Sorrentino was often seen wearing their brand during the show (see Appendix 1), they decided to take action. In August 2011, the company offered to pay Michael Sorrentino a substantial amount of money in order for him to stop wearing their clothes. They also extended the offer to the other cast members of the show ([www.forbes.com](http://www.forbes.com), 08-02-2012). Along with that, Abercrombie and Fitch released the following statement ([www.forbes.com](http://www.forbes.com), 08-02-2012):

“We are deeply concerned that Mr. Sorrentino’s association with our brand could cause significant damage to our image. We understand that the show is for entertainment purposes, but believe this association is contrary to the aspirational nature of our brand, and may be distressing to many of our fans. We have therefore offered a substantial payment to Michael ‘The Situation’ Sorrentino and the producers of MTV’s The Jersey Shore to have the character wear an alternate brand. We have also extended this offer to other members of the cast, and are urgently waiting a response.”

As a result to that action, the Abercrombie & Fitch stocks dropped 9% on the next day. ([www.money.cnn.com](http://www.money.cnn.com), 08-02-2012). Before that, Abercrombie & Fitch had two T-shirts parodying Jersey Shore and Michael Sorrentino, writing on one T-shirt; “The Fitchtuation”. As a result to these actions, Michael Sorrentino stated that he actually never received the offer and that he was attempting to file a lawsuit against Abercrombie & Fitch for using his expressions on the T-shirts.

Abercrombie & Fitch’s action of “unsponsoring” Michael Sorrentino has launched vivid reactions around the world. Some marketers argue that Abercrombie and Fitch only goal is to create publicity and draw people’s attention towards the brand. MTV, the channel that produced and airs Jersey Shore, reacted quickly saying that it was a PR stunt by Abercrombie & Fitch ([www.nytimes.com](http://www.nytimes.com), 08-05-2012):

“It’s a clever P.R. stunt, and we’d love to work with them on other ways they can leverage ‘Jersey Shore’ to reach the largest youth audience on television”

Others, that are aware of all the negative views that surround the show Jersey Shore and its characters, understand Abercrombie & Fitch’s reaction in the way that the characters are not in line with the brands desired image. Donna Sturgess, president of Buyology (a marketing firm), explained Abercrombie’s action by basing herself on Michael Sorrentino’s negative image ([www.telegraph.co.uk](http://www.telegraph.co.uk), 08-05-2012):

“He doesn't have a job, he's not someone girls want to date because he doesn't treat them well, and guys don't want to be him. He doesn't fit the 'hot boy-next-door' image.”

The case has also started debates around the world about the ethics associated to companies deciding what individuals should or shouldn't wear. The public's reaction to if Abercrombie and Fitch's action was justifiable varied, but it illustrates well how debated the situation was (www.stylenews.com, 02-05-2012):

***BBB:***

I was a big fan of A & F clothing—really liked the tight fit. But this is ridiculous. It's clothing. How dare they say that they will pay someone not to wear their brand? That person is their customer and they need to be thankful that he purchases their items. Incredibly rude and I don't care whether they said it to someone like The Situation or anyone else, it's really unacceptable.

***Kisa:***

Who do they "Abercrombie and Fitch" think they are. Maybe everyone should stop wearing their clothes and they wouldn't have to worry anymore cause they would be out of business. Absolutely unbelievable!!!

***CHACHA:***

I DON'T BLAME A&F, THE SITUATION IS EVERYTHING A MAN SHOULDN'T BE.

***Melissa:***

I agree with Abercrombie and Fitch, I mean why would they want this clown representing their image? At the same time, I shop A&F and while I do like their clothes they are somewhat overpriced. High prices or not, this guy is creating publicity. I am no way a fan of this show. At all. But there are a lot of people who are, and they may shop A&F to be like Mike. Good image or bad, this store gets business. They are boosting sales, so why complain? Money is money or one way or another and they are flourishing, so why such a problem?

To summarize, the case described above has been very debated by the media, marketing specialists and the public. The views differ strongly when it comes to how justifiable and understandable it was that Abercrombie & Fitch took action against the Jersey Shore celebrity. Through the lenses of the theories brought up, we will in the analysis dissect the case and explore concretely how Abercrombie & Fitch's action could help the brand protect its image.

## 4.2 Stone Island

The developments of the Stone Island brand make up an interesting example of how a brand may get hijacked by the customers. The case we have studied is rather special due to the large gap between the communicated and the perceived brand image and associations. The protection strategies, used to prevent this gap from occurring in the first place, stands in contrast to the “unsponsoring” strategy described in the Abercrombie & Fitch case above.

The Stone Island brand has been recognized for its high quality and original designs ever since it was launched in Italy in the early 1980s ([www.stoneisland.co.uk](http://www.stoneisland.co.uk), 12-03-2012). The clothes were first made out of sailing fabric and a lot of money was early invested in technology research to improve the quality, in order to outshine the competitors. Who could have guessed, that during the next decades, their typical customer would be a hooligan, using the clothes as a uniform to blend in with the other football firms? ([www.dooyoo.co.uk](http://www.dooyoo.co.uk), 12-03-2012)

In the late 1970s a new subculture, better known as Casual, was on the rise in the United Kingdom. The Casual subculture mainly consisted of hooligans who had adopted expensive fashion brands from European designers, instead of wearing their favourite team’s football shirt at the games. The Stone Island clothing brand was a perfect fit and was quickly adopted by the violent football supporters. At first, the expensive choice of clothing attracted less attention from the police and the hooligan gangs had an easier time getting into rival bars and to infiltrate other football firms. However, during the 1990 the Casual clothing style was adapted as more of a uniform, used in order to differentiate the other hooligans from the regular football supporters. ([www.casualhoolbrands.wordpress](http://www.casualhoolbrands.wordpress), 06-03-2012). We discussed this matter in an interview with the president of Stone Island, Carlo Rivetti, and he confirmed that Stone Island had an issue with the violent football supporters:

“Yes, I am aware of the problem with associations with hooligans in England. We don’t want to be associated with “violence”. Personally, I love football and don’t understand why anyone would want to ruin the game. Of course, we would rather like to see the brand in a more positive sport context.” (C. Rivetti, personal communication, 23-03-2012)

