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ECONOMICS AND  
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# **Pride and Prejudice: a study on the various types of consumer-brand relationships that brand activism campaigns form**

by

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# Abstract

**Title:** Pride and Prejudice: a study on the various forms of consumer-brand relationships that brand activism campaigns form

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**Keywords:** Brand Activism, Marketing, Consumer-brand relationship, Societal issues, Political debates

**Purpose:** The purpose of this study was to understand which types of consumer-brand relationships brand activism campaigns form. To explore this phenomenon, we used three brands who recently launched brand activism campaigns. The selected brands were Nike, Gillette and Ben & Jerry's. With this study we aimed to contribute to the field of brand activism.

**Literature review and theoretical perspective:** To analyse the empirical material, previous literature within corporate social responsibility (CSR) and brand activism was examined. Thereafter, we used the existing theoretical consumer-brand relationship framework by Fournier (1998) to categorize which types of consumer-brand relationships brand activism campaigns form.

**Methodology:** The present study was conducted in a qualitative form, including virtual observations and a focus group. Furthermore, by using an inductive approach, we sought to systematically develop themes and identify patterns from the data that we have collected to answer the research question.

**Empirical data:** The empirical data has been divided into two aspects on consumers' views on brand activism campaigns: (1) consumers agreeing on brand activism campaigns, and (2) consumers disagreeing on brand activism campaigns. Further, we have divided the findings into sub-themes in relation to Fournier's (1998) consumer-brand relationship framework and dissolution model.

**Conclusion:** The present study contributes novel insights on which types of consumer-brand relationships brand activism campaigns form. Moreover, the paper determines how consumers react when brands are taking a social or political stance in their advertisements. Additionally, consumers form various types of relationships with the brand, depending if they agree or disagree with the brand activism campaign.

**Practical implications:** The study provides marketing professionals and researchers with an understanding of the different types of consumer-brand relationships that are formed in regard to brand activism campaigns. Moreover, it is important to be aware of the consequences that can occur when using brand activism as a marketing technique, since it can result in a loss of consumers.

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# 1. Introduction

*This chapter introduces the concepts of brand activism with a focus on the brand's relationship with the consumer when launching brand activism campaigns. Moreover, this chapter explains the purpose of this study by concluding with a research question. Lastly, the structure of this research study is shortly defined.*

## 1.1 Background

*“Leveraging popular social issues is a sure-fire way to connect to consumers on an emotional level, but if approached wrong, that connection is liable to turn septic.” (The Moon Unit, 2019).*

This quote states an important strategy that has been apparent in the last few years. In today's society, more brands are starting to confront political and social issues that matter to people (Davis, 2018). The old school style of advertising products by focusing on the product has been switched to a more value-driven advertising, focusing on the relevant issues in society (The Moon Unit, 2019). This act of engaging in political and societal issues is called brand activism and grows according to Kotler and Sarkar (2018) from a "fundamental concern for the biggest and most urgent problems facing society," such as racism, inequalities, and climate change. In that way, brand activism can be seen as a similar strategy to corporate social responsibility (CSR) practices in the sense that companies are attentive to the impact they have on societal aspects, such as economic and environmental issues (Chen & Scott, 2020).

In today's society, organizations are challenged with social and political issues that may affect their brand (Manfredi-Sánchez, 2019). According to Edelman's (2018) Earned Brand study, over 50% of the participating consumers think that brands could help solve problems in their country instead of the government, meaning that "people believe in brands as an effective force for change" (p.14). The study also shows that consumers want to gain a deeper understanding of the values of the brand when they are about to make a purchase, mainly called "belief-driven buying" (Edelman, 2018, p. 10). Belief-driven buying is used by consumers who value the brand's principles over their products (McTavish, 2018). These consumers are willing to boycott or switch to another brand based on the brand's views on social and political issues (Edelman, 2018).

Moreover, the digitalization in our society has made it easier to share information across different parts of the world, but the immense amount of information has also increased the chances of misuse and the spreading of false information (Shetty, Venkataramaiah, Anand, 2019). This has led to a more passive and disintegrated society where more people are becoming critical towards the information they are exposed to (Martins, Aguiar Wicht, Gomez Herrera, Muller-Langer, 2018). Because of this, honesty and authenticity have become vital attributes for consumers when seeking for products (Dudler, 2017). Instead of just looking at the price and quality, consumers also take into consideration the values of the brands. To keep up with this belief-driven market, brands need to focus on what makes them authentic and not hide anything from their consumers, especially if they want to participate in social and political debates (The Moon Unit, 2019).

Generally, brand activism is a way for brands to stand up against issues in society that affects people in some way (Manfredi-Sánchez, 2019). Standing up for a cause in an authentic way can positively impact the brand, developing long-lasting relationships with consumers, which often is the primary step for building an emotional connection with the brand that is not dependent on the product or the price (Morgan, 2018). However, there are also risks in implementing brand activism strategies (Manfredi-Sánchez, 2019).

When brands decide to use brand activism strategies, they automatically position themselves as “socially-conscious activists”, meaning that they show the consumers that they care and stand up for societal and political issues (Morgan, 2018). Thus, brands need to show consumers that they believe in the cause they are supporting and not just trying to make a profit, which can happen if there is a gap between the brand’s values and principles (Manfredi-Sánchez, 2019; Jones, 2019). If brands do not consider these risks, the chances are that consumers will boycott the brand in terms of not buying or supporting their products, which in the long run, will damage the brand’s image (Neilson, 2010). Hence, it is also essential for brands to be prepared to withstand critique and resistance from consumers (Davis, 2018).

Brand activism is a fairly new concept and has exploded the last decade, with many multinational brands taking social and political stands (The Moon Unit, 2019). Dove was one of the first brands to use activism and actively participate in a social debate (Activist Brands, 2018; Dove, 2020). They initially launched their campaign “Real Beauty” in 2006, where they produced advertisements, videos, and events to celebrate “real” and natural women and motivate them to be comfortable with themselves (Tarnovskaya, 2017). Other major brands such as United Colours of Benetton, Airbnb, and Burger King have also participated in social and political debates by launching campaigns that support/oppose various debates and issues (Manfredi-Sánchez, 2019).

As mentioned earlier, brand activism is, therefore, a way for brands to interact with consumers in an authentic way that shows the values and beliefs they have (Activist Brands, 2018). As we live in a symbolic prosperous, and belief-driven society, brands that use activism as their marketing activities, such as Dove or Airbnb, play an essential role in forming the project of the consumers' *self* (Elliot & Wattanasuwan, 1998). Consumption, in this case, has a symbolic meaning, which Elliott and Wattanasuwan (1998) explain in which consumers' possessions are "viewed as major parts of their extended selves." Hence, consuming products from different brands that align with the consumers' beliefs and values can help them to express their own identity via consumption (Elliott & Wattanasuwan, 1998). At the same time, the consumer forms a relationship with the brand, depending on how they perceive it (Fournier, 1998). This can be explained as a consumer-brand relationship (CBR), which is seen as the bond that is created between consumers and brands when the consumer has got a perception of the brand in terms of its image and values (Bowden, 2009).

Consumer-brand relationship is built on the assumption that strong and long-lasting relationships between consumers and brands provide the brand with a competitive advantage compared to competitors (Bowden, 2009; Olenski, 2013). According to Fournier (1998), a relationship is defined as "process phenomena", meaning that it can "evolve and change over a series of interactions and in response to fluctuations in the contextual environment" (p. 344). When the brand's campaigns and marketing activities are different from their brand image, the relationship between the consumer and the brand might change because of what the consumer feels and thinks about the marketing activities (Wharton, 2020). The relationship between the consumer and the brand may, in many cases, evolve or diminish in response to the campaign, which is in line with Fournier's definition of a relationship as "process phenomena" (Fournier, 1998).

When consumers build relationships with brands, the brand's core values, and demographic characteristics are the main traits that decide what kind of relationship is developed (Bhattacharya & Sen, 2003). The relationship between the consumer and the brand mirrors similar characteristics between people, such as love, friendship, commitment, or hate (Wharton, 2020). Similarly to personal relationships, they can also develop and become stronger or weaken if the consumer does not identify with the brand after a while (Aaker, Fournier, Brasel, 2004).

As we live in a belief-driven society, people are getting more attentive towards brands and their marketing activities. Dahlén and Lange (2004) argue that brands that launch campaigns that do not conform to consumers' expectations will become dissonant in relation to what the consumers' are expecting. When this happens, the consumer will automatically gain interest in the campaign because of the unexpected nature (Dahlén & Lange).



Since brand activism has become popular during the last years, it is still a new and unexpected strategy for many consumers since the campaigns may not conform to their expectations (Dahlén & Lange, 2004). Thus, many consumers will open their eyes to the brand activism campaigns and become more interested.

However, according to Dens, De Pelsmacker, and Janssens (2008), if the campaign is too distinctive compared to the consumers' expectations, their interest and observable manners will turn into dissatisfaction and disappointment. Thus, if a brand launches an activism campaign that is too disparate and does not match with the consumers' beliefs and values, they will not support it. Additionally, Fournier (1998) explains how consumers treat brands as individuals whom they can form and break relationships with. Hence, by being exposed to campaigns that are incongruent to ones' expectations, in this case, brand activism, consumers use their reactions and expectations to form a new or change an already-existing relationship with the brand based on what they think about the brand activism campaign. This indicates the relevancy of analyzing brand activism campaigns concerning consumer-brand relationships. Moreover, consumers are seen as the foundation of a brand's success. They have the power to affect a brand's profit margin by deciding to buy more products or to boycott the brand (Kotler & Sarkar, 2018). Thus, a good relationship between the consumer and the brand is vital for the brand's survival.

## 1.2 Research purpose

As the world is changing every day, brands are opening up their eyes to brand activism, and these kinds of campaigns are set to grow in the coming years (Davis, 2018). Since the term "brand activism" is a relatively new concept, the amount of literature is limited (Kotler & Sarkar, 2018; Manfredi-Sánchez, 2018). However, when it comes to literature, consumer-brand relationships have been treated by many researchers, which gives this study a solid foundation to work from (Fournier, 1998; Fournier et al., 2012; Bowden, 2009; Olenski, 2013). Because of the limited research about brand activism, no researchers have yet looked at brand activism in relation to consumer-brand relationships. Moreover, as mentioned before, many consumers want to feel a connection with the brand in a way that aligns with their values and beliefs, so-called belief-driven buying (Fournier, 1998; Edelman, 2018). By launching brand activism campaigns, brands are taking a stance that consumers either agree or disagree with. Hence, this will also affect the relationship between the consumer and the brand in the long-run.

Thus, there is a need for relevant research and empirical contributions to the connections between brand activism and consumer-brand relationship. Hence, we believe that it is essential for brands to gain an advanced understanding of the ways in how brand activism campaigns can affect the relationship with consumers. Based on the scarce literature and empirical research about brand activism and consumer-brand relationships, this study aims to contribute to this area by defining the different consumer-brand relationships that brand activism campaigns form. Thus, our research question is as follows:

*Which types of consumer-brand relationships do brand activism campaigns form?*

This study connects new literature about brand activism with well-known research about consumer-brand relationships to show the types of relationships that brand activism campaigns can form between consumers and brands. Moreover, we will use Fournier's (1998) consumer-brand relationship framework and dissolution model as theoretical frameworks to gain a deeper understanding of the types of consumer-brand relationships that are formed. By analyzing brands that have used brand activism in their marketing activities and the response they have received from consumers, this study will gather substantial conclusions for professionals within the marketing industry as well as academia. Thus, the ambition is to add valuable information and contribute to the world of brand activism and consumer-brand relationships.

### 1.3 Research structure

This study aims to discover and analyze different types of relationship forms that are created between consumers and brands when brands launch brand activism campaigns. Thus, we will begin by introducing the subject of brand activism and consumer-brand relationship, followed by a literature review. Furthermore, we will describe the theoretical literature on consumer-brand relationship, which will be used to analyze the empirical material. Afterward, the methodological process of the study is presented by describing the qualitative approach this study has taken. To illustrate the different forms of relationships that arise from brand activism campaigns, we will look at three brands that have used brand activism in their advertisements; Nike, Gillette, and Ben & Jerry's. The chosen campaigns are described and explained so the reader can get an overall picture of their campaigns. With the help of theory and the selected brand activism campaigns, we will be analyzing the different consumer-brand relationships that are formed. The empirical findings will be analyzed and discussed, which brings the reader to the conclusion of this study. Finally, the theoretical contribution, limitations, and future research of this study are explained. The outline of this study can be seen in figure 1 below.

Chapter 1	The <b>introduction</b> presents the reader to the topic. Further, the research purpose is addressed as well as the structure of this study.
Chapter 2	The <b>literature review</b> introduces a review of relevant previous research, covering topics such as corporate social responsibility, brand activism and the consumer as an activist.
Chapter 3	The <b>theory</b> outlines the theoretical choices of this study. In this part, Fournier's (1998) consumer-brand relationship theory and dissolution model are presented.
Chapter 4	The <b>methodology</b> describes the methodological process of the study including research philosophy, research strategy and design, data collection, empirical analysis and ethical considerations.
Chapter 5	The <b>brand activism campaigns</b> chapter describes three selected brands, who recently participated in debates on political/social issues in society. Hence, we are using the three brands as case examples in our study.
Chapter 6	The <b>findings and analysis</b> cover empirical findings with the use of virtual observations and a focus group. This is followed by a conceptual analysis of the research phenomenon, Fournier's theoretical framework.
Chapter 7	The <b>conclusion</b> finalizes the thesis by briefly summarizing the finding and by answering the research question. Afterwards, theoretical contributions, limitations and future research are discussed.