The Stone Island clothes have a characteristic brand label with a compass logo that is attached with buttons on the upper left arm. The brand label clearly distinguishes Stone Island from other similar brands. During the 90s, the English police incorrectly associated the Stone Island label as a token for hooliganism. Parts of the police force even tried to connect the logo with the neo-Nazi cross symbol ([www.casualhoolbrands.wordpress.com](http://www.casualhoolbrands.wordpress.com), 20-03-2012). Some say that the police were also led to believe that the compass badge was used as medal or an award, within hooligan gangs. As a precaution, people wearing the compass symbol were refused entry to the football games. Of course, this had consequences for the regular Stone Island customers who had no association with the violent hooligans. Regular customers were ultimately refused entry to football games on the sole basis that they were wearing clothes from Stone Island ([www.cfcnet.co.uk](http://www.cfcnet.co.uk) 08-05-2012). Jason Williams, an undercover producer, infiltrated a hooligan firm, in order to document and film their activities. In an article in BBC new, he shares his experiences and confirms the strong association between the Stone Island brand and the hooligans ([www.news.bbc.co.uk](http://www.news.bbc.co.uk) 06-05-2012).

“In fact I came to learn the subject of football was rarely discussed amongst hooligans. On match days, their preoccupation with finding rival firms often took centre stage. [...] I was turned away from a pub in Cardiff on one occasion. Ironically, it was not for wearing a football shirt, but for wearing Stone Island because of its association with hooligan culture.” (Jason Williams)

Despite the problem, Carlo Rivetti indicated that Stone Island did not make any major changes in order to handle the negative association with hooliganism and violence. Some of the customers that didn't want to be associated with these very negative aspects decided to distance themselves from the hooligans by making their own adjustments to the product. ([www.cfcnet.co.uk](http://www.cfcnet.co.uk) 08-05-2012) By simply removing the Stone Island label from the clothes, the customers could keep wearing the brand and at the same time distance themselves from the hooligans (see Appendix 1).

Carlo Rivetti confirmed that the associations and characteristics connected to the Stone Island clothing brand remain almost the same in present time but he was surprised that some of the customers removed the brand label from the clothes:

“The removable badge is not intended for the customers who want to disassociate themselves from the hooligans. It is a heritage from the Italian military uniforms and has been used for many years”.

Carlo Rivetti also explained that the brand has been frequently exposed and used in various movies with hooligan themes during the 2000s, which may have amplified the prejudices towards the brand even further. Netnographical research gives an insight about recent opinions of the brand. The quotes below are extracts of answers to the question: “What do you know of Stone Island?” (www.thestudentroom.co.uk, 07-05-2012)

***just say hello:***

Its what all the football hooligans wear, its nice stuff but not worth the money.

***x\_LiNk\_x:***

It's a prerequisite to becoming a *chav*.

***not-another-number:***

Nowadays when somebody says Stone Island, I just think of football hooligans.

In the movie called “Green Street Hooligans” several of the main characters can be seen wearing garments from Stone Island while fighting other football gangs (see Appendix 1). As Mr. Rivetti explains, this didn’t help the brand get rid of the association with hooliganism:

“The fact that the brand was seen and associated with hooliganism in the movie was not something we would have hoped for... We were not asked for permission before the movie aired, and of course the association between Stone Island and hooliganism got stronger after the movies like this one was released”.

Despite this problem, Carlo Rivetti explained that he didn’t see any possible actions in order to keep the hooligans from continuing using the brand: As we can see from the quote underneath, Stone Island adopted a passive strategy in their attempt to counter the hooligan association:

“We don’t think it’s possible to keep certain customers from buying and using the brand. It is not possible to stop the hooligans from entering the stores. Instead, we try to make the best products possible, and that way attract “real men”; sports interested

men that are not violent. We have for example had the pleasure of seeing Pep Guardiola and Xavi, coach and key player of the European champions football team FC Barcelona, wearing our clothes in their everyday life. I am proud that fair players like these are using the brand. These are the customers that best represent the brand.”

Carlo Rivetti confirmed that the company has had an upswing in sales as a result of all the attention although he was unable to answer if the brand had been damaged in the process. Thus, our question still stands. Could Stone Island have benefited from using a more direct protection strategy in order to get rid of the undesirable customers? We will further discuss this matter in the analysis chapter.

### 4.3 Burberry

Burberry is another exclusive brand that has had similar troubles as Stone Island. In recent years, the brand has struggled to maintain its high-class profile that Burberry is originally known for. Just as described in the case with Stone Island, the Burberry clothing brand has been associated with hooligans. Stacey Cartwright, the Executive Vice President of Burberry, has described this association as unhelpful ([www.telegraph.co.uk](http://www.telegraph.co.uk), 23-04-2012). A major difference in this case, compared to the Stone Island case above, is the measures Burberry has taken to prevent the undesired associations from sticking to the brand.

Burberry was founded in 1856 and is by many considered an exclusive brand with over a century of heritage. The characteristic beige Burberry check pattern was introduced in 1924 and has been the brand's trademark ever since ([www.burberry.com](http://www.burberry.com), 20-04-2012). In the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, Burberry experienced a rise in popularity and the brand was frequently used and worn by influential celebrities around the globe. However, just as described in the Stone Island case above, the Burberry brand got adopted by hooligans and chavs. "Chav" is a term for the loutish and destructive customer who often uses sportswear and is part of a low status society group (Sheff, 2011). The expensive clothes and accessories from Burberry were made part of the hooligan uniform (Wippenfürth, 2005). As in the case with Stone Island, taxi drivers and bouncers started to reject people who wore the Burberry caps ([www.economist.com](http://www.economist.com), 29-04-2012). We discussed hooligan matter with X (who preferred that we didn't use his/her name as a reference), who is working with the management of the Burberry brand:

"We absolutely don't want to be associated with hooligans. The hooligans in England are very different from the hooligans in for example Denmark or Sweden. They are a lot more violent."