*Figure 1: Outline of the thesis (Own figure, 2020)*

## 2. Literature review

*In this coming section, the existing literature on brand activism will be presented and further explained. However, due to the scarce literature on brand activism, another closely related topic, which is corporate social responsibility (CSR), will be presented to get a better understanding of brand activism. The differences between brand activism and CSR will be discussed. Lastly, the outcomes of brand activism strategies from a consumer point-of-view are going to be explained and deliberated.*

### 2.1 Corporate social responsibility (CSR)

Corporate social responsibility is a concept that has been around for centuries, with literature from as early as in the 1950s. During that time, CSR was called social responsibility (SR), primarily since the importance and dominance in the business sector had not yet arisen (Carroll, 1999). It was not until the 1960's CSR became prevalent in society with an additional contribution to the concept from researchers such as Keith Davis (Carroll, 1999).

According to Davis (1960), the definition of SR was “businessmen’s decisions and actions taken for reasons at least partially beyond the firm’s direct economic or technical interest” (p.70). Davis (1960) also argued that SR was a concept that would fit better in a managerial context, meaning that responsible and long-term decisions that companies make will have a better chance of acquiring economic gain while at the same time giving back to society. Moreover, this view of SR was further described by Johnson (1971) and defined as a strategy where “businesses carry out social programs to add profits to their organization” (p. 54). The definition by Johnson (1971) focused more on the company and their self-interest, rather than trying to improve society. However, today CSR is defined in many ways. The standard definition is built on the idea that companies have a responsibility to give back to society besides the economic liabilities they have towards their shareholders (Schwartz, 2011). Thus, the definition is not focused as much on the self-interest and profit of the company in the way that Johnson (1971) defined it.

CSR has become more of an essential strategy that many brands have implemented. It has become a way for brands to position and differentiate themselves in the marketplace and give back to society by “creating joint value for the firm and society” (Du, Bhattacharya & Sen, 2011, p. 1528). CSR strategies included supporting communities, employees, or helping the environment (Sen & Bhattacharya, 2001). In line with this strategy, Du, Bhattacharya, and Sen (2011) argue that there has been an increase in the number of companies who have engaged in CSR initiatives during the past years. The reason for this is further explained by Sen and Bhattacharya (2001) and Lafferty (2007) as an increase in consumers looking for responsible and ethical brands to buy from.

However, Weber and Larsson-Olaison (2017) argue that the increase in brands who have engaged in CSR initiatives has made many consumers more apprehensive when choosing companies to buy from, as they assume that the companies' social responsibility initiatives are impelled mainly by self-interest inclinations. Because of this, many consumers have become very attentive when choosing which brands to buy from. Thus, the main challenge brands have with CSR is to be able to match their brand image and values with the initiatives they are implementing (Weber & Larsson-Olaison, 2017).

## 2.2 Brand activism

Brand activism has, during the past years, become a popular strategy among different types of brands. According to Kotler and Sarkar (2018), brand activism is defined as consisting of "business efforts to promote, impede, or direct social, political, economic, and/or environmental reform or stasis with the desire to promote or impede improvements in society" (p.465). Brand activism efforts are often implemented through marketing activities, such as campaigns, open statements, and lobbying (Manfredi-Sánchez, 2019; Shetty, Venkataramaiah & Anand, 2019). However, Mukherjee and Althuizen (2020) point out that brand activism efforts can also happen coincidentally, when for example, a brand representative expresses private opinions publicly, even though they know that they are the face out and advocate of the brand. Thus, Mukherjee and Althuizen (2020) argue that because of the inadvertent nature of brand activism acts, there is a significant risk that brand activism efforts can get the opposite result than planned.

Further, Kotler and Sarkar (2018) divide brand activism into two different aspects: *regressive brand activism* and *progressive brand activism*. Regressive brand activism is a strategy used by companies who, in some ways, hurt the common good in society, for example selling unhealthy products, such as cigarettes, to consumers (Kotler & Sarkar, 2018). Progressive brand activism is used by companies who want to influence societal and political issues rather than making a profit (Kotler & Sarkar, 2018).

To explain the concept of brand activism in a more detailed manner, Kotler and Sarkar (2018), have recognized six areas under the concept of brand activism which capture the overall issues facing society:

- Social activism, which is about inequality, racism, oppression, etc.
- Workplace activism, which handles governance, CEO pay, worker compensation, etc.
- Political activism, which deals with lobbying, privatization, voting, etc.
- Environmental activism, which covers conservation, environmental laws, and policies, etc.
- Economic activism, which takes into account wage and tax policies that can impact, for example, inequalities in income.

- Legal activism, which examines laws and policies that affect companies and citizenships.

These six areas represent the different issues that are relevant in today's society and, thus, possible subjects of brand activism (Kotler & Sarkar, 2018). By engaging in various types of brand activism that matter and align with the brand's core values, they show the consumers that they care about these types of societal and political issues. However, it is vital that brand activism effort matches the brand's core values and image. Shetty, Venkataramaiah, and Anand (2019) found that brands who 'cherry-pick' what societal and political issues to support, receive backlash and complaints from consumers since their efforts are seen as spurious. This can also lead to consumer resistance and boycotts, which will be further explained below.

Furthermore, Kotler and Sarkar (2018) argue that brand activism can be seen as a continuation of CSR strategies. These two strategies have in common to get involved in societal and political issues in society. According to Carroll (1999), this is seen as a way for organizations to maximize their profit in the long-run and can be seen as a marketing-driven strategy. What distinguishes brand activism from CSR is that brand activism focuses on the "biggest and most urgent problems facing society" (Kotler & Sarkar, 2018). While CSR may be marketing-driven and corporate-driven, brand activism is said to be society-driven, adapting around the issues of society and taking a stance on concerns that are of importance (Peiritsch, 2019). Brand activism is also seen as value-driven, focusing on the "future of society and the planet's health" (Kotler & Sarkar, 2018; Peiritsch, 2019). Thus, it can be argued that brand activism can be seen as a cultivated strategy of CSR. In that case, the philosophies do not have to be similar, since they are two different strategies in terms of definition (Kotler & Sarkar, 2018).

## 2.3 The consumer as an activist

As mentioned earlier, we live in a digitalized and competitive society where the number of brands keeps on growing every day (Shetty, Venkataramaiah & Anand, 2019). Thus, the overflow of products and marketing strategies has made consumers able to pick and choose the brands that they value and believe fits with their identity, rather than converge on price and quality (Kotler & Sarkar, 2018). According to Elliott and Wattanasuwan (1998), the postmodern consumer can express his/her identity via the consumption of different goods and services. Consumption, in this case, has a symbolic meaning, and Elliott and Wattanasuwan (1998) mean that consumers' possessions are "viewed as major parts or their extended selves" (p. 134).

Similarly, Schau (2018), explains that identity consists of four parts; personality, self-concept, identity project, and self-presentation. Consumers use the marketplace, symbols, and practices to create a self-identity where the four parts align with each other. This perspective is more complicated compared to Elliott and Wattanasuwan (1998); thus, one could argue that there is a small gap when it comes to the definition of identity. However, the article by Elliott and Wattanasuwan (1998) was written in 1998, which could affect the definition of a postmodern consumer in today's society.

When consumers find brands that align with their values and beliefs, loyalty will start to grow between the consumer and the brand (Fournier, 1998). Consumer loyalty is an integral part of a brand since it helps to raise the brand's image. According to Delgado-Ballester and Luis Munuera-Alemán (2001), consumer loyalty is created when consumers want to show their satisfaction to a brand. When there is loyalty, the relationship between the consumer and the brand can grow and develop over time (Fournier, 1998). However, consumers can also, if they are not satisfied with a brand, act the other way and protest against the brand by boycotting their products. This phenomenon is usually called consumer resistance and is according to Cambefort and Roux (2019, p.576), defined as:

*“When a consumer adopts resistant behavior and he/she perceives a dissonance between his/her values, beliefs and practices, discourses and logic of businesses and markets and feel oppression or hegemony”.*

The motivations behind why consumers resist certain brands can, according to Cambefort and Roux (2019) be arranged in three categories:

1. The consumer does not identify with the brand because the brand image does not meet the consumer's values and principles.
2. The brand does not match the consumer's expectations.
3. The brand is rejected because of its associations, behaviors, and actions of its parent company.

Moreover, according to Odour and de Pechpeyrou (2010), consumer resistance is seen as a way to defend the individual self from getting manipulated by brands and their advertising techniques. When brands implement brand activism campaigns that the consumer does not agree with, they defend themselves by resisting the brand (Kotler & Sarkar, 2018). This type of resistance could be explained as a form of consumer cynicism, a way for consumers to protect themselves. Odour and de Pechpeyrou (2010) find four different types of cynicism that consumers use; defensive cynicism, offensive cynicism, subversive cynicism, and ethical cynicism. The core idea of these perspectives is that brands are communicating a "fake" image to consumers for their self-interest (Odour & de Pechpeyrou, 2010). However, this article only analyzes consumer cynicism as an individualistic resistance and does not consider it as a collective form of resistance.

Consumer resistance as a collective form is explained more by Cambefort and Roux (2019), as they provide four different types of risks that consumers take when resisting brands. The risks are stated as performance risks, social risks, legal risks, and physical risks and include both individual and collective aspects. Both Odour and de Pechpeyrou (2010), and Cambefort and Roux (2019) explain why consumers resist brands. However, they do not take into consideration the various ways that brands express themselves. According to Manfredi-Sánchez (2019) and Kozinets and Handelman (2004), a reason for consumer resistance is brand activism. When brands express themselves and take political and societal stances, they are also at the same time taking a risk in the form of losing consumers who do not have the same opinions. Thus, the image of the brand changes according to the consumer (Kotler & Sarkar, 2018).

Brand activism is, according to Holt (2002), a type of post-postmodern condition. As the brands are no longer able to "hide their commercial motivations," it will be harder for them to "fake" their image, and more accessible for the consumers to choose the right products. In line with what Holt (2002) and Kozinets and Handelman (2004) are saying, Mohr, Webb and Harris (2001) found out that consumers are more likely to resist and boycott a brand if they notice that the brand's activism efforts are unauthentic in the way that they do not align with their values.

Even though the research by Holt was written in 2002, eight years before the article by Odour and de Pechpeyrou was released. One can discuss the gap of different perspectives in which they describe the effect brands have on consumers. Although the research by Holt (2002) was written first, he gives a more neutral and thorough explanation of a brand's image in different decades, while Odour and de Pechpeyrou (2010) have a more critical opinion towards brands and their image. However, we still think that both articles are necessary to get a bigger picture of how consumers can react towards brands.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Some parts of the Literature Review are taken from the course in Research Strategy (BUSP37)



### 3. Theory

*In this chapter, the theoretical fundamentals are presented in order to analyse the empirical material. Firstly, the definition of consumer-brand relationship (CBR) is explained. Secondly, Fournier's (1998) consumer-brand relationship framework is presented. Moreover, the dissolution model by Fournier (1998) has been used in order to supplement the consumer-brand relationship framework. By using these two relationship marketing theories, we are able to analyze the different types of consumer-brand relationships that are formed in relation to brand activism campaigns.*

#### 3.1 Consumer-brand relationship

Consumer-brand relationship (CBR) is defined as a relationship between consumers and brands, and that has similar characteristics as relationships between people, such as friendships or partnerships (Bowden, 2009). As specified by Veloutsou (2010) and Bowden (2009), consumers decide to establish relationships with brands whom they feel some kind of connection or disconnection to. Successful consumer-brand relationships often increase customer loyalty, interaction and long-term engagement with the brand (Olenski, 2013).

Moreover, many researchers argue that CBR creates emotional connections between the consumer and the brand (Bowden, 2009; Veloutsou, 2010; Fournier, 1998; Muniz & O'Guinn, 2001). When consumers establish relationships with brands, traits such as the brand's core values and brand image are evaluated beforehand (Bhattacharya & Sen, 2003). However, the consumer's values need to match the brand's in order to create a positive relationship. If the consumer does not feel that the brand's image and values are similar to theirs, the consumer-brand relationship becomes negative (Bowden, 2009). In line with this, Veloutsou (2010) argues that brands can be seen as having personalities which consumers can relate to. Thus, consumers create relationships with brands that they feel like having the same values and personality as themselves. Having a truthful and strong bond with a brand can lead to positive effects on the relationship, and will thereby increase trustworthiness, loyalty and growth (Aaker, Fournier and Brasel, 2004).

## 3.2 Fournier and the consumer-brand relationship framework

In 1998, Susan Fournier mentioned the importance of consumer-brand relationships by developing a framework of consumer-brand relationship types. The framework consists of fifteen different relationship types, which are different from each other and contain different benefits from those relationships (Fournier et. al., 2012). In addition, loyal customers are typically more willing to buy more products from a brand and can be adaptable to new product introductions and other marketing activities (Fournier et. al., 2012), such as brand activism advertisements. Brand relationships are a complex psychological and cultural phenomena that can be difficult to investigate (Fournier et. al., 2012). According to that, the outcome of the consumer-brand relationships are complex since they can vary to a large extent. While strong relationships between the consumers and brands guarantee a cash flow within loyalties (Fournier et. al., 2012), weak relationships can result in loss of consumers. In addition, Fournier (1998) presents three main arguments in her research of the Consumer-brand relationship framework.

- *Brand can and do serve as legitimate relationship partners.*
- *Consumer-brand relationships are valid at the level of consumer's everyday life and lived experience.*
- *Consumer-brand relationships may be expressed in several different ways, using a rich vocabulary that is both managerially and theoretically relevant.*

Thus, Fournier (1998) argues that brands can be seen as appropriate relationship partners to consumers, just like any other human. Furthermore, consumer-brand relationships can fit into consumers everyday-lives.

Consumer-brand Relationship Forms	Definition
Arranged marriages	Nonvoluntary union imposed by preferences of third party. Intended for longterm, exclusive commitment, although at low levels of affective attachment.
Casual friends/buddies	Friendship low in affect and intimacy, characterized by infrequent or sporadic engagement, and few expectations for reciprocity or reward.
Marriages of convenience	Long-term, committed relationships precipitated by environmental influence versus deliberate choice, and governed by satisficing rules.
Committed partnerships	Long-term, voluntarily imposed, socially supported union high in love, intimacy, trust, and a commitment to stay together despite adverse

	circumstances. Adherence to exclusivity rules expected.
<b>Best friendships</b>	Voluntary union based on reciprocity principle, the endurance of which is ensured through continued provision of positive rewards. Characterized by revelation of true self, honesty, and intimacy. Congruity in partner images and personal interests common.
<b>Compartmentalized friendships</b>	Highly specialized, situationally confined, enduring friendships characterized by lower intimacy than other friendship forms but higher socioemotional rewards and interdependence. Easy entry and exit attained.
<b>Kinships</b>	Nonvoluntary union with lineage ties.
<b>Rebounds/avoidance-driven</b>	Union precipitated by desire to move away from a prior or available partner, as opposed to attraction to chosen partner per se.
<b>Childhood friendships</b>	Infrequently engaged, affectively laden relation reminiscent of earlier times. Yields comfort and security of past self.
<b>Courtships</b>	Interim relationship state on the road to committed partnership contract.
<b>Dependencies</b>	Obsessive, highly emotional, selfish attractions cemented by feeling that the other is irreplaceable. Separation from others yields anxiety. High tolerance of others transgressions results.
<b>Flings</b>	Short-term, time-bounded engagements of high emotional reward, but devoid of commitment and reciprocity demands.
<b>Enmities</b>	Intensely involving relationships characterized by negative affect and desire to avoid or inflict pain on the other.
<b>Secret affairs</b>	Highly emotive, privately held relationships are considered risky if exposed to others.
<b>Enslavements</b>	Nonvoluntary union governed entirely by desires of the relationship partner. Involves negative feelings but persists because of circumstances.

*Figure 2: A Typology of Consumer-brand Relationship Forms (Own Figure in line with Fournier, 1998)*

### 3.3 Fournier's dissolution model for casual and committed relationships

In relation to Fournier's (1998) consumer-brand relationship forms, Fournier (1998) brings up a dissolution model as a way to conceptualize relationship deterioration (Bertilsson, 2017). The different types of stresses to be considered are partner-orientated, environmental and relational stresses. Partner-oriented stresses may be applicable if, e.g, a consumer experiences a difference between his or her value and the brand's values. This can for example happen when a consumer appreciates ethical and sustainable products, which may lead them to terminate their relationship with the brand in case this does not live up to such standards. Moreover, environmental stressors can include a long distance relationship between the brand and the consumer. This can lead to buy from other alternatives if the geographical location is too far. The third type is relational-stresses, which includes breaking trust or failing to keep a promise (Bertilsson, 2017). This can for example be the consumer's perception of a brand's quality that keeps failing. This can in term lead to the consumer being reluctant to purchase any more products from the brand.

Dissolution Model	Definition
<b>Environmental stresses</b>	<p><i>Situationally imposed stressors.</i> Disturbance invoked by change in a physical situation that renders relationship continuity impossible or highly unlikely (e.g., move to a different geographic area in which brand is not available causes abrupt decline of relationship, as with Vicki and Friendly's ice cream).</p> <p><i>Intrusion of alternatives.</i> Disturbance precipitated by interference from imposing, attractive, or superior alternatives (e.g., introduction of long-awaited product benefit under competing brand name, as with Vicki and Mentadent).</p>
<b>Partner-oriented stresses</b>	<p><i>Personally-induced stressors.</i> Disorder motivated by change in personality, roles, needs, or values that renders consumer- product "fit" unacceptable (e.g., Karen reveals switch to Diet Coke four years after original interview in response to reconciled battle against an aging self).</p>

	<i>Managerially imposed stressors.</i> Disorder resulting from managerial decisions to terminate the relationship or alter the brand partner role (e.g., Karen's relationship with Mary Kay Moisture Lipstick terminated when manufacturer pulls line from the shelf).
<b>Relational stresses</b>	Trespass of unwritten relationship rules, breach of trust, failure to keep a promise, or perception of neglect on part of a relationship partner (e.g., Jean's perception of inconsistent quality delivery by Bon Ami partner).

*Figure 3: Dissolution Model (Own Figure in line with Fournier 1998)*

## 4. Methodology

*In this chapter, the methodology of the data collection will be presented. Firstly, the research philosophy is explained in regards to the study, which is followed by the research strategy and design. Thereafter, the data collection including a netnographic approach and a focus group are explained. Afterwards, we argue for our empirical analysis, including the trustworthiness of this study. Lastly, the ethical considerations are reflected upon.*

### 4.1 Research philosophy

The research philosophy looks at the way one sees the world and is fundamental for formulating the research strategy and choosing the designs when conducting a study (Easterby-Smith et al., 2018). This way of seeing the world can be divided into two significant parts: ontology and epistemology (Saunders, Lewis & Thornhill, 2009). Ontology deals with how reality is viewed, while epistemology studies the nature of knowledge and how to attain it (Easterby-Smith et al., 2018).

In terms of ontology, the reality viewed depends mostly on what the study aims to investigate (Easterby-Smith et al., 2018). In our case, we want to study which types of consumer-brand relationships brand activism campaigns form. Thus, we believe that this study is best understood when studying consumers' feelings and opinions on brand activism campaigns. Following our study, we believe that a relativist view is the most suitable type of ontology. Relativism is, according to Easterby-Smith et al. (2018), the perspective that has many different truths and versions of realities depending on the outlook of the observer. People cope with things differently, and their experiences might be influenced by status or past reputation. Thus, the idea of a 'truth' is created by meanings and experiences and is different according to everyone (Easterby-Smith et al., 2018). We believe that consumers cope differently with brand activism campaigns in the sense that they perceive the campaigns in different ways depending on their beliefs, values, and interests. Thus, there will not be one answer that is truer than other findings on the different consumer-brand relationships concerning brand activism campaigns. Nonetheless, this study provides different ways or 'truths' on various consumer-brand relationships that are apparent in relation to brand activism campaigns.

In terms of epistemology, knowledge is developed upon perceptions and experiences. There are two views on how to develop knowledge: positivism and social constructionism (Easterby-Smith et al., 2018). In this case, we believe that a social constructionist view is the most applicable for our study. Social constructionism is defined by seeing knowledge in a social context, and that it may only exist because people give it a reality through shared assumptions (Saunders, Lewis & Thornhill, 2009).

This is further explained by Easterby-Smith et al. (2018, p.52) as "focusing on what people, individually and collectively, are thinking and feeling, and attention should be paid to the ways they communicate with each other, verbally and non-verbally". Our study aims to analyze the various consumer-brand relationships that are defined when consumers are exposed to brand activism campaigns. Thus, a social constructionist view is essential when studying the relationships between consumers and brands when investigating brand activism campaigns (Easterby-Smith et al., 2018).

## 4.2 Research strategy

To understand which types of consumer-brand relationships brand activism campaigns form, we conducted a qualitative study. According to Easterby-Smith et al. (2018), qualitative data can be explained by "their non-numeric form and by the interactive and interpretative process in which they are created" (p.129). By selecting a qualitative research strategy, we aimed to collect unique in-depth information about consumer-brand relationships in relation to brand activism campaigns.

Moreover, we argue that a netnographic research in the form of virtual observations is best suited for this study, which originates from ethnography and is a way to understand the social interactions between consumers and brands online (Kozinets, 1999). Netnography can according to Kozinets (2000) be beneficial when studying the language or motivations of consumers digitally. For this study, we selected three brands that had launched brand activism campaigns online, which were used to analyze the language and symbols the consumers were using.

Furthermore, the three selected brands were carefully chosen to include a broad range of industries and products, so that we would get a more heterogeneous range of findings. The selected brands were Nike, Gillette and Ben & Jerry's, who all recently launched campaigns about social/political issues in today's society.

To get an additional view on what kind of consumer-brand relationships that are simulated by brand activism campaigns, we conducted a focus group. According to Bryman et al. (2019) focus groups allow the participants' to give their perspective and opinion of the subject, which is important in qualitative studies. We believe that a focus group is relevant for this study as it leads to a more simultaneous involvement between the consumers in the form of discussions, which will lead to more transparent answers (Carson et al., 2001). By combining virtual observations and a focus group, we collected valuable data that gave us an understanding of the different consumer-brand relationships that are formed in relation to brand activism campaigns.

Moreover, we obtained the information in the form of primary data. When using primary data, it is possible to generate new insights which will lead to informative outcomes in the research, which was the reason why we chose to use primary data (Easterby-Smith et al., 2018). Furthermore, this paper has taken an inductive approach as it seeks to systematically develop themes and identify patterns from the data that we have collected to answer the research question (Bryman et al., 2019).

### 4.3 Research design

This project is based on a qualitative research study to collect in-depth empirical data and thereby identify every possible argument of brand activism campaigns. In relation to this, we are using a multi-method study since we are retrieving relevant data with the use of various qualitative techniques (Saunders et al., 2016). In addition, we decided to collect online information available on various social media platforms. We aimed to observe consumers' reactions and opinions through their active engagement by commenting and participating in three brand activism campaigns. This type of data collection is also called a netnographic method consisting of internet-mediated observations (Saunders et al., 2016).

Additionally, we conducted a focus group to further collect in-depth material. To collect this rich, in-depth material, we constructed a semi-structured interview guide. We aimed to cover brand activism as a theme, including some specific questions on brand activism marketing activities. However, the order of questions was varied, depending on the flow of the conversation (Saunders et al., 2016). Moreover, while using a semi-structured interview strategy, we were able to add additional questions during the focus group. This type of interview also made it easier to create an open discussion (Saunders et al., 2016). Hereby, it was possible to get more insights and information about the participants' opinions and reactions to brand activism campaigns. Before deciding to collect a focus group, we were considering conducting individual interviews. However, we decided to select a focus group. The reason why we chose to collect a focus group instead of individual interviews was that a focus group could help us in providing relevant insights through discussions and interactions between several participants (Easterby-Smith et al., 2018).

It is also important to note that we had a time limit of ten weeks to finish our study. For this study, a cross-sectional time horizon was used to provide a snapshot of the market (Saunders et al., 2016). According to Saunders et al. (2016), this is the most suitable time horizon for project writing since it gives a preview on how the current situation looks like. Moreover, the cross-sectional method is relevant for our study since we are analyzing which types of consumer-brand relationships that arise from three relevant brand activism campaigns.



## 4.4 Data collection method

The data collection method has been divided into two parts. In the first part, we are describing how we collected online-mediated observations through a netnographic method. In the second phase, we gathered in-depth information on the consumers' reactions on brand activism campaigns. This was done through a focus group. In the following section, we are describing the two different data collection methods in detail. Furthermore, it is important to note that we conducted the focus group before the social distancing measures that were set due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

### 4.4.1 Netnographic approach

A part of our empirical analysis is based on a netnographic method in the form of virtual observations to analyze different consumer-brand relationships that arises in relation to brand activism campaigns. This method is a qualitative interpretive approach that combines observation of various online platforms with the use of ethnographic techniques, also called internet-mediated observations (Saunders et al., 2016). Moreover, internet-mediated observations have the capacity to gather a large amount of valuable data, which was needed for our study to come up with conclusions (Saunders et al., 2016). The online platforms that have been investigated in this study are YouTube, Facebook, LinkedIn, Instagram and Twitter.

For a better understanding of the phenomenon of brand activism, we have taken a passive and observative role (Elliott & Jankel-Elliott, 2003). For this study, archival data were used to express consumers through existing words and texts found online on selected platforms (Easterby-Smith et al., 2018). This was done by studying three different marketing campaigns all with a brand activism focus. Here, several consumers were involved by participating in discussions and debates on the advertisements at the various platforms. Moreover, this approach has allowed us to investigate the reactions of consumers and additionally analyze the consumer-brand relationships that are formed in relation to the brand activism campaigns.

One of the main reasons and strengths of selecting a netnographic approach is that there is a lot of information available online on this topic. Moreover, it would have been difficult to contact the online respondents for an interview since the majority of the observed consumers had random usernames and would probably not want to be interviewed about their beliefs and values. Moreover, a disadvantage of using virtual observations is that it can pose difficult ethical dilemmas for the project (Saunders et al., 2016).

In addition, using primary observations allowed us to observe how consumers interact and construct meanings in their environment (Saunders et al., 2016), without the influence of an interviewer and response bias related to primary interpretative investigation. Moreover, a bias to be aware of while using a netnographic method is that individuals might be behaving differently on the Internet than in reality.

Our aim of using a netnographic (or ethnographic of the internet) method is to identify which effects brand activism campaigns have on consumers, and finally to understand what is behind their online attitudes. In order to investigate the consumers, we have decided to use several online platforms to support each other and find common consumption as well as behavior patterns between the consumers. We have selected to collect online observations on the following five different platforms:

- Nike: YouTube, Facebook and LinkedIn
- Gillette: YouTube, Facebook and LinkedIn
- Ben & Jerry's: Instagram and Twitter

Platform	Largest age group	Characterized
Facebook	18-49	Largest social media audience in the world.
LinkedIn	18-49	Mainly a platform for professionals.
Instagram	18-29	Best platform to work with influencers.
Twitter	18-29	Highly politicized.
YouTube	15-25	Most popular platform in the United States.

*Table 1: Overview of consumers in the United States on various social media platforms (Own Table in line with Statista, 2020 and Stokes, 2018)*

Facebook and LinkedIn are characterized in people using their real and legal names (Flick, 2013). Moreover, Facebook has the largest social media audience in the world (Stokes, 2018). This makes Facebook to be a good platform to investigate since there are potentially a lot of consumers. Additionally, LinkedIn is mainly a platform for professionals. Hence, their online behavior is different from other social media, since the posts and comments are more judicious and longer. Instagram is the best platform to work with influencers (Stokes, 2018). Twitter is highly politicized, with a majority of the audience that is studying or has just graduated (Stokes, 2018). Furthermore, according to Kessel (2019), YouTube is the most popular online platform in the United States.

The total number of people who use YouTube every day is 1,3 billion and almost 5 billion videos are watched on Youtube every single day (Cooper, 2019). When using five different social media platforms, we are able to get an overall understanding of the consumers and to identify if the majority of the consumers agree or disagree on brand activism advertisements.