At the same time, the Burberry check has been subject to immense plagiarism and ridiculed in media. Undesirable celebrities were seen wearing Burberry clothes from head to toe, which contributed to an even worse brand development ([www.news.bbc.co.uk](http://www.news.bbc.co.uk), 14-04-2012). For example, Tania do Nascimento, a member of the Big Brother cast in 2003, wore clothes and accessories from the brand. The other contenders described her as "two-faced" and she claimed that she would buy breast implants if she won the prize money. Netnographical

research provide an insight of opinions about the fact that she had adopted the brand and promoted it in Big Brother. The quotes below are an extract of answers to the topic “Burberry's Don't Need Tania Wearing Their Gear ([www.forums.digitalspy.co.uk](http://www.forums.digitalspy.co.uk), 07-05-2012):

***Swipe:***

What about all the mindless thugs and football hooligans who wear burberry attire?  
Can't be any worse publicity than Tania

***The\_Green\_Man:***

Personally, I thought the Burberry check had already become vulgar and was not surprised when I saw Tania wearing it. I have seen many copies on street markets - a sure sign that the brand is now highstreet.

At the same time, additional soap opera stars, such as Daniella Westbrook (see Appendix 1) adopted the brand and wore it from head to toe ([www.telegraph.co.uk](http://www.telegraph.co.uk), 25-04-2012). A survey was performed on 200 fashion enthusiasts to establish the worst fashion attribute of the last 50 years. Unfortunately for the brand, the Burberry check pattern finished in first place ([www.thesun.co.uk](http://www.thesun.co.uk), 01-05-2012).

Burberry realized that they had to do something to stop the negative development of the brand. The company chose not to openly criticise or provoke neither the unwanted customers nor the impostors. Instead, Burberry chose to reduce the trademark pattern on the products. In 2001, the check pattern was found on about 20 percent of the assortment. Three years later it could only be found on about 5 percent of the products ([www.news.bbc.co.uk](http://www.news.bbc.co.uk), 14-04-2012). Further on, Burberry made the radical decision to change their trademark check to a new pattern they call the Burberry stripe (Wippenfürth, 2005). Additionally, they stopped the production of the Burberry baseball caps (see Appendix 1) that was very popular among the violent football supporters ([www.independent.co.uk](http://www.independent.co.uk), 15-04-2012). In other words, Burberry sacrificed a major part of their brand heritage in order to preserve and protect the brand. We discussed the reinvention of the brand and the strategies used with X:

“Yes, Burberry has had trouble with associations to hooligans and the caps have been very popular among this groups. This is the reason why they were removed”

As shown in the quote above, X confirmed that the brand had made changes that can be traced to the undesirable associations with hooligans. Although, X was unable to answer if the change in the pattern could be contributed to the hooligan customer group as well.

According to other sources, it seems like the reinvention of the brand have paid off. The new collections have performed very well and the Brand has recovered a lot from the hooligan and chav connection ([www.dailymail.co.uk](http://www.dailymail.co.uk), 27-04-2012). The brand has been transformed during the last couple of years from being a chav-brand to a brand representing once again representing the top fashion in England ([www.yorkshirepost.co.uk](http://www.yorkshirepost.co.uk), 07-05-2012).

As stated, the major difference in the three cases above is the strategies Burberry used to get rid of the unwanted associations. The brand has been rather neutral in the communication towards the undesirable customer groups. When asked about the brand associations with chavs, Christopher Baily, the man in charge for the reinvention of the brand, replied that Burberry was proud that the brand had such a democratic appeal ([www.dailymail.co.uk](http://www.dailymail.co.uk), 27-04-2012).

#### **4.4 Implications of the Empirical Data**

As seen in the empirical data gathered, the studied companies have faced different types of situations that involved various kinds of undesirable consumer or consumer groups that used the brand. Burberry and Stone Island have faced a similar situation with a major adoption of the brand by hooligan groups, which makes the comparison between the cases particularly interesting. A noteworthy difference between the two cases is the dissimilar ways the managements have acted in response to the adoption of the brand by hooligans. While Burberry tried to take action in order to eliminate the link between them and the hooligans, Stone Island has adopted a much more passive approach to the problem. Stone Island also differentiates itself in the way their customers have tried to cut the link between themselves and the hooligans. The case of Abercrombie & Fitch is similar to Burberry in the way that Burberry also had problems with unwanted celebrity endorsers. However, the strategy Abercrombie & Fitch used to disassociate the brand from these individuals is different from Burberry. To summarize, we have witnessed both active and passive strategies in order to protect the brand from unwanted customers.

## 5. Analysis

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*In this part, we will connect our empirical findings with the theories that have been discussed throughout the paper. The theories will help us explain the actions and phenomenon that have been observed in the different cases. A comparison between the cases will then help us understand the importance of brand protection tools and ultimately support our reflection on "why and how companies should distance themselves from unwanted customers".*

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In the collected empirical data, we have witnessed three different situations where various actions have been used to handle unwanted customers. We have found that the reactions are good illustrations of Mary Douglas' (1966) theories of handling "dirt". As discussed in the theoretical chapter, Mary Douglas proposes three ways of handling things and people that are different to the ones we are used to: ignoring them, accepting them or condemning them. Our cases displayed circumstances where companies primarily used themselves of two responses: ignoring and condemning the unwanted customers. The third category, "accepting the customers", involves an adaptation of the brand image rather than a strategy used to protect the current brand image. Since our study focuses on strategies used to preserve the brand (rather than changing the brand), we ignore this category throughout the rest of the study. Consequently, the rest of the analysis will be divided into the two categories "ignoring" and "condemning" unwanted customers.

### **5.1 Ignoring the unwanted customers: Stone Island buries their head in the sand**

The developments of the Stone Island brand have provided us with a lot of input in our discussion about *how* and *why* companies protect the brand from unwanted customers. In order to fully understand the problems and challenges Stone Island has faced, we have applied the theories that we have discussed in previous parts of the study. In this case, we feel that theory about brand hijacking, extended self and brand purity are utmost relevant. Additional theories about segmentation, targeting and opinion leaders have also been useful and provided additional input to the analysis.