When collecting a netnographic study, there are some criteria to consider when investigating consumer behavior online. According to Flick (2013), one criteria to consider is to pay attention to if the project would be better served when analyzing comments in a specific time period. To meet this criterion, we have only been looking at comments in the time period after the brand activism advertisements was launched. Therefore, our virtual observations will not cover any other comments that have been made before the brand activism advertisements. Another criterion Flick (2013) points out is to consider to compare data with other websites. In addition, we selected five different social media platforms to get an overall understanding on the consumer behavior and which relationship brand activism campaigns stimulate. Hence, we collected data from several platforms with a different target group and varied characteristics (see table 1).

<b>Platform</b>	<b>Number of quotes used in our analysis</b>
Facebook	6
LinkedIn	5
Instagram	3
Twitter	2
YouTube	8

*Table 2: Overview on quotations used in our analysis (Own Table, 2020)*

In total we have used 24 quotations from virtual observations in our analysis and findings. The largest volume of data used as quotations in our study has been collected from YouTube, Facebook and LinkedIn (see table 2). Lastly, it is important to mention that the quotations selected for this study only represents a small fraction of many available quotes online (see Appendix 1). However, to investigate the consumer-brand relationships, we decided to use quotes that were repeated several times, or quotes that many consumers agreed to by liking or reposting the comments.

#### 4.4.2 Focus group

To understand consumer-brand relationships in terms of brand activism campaigns, we decided to conduct a focus group. According to Bryman et al. (2019), focus groups allow the participants' to give their perspective and opinion of the subject, which is important in qualitative studies.

We believe that a focus group would be relevant for this study as it contributed to a more simultaneous involvement between the participants in the form of discussions, which lead to more transparent answers (Carson et al., 2001).

However, focus groups can also have group effect problems, which according to Bryman et al (2019), can happen when some participants talk more than others and hereby dominate the conversation. If this happens, Bryman et al., (2019) recommends the moderator to act up and give other participants the opportunity to share their opinions. Thus, we still think that a focus group was an appropriate method for our study. By making the participants involved in each other's opinions and perspectives, we believe that they will come to interesting thoughts and conclusions, which would not have happened for example with individual interviews (Easterby-Smith et al., 2018).

Since brand activism and consumer-brand relationship (CBR) can be complex subjects, we aim to make it easier for the participants to provide us with answers by using two brands who have applied brand activism in their marketing campaigns, as examples. The brands and campaigns we selected were Nike's "Dream Crazy" campaign and Dove's "Real Beauty" campaign. Both brands have used brand activism in their campaigns to state social and political issues. However, these campaigns are also different in many ways; they highlight different issues, are years apart, and are aimed at different consumers, which are the reasons why we chose them. Moreover, both of the campaigns received worldwide attention. Dove was one of the earliest brands who participated in brand activism (Dove, 2020) and Nike has a long story of being 'fearless' in their campaigns (Nike, 2020). However, it should be noted that these brands were only examples of brands who had launched activism campaigns, which was used to help the participants get inspired and to make the discussion going.

To get the participants in the right mode, we were implementing the video elicitation method, meaning that we showed the participants three short YouTube clips of the campaigns; two from Nike and one from Dove. By showing videos of the campaigns before the discussion, we aimed to refresh the participant's memories and to avoid any misunderstandings. According to Li et al. (2019), the video elicitation method is good to use when comparing the participant's values, emotions and opinions. Moreover, this method also leads to a more comprehensive understanding of the participants' sensemaking mechanism" (p. 3).

For our focus groups, we selected young adults in the form of millennials, since they were the most suitable sampling for this study, based on time and accessibility. Millennials are between the ages of 23-38 and are according to Anderson (2020) a very relevant target group for brands as they care about the company's image and values. Moreover, millennials are also more likely to have opinions about political and social issues, which can be very valuable when it comes to brands and their activism campaigns (Jankowski, 2018).

According to Carson et al. (2001), a functional focus group consists of between 6 and 12 participants, mainly to allow the group to interact with each other and to have an effective discussion. A focus group with more than 12 participants is not recommended since it will be difficult for every participant to share their opinions and thoughts (Carson et al., 2001). Carson et al. (2001) also argues the importance of preparing for a no-show. It can be useful to plan ahead and invite an extra person if someone decides not to show up so that you still have enough people to complete a successful focus group (Carson et al., 2001). In our case, we invited 7 people, but 2 people decided not to show up on the day. However, we decided to go ahead with the 5 people that had shown up, since we still could get useful insights.

To recruit participants, we used a purposive sampling approach. The objective of a purposive sampling approach is to select participants that will be the best option to answer our research question (Easterby-Smith et al., 2018). We aimed to recruit students from Lund University, who had some kind of knowledge and interest in social and political issues in society. We attempted to create a varied group of respondents, therefore, we recruited students with different study backgrounds, gender and nationality. Thus, it should be noted that the nationality of the students are all Scandinavians, since this focus group was conducted at a qualitative pre-thesis course. Here, we were focusing if brand activism campaigns influence the Scandinavian millennials buying decisions. However, the focus group is still very relevant for our thesis, since the participants provided us with valuable insight on brand activism, which we are using to understand which types of relationships the consumers develop with the brand. Moreover, the students that agreed to participate in our focus group were studying at different programmes, such as marketing, political science, social work etc., which gave us different perspectives on brand activism. Thus, the participants defined themselves as millennial students with an interest in social and political issues, which seemed to be the correct sample for our research topic. For reasons of anonymity the respondents are only referred by their first names. Table 3 provides an overview of the focus group participants.

<b>Name</b>	<b>Age</b>	<b>Nationality</b>	<b>Studies</b>
Frida	27	Swedish	MSc. International Marketing & Brand Management
Laura	24	Danish	MSc. Economics and Business Administration
Sofie	24	Danish	MSc. International Strategic Management
Daniel	26	Swedish	MSc. Social Work and Human Rights
Simon	23	Swedish	MSc. Politics and Economics

*Table 3: Overview of focus group participants (Own Table, 2020)*

According to Carson et al. (2001), it is important that the focus groups are conducted at a place where the participants feel “comfortable and at ease” (p.120). Moreover, the place should be easy to access and convenient (Carson et al., 2001). Thus, we conducted the focus group in an available group room at Lund University. The group room was spacious and had a big, round table, making it easy for the participants to discuss and talk to each other. The reason why we conducted the focus group at Lund University was because it is easy for the participants to access the site, and it allowed the participants to feel more relaxed in a familiar and well-known environment. According to Carson et al (2001), the time of day can affect the participants in the form of disruptions of daily routine, and thus we chose to conduct the focus group during the afternoon around 15.00 o’clock after the participant’s lectures.

We provided the participants with snacks and drinks to make the students feel more comfortable and energized. Moreover, we also provided the participants with paper and pens to let them write down any thoughts when watching the campaign videos.

Before we began the focus group discussion, we introduced ourselves and explained the agenda of the focus group, and hereby give the participants a better understanding of the purpose. We asked the participants to introduce themselves, mainly to get them to know each other and by creating a more comfortable and friendly atmosphere between them. Furthermore, we mentioned that the focus group would be recorded and asked for their approval. Both of us were present at the focus group; one of us took the role as a moderator leading the focus group and asking the questions and the other one was the assistant moderator, taking notes, recording and observing the participants (Carson et al., 2001). Moreover, we had prepared some questions in advance in the form of a semi-structured technique to assist the participants and get the discussion going if needed.

After the introduction, we initiated the video elicitation method and began by showing the campaign videos. The first video was showing a timeline of the Nike campaign with NFL quarterback Colin Kaepernick to provide the participants with a background story (YouTube, 2018a). We continued by showing the participants the outcome of the previous video, which was the Nike advertisement “Dream Crazy” where Kaepernick and many other athletes could be seen (YouTube, 2018b). We gave the participants a minute to write down any thoughts they had and proceeded by showing the third video.

The third and last video was an advertisement from Dove’s “Real Beauty Campaign” showing a girl taking a picture which later is heavily photoshopped (YouTube, 2006). After showing the videos, the moderator initiated the discussion by asking about their thoughts on the videos. The participants began discussing and sharing their thoughts on the two campaigns and general opinions about brand activism. To assist the participants in their discussion, the moderator asked if they had bought something from either Nike or Dove. By asking this question, the participants started a discussion about their consumption decisions and brand activism.

Overall, the structure and campaigns of our focus group gave us a rich understanding of the participants' values and thoughts about brand activism and their buying decisions.

It is important to note that for this study we will be using three brand activism campaigns. As mentioned before, we have used Nike and Dove as brand activism campaign examples in our focus group. However, we would only use Nike in this study since we found very valuable insights among the participants. We also noticed that the participants mentioned Nike and their "Dream Crazy" campaign many times. Hence, we decided to continue using Nike as one of the three campaign examples, since we thought that we could get more insights and material from the virtual observations. According to the "Real Beauty" campaign by Dove, the participants in our focus group did not mention Dove as much as they did with Nike. Since Dove's campaign is older than many other brand activism campaigns, we believe it would be more difficult to investigate the consumers through virtual observations.<sup>2</sup>

## 4.5 Empirical analysis

According to Easterby-Smith et al., (2018), it is important to discuss how the data was evaluated before it can be analyzed. In this study, we decided to conduct both virtual observations and a focus group. Our findings from the virtual observations, also mentioned as a netnographic approach, has been reported in writing (see Appendix 1). Moreover, the focus group conducted in this study has been audio taped and later transcribed (see Appendix 2). When recording our focus group, it allowed us to concentrate on the participants during the interview. We could, therefore, analyze the data meticulously afterwards.

For this research, we applied a narrative analysis, which is based on how people "create and use stories to make sense of the world" (Easterby-Smith et al., 2018, p. 207). However, the stories are not considered as facts, but rather as a way for people to express themselves and their surroundings (Easterby-Smith et al., 2018). Furthermore, the performance narrative analysis was applied to identify how brand activism affected the focus group in terms of their everyday lives. The performance narrative analysis focuses on "non-verbal interaction as well as verbal interaction" (Easterby-Smith, 2018, p. 209). Our study is based on what the participants say, however, we believe that the non-verbal interaction, both individually and within the focus group, is vital to get an overall picture of their opinions. Thus, it can be argued that the performance narrative analysis is the most suitable technique for our study.

The collected data was analyzed in accordance with the four-step process presented by Easterby-Smith et al. (2018, p. 208-209): *(1) selection, (2) analysis of the narrative, (3) recontextualization and (4) Interpretation and evaluation*. In our focus group, we selected two brands, which were Nike and Dove, to illustrate brand activism advertisements. However, in the virtual observations, the incorporated brands were Nike, Gillette and Ben & Jerry's. These three brands have been selected for further investigation in this study.

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<sup>2</sup> Parts of the Focus Group are taken from our Qualitative Research course (BUSR31)

Thereby, Dove has only been used as an illustrating example for our focus group participants. The storytellers in our study were millennials and students from Lund University. The stories were collected during conversations. By implementing brands which had participated in brand activism advertisements made it easier to contextualize the findings with the social, political and cultural background of their stories. Lastly, the data was interpreted and evaluated, which made it easier to reflect on the contribution and relevance of this study.

#### 4.5.1 Trustworthiness

Trustworthiness is another important factor to consider when evaluating the quality of the data. Lincoln and Guba (1985) suggest 4 dimensions to consider when evaluating and assessing the quality and trustworthiness of the data: *credibility*, *transferability*, *dependability* and *confirmability*.

##### ***Credibility***

As previously mentioned, this study focuses on which relationships brand activism advertisements form between the consumers and brands. To understand this phenomenon better we used two different qualitative methods to gain a more advanced knowledge. While using virtual observations, we were able to gain in-depth knowledge of the consumers' underlying behavior, and to understand if they agreed or disagreed with brand activism advertisements. Similarly, our focus group enabled us to understand consumers' meanings and feelings on brand activism advertisements by analysing debates, interactions and discussions between the respondents. Moreover, we transcribed the focus group afterwards which enabled us to confirm findings and to avoid misunderstandings.

On the one hand, we argue that our findings are credible since the participants in the focus group were only recruited if they had some kind of knowledge about brand activism. On the other hand, the credibility would have been even stronger if several focus groups were conducted, since we would have obtained more and varied data.

##### ***Transferability***

In our virtual observations, we have collected three brand activism campaigns as case examples, which are Nike, Gillette and Ben & Jerry's. While only using a few case examples, this study was somewhat limited. However, using well-known, big and popular brands enhanced the transferability, as it made the material more applicable to investigate which consumer-brand relationships are formed. However, it is important to notice that this study must be understood in its situational context.



### ***Dependability***

While investigating consumer behavior on brand activism, we tried to be as open and transparent as possible. Moreover, we attempted not to hide any relevant information that could be used in this study. According to the virtual observations, it would be possible for other researchers to replicate these online findings, which enhances the dependability of this study. However, it would be more difficult to replicate the focus group, since the discussions depended on the participants and the context.

### ***Confirmability***

It is important to be aware of personal biases when interviewing participants in a focus group. To avoid this, we as moderators, tried to ask objective questions to the participants. We aimed to produce a more reflexive study by not favoring any sides or opinions of the respondents (Alvesson et al., 2008). Hence, we argue that the confirmability is high, since we used quotes directly taken from virtual observations and the focus group to clearly illustrate their opinions on brand activism advertisements.

## **4.6 Ethical considerations**

According to Saunders, Lewis & Thornhill (2009) ethics is described as ‘‘the appropriateness of your behavior in relation to the rights of those who become the subject of your work, or are affected by it’’ (p. 183-184). It is vital to ensure that the study is conducted in an ethical way to make sure that we do not disrespect or expose anyone who has shared their private opinion online (Kozinets, 2002). Moreover, Kozinets (2002) mentions that one of the most important aspects of netnography is concerned with research ethics. When using a netnographic approach, researchers need to acknowledge ethical guidelines that concern two questions (Kozinets, 2002, p. 65).

- ‘‘Are online forums to be considered a private or public site?’’
- ‘‘What constitutes ‘‘informed consent’’ in cyberspace?’’

For our virtual observations, we have chosen different social media platforms to collect data, which are all considered as public sites that anyone can access. Some platforms were more open than the others in the sense that one needed to have an account to be able to access comments from consumers, whereas other platforms were accessible without an account. Thus, it can be argued that the platforms we chose to collect our data from are all public in one way or another. When it comes to ‘informed consent’, this is an ethical problem that arises with the immense amount of information that is available on the Internet.

According to Kozinets (2002) and the guidelines for conducting a netnography, a researcher should acknowledge their presence and intentions to the members of the platform during the research, and ask for consent. This is very important especially when conducting a netnographic study since people on social platforms are not expecting to be researched or analyzed based on what they write. However, this can lead to bias where the people who have given their consent for the data collection, may not understand in which way the data will be used (Saunders, Lewis & Thornhill, 2009). This lack of clarity can be seen as a mix between *lack of consent* and *implied consent*, which according to Saunderson, Lewis & Thornhill (2009, p. 190) can cause ‘‘harm and embarrassment’’ to the participants if their opinions or thoughts are analyzed without them fully understanding why. In this case, it is impossible to know whether people on the chosen social media platforms are saying who they really are.

Even though the platforms we chose were public and the data could be seen as public information available to anyone, we decided to protect the individuals freedom of speech by anonymizing their alias and only focus on what they were saying (Saunders, Lewis & Thornhill, 2009; Kozinets, 2002).

In the case of our focus group, we conducted it during a preparatory Qualitative Research Methods course (BUSR31) for our master thesis. Since then, we have modified our research question. However, we think that the focus group gave us very useful insights into brand activism and which types of consumer-brand relationships brand activism campaigns form. Therefore, we chose to include our focus group findings in our thesis.

When conducting focus groups, consent is a key factor in collecting the data that is needed for the study in terms of the participants safety and confidentiality (Saunders, Lewis & Thornhill, 2009). To make sure that our focus group was conducted in an ethical way, the participants were informed about the topic of the research beforehand, so that they were able to decline the participation if needed. Furthermore, we asked for their permission to share personal information such as their first names, ages and occupation, which they agreed to.

Hence, we believe that by only sharing these personal informations (see table 3), we made the participants partly anonymous thus giving them the possibility of opening up and speaking more freely. During the focus group, we asked for permission to use their personal information once again to make sure that they had not changed their mind (Carson et al., 2012).

## 5. Brand activism campaigns

*In this chapter, the three selected campaigns are going to be presented and further explained. These campaigns have a background within political and social issues in society, making it good examples for brand activism and our study. The chosen campaigns are from the brands Nike, Gillette and Ben & Jerry's. We will start by introducing the brands and continue with explaining the campaign in three different parts; prelude, the campaign and postlude. Through these brands and their campaigns, we intend to analyze what kind of consumer-brand relationships that have been created.*

### 5.1 Nike

Nike is a worldwide sports brand that is striving for innovation and doing good for the community (Nike, 2020a). Nike helps the community by being committed to improving the conditions of people so they can reach their highest potential (Nike, 2020a). Moreover, Nike strives to create more equal playing fields for all (Nike, 2020a). Beside that Nike is one of the biggest sport brands in the entire world, Nike is also known for having a long history of bringing up social and political issues in their advertisements, such as racism, gender issues and inequalities (Chadwick & Zipp, 2018).

Nike also uses its recognized brand to inspire people from different backgrounds, and as a result, make sports equal for everyone by breaking boundaries (Nike, 2020b). In 2018, Nike participated in a social and political debate with its brand activism campaign “Dream Crazy,” focusing on current issues in the society. This campaign is a fascinating case to analyze since it created a stir between the population.



Picture 1. Nike “Dream Crazy” with Colin Kaepernick (The Guardian Sport, 2019)

## Prelude

In 2018, Nike released its campaign “Dream Crazy”, to take an active stance in the political debate (The Guardian, 2019). In the commercial, Nike used the athlete Colin Kaepernick, who previously in 2016 kneeled before a game during the national anthem in protest against racism, inequalities and police brutality in the United States stirring up controversy (Mindock, 2019). Many observers perceived it as a very inspirational act from Kaepernick. However, this effort was highly riskious. Many Republican politicians and not least, President Donald Trump, were not pleased with Kaepernick’s act (Graham, 2017). Donald Trump complained with the NFL club and wanted Kaepernick to be fired immediately for insulting the nation. Kaepernick was not signed again after the protest spread (The Guardian Sport).

## The campaign

In 2018, Nike released a commercial “Dream Crazy” (The Guardian, 2019). The advertisement was made as a short video with the main purpose of dreaming bigger (Youtube, 2018). The advertisement points out that it is important to have a dream to achieve, in this example, sport results, although there may be obstacles along the way, such as a disability, obesity, cancer, refugees, racism. In relation to this, the video shows an example of a football player who was born as a refugee, while fighting for a professional career. Moreover, the advertisements include different professional athletes, such as Colin Kaepernick and Serena Williams. In addition, the advertisement aimed to portray their backgrounds and childhood before their professional achievements in sports. At the end of the commercial, Colin Kaepernick, mentioned the golden words “Dream Crazy”. Furthermore, Nike and Kaepernick selected the slogan *“Believe in something. Even if it means sacrificing everything. Just do it”* (The Guardian, 2019).

## Postlude

The outcome of the advertisement created a conflict between the consumers. On the one hand, many sympathized with the campaign, and could see the importance of brands participating in political and social issues in society (Nittle, 2018). On the other hand, the campaign was criticized by people who did not support Kaepernick and his political statement. Some people even started burning and ripping their Nike shoes and clothes. However, the campaign was praised by the majority of people and Kaepernick was honoured with several awards (Vera, 2018).<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Parts of the Postlude are taken from our Qualitative Research course (BUSR31)

## 5.2 Gillette

Gillette was founded in 1901, and is owned by the multinational company Procter & Gamble (Gillette, 2020b). Gillette is selling grooming products for men, and is striving for implementing innovative and revolutionary products (Gillette, 2020b). In relation to their marketing activities, Gillette previously focused on masculinity with their slogan “The Best Men Can Be” (Gillette, 2020b). However, Gillette recently participated in a current political debate - the #MeToo movement. Here, Gillette released a brand activism campaign: ‘We Believe: The Best Men Can Be’ (YouTube, 2019), with the purpose of drawing attention to issues such as sexual harassment and fighting. Gillette’s choice of participating in brand activism activities is a new marketing strategy for the company. Therefore, it is interesting to study the effect of the brand activism campaign to understand how their consumers react.



*Picture 2. Gillette “The Best Men Can Be” (Sant, 2019)*

### Prelude

In regards to marketing activities, Gillette chose to base their brand activism campaign on the #MeToo movement that recently became an important and relevant topic. Harvey Weinstein, a famous Hollywood producer, was one of the first celebrities, who was accused of sexual harassment and sexual assault by more than 13 women, including two actresses in the United States (BBC News, 2020). The conflict of Harvey Weinstein created the #MeToo movement, which evolved into a riot worldwide. In addition, several other well-known names, including president Donald Trump, were being accused of sexual harassment (Wünsch, 2018). In the end, sexual harassment was defined as violation against human-rights (MacKinnon, 2019), which created the #MeToo movement.

## The campaign

In 2019, Gillette released an advertisement 'We Believe: The Best Men Can Be' (Topping et al., 2019). The advertisement was made in a short film format which was uploaded on Gillette's own YouTube channel (Youtube, 2019). Several themes such as sexual harassment and fighting were included in the advertisement. To sum up the advertisement, at the beginning of the short film on YouTube, we see a lot of young boys running after a vulnerable boy and bullying him. Later, the film came up with some small clips of how men are downplaying women in workplaces. Then, the video is bringing us back to the beginning of the #MeToo movement that was discussed among reporters in the United States. In the end, the film tries to show how men should be acting correctly nowadays, including how parents should raise their kids by being good role models.

## Postlude

After the commercial was launched, there were a lot of different reactions among Gillette's consumers. Both positive and negative comments were found on various online platforms, and it was clear that many men and women had different feelings about the commercial. On the one hand, it was primarily men that participated in the debate with mainly negative comments. Some consumers even wrote that they want to boycott the brand after the commercial was released. Comments such as "*Just switched on to dislike. Stopped buying Gillette.*" were being repeated a lot of times from different men, and many thought that Gillette went too far in their campaign with the #MeToo movement and engagement. On the other hand, many women that attended the debate were celebrating the advertisement with positive comments and gave a tribute to Gillette. Furthermore, according to the short advertisement film on YouTube (2019), there were around 800.000 positive likes (thumbs up), and 1.500.000 negative likes (thumbs down). Hereby, it can be concluded that the majority of the consumers had a negative reaction on the commercial. Furthermore, after the campaign was launched, Gillette decided to donate to several non-profit organisations in the United States, which are working on fighting issues such as bullying and sexual harassment (Gillette, 2020a).

## 5.3 Ben & Jerry's

Ben & Jerry's was founded in 1978 by the two friends Ben Cohen and Jerry Greenfield. In 2000, their ice-cream business was sold to the multinational food company Unilever (Ben & Jerry's, 2020). Today, it is one of the biggest ice-cream brands in the world with over 50 different flavors (Myers, 2018). Ever since from the start, Ben & Jerry's have been engaged in societal issues. In 1988, they advocated for their first cause called *1% for Peace*, where the goal was to shift 1 % of the U.S national defense budget to support activities and projects which encouraged peace (Ben & Jerry's, 2020a).

Being known for taking political and societal stances, it was no surprise when Ben & Jerry's launched their campaign "Pecan Resist" in 2018, which was a way to protest against president Donald Trump and the administration for discriminating minorities, LGBTQ-people, refugees and more (Knoebel, 2018). Due to their straightforward approach to criticize Donald Trump, we believe that this campaign would be a good example to analyze the way consumers cope with such direct forms of brand activism.



*Picture 3. Ben & Jerry's "Pecan Resist" (Hoeffner, 2018)*

## Prelude

On November 9 2016, Donald Trump was elected for president and thus became the 45th president of the United States (Flegenheimer & Barbaro, 2016). Ever since he took office on 20 January 2017, his administration has issued policies regarding social, environmental, economic and foreign matters (Yglesias, 2019). However, there has been a lot of criticism regarding the policies discriminating against people, society and the environment (Ben & Jerry's, 2020b). One of the most controversial policies was the entry ban that was put up for refugees and tourists from various Muslim-majority countries, which made it impossible for these people to enter the United States. This policy was issued with the goal of lowering the number of refugees seeking asylum in the United States (Abdalla, 2020). Moreover, there has been policies against the LGBTQ-community, for example, the transgender military policy which meant that transgender people would no longer be allowed to serve in the U.S military (Moreau, 2017).



Donald Trump has faced world-wide critique from politicians and citizens regarding the policies he has issued (Ellyatt, 2020). Furthermore, on December 18 2019, Donald Trump got impeached by the House of Representatives for ‘‘abuse of power and obstruction of Congress’’ (History, 2019). However, on February 5 2020, Donald Trump was released from both charges and was able to remain in office (Collinson, 2020).

## The campaign

On October 30, 2018, Ben & Jerry’s launched the campaign ‘‘Pecan Resist’’ which also included a new ice-cream flavor with the same name. The campaign was launched strategically a week prior to the midterm elections in 2018, and the purpose of the campaign was to protest against the policies of the Donald Trump administration in the United States (Knoebel, 2018). By partnering up with different organizations such as Honor the Earth, Women’s March, Color of Change and Neta, Ben & Jerry’s made a political statement against the discriminatory policies which targeted minorities, women, the LGBTQ-community, refugees and the environment (Ritschel, 2018). The famous Ben & Jerry’s package was designed by a social justice activist, Favianna Rodriguez (Rense, 2018). The design showed three people standing facing different angles, where the person in the middle held a sign with the word ‘‘RESIST’’ on it (Sanchez, 2018). Furthermore, there was also an additional message under the lid of the package saying (Greaber, 2018):

*‘‘Together, we can build a more just and equitable tomorrow. We can peacefully resist the Trump administration’s regressive and discriminatory policies and build a future that values inclusivity, equality, and justice for people of color, women, the LGBTQ community, refugees, and immigrants’’.*

The campaign was launched during a livestream and later on all social media platforms and in selected stores, where the ice-cream was available. Additionally, Ben & Jerry’s also supported their partners with \$25,000 each as a way of marking the launch of Pecan Resist (Flager, 2018).

## Postlude

After the launch of the campaign, Ben & Jerry’s faced a lot of dubious reactions, positive and negative. Many people supported Ben & Jerry’s for standing up against political issues. However, the majority of people were not as supportive, claiming that they would boycott the brand (Flager, 2018). Hashtags such as #boycottbenandjerrys on Twitter became viral and people shared their dislikes about the campaign (Knoebel, 2018). The fact that an ice-cream brand would take a political stand was absurd to many people, meaning that politics and ice-cream should not be mixed (Flager, 2018). In addition to this, the expression ‘‘Orange Man Bad’’ was heavily used as a way of mocking Ben & Jerry’s attempt to criticize Donald Trump (Know Your Meme, 2018). Nonetheless, the ice-cream was sold out and Ben & Jerry’s stock rose with 4,74 % suggesting that the campaign was in fact successful in the end (Knoebel, 2018).