To begin with, the development of the Stone Island clothing brand composes a perfect example of Wippenfürths (2005) theory about brand hijacking. As we have discussed before, a brand hijack can help a brand reach tremendous success but it can also have the opposite effect, depending on who the hijackers are. In recent years, we have witnessed many success stories that can be attributed to brand hijacking by customers. Starbucks, for example, has reached tremendous success thanks to this phenomenon. As we have witnessed in this case, Stone Island has not been as lucky due to the rather unusual customer group that has hijacked the brand. The typical characteristics of a hooligan, that in this case resembles the hijackers, differ a lot from the attributes De Pelsmacker (2010) described as essential in an attractive brand endorser. Especially in terms of behavior, credibility and appropriateness. As our empirical findings display, hooligans in Europe have adapted the Stone Island brand as a uniform used to avoid attention from the police and to make it possible to infiltrate other football firms. Thereby, the fundamental brand associations have changed from being a high quality sportswear to a brand associated with violence.

According to the president of Stone Island, Carlo Rivetti, the attributes that the hooligans attach to the brand stand in contrast with the values the company communicates to the market. In other words, there is no congruency between the characteristics of the hooligans and the brand. It seems like Stone Island has had a very difficult task in trying to drown the negative associations by communicating positive ones, because of the fact that the negative associations have become deeply rooted. In our study, we found that Stone Island has been focusing on a certain segment and targeted their communication towards a specific type of customer. Carlo Rivetti, told us that Stone Island has focused their efforts on “men who cares a lot about quality and fashion”. At the same time the brand has been closely associated with typical “masculine” sports such as football. This helps us to explain why the brand has been an attractive hijacking target for the hooligans.

In the previous part of our thesis, we brought up theories explaining that we use our possession as an extension of self and to create our identities. Since the Stone Island clothes, according to some parts of the customer base, have become almost synonymous with a hooligan uniform, the brand may be considered attractive for those who want to extend their own identities with the characteristics of a typical hooligan. In other words, wearing Stone Island clothes may be a way for an aspiring hooligan to extend his character and become more intimating towards other hooligans. A similar phenomenon can be observed in the army

where a high ranked military uniform indicate that you are capable of more than a person without a uniform. The fact that a product or brand can assign the user certain attributes can help the brand attract customers, but it can also repel others. This can be clearly observed in the case with Stone Island. Some of the customers wear the brand because they like the hooligan culture and lifestyle. Still, many other customers wear the brand because they like the fashion and quality of the clothes. As a result of the negative brand associations, many of the customers remove the brand label from the clothes in order to distance themselves from the hooligan culture.

Moreover, the fact that some of the customers remove the Stone Island label is a great example of the brand purity theory and the “dirt” phenomenon that we have discussed in the theoretical chapter. Our findings confirm that parts of the customer base at Stone Island consider the hooligans as “dirt” that is polluting the brand. The characteristic of the hooligans does not correspond with the values and purity of the brand. The hooligans are considered as “dirt” to the company and the rest of the customers due to their violent behavior and negative associations. Yet again, an evidence of this is the fact that they remove the detachable brand label from the clothes in order to “remove the dirt”. As we discussed earlier, Mary Douglas (1966) explains that people tend to have very different reactions when they come in contact with things that are different from their own cultural values or that they consider as dirty. As we brought up earlier, she highlights three different ways of handling these anomalies: ignore them, condemn them or try to accept them. From our analysis of Stone Island we can draw the conclusion that the company itself have chosen to ignore the hooligans (dirt) but that many of Stone Island’s regular customers have chosen to condemn them.

To expand the analysis we can also connect the Stone Island case with the theory concerning opinion leaders. We previously discussed that opinion leaders have a great amount of influence on the other customers. Therefore, it is very important to attract the right opinion leaders to the brand that can hereafter promote the brand towards their friends and family. Stone Island has attracted opinion leaders within the football firms that have promoted it towards other hooligans. As Carlo Rivetti, the president of Stone Island explained, the only strategy the company has adapted to protect the brand from undesirable customers is to attract new customers by continuing to produce fashionable clothes of high quality. Through this strategy they hope to attract opinion leaders with morals and characteristics in line with the company, which will contradict the undesirable values brought by the hooligans. Mr. Rivetti

proudly explained that he had seen members of the current football European champions, FC Barcelona, wear the brand outside the football arenas. He further explained that the players are very popular opinion leaders and therefore have the possibility to change people's negative opinions about the brand.

To summarize, Stone Island has adapted a rather passive strategy to protect the brand from undesirable customers. According to our empirical findings, the strategy is still in use, even though this group clearly undermines the brand values and is considered as "dirt" by the rest of the customer base. Since the hijacking is of very negative nature, due to the characteristics of the hooligans, we question the passive strategy Stone Island has used to prevent the situation. A stronger hijacking by the hooligans could be "a dirt" too big to remove and that could forever change the brand's image and purity. This could repel the existing customer base of Stone Island due to the very negative associations Stone Island could have with hooliganism and violence.

## **5.2 Condemning the unwanted customers**

### **5.2.1 Burberry's brand amputation**

Through our analysis of Burberry, we have found the theories about targeting, brand purity, brand hijacking and celebrity endorsement very useful in order to understand the way Burberry has coped with the unwanted customers. To expand the analysis, we have also used additional theories about opinion leaders and self-extension.

The developments of the Burberry brand have a lot of similarities with the brand developments of Stone Island. To begin with, Burberry has been a victim of brand hijacking in a way that resembles the hijack we observed in the Stone Island case. As our empirical findings show, the brand has been used as a part of the hooligan uniform and it has been closely associated with a customer group called chavs during the last decade. In the analysis of Stone Island above, we concluded that theory about self-extension could provide an insight on why the brand is an attractive target for the hijackers. Our findings indicate that the same theory can be applied on the development of Burberry, where the brand can help the customer extend their character with the sophisticated characteristics that have been historically connected with the brand. In the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, Burberry was frequently worn

on the red carpet by some of the most influential celebrities and opinion leaders in the world, which resulted in a major upswing in sales. However, as soon as the less popular celebrities and the soap opera stars adopted the brand, Burberry was ridiculed in media and sales turned for the worse. Our research verifies that the general opinion about celebrities like Tania do Nascimento and Daniella Westbrook were very negative. The Burberry case thereby reflects the importance of attracting the right kind of opinion leaders to the brand.

We have previously elaborated De Pelsmacker's (2010) theories about celebrity endorsement and discussed characteristics that a useful brand endorser preferably should possess. As our netnographical research and empirical findings proved, Tania do Nascimento and Daniella Westbrook were far from a perfect match with these attributes. The same observations apply for the hooligans and chavs that have adopted the brand. Burberry wants to communicate a luxurious and exclusive image towards the market and therefore prefers customers with characteristics that resemble those aspects. As we could conclude from our interview with X, who has a lot of insight in the strategies of Burberry, the hooligans and chavs most certainly do not represent such attributes. X told us that they have a very loud and violent behavior that Burberry wants to avoid from being associated with. In other words, the customers that have hijacked the brand are the complete opposite of Burberry's targeted customers and could therefore be considered as "dirt", in the same way as described in the Stone Island case.

According to Henrik Sjödin's (2008) theories about brand purity, the undesirable customers (hooligans, chavs and celebrities) have damaged the original purity of the brand. Mary Douglas' (1966) theories about "dirt" can help us to further explain that the unwanted customers make the brand less exclusive in the eyes of the other customers. The theories explain why the sales declined when the brand was adapted by the undesirable customers. Our research showed that Burberry has adapted a strategy that involves major changes in the brand characteristics, in order to protect the brand and lessen the impact of the undesirable customers. As we discussed in the Stone Island case, Mary Douglas (1966) describes three ways to counter the "dirt". Instead of ignoring or accepting the undesirable customers and celebrities, Burberry has decided to condemn them. The brand has decided to reduce and ultimately change their characteristic check pattern in order to get rid of the "dirt". Additionally, they have decided to get rid of the hats that have been closely connected with the hooligans and chavs. A strategy that resembles the way some of the customer removed the Stone Island label from the clothes in the previous case. In other words, Burberry has

amputated the parts of the brand that was infected by the “dirt” to prevent the “disease” from spreading.

We can conclude that there is a clear difference in brand protection strategy between Burberry and Stone Island. Burberry has adopted a reactive strategy, instead of the rather passive strategy used by Stone Island, in order to save the brand from being worn out and replaced with other exclusive brands. Our empirical findings point towards the fact that Burberry’s brand protection strategy has been rather successful. The brand has recovered from the worst damage ascribed to the unwanted customers. Burberry focused on cleaning the “dirt” of the brand by modifying the parts of the product line that were closest connected with the unwanted customers. One may say that they amputated a part of their brand to save the brand image. In the theoretical chapter, we discussed the possibility of inverting the regular theory about targeting in order to understand the tools companies use in order to get rid of unwanted customers. In regular targeting, the aim is to attract a desired clientele through appealing products and various communication efforts. In contrast to the regular targeting strategy, we found that Burberry attempted to remove the parts of the brand that appealed to the undesirable segment with the intention of appearing less attractive. This confirms our hypothesis regarding inverted targeting.

To summarize, the brand has adopted an aggressive inverted targeting strategy in order to prevent the unwanted customers from harming and hijacking the brand. For example, they decided to reduce and change the characteristic Burberry pattern, as well as removing the popular caps from their product line. As we can conclude from the case, Burberry prioritized the brand image above temporary sales from the undesirable customers.

### **5.2.2 Abercrombie & Fitch eradicates ”The Situation”**

In order to understand *how* and *why* Abercrombie & Fitch distanced the brand from an unwanted celebrity, Michael Sorrentino, we have studied the case through a theoretical lens. Particular emphasis has been put on celebrity endorsement and Mary Douglas’ theories on “dirt”. We have used additional theory about brand hijack, extended self and opinion leaders in order to expand the analysis. Lastly, we adopted an ethical perspective in order to give an insight about potential risks associated with the brand protection strategy used by Abercrombie & Fitch.

Even if Michael Sorrentino is not the most popular or charismatic person, he can still be considered as an opinion leader. Thanks to the popularity of the reality show Jersey Shore, Michael Sorrentino has a high level of social visibility, which is a key characteristic for an opinion leader. As explained in the theory, it is therefore important for companies to make sure that opinion leaders, that are “close” to the brand, transfer the right information to their communities. In the theoretical chapter of the paper, we brought up a few characteristics that could evaluate a potential celebrity endorser. By using these same criteria, we argue that the same characteristics could be used in order to evaluate celebrities that absolutely shouldn't become endorsers for the brand. That way, we can evaluate if Michael Sorrentino's image and characteristics are in line with the Abercrombie & Fitch's. We summarized the characteristics into 4 factors (also brought up in De Pelsmacker et al., 2010): *Credibility*, *Attractiveness*, *Appropriateness of fit* and *Behavior of the celebrity*.

Our empirical findings showed that Michael Sorrentino's *credibility* can't be considered as being very high. By being famous for being part of a reality show that many consider as a low form of entertainment, the trustworthiness of the participants lowers consequently. Also, the credibility of Michael Sorrentino is harmed by his nickname “The Situation” and all the expressions he uses, that are qualified by many as “arrogant” or “stupid” (which we illustrated in the netnographical studies). The *attractiveness* of Michael Sorrentino would obviously be evaluated very differently from one person to another. If you would ask Michael himself, he would say that he is very attractive, having said before “This is the situation right here, my abs are so ripped up it's... we call it The Situation!” (www.mtv.se, 14-02-2012) From three forums (www.hubpages.com; www.answers.yahoo.com, 14-04-2012), we collected answers and comments in order to obtain a good picture of the way Michael Sorrentino was seen by the public. As seen in the empirical data, many viewers find Michael Sorrentino unattractive and arrogant, which shows that Michael Sorrentino can't be considered as being “attractive”. As for the *appropriateness of fit*, it is important to first evaluate the profile of the Abercrombie & Fitch brand. The U.S. Securities and Exchange Commission (2011) qualifies that brand as “casual luxurious” with “a combination of classic and sexy creates a charged atmosphere that is confident and just a bit provocative” and that “Abercrombie & Fitch is timeless and always cool”. According to our study, Michael Sorrentino could not be described that way. Even if he could be associated with “young” and maybe “sexy” (according to some people), Michael Sorrentino's character is more than “provocative” and “confident”, and closer to “arrogance” and “narcissism” (as observed in our netnographical study). Also, the

activities, actions and expressions used by the participants and especially Michael Sorrentino during the show Jersey Shore are often qualified as being “vulgar” and “stupid” (as shown in the empirical data), which doesn’t go in line either with the character of Abercrombie & Fitch. The *behavior of the celebrity* is one of the factors that strongly disqualify Sorrentino as a potential celebrity endorser for Abercrombie and Fitch. By being part of a reality show like Jersey Shore for over 6 seasons, the celebrity strongly degrades his reputation and image. All the other activities that “The Situation” is seen doing during the show; as for example drinking, partying, using arrogant expressions, are also behaviors that Abercrombie & Fitch (and most other brands) wouldn’t want to be associated with and could therefore harm a brand that he would represent.