## 6. Findings and analysis

*In this chapter, the findings from the focus group and the virtual observation are presented and analyzed in relation to Fournier's (1998) consumer-relationship framework and stress-model. The three brands Nike, Gillette and Ben & Jerry's and their activism campaigns are analyzed together to get a broader and overall understanding of the different consumer-brand relationships that are formed. Based on our findings, we have divided our findings into two themes, (1) Agreeing with brand activism campaigns and (2) Disagreeing with brand activism campaigns. Additionally, these themes have further been divided into sub-themes, thus providing an understanding of the different consumer-brand relationships identified.*

### 6.1 Consumers agreeing on brand activism campaigns

According to the empirical material, it is established that brand activism has been on the rise in the past years, and is here to stay. Global brands such as Nike, Gillette, and Ben & Jerry's are showing where they stand politically and socially by implementing activism efforts in their marketing activities, taking a significant risk, and not knowing if their consumers will stick around. As mentioned before, if brands want to implement activism strategies, they need to make sure that their core values and image match the activism efforts (Shetty, Venkataramaiah and Anand, 2019). If done successfully, the consumers will create and develop their relationships with the brands. Our findings indicated that consumers who agreed and supported brand activism campaigns have diverse ways of expressing it. Even though they all supported the brand and their brand activism campaign, they responded in various ways. Their relationship with these brands, in some cases, was said to become more reliable than before. To show the different relationships that were formed in the following chapter, we have developed three underlying sub-themes:

- (1) Bringing up personal experiences: The supportive friends*
- (2) Defending the brand and their campaign: The protective sibling*
- (3) Feeling proud and emotional of the brand: The proud parent*

These sub-themes have been defined in relation to the consumer-brand relationship framework by Fournier (1998). Moreover, the sub-themes are also identified after various relationship types in accordance with our findings. The sub-themes are covering findings from the focus group and virtual observations, which are explained further below.

### Bringing up personal experiences: *The supportive friends*

One of the main findings in the agreeing part was that many consumers brought up personal experiences, where the brand had made a positive impact. When analyzing the way the consumers were mentioning and bringing up personal experiences, it felt like a friendship in which both parts were very supportive of each other. Many consumers talked about the campaign in a way that showed it had improved their lives for the better. This can be shown in the statement below on Nike's campaign "Dream Crazy" on YouTube.

*"...I have been feeling depressed that I broke my tibia couple weeks ago and haven't been able to do anything..I needed to see this video. I'm gonna get up and get around tomorrow and get some things done"* (YouTube).

Drawing upon this statement, it can be explained that the consumer acknowledged that the brand activism campaign made them feel more motivated to take on any personal hardship they faced in their lives. This can, according to Fournier (1998), be seen as *best friendships*, in the way that the relationship between the consumer and the brand is symbolized by "revelation of honesty, true self, and intimacy" (p.362). The campaign, in this case, helped the consumers to overcome any negative thoughts or physical barriers, which in the end, according to Elliott and Wattanasuwan (1998) is a way for the brand to become a part of the postmodern consumer's identity, and viewed as "major parts of their extended selves" (p. 134).

When it comes to Nike and their campaign "Dream Crazy", we found a lot more consumers who brought up personal experiences than the other two campaigns from Gillette and Ben & Jerry's. The majority of the consumers who had expressed their support by bringing up personal experiences were veterans who had served in the military. This could further be explained by the slogan of the campaign "*Believe in something. Even if it means sacrificing everything*" (The Guardian, 2019). Here, the word *sacrifice* became highly remarked upon since it became connected to people serving the military and sacrificing their lives for their countries. Many consumers got very upset by this, insisting that Nike and Colin Kaepernick were disgracing people who were serving in the military (The Guardian, 2019). Despite the backlash that Nike and Colin Kaepernick received for the campaign, many consumers, especially veterans and soldiers, supported them and shared their personal experiences. This is shown in the statements below from Facebook.

*"As a disabled veteran that has worked for two law enforcement agencies I love this and support it"* (Facebook).

*"I am a veteran and I stand with you and I kneel with you. #respect"* (Facebook).

Thus, it became apparent that the consumers who agreed on brand activism campaigns wanted to show that they supported the brand and the campaign by sharing personal stories that aligned with the campaign, which in turn would create a special bond between the brand and the consumer. The statements above also show how the consumers mentioned being reminded of their pasts with the help of the campaign. This could further be seen, according to Fournier (1998) as *childhood friendships*, in which the consumer is reminiscent of the earlier times of their lives. According to Fournier (1998), this also gives the consumer “comfort and security of the past self” (p. 362).

In the case of Ben & Jerry’s campaign and launching of their ice cream “Pecan Resist”, it was not easy to find consumers who agreed with the brand. We found this interesting since their campaign had many similarities to Nike’s campaign in the sense that they were both about the political climate in the United States. Nevertheless, some consumers did share personal information and experiences, but not in the same emotional, reminiscent, or intimate way as with Nike. Instead, the consumers shared personal information in another kind of way, a way that perhaps was more open and comical. This can be seen in the statement below from Instagram.

“*I’m lactose intolerant and imma still eat this, thanks for your support!*” (Instagram).

The statement above shows in what way the consumers were personal in supporting the campaign. When compared to the consumers from the Nike campaign, it was evident that the reaction of the campaign was not as emotional or intimate as Nike’s campaign. However, they still shared personal information, which in this case, still is relevant. Moreover, according to Fournier’s (1998) theory of consumer-brand relationship, this could be seen as another form of friendship; *compartmentalized friendship*. Compartmentalized friendships are friendships that are defined by a low intimacy, but a higher socioemotional reward, which makes it easy to leave and re-enter the relationship when needed (Fournier, 1998). In this case, the consumer stated that they were lactose intolerant, which explains that they may not eat ice cream that often. However, because of the campaign, they acknowledged the need to show that they were going to eat the ice cream because of how much they agreed with the campaign. Thus, the consumer chooses to enter the relationship whenever they feel like doing it, and can, in the same way, leave it whenever they feel like it, without conflicts.

In sum, the consumers expressed their opinions about the brand activism campaigns by bringing up personal information and experiences in which they could feel that they had something in common with the brands. When sharing personal information that had a connection to the campaigns, they showed that the brands had succeeded in delivering the message of their campaigns.

Even though these consumer-brand relationships differ, they still have that feeling of intimacy and honesty, which makes them trustworthy. Furthermore, some friendships could be dissolved easier than other friendships, for example, in the case of *compartmentalized friendships* compared to *best friendships* and *childhood friendships*. However, they all have that feeling of intimacy and feeling of trust. Thus it can be argued that *compartmentalized friendships* could be seen as strong as the two latter since there is a high level of trust between the consumers and the brands in the sense that they will always be there for each other when needed. Lastly, by analyzing our findings, these kinds of friendships have one thing in common: a sense of trust, meaning that the consumers correspond in a way that people do when having *supportive friends* who are loyal and always there no matter what and gives their support when needed.

### Defending the brand and its campaign: *The protective sibling*

In terms of agreeing with the brand activism campaigns, some consumers showed their support by defending the brand and the campaign, inferring that other consumers who did not agree with the campaign were the problem. The comments found that were of a protective tone, were communicated in a way that insulted other consumers who did not agree with the campaign. This is shown in the statement below from Nike's campaign "Dream Crazy" on YouTube.

"Omg shut up Trumpers 😂 he is not the first or last to protest during a national anthem. He protest PEACEFULLY and kneeled while you guys just sat. Many Veterans came to his defense. So shut up with your BS" (YouTube).

In the case of the statement above, the consumer has made a judgment based on who does not agree with the campaign, and has called them out by insulting them, calling them "Trumpers". This refers to the fact that the president of the United States, Donald Trump, had criticized Colin Kaepernick for kneeling during the national anthem before the campaign was launched. Moreover, Donald Trump also attacked Nike and the campaign, calling it "a terrible message" (The Guardian, 2019). Many consumers who supported or agreed with Donald Trump had the same opinions as him and thus also started to criticize Colin Kaepernick and Nike. Thus, it can be argued that "Trumpers" in this case was a nickname for all the consumers who did not agree with the campaign, putting them all in one "box". Furthermore, the consumer above is also defending the campaign by mentioning that these "Trumpers" opinions are lies and nonsense.

According to Fournier (1998), we can see this as a type of *committed partnership* in the sense that there is an extensive support system, trust and a commitment between the brand and the consumer to stay together despite "adverse circumstances" (p. 362). In line with insulting consumers who did not agree with the campaign, some consumers mentioned other brands in their comments to show the similarities between people who did not agree with the campaign. This could be found in the case of Ben & Jerry's and their campaign "Pecan Resist".

In many of the comments, the defensive consumers insulted other consumers and called them “idiots” or “stupid” since they did not support the campaign. However, the fascinating part about this was that many of these comments also remarked on other campaigns, such as Nike and their campaign “Dream Crazy. This can be shown in the statement below from Twitter.

*“LOVE THIS. THANK YOU FOR TAKING A STAND AND SPREADING THIS MESSAGE. People offended by this are bafflingly ignorant and void of compassion. It's fine, don't eat ice cream and burn your socks and shoes, your loss, idiots”* (Twitter).

This consumer is defending Ben & Jerry's campaign by insulting other consumers who have disagreed in the same way as shown above. However, in this case, the consumer is also mentioning “burning socks and shoes”, which is directed towards Nike and their campaign “Dream Crazy”. When Nike launched the campaign, they faced extensive backlash, and people started to burn their Nike shoes and socks as a way to boycott the brand (Bostock, 2018). Additionally, both campaigns from Nike and Ben & Jerry's had similar political meanings, thus the reason why this consumer chose to include Nike in their comment. By also including the reactions from Nike's campaign, the consumer is suggesting that the consumers who disagreed on the Ben & Jerry's campaign are the same people that burned their socks and shoes during Nike's campaign.

Analyzing further, some consumers defended the brand and the campaign by blaming it on a larger group of people and essentially themselves. In the case of Gillette and their campaign “The best a man can be”, the majority of the consumers did not agree with the campaign since they thought it emasculated men (Cerón, 2019). However, we managed to find some consumers who agreed with Gillette and the purpose of their campaign. However, instead of defending the brand and the campaign by insulting the people who were against the campaign, they chose to see the bigger picture of the problem that Gillette was trying to show. The statement below from LinkedIn is an example.

*“If all men behaved well, Gillette wouldn't have had to make an advert to remind us to do better. Every woman should be comfortable to go anywhere at any time without fear. When they can, then men have done enough; up until that point we can improve”* (LinkedIn).

The point of this statement is to show that Gillette was bringing up a fundamental issue of bullying and sexual harassment that needed to be addressed. Instead of directly attacking the disagreeing consumers, the author of this comment is showing the bigger picture of this issue and even including himself as part of the problem.

By mentioning ‘‘remind us to do better’’ and ‘‘we can improve’’, he chooses to request all men, including himself, to do better. Looking at the theory of the consumer-brand relationship by Fournier (1998), we can argue that this type of protective statement is a sort of *best friendship* in the sense that the consumers have a high level of self-revelation when they put themselves as part of the issue. Furthermore, with a high level of true self comes honesty and intimacy, which is needed when defending brand activism campaigns.

Our findings indicate that consumers are willing to protect a brand when needed. The majority of the consumers defended the brands by insulting the disagreeing consumers, to show that they were not able to understand the campaign entirely. Moreover, we found that the consumers would also state that they support the brand and their campaign in their comments before criticizing the people who did not agree with the campaign. This could further be argued as a way for the consumers to show that they are not like other consumers. However, some consumers chose not to criticize a particular group of people. Instead, they looked at the brand activism campaigns as a specific problem in society that everyone is responsible for, even themselves. In that case, they defended the campaign by including themselves as part of the problem. The relationships that we found were *best friendships* and *committed partnerships* in the way that the consumers protected, loved, and trusted the brands in a way that they were willing to defend them regardless of what other people would say about the brands and their campaigns. This can further be analyzed and seen as a *protective sibling*, that is always there for her/his other siblings and protects them when needed.

### Feeling proud and emotional of the brand: *The proud parent*

Our findings further showed that many consumers were mentioning that they were feeling proud of being a customer after the brand launched their activism campaign. Moreover, the consumers felt emotional and proud of the brand, since the campaign made them feel either touched or happy and increased their positive thoughts for the brand. This can be shown in these statements below on Nike’s campaign ‘‘Dream Crazy’’ on YouTube.

*‘‘This made me cry. This man sacrificed everything for what he believed in’’* (YouTube).

*‘‘OMG this ad makes me teary-eyed, every single time! Beautiful!’’* (YouTube).

Drawing upon these statements, the consumers mention feeling emotional and proud about Nike and Colin Kaepernick. According to Fournier (1998) this type of reaction can be seen as *committed partnerships* in the sense that the consumers are loving and trusting towards the brand in a way that is reminiscent of a ‘‘loving home’’ (Bertilsson, 2017, p. 178). The interesting part about the statements above are the way in which the consumers have expressed themselves; sounding like proud and emotional parents in which the brand is their ‘‘child’’.



Analyzing further, some consumers showed how proud they were of the brand activism campaigns by mentioning that they had worked for the brand. These consumers then have had an internal outlook on the brands, and have represented them at a point in their lives, which gives them another type of connection that other consumers perhaps do not have with the brands. This can be seen in the statements below on Ben & Jerry's campaign "Pecan Resist" on Instagram, and Nike's campaign "Dream Crazy" on LinkedIn.

*“❤️❤️❤️❤️❤️ I'm so grateful and proud that my first job (which started out as an internship & lasted around 4 years) was Ben and Jerry's. I even met THE Jerry. So much love pours out of this company ❤️❤️❤️❤️❤️❤️❤️❤️❤️ thank you guys for being so damn awesome ”* (Instagram).

*“I'm glad to say I worked for Nike! Nike has made me proud and I'm glad they're moving with Colin Kaepernick”* (LinkedIn).

Drawing upon these statements, it becomes apparent that the consumers are proud to have worked for these brands and are happy to share it with others. By mentioning words such as "proud" and "grateful", they are showing their gratitude and trust towards the brands, where they have had the chance to be a part of the brand. Moreover, a high level of trust can also lead to more loyal consumers, which, according to Delgado-Ballester and Luis Munuera-Alemán (2001), allows the consumer-brand relationship to grow and develop over time. Furthermore, these types of statements can be seen as *best friendships* in the sense that they are loyal and trusting towards the brands, who have been a part of the consumers' lives on a more intimate level, and have supported the consumers in shaping their lives (Bertilsson, 2017).