We could also evaluate Michael Sorrentino as celebrity endorser by using Grant McCracken’s “Meaning Transfer Model” (1989). As explained in the theoretical chapter, the model focuses on the way a meaning is transferred from a product/brand to a person’s cultural knowledge. According to Grant McCracken, this is primarily done through the use of a celebrity endorser that will be a crucial tool to transfer a desired meaning. A good celebrity endorser is therefore a celebrity whose image best fits the meaning that the company wishes to communicate for its product and can best bear the cultural meaning in the product and transfer them to the customers (McCracken, 1989). When evaluating if Michael Sorrentino would make a good celebrity endorser for Abercrombie & Fitch, we therefore have to assess if Michael Sorrentino’s image fits the meaning that Abercrombie & Fitch wants to communicate. As explained in the previous paragraph, Michael Sorrentino’s image has been harmed, not least by being a main character of a popular reality show like Jersey Shore and for having a very vulgar and arrogant personality. According to McCracken’s model, Michael Sorrentino would be a bad candidate to promote the “casual luxurious”, “cool” and “confident” meaning that Abercrombie & Fitch wants to communicate to their customers.

The theories about celebrity endorsement used above all point to the importance of the celebrity having a good image that matches the one of the brand that he/her endorses. The empirical data gathered (documents and netnographical studies) illustrates the fact that Michael Sorrentino has characteristics and associations that are opposite to the ones of Abercrombie & Fitch. This is also illustrated in the documents gathered in our empirical chapter, where marketing specialists argued that Michael Sorrentino didn’t fit the Abercrombie & Fitch image.

The theories regarding “dirt” (Douglas, 1966) and “brand purity” (Sjödín, 2008) are also appropriate to discuss when analyzing the case of Abercrombie & Fitch. As explained in the theoretical chapter, Henrik Sjödín (2008) brings up the notion of brand purity and Mary Douglas’ (1966) notion of “dirt” in order to analyze the reaction of Porsche users, after a launch of a brand extension by Porsche (from a consumer perspective). We believe that these same notions could be used from a company’s perspective to analyze potential harmful customers and groups (which can be considered as “dirt”). Indeed, as explained earlier, the notion of “dirt” is very subjective depending on the situation, culture and perspective. However, from a company’s perspective, “dirt” will represent the customers, celebrities and groups that they do not want to be associated with and that don’t go in line with the desired brand image (or purity). From the discussion above and from the previous paragraphs regarding celebrity endorsement, we can conclude that Michael Sorrentino can be considered as “dirt”. The reasons for that are the celebrity’s characteristics, images and associations that are all complete opposite the ones that Abercrombie & Fitch wants to communicate. Moreover, the fact that Michael Sorrentino is a celebrity and opinion leader starring in the show with high visibility makes him “a dirt” even more harmful for the brand.

Theories about “Extended self” (Belk, 1988) and “Brand Hijacking” (Wipperfurth, 2005) can provide us with further insight and make us understand why Michael Sorrentino should be distanced from Abercrombie & Fitch. As explained earlier, the fact that Michael Sorrentino is considered as an opinion leader and is a key character of a popular reality show, makes him a potential threat for any brand that he is connected with. Since his characteristics don’t go in line with the ones of the company (as explained above and in the netnographies and documents), there is also a risk for the brand. With a celebrity like Michael Sorrentino wearing and promoting the brand, there is a risk that existing consumers will stop purchasing clothes from Abercrombie & Fitch because they don’t want to identify themselves with Michael Sorrentino. Also, an opinion leader and celebrity that is seen wearing the label Abercrombie and Fitch on a popular show, could influence communities and segments with similar characteristics as Michael Sorrentino to purchase and wear the Abercrombie & Fitch brand as well. There is therefore a potential risk that the “wrong target group” will hijack the brand. Abercrombie & Fitch therefore wants to distance the potentially harmful celebrity and opinion leader from the brand and that way also make sure that other consumers with similar characteristics as Michael Sorrentino won’t be lead into purchasing the brand.

By condemning Michael Sorrentino from their brand, the company wants to prevent “the dirt” from soiling the brand’s purity (or image). That way, as explained in the statement released by the company, Abercrombie & Fitch wants to make sure that the “association (that) is contrary to the aspirational nature of our brand”, does not “cause significant damage to our image” (www.forbes.com, 08-02-2012). The company is clearly afraid of the bad association that Michael Sorrentino could create and that the brand image (or purity) could get hurt by “the dirt”. Additionally, the company underlines the risk of the association being “distressing to many of our fans” (www.forbes.com, 08-02-2012). As explained in the previous paragraph, the company felt the risk that existing customer bases would reject a brand being associated with Michael Sorrentino. The action has therefore enabled the company to neatly and instantly remove the “dirt” from the brand purity. That way, the bad associations linked to Jersey Shore and Michael Sorrentino can’t any longer harm Abercrombie & Fitch’s brand image.

Through regular celebrity endorsement, a company uses itself of a celebrity with characteristics similar to the ones that the company wants to represent, in order to attract customers. In the theoretical chapter, we discussed if it was possible to invert regular celebrity endorsement theory in order to understand what kind of individuals the company should distance themselves from. As explained through the theories brought above above, Abercrombie & Fitch has found a celebrity (Michael Sorrentino) that contradicts the values and image of the company. By paying him in order to not wear the brand, the brand uses itself of a tool we label as inverted celebrity endorsement that enables the brand to get rid of “the dirt”.