In the case of Gillette and their campaign "The best a man can be", there were none to less comments where the consumers showed their gratitude. However, among the negative comments, a single mother pointed out how important it was to focus on the societal issues that Gillette was mentioning in its campaign, such as sexual harassment and bullying. This was done in a special way and is shown below.

*“LOVE. THIS. Thank you! - A single mother that just taught her son how to shave (with a Gillette)”* (Facebook)

The consumer shows her satisfaction with the campaign by mentioning the importance it has for young boys, including her son. By mentioning that she has taught her son to shave with a Gillette-razor, she is showing that Gillette has been a part of a special moment in her son's life; learning how to shave. By mentioning that she is a mother, and that Gillette is a part of her son's everyday life, she is indirectly mentioning how grateful and proud she is of Gillette and their activism campaign. According to Fournier (1998), this can be seen as *compartmentalized friendships* between the consumer and the brand. The intimacy is low, but the relationship form is characterised as a frequent brand, used for special occasions, which in this case is when learning her son how to shave.

In sum, we found that many consumers were feeling proud of the brands and their activism campaigns, but mentioned it in different ways. Some of the consumers were very emotional in their comments, stating that they were "teary-eyed". Moreover, some consumers showed that the brands had been a great part of their lives, for example consumers who had been working for the brands, or consumers who had used the brands' products on special occasions. The relationships that we found were *committed partnerships*, *best friendships* and *compartmentalized friendships*. Although these types of consumer-brand relationships are different, the consumers all showed some kind of gratitude and pride that can be seen as a *protective parent*, who will always be proud of their children in one way or another.

## 6.2 Consumers disagreeing on brand activism campaigns

As much as consumers' can support and show gratitude to a brand, they can show their disapproval by, for example, boycotting the brand. This phenomenon is called consumer resistance (Cambefort & Roux, 2019). When consumers realize that their values do not match the brand's values, they will stop buying from the brand. This eventually affects the consumer-brand relationship in a negative way (Odour & de Pechpeyrou, 2010). Our findings indicated that consumers who disagreed with the brand activism campaigns inferred to switch away from a brand since there was a misalignment between the consumers' values and the brands' values. Many consumers even stated that they would never buy from the brand again. To analyze these different statements further, the following sub-themes have been established:

- (1) *Boycotting the brand: A breakup*
- (2) *Mentioning the brands former history: The conflicting in-laws*
- (3) *Focusing on traditional marketing activities: The old-fashioned partner*

These sub-themes are established in relation to Fournier's (1998) consumer-brand relationship framework and dissolution model for relationships. Moreover, we have developed two new consumer-brand relationship forms to contribute to Fournier's (1998) theoretical framework.

### Boycotting the brand: *A break-up*

One of the main findings showed that many consumers stated that they were willing to boycott the brand, if they disagreed with the brand activism campaigns. When analyzing the different statements, many consumers shared that they had been consumers for many years, which almost felt like a break-up, since they have supported the brand for a long time. This was clearly shown in Gillette's campaign, "The best a man can be". The goal of the campaign was, as mentioned earlier, to address societal problems such as bullying, sexism, and toxic masculinity (Topping, Lyons, Weaver, 2019).



Many consumers expressed how they had been lifelong customers of their products and that the campaign ruined their image and their relationship with Gillette. This can be shown in the comments below from Facebook.

*“30 years of shaving with Gillette razors ends today. I’ll never purchase another product from #Gillette or #Procter&Gamble”* (Facebook).

*“Congrats, you have just lost a lifelong customer. I will never buy anything from you again”*(Facebook)

Comments such as "ending a lifelong relationship" and "I'll never purchase another product from Gillette" appeared several times on the various platforms. According to Fournier (1998), the consumers faced a contradiction, on the one hand, the consumers were defined as being in *committed partnerships* with the brand, in the way that their relationship with the brand was symbolized as a "long term, voluntarily imposed, socially supported union" with high intimacy (Fournier 1998 p. 362; Bertilsson 2017 p. 178). However, according to the consumers, the campaign had failed as many consumers disagreed with the campaign and chose to boycott the brand. In that sense, it can be argued that many customers went from having a *committed partnership* with the brand to breaking up with the brand, and as a result, becoming *enmities* with the brand. Thus the consumer has to find a new brand in order to show that they have started a new chapter in their lives (Fournier, 1998, p. 362). Several consumers illustrated this, such as the comment below regarding Ben & Jerry's campaign "Pecan Resist" on Twitter.

*“Stay out of the political arena. I don’t need to know which side of the aisle you stand on because that affects my purchasing power. Know that I will NOT support your political agenda & no one in my family will purchase your products. Thanks for making it clear where you stand”* (Twitter).

According to the statement above, the consumer is stating that she does not want the brand to get involved in the political arena. Also, Fournier (1998) brings up the dissolution model as a way to conceptualize relationship deterioration (Bertilsson 2017). Going from having an intimate relationship to boycotting the brand is, according to Fournier (1998), seen as *partner-oriented stresses*. This type of stress occurs when one of the parts in the relationship changes their values or personality, making the relationship outmoded. In this case, the brand may change its meaning through various actions such as supporting a political party, which can result in that the consumers can no longer identify their values with the brand, who therefore dissolves the relationship.

Drawing upon this, many consumers stated that they would boycott the brands since the brands' values had changed and did not align with their values anymore. This can be seen in the Gillette campaign “The best a man can be,” where we noticed that the consumers claimed that the commercial was created by feminists to ridicule men, meaning that the campaign did not represent men in a good light. The comments below illustrate this further.

*“Sorry gillette, I enjoy being a man so take your pc and shove it. #nevergillette. men should be better and not objectify women!! Hypocrites caving into the metoomovement” (Facebook)*

*“Gillette missed the mark on this one. The way they perceive men in this ad shows that it was written by a bunch of women.” (LinkedIn)*

*“If the goal was to sell me razors, it failed. I will actively seek out alternative and generic brands. I'm not going to reward anti-male feminist gender slander.” (LinkedIn)*

Drawing upon these statements, it can be explained that the brand activism campaign made some consumers feel misunderstood and attacked concerning their values. This can, according to Fournier (1998), be seen as an *avoidance-driven relationship* where the consumer wants to move away from the brand by switching to a new brand because of dislike of the old brands' activities (Fournier 1998 p. 362; Bertilsson 2017 p. 178). Moreover, according to Odour and de Pechpeyrou (2010), this type of resistance is a way to protect oneself from getting manipulated by brands. In this case, the campaign created a misalignment between the consumers' values and the brands' values, which made the consumers' want to cut the relationship and switch to another brand.

Moreover, when it comes to the participants in our focus group, it is essential to note that the majority of the participants mentioned more about brands and campaigns that they did not support, rather than the opposite. Many of the participants stated that they would not buy from a brand if their activism campaign did not align with their values and opinions. Hereby, the participants would take more action regarding issues that they do not agree with, rather than issues they do agree with. This can also be illustrated in the quote below.<sup>4</sup>

*“I remember “Chick-fil-a” which is chicken burger (ed. restaurant) and they are very much against gays and against abortion. They were creating a lot of social media debates and wanted to tell people about the ‘normal family’, and I don't like this point of view, so in the end I will never purchase any products from them” (Focus Group: Laura).*

In sum, when brands take political and social stances, there is a risk of losing consumers if there is a misalignment between the consumer's values and the brand's values. Also, we found out that if the consumers do not agree with the brand's activism campaign, they tend to boycott the brand, so-called *partner-oriented stresses* (Fournier, 1998). The consumer-brand relationships that were formed could be reminiscent of going from having committed *partnerships*, to "breaking-up" with the brand. The other relationships that were formed consisted of *enmities* and *avoidance-driven relationships*. The difference between *enmities* and *avoidance-driven relationships* is that *avoidance-driven relationships* are motivated by the reason to switch to another brand because of disliking the old brand and not because of an attraction to a new brand.

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<sup>4</sup> Part of the sub-theme: *A break-up* has been taken from the Qualitative Research Methods course (BUSR31)

Even though there are different types of relationships, the results are the same, which is that the consumers move away from a brand if there is a misalignment between the brands' and consumers' values, which as a result of this, provides us an overall understanding of the sub-theme "a break-up."

### Mentioning the brands former history: *The conflicting in-laws*

Looking through our empirical data, we found that many consumers who disagreed with the brand activism campaigns showed it by bringing up issues the brand had faced before, and that had affected their reputation negatively. The reason for this was to show that the brands' activism campaigns were nothing but another way of financial gain. The following statements on YouTube about Nike's campaign "Dream Crazy" highlighted this:

"Meanwhile in a sweltering rodent-infested sweat shop in Southeast Asia..." (YouTube).

"Cool story Nike i bet this inspired the children that work in the sweatshops manufacturing your products to look for a job that pays more than 20c an hour" (YouTube).

"I think it's double standards from for example Nike's side to make such a campaign and then still have sweatshops and things like that in the back. It's like they want us to focus on this instead of all the shit they are doing" (Focus group: Daniel).

Drawing upon these statements, it is evident that the consumers were trying to shed light on issues that Nike has been facing before, to show how implausible their campaign was. Furthermore, it can be analyzed that Nike has, for a long time, been accused of using sweatshops and child labor to produce their products (Lutz, 2015). By launching a campaign that has to do with equality and racism, it automatically contradicts to Nike's sweatshop and child labor accusations. Thus, it can be argued that the consumers, in this case, lose their trust towards Nike as a brand. Additionally, with distrust against Nike, the relationship gets worse to the point that they may stop buying any products from Nike. According to Fournier (1998), this type of relationship is a type of *avoidance-driven relationship*. This relationship is defined by a motivation to move away from a partner because of dislikes, rather than changing to a new partner because of attraction. In this case, the consumers do not agree with the campaign and feel like moving away from Nike because of distrust. Through this, the consumers may find a rebound, another brand so that they can get over Nike.

Similar behavior could be observed in the case of Gillette and Ben & Jerry's. Since global corporations own them both, many consumers tried to shed light on problems that had occurred or that the corporations had been accused of. Comments about sweatshops and child labor were pervasive for all three cases. When it came to Gillette and their campaign "The best a man can be", many consumers criticized the owner Procter & Gamble instead of Gillette.

Thus, Procter & Gamble can, in this case, be seen as the ‘‘mother’’ brand, which essentially is responsible for the ‘‘wrongdoings’’ of her daughters, which in this case is Gillette. This can be seen in the statement below from YouTube.

*‘‘Is the young chap pictured one of the children used in your forced labour camps Procter & Gamble?’’* (YouTube).

This statement shows how the consumer accuses Procter & Gamble of using sweatshops and child labor for their products, while not mentioning Gillette as a brand. Moreover, by criticizing the mother brand directly, it shows that the consumer not just sees Gillette in a negative way, but also all other brands that Procter & Gamble owns. This brand activism campaign fundamentally questions the liability of the whole corporation. Similar statements could be found on Ben & Jerry’s campaign ‘‘Pecan Resist’’, where consumers accused the mother brand, Unilever, of damaging the environment when producing their products. However, in this case, the consumers were quick to also blame Ben & Jerry’s for the campaign, showing that both the mother brand and the daughter brand did wrong. This is further explained by the statement below from Instagram.

*‘‘Coming from the guys that sold out to the Monsanto-like Unilever corporation. @benandjerrys How much environmental damage, deforestation and mercury dumping has occurred since 2000 when you sold your beloved ice cream company to the giant conglomerate? You’re very quick to spew a progressive opinion, but in typical fashion, you’re more than willing to sell your soul for financial gain’’* (Instagram).

The statement above shows how the consumer criticizes Ben & Jerry’s for being a part of an ‘‘evil’’ conglomerate only for financial gain. Additionally, the consumers lose their trust in both the mother brand and the daughter brand, by seeing them as hypocritical companies that only care about financial gain. The decline in trust can, according to Fournier’s (1998) dissolution model, be seen as a type of *relational stress*, in which the brand has broken their trust. Thus the consumer can choose to leave the relationship in the form of consumer resistance. Cambefort and Roux (2019) highlight the fact that rejecting a brand because of its associations and behaviors of its parent company is a form of consumer resistance.

Furthermore, our findings also showed that consumers who accused the mother brand of different problems also involved other daughter brands who had nothing to do with the campaign. In the case of Gillette, consumers mentioned other daughter brands of Procter & Gamble and criticized them for the campaign. An example is shown below from YouTube.

*‘‘Procter & Gamble own the Gillette brand. They need to make a Tampax advert targeting female behaviour. Suggested slogan: "Just because you have a c\*nt doesn't mean you have to be one!"* (YouTube).

Drawing upon this statement, the consumer is mentioning another brand of Procter & Gamble, Tampax, which is a feminine hygiene brand. As mentioned earlier, we found out that the majority of negative comments came from men who felt that Gillette was hypocritical in the sense that the campaign did not match with the earlier brand image "The best a man can get", which was about encouraging one's masculinity (Gillette, 2020). By mentioning a brand that focuses on female hygiene, the consumer tries to give an example of how a similar campaign like Gillette's would look like if Tampax would launch a similar one about femininity.

According to Fournier (1998), this type of criticism against the mother brand can also be seen as a type of *avoidance-driven relationship* in the sense that the consumers do not agree with the campaign and want to boycott it. However, it can be argued that just because the consumers are criticizing the companies for only wanting to capitalize on social and political issues, it may not necessarily mean that they will stop buying from the other brands that the corporations own. In this case, the corporations such as Unilever or Procter & Gamble can be seen as the consumers' in-laws, and the daughter brands as the one in a relationship with the consumer, and the child of the consumer's in-laws. The in-laws are seen as responsible for all decisions that their daughter-brands do. When issues arise, the consumer copes with it by blaming it on their partner's parents, the in-laws. However, this does not necessarily mean that their relationship dissolves. This is a new type of relationship that we have created to support Fournier's typology of consumer-brand relationship forms (1998), which we call *the conflicting in-laws*.