As explained in the empirical data, Abercrombie & Fitch’s usage of an inverted celebrity endorsement caught a lot of “media attention” and started a debate about ethics and morals. For example, the fact that the Abercrombie & Fitch stocks dropped with 9% on the day following the release of the statement is a good testimony of the attention the situation caught. Particularly interesting was the vivid debates that Abercrombie & Fitch’s action created. As we can see in the documents and the netnographical research, the debate centered on how acceptable or discriminating it is that a company pays someone (celebrity or not) to keep him/her away from their clothes. Some consumers and marketing specialist argued that Abercrombie & Fitch’s action is justifiable since the “dirt” is at risk of harming the brand, which needs to be protected at all cost. Others, that also understand the difference in image

between Michael Sorrentino and Abercrombie & Fitch, explain that it is not up for the company to decide who should or shouldn't wear a brand. Also, as brought up in the theoretical chapter, the use of unethical practices can strongly compromise the reputation of a brand. The risk is particularly present here because of the important attention the case received, especially in the media. Overall, the debate gives a good illustration of the risk associated with the use of an inverted celebrity endorsement that could easily backfire and harm the company using it.

To summarize, Abercrombie & Fitch has used a reactive strategy in order to protect the brand from the unwanted opinion leader Michael Sorrentino. The inverted celebrity endorsement tool that Abercrombie & Fitch applied enabled them to get rid of the "dirt" and its negative associations from their brand purity and at the same time make sure that the brand didn't get hijacked by an unwanted customer group. The strategy also created reactions from certain consumers that perceived the tool as unethical, which could in term also lead to a damaged brand image.

### **5.3 Summary of discussions**

Based on the observations and analysis that have been performed throughout the three cases, we would like to make comparisons and draw parallels in order to pin point possible generalizations.

All three cases had one important point in common: the fashion companies were all in situations where the "wrong" consumers were purchasing and wearing their brand. By "wrong", we mean consumers that have characteristics that are in strong opposition with the attributes that the brands themselves want to communicate. Actually, the word "wrong" is an understatement since the customer groups and customers in the studied cases, also carry a lot of very negative associations with them. Associations and characteristics such as "stupidity", "arrogance", "alcohol" and "violence" have been frequent among the unwanted customer groups that we have encountered in the cases.

The case of Abercrombie & Fitch was dangerous because of the celebrity status attached to the character of Michael Sorrentino, whom may be considered as an opinion leader (with potential influence on many people). The development of the Stone Island and Burberry brands were damaging because of the very negative impact of the associations with

“hooliganism”, “chavdom” and “violence” that were on the way to become deeply impregnated in the brand image. In all three cases, we define the hooligan groups, chavs and celebrities as “dirt” that attacks the desired image of the brand that is originally pure. The “dirt”, that carry negative associations, could rapidly grow with customers possessing similar characteristics, who decide to purchase the same clothes in order to identify themselves with the group or celebrity. The growth in popularity of the brand among these undesirable customers could make the “dirt” grow larger and harm the brand’s image and purity. The brands’ new negative associations could in turn push away existing and desired customers who want to avoid being identified with the new “negative” customers. The whole process could ultimately lead to a brand hijack, where the companies rapidly loose control of the brand to these new customers. In order to prevent this loss of control, the companies have used themselves of different strategies: either by being reactive and using a brand protection tool (e.g. the cases of Abercrombie & Fitch and Burberry) or by being passive (e.g. Stone Island).

## 6. Conclusion and contributions

At the beginning of our study, our aim was to provide a thorough answer to “why and how companies distance themselves from unwanted customers”. To present our findings, we will divide this question into two parts, consisting of “*why*” and “*how*”. The cases of Stone Island, Burberry and Abercrombie & Fitch have made it easy to explain *why* companies may want to distance themselves from unwanted customers. The findings have then enabled us to further investigate and understand the “*how*” aspect of the same question.

### *Why?*

Through our studies of existing theories, as well as the analysis of our empirical cases, we have found evidence supporting the usage of brand protection tools (such as inverted celebrity endorsement and inverted targeting). The case studies presented situations where companies were confronted with potentially harmful customers, in the way that their negative characteristics could reflect on the brand. Previous theories have shown that a “brand hijack” can be profitable as long as the customers don’t have features that are negatively perceived by the majority of the customer base. We found that in the cases where the customers’ and customer groups’ characteristics strongly contradict the core brand values, as well as the existing customers’ perception of the brand, it is necessary to fight these customers. If not, the brand may lose control over the customers using the brand, which ultimately affects the brand image. Our case study implied that the original and desirable customers may abandon the brand if the image is changed into something they do not want to identify themselves with. Through our case study, we have observed different ways of handling the undesirable customers, with differences in outcome. We ultimately arrived at the conclusion that taking actions against strongly undesirable customer groups, may be a crucial decision for a brand’s and a company’s future.

### *How?*

Since the brand is considered to be a company’s most valuable asset, we are surprised that previous research does not address potential strategies explaining how companies distance their brands from certain customers. Existing theories bring up many ways of avoiding these kinds of situation from arising in the first place. However, we have found limited literature addressing the reactive ways of handling the undesirable customers. The cases of Stone

Island, Burberry and Abercrombie & Fitch have given us an insight on various ways companies act against unwanted customers and customer groups. Through a combination of theory, empirical findings and our own interpretations, we can contribute with an understanding on how companies distance their brands from unwanted customers.

To begin with, we have arrived to the conclusion that companies can either choose to ignore or condemn the unwanted customers in order to protect their brands. When “ignoring the unwanted customers”, companies keep their focus on “business as usual”, with the hope that the unwanted associations will either disappear or be dampened by the original brand values. For example, in the case of Stone Island, Carlo Rivetti told us that the company hoped that their “business as usual” would eventually drown the negative associations with the hooligans.

In the cases “condemning the unwanted customers”, we found that the companies’ actions could be further divided in the categories “inverted celebrity endorsement” or “inverted targeting”. For example, in regular celebrity endorsement, the company assesses the characteristics they want to associate to the brand. The next step is to find a suitable celebrity and pay him/her an amount of money to represent the brand. As seen in the case of Abercrombie & Fitch, the complete inverted strategy was applied. The company first spotted a celebrity or opinion leader that was endorsing the brand in an undesirable way. It then assessed the celebrity’s features as opposite to the desired characteristics. Finally, the company decided to pay the celebrity to make him no longer use the brand. The same concept applies for “inverted targeting”. In regular targeting, the company finds the most suitable customer groups for the brand and focuses their advertising in order to attract them to the brand. Through an inverted targeting that was witnessed in the case of Burberry, the company identifies an unsuitable group and tries to push it away from the brand through various strategies. Both Stone Island and Burberry identified the hooligans and the chavs as the opposite of their targeted audience. Burberry decided to adapt a more reactive strategy than Stone Island by identifying and changing the key features that were the most associated with the undesirable customers (e.g. changing the checked pattern and removing the caps from their product line).

## **Summary of the contribution**

Initially, our study contributes to theories within the scope of segmentation and brand management. More specifically, our findings add on to the existing theories of celebrity endorsement and targeting. As we exemplified above, with the use of a new inverted perspective on celebrity endorsement and targeting, we have found that it is possible to understand how companies distance themselves from unwanted customers. Throughout the report, we have also demonstrated that theory about brand hijacking can be used for the purpose of understanding the dangers of leaving a brand in the hands of the undesirable customers.

Furthermore, our study has contributed with a firm connection between the brand protection strategies used by the companies, and theory about brand purity and “dirt”. The connection is a new contribution to the previous theory in the sense that the concept that can be used from a company’s perspective. The “dirt” metaphor can be applied in order to identify the customers who lack congruency with the brand and may therefore harm the image of the brand. We have found that all of the strategies used in the cases, could in some way be connected to the company’s urge to remove the “dirt” in order to preserve the purity of the brand.

## **Additional reflections**

We found that the decision to ignore or condemn unwanted customers may put the company into a difficult situation. When ignoring the unwanted customers, the management leaves the future of the brand in the hands of the market. Ignoring the unwanted customers can in the best case, result in an automatic recovery of the brand to its initial brand image and customers. That way, the company can successfully keep the brand intact without needing to take costly decisions. However, in the worst-case scenario, this may lead to a hijack of the brand by the unwanted customers, which can result in a damaged and dirty brand image, with negative associations.

When condemning the unwanted customers, the companies are at risk of being perceived as unethical by the rest of the market. In an attempt to remove the “dirt” (unwanted customer groups) from their brand image, the brand might therefore get even dirtier. As brought up in our study, strategies for brand protection may sometimes be considered as discrimination

against certain customers. Such practices may therefore lead to an even dirtier brand. However, as explained throughout this study, if a reactive strategy is not adapted, the “dirt” may fuse and forever change the image and associations of the brand. The decision of acting or not acting against unwanted customers may therefore be a crucial decision for the future of a brand.

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## Appendix 1: Empirical illustrations



Michael Sorrentino from the reality show called “Jersey Shore”. To the right, a photo where Michael Sorrentino is pictured wearing the Abercrombie & Fitch Brand.



To the left, a picture with the main characters from the movie “Goon Street Hooligans”. As we can see, several of the main characters wear garments from Stone Island. The picture to the right illustrates the easily detachable Stone Island label.



To the left, soap opera actress Daniella Westbrook and her baby wearing Burberry from head to toe. To the right, the Burberry cap that was removed from the product line in order to distance the brand from hooligans and chavs.

## **Appendix 2: Interview Guide for the semi-structured interviews**

*Since the interviews followed a semi-structured process, we used the questions that follow in order to cover the main areas of our study. We then asked follow-up questions to each of the questions, depending on the answers.*

- In what way has your brand been adapted by undesirable customers?
- In what way are these undesirable customers harmful for the brand?
- What actions were taken in order to handle the situation?
- What were the results of the actions taken (financially and for the brand image)?
- Did you encounter any ethical constraints in regard to these actions?
- Have you ever used celebrity endorsers?
- Have you ever paid someone not to wear your brand?

## Appendix 3: Article

Journal: Marketing Magazine (UK)

### Brands are getting rid of bad customers

**In the fashion market, where the brand image is considered a key asset, new types of brand protection strategies are now being used in order to drive away customers. Recently, Burberry and Abercrombie & Fitch have used themselves of controversial methods in order to get rid of unwanted celebrities and undesirable customer groups.**

Markus Bergkvist  
Niklas de Goys

#### **Amputating the contaminated parts**

In the beginning of the 21st century, Burberry experienced a severe brand transformation when undesirable celebrities, chavs and hooligans hijacked their brand. The groups frequently endorsed the brand and attached their own values to it. Consequently, the exclusive brand turned into a symbol for imitators and troublemakers. Burberry finally had enough and amputated the parts of the brand that had become contaminated with the unwanted customers. In other words, Burberry made the decision to modify or remove the products that were popular among the unwanted customers and customer groups. Today, other controversial brand protection strategies are used to distance unwanted celebrities from the brand.

#### **"Celebrity Endorsement, What Else?"**

Historically, celebrities have been widely used for the purpose of promoting brands. For example, Nespresso has employed George Clooney in order to transfer his elegant characteristics to their coffee brand. The purpose is to transfer the celebrity's positive features to the brand and that way strengthen the image. Today, one out of four ads in the USA promotes products and brands through the use of celebrities. However, a handful of companies have recently found themselves in situations where undesirable celebrities have endorsed their brand. This has called for a new type of strategy in order to protect the brand from the negative associations that may come with these celebrities.



*Soap opera actress Daniella Westbrook was seen endorsing Burberry from head to toe.*

#### **Getting rid of "The Situation"**

Michael "The Situation" Sorrentino is known for being a vulgar, arrogant and narcissistic character of the MTV reality show Jersey Shore. During the controversial show, he was frequently seen in garments from Abercrombie & Fitch. The brand didn't appreciate being associated with Michael Sorrentino and therefore quickly decided to take action. The strategy they decided to use differs from the regular celebrity endorsement strategies that marketers are used to. In desperation, the brand offered "The Situation" money in order to make sure that he never used their brand again.

#### **New tool and new ethical constraints?**

Abercrombie & Fitch's method of paying Michael Sorrentino in order to make him stop using the brand, can be comprehended as an inverted version of celebrity endorsement. While regular celebrity endorsement provide an insight on the way companies use celebrities in order to promote and improve the brand image, inverted celebrity endorsement explain the way companies keep an undesirable customer from using the brand. This new strategy has caused strong reactions due to the ethical aspects that are attached to it. Would you feel guilty excluding a customer only because of his or her characteristics? Can the strategy be regarded as a form of discrimination?