Overall, it becomes apparent that the consumers, in this case, do not want to understand the campaign; they feel like the brand is being hypocritical in the sense that they have other internal issues to solve rather than to take on social or political issues. This could be seen in all three cases, whereas especially with Gillette and Ben & Jerry's since big corporations own them. Many consumers criticized the campaigns by blaming it on the mother brands and leaving out the daughter brand itself, which shows distrust towards big corporations. The relationships that were formed consisted of *avoidance-driven relationships* in the sense that the consumers do not want to support the brands because of their opinions and because of distrust towards the mother brands. However, it does not mean that they will stop buying from the other daughter brands, which is why we developed the *conflicting in-laws'* relationship, where the consumer blames and criticizes the actions of the daughter brand on the mother brand; the in-laws.

### Focusing on traditional marketing activities: The *old-fashioned partner*

Lastly, our findings showed that many consumers did not like brand activism campaigns because they did not focus on the product. Instead, consumers stated that the brands should stick to selling their products and leave societal and political issues to politicians and lawmakers.

Regarding our focus group, we asked the respondents whether they think it is suitable for brands to go into political and social debates or not. Our findings indicated that the respondents think that brands should not take part in discussions in society that are not a part of their business area. This can be illustrated below.

*... "Don't go into debates that do not fit into their brands." (Focus group: Frida)*

Concerning the statement above, it can be evaluated that the brand needs to have a connection with the context of the activism campaign. Also, authenticity is valued high among consumers, and therefore launching activism campaigns that do not fit into the brand image can be seen as morally inauthentic and leave the consumers in a confused stage. Thus, brands touching other topics that do not fit into their original business values might turn into negative branding (Koch, 2017). Another example can be seen in the statement below from the focus group mentioning Nike's campaign "Dream Crazy".

*"We live in a capitalist society where every brand just wants to make profit and I think that sometimes we get brainwashed without even knowing. Nike makes ads like this and at the same time has sweatshops. Brands should leave politics alone and let politicians handle that." (Focus group: Daniel).*

According to the statement above, the consumer thinks that brand activism campaigns are just a way to earn more money. Moreover, he explains that, in this case, Nike is a double-standard since they have other problems they need to solve, and thus should focus on them instead of going into political and social debates. Furthermore, these kinds of opinions can also be seen regarding Gillette and their campaign "The best a man can be". Some consumers may be questioning whether they are buying grooming products or supporting a political initiative. A questioning consumer from LinkedIn illustrates this in the statement below.

*"Is it ever a good idea to alienate half your market by jumping headlong into a polarizing social/political issue?" (LinkedIn)*

Moreover, the statement above can create a debate about whether it is worth mixing political and social issues in marketing activities. Beyond this, a brand should be aware of whether they are polarizing society and if it has financial consequences for the company. In addition to Fournier's (1998) dissolution model, we argue that using brand activism advertisements as marketing activities can turn into *relational stresses*.



This can happen if the consumers disagree on what the brand chooses to stand behind, which slowly breaks the trust with the consumers.

When companies create brand activism campaigns, there is a chance of losing consumers. Since brand activism campaigns are a relatively new marketing approach affecting consumers' feelings and attitudes, there is a risk that consumers disagree with the advertisement. By developing a novel relationship-form in the current consumer-brand framework of Fournier (1998), we have implemented a relationship form named *the old-fashioned partner*".

These statements above all have in common that the consumers do not think that brands should focus on societal and political issues in society. Instead, they should sell their products and move on. By analyzing these kinds of statements, we developed a novel relationship-form named *the old-fashioned partner*". The relationship is defined as when the partner appreciates traditional marketing activities such as advertisements focusing on product and price. The reason for implementing a new element in Fournier's (1998) consumer-relationship framework is because brand activism campaigns are a relatively new and popular marketing strategy, focusing on brands participating in political and social issues in society. Hence, the brand aims to create attention among a current problem in society and, at the same time, promote their products in an advertisement. As an old-fashioned partner, the consumer has feelings of distrust towards brand activism campaigns and does not think that brands should implement these kinds of marketing activities.

In sum, it can be argued that the consumers are skeptical when it comes to brands using brand activism campaigns in their marketing activities. Moreover, several consumers from our findings state that brands should not be participating in issues in society that do not fit into their brand. Hence, brands touching other themes that do not fit into their original business values might turn into negative branding and can result in brands being inauthentic. Furthermore, when using a brand activism focus as a marketing strategy, it can create a more polarized society. Concerning this, brands can create debates among specific issues. However, if the brands' consumers do not agree with the actions, e.g., supporting a particular political party, the brand will be breaking trust with the consumers, which can result in a loss of consumers.

## 7. Conclusions

*In the following chapter, we discuss the findings of the analysis that has been obtained from the qualitative research using the virtual observations and our focus group. Hereby, we have been connecting our findings with previous literature and theory in our analysis. Firstly, we summarize our main findings on how agreeing and disagreeing consumers differ from each other. This is followed by our novel theoretical contributions on Fournier's (1998) consumer-brand relationship framework. Finally, we outline our research limitations and provide suggestions for future research that could be interesting to analyze within this area.*

### 7.1 Distinction between two types of consumers: agreeing and disagreeing consumers on brand activism campaigns

This study aimed at gaining a deeper understanding of which types of consumer-brand relationships brand activism campaigns form. What made this a topic of high relevance is to understand the combination of branding with societal and political issues, and how it affects consumer-brand relationships. Additionally, more companies are engaging in political and social debates in society without knowing how it forms their relationship with the consumers. Hence, the consequences for brands participating in social and political debates have not been fully understood since no previous study is present in the literature.

As regarding our research question, we found various types of consumer-brand relationships depending on how the consumers reacted to the chosen brand activism campaigns. We found out that when consumers agreed with the brand activism campaigns, their relationship with the brand was strengthened. Besides, the consumers were more willing to support the brand and buy their products or services. Moreover, we identified that many of the consumers' comments and reactions on the brand activism campaigns were both personal and emotional since they mentioned personal experiences they had with the brand. Additionally, we observed that some consumers were willing to defend their preferred brand even if the brand experienced resistance from other people. Finally, the reactions of the consumers who supported brand activism campaigns could be classified as loving, supportive, and loyal partners.

Furthermore, we found out that brand activism campaigns also can develop negative consequences. Based on our findings, breaking trust with the consumers and polarising the population, even more, are some of the consequences brand activism campaigns can create. According to the consumers' perceptions, we found out that brands being inauthentic and supporting a political/social initiative that does not fit into their business values can lead to a loss of consumers. Additionally, many consumers stated that companies should stay out of the political area and let the politicians and lawmakers deal with issues in society.



In line with this, we experienced that some consumers changed their former positive opinions on the brand after seeing their brand activism campaign. Additionally, this can happen if the brand supports efforts that the consumer does not agree with. This can result in the consumer no longer identifying with the brand's values and therefore terminating the relationship. As previously mentioned, this can, according to McTavish (2018), be categorized as a belief-driven buying behavior, since the consumer values the brand's principles over their products.

In sum, with the use of Fournier's (1998) consumer-brand relationship framework and dissolution model, we found out that when consumers agree with the brand's activism campaigns, the types of relationships they form with the brand are: *best friendships*, *childhood friendships*, *compartmentalized friendships* or *committed partnerships*. On the other side, we learned that when consumers disagree on brand activism advertisements, their relationships can be: *enmities*, *rebounds/avoidance-driven relationships*, *conflicting in-laws*, or *old-fashioned partners*. Moreover, we took the opportunity to develop two consumer-relationship forms; *the conflicting in-laws* and *the old-fashioned partner*, which are further explained in our theoretical contribution.

The conclusion of this study is that brand activism campaigns form many different types of relationships with consumers depending on if they agree or disagree with the campaigns. When consumers agree on brands participating in political/social issues in society, they become proud and support the brand even more than before. Their relationship with the brand also develops and gets stronger. Moreover, it can be concluded that when consumers disagree on brands participating in political/social issues in society, the consequences can result in consumers boycotting or resisting the brand. The output of this study can, therefore, help professionals that are working within sales and marketing, to assess whether the risk is worth taking. However, with this study, we explored that many consumers were skeptical of brand activism campaigns; therefore, brands must consider the consequences very carefully when choosing activism efforts for their marketing campaigns.

## 7.2 Theoretical contributions

In this section, we explain our theoretical contributions to support the current consumer-brand relationship theory by Fournier (1998). With this study, we contribute with two novel relationship forms, namely *the conflicting in-laws* and *the old-fashioned partner*.

The focus of this study was to analyze the types of consumer-brand relationships that brand activism campaigns form. Overall, we agree with the consumer-brand framework of Fournier (1998). However, we argue that brand activism campaigns create different types of relationships between the consumer and the brand. The framework of Fournier was developed in 1998, which was before brand activism was used as a marketing technique.

Hence, in our analysis, we observed new consumer-brand relationship forms that develop when brands launch activism campaigns. When implementing two novel relationship forms, we are providing a more current and newer understanding of this phenomenon.

During our analysis, we found out that most of the consumers supported traditional marketing activities such as advertisements focusing on product/price instead of brand activism strategies focusing on supporting political/societal issues in society. Additionally, we were not able to define this type of relationship in the current consumer-brand framework of Fournier (1998). Therefore, we developed the relationship form: *the old-fashioned partner* (see figure 4).

Moreover, we developed one more relationship form: *the conflicting in-laws* (see figure 4), which has been used in the analysis when mentioning the brand's history. Hence, the in-law relationship is seen as parents being responsible for all decisions their kids make. Concerning this, the mother brand will be held in charge. Additionally, we found this very important to incorporate as a relationship form in the consumer-brand framework since when issues arise, individuals tend to blame it on their partner's parents, e.g., Procter & Gamble in the case of Gillette.

<b>Contributions to Fournier's (1998) Consumer-brand Relationship Forms</b>	<b>Definition</b>
<b>The conflicting in-laws relationship</b>	The in-law relationships are seen as a parent (mother-brand) being responsible for all the decisions their children makes (daughter-brands). Moreover, the relationship is seen as an in-law, since the mother-brand has a lot of power over the daughter-brand. When issues arise, the consumers are blaming it on their partner's parents; the in-laws. However, this does not necessarily mean that their relationship dissolves.
<b>The old-fashioned partner</b>	When the partner appreciates traditional marketing activities such as advertisements focusing on product and price. Brand activism campaigns are new marketing strategies focusing on brands participating in political and social issues in society. Hence, the brand aims to create attention among a current problem in society and at the same time promote their products in an advertisement.

Figure 4: Theoretical contributions to Fournier's (1998) Consumer-brand relationship framework (Own Figure, 2020)

This study contributes to the literature of brand activism campaigns by providing two new relationship forms in Fournier's (1998) consumer-brand framework. In addition to that, this study supports the research of Bengtsson (2003), who argues on the limitations of the consumer-brand relationship, for example, in which context the relationship is analyzed. With this argument in mind, we have developed consumer-brand relationship forms that can be used in context with brand activism strategies. Thereby, future researchers will have the opportunity to use our contribution to the Fournier's (1998) consumer-brand relationship framework to categorize which relationship types consumers and brands form leveraging brand activism campaigns. In the end, this knowledge can be used to identify consumer loyalty and satisfaction.

### 7.3 Research limitations and future research

This study was designed with two different data collection methods: (1) *a netnographic approach*, and (2) *a focus group*. Virtual or internet-mediated observations can bring different results than focus groups. When investigating consumers online, we found that people tend to be more open in terms of sharing their true opinions. Therefore, it has been easier to examine if the consumers agreed or disagreed with brand activism campaigns, because of their open and clear proverb. In regard to the time limit of this study, we were not able to analyze more brand activism campaigns, including extra case examples and by investigating consumer reactions on more online platforms. Therefore, we decided to focus on three specific brand activism campaigns. However, the outcome of this study could be different when investigating other brand activism campaigns, which could lead to other types of consumer-brand relationships.

Moreover, the focus group of this study was conducted at Lund University. We aimed to create a second focus group with a more diverse audience since all the participants were students. However, it was not possible to collect another focus group due to the current COVID-19 pandemic that has been spreading during our project. In this case, it has almost been impossible to collect primary data in the form of interviews and focus groups after the 12th of March 2020 because of lockdowns and social distancing. Therefore, we chose to conduct an additional study on brand activism campaigns by performing an online investigation in the form of virtual observations. Furthermore, this study has been made with a qualitative method. However, by doing a quantification of the respondents from the focus group's perspective can be beneficial, increasing the validation of our findings.

For future research, it would be interesting to include other kinds of consumers in focus groups, for example, different nationalities and backgrounds (e.g., professionals). This can result in different perspectives. Moreover, this study could be extended to include consumers buying decisions, which future researchers can investigate in order to understand if brand activism campaigns have a positive, negative, or a neutral effect on consumers' buying behavior.

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## Appendix 1. Virtual observations

### Nike campaign “Dream Crazy”

Platform	Link	Total amount of comments
YouTube	<a href="https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wyHI3IrJOR8">https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wyHI3IrJOR8</a>	637
Facebook	<a href="https://www.facebook.com/kaepernick7/photos/a.560424880678425/1855085104545723/?type=3&amp;theater">https://www.facebook.com/kaepernick7/photos/a.560424880678425/1855085104545723/?type=3&amp;theater</a>	8.500
LinkedIn	<a href="https://www.linkedin.com/feed/news/nikes-kaepernick-ad-scores-1815737/">https://www.linkedin.com/feed/news/nikes-kaepernick-ad-scores-1815737/</a>	5.000

### Gillette campaign “The Best Men Can Be”

Platform	Link	Total amount of comments
YouTube	<a href="https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=koPmuEyP3a0">https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=koPmuEyP3a0</a>	457.526
Facebook	<a href="https://www.facebook.com/watch/?v=385798698841904">https://www.facebook.com/watch/?v=385798698841904</a>	2.100
LinkedIn	<a href="https://www.linkedin.com/pulse/best-man-can-get-men-steve-blakeman/">https://www.linkedin.com/pulse/best-man-can-get-men-steve-blakeman/</a>	400

### Ben & Jerry’s campaign “Pecan Resist”

Platform	Link	Total amount of comments
Instagram	<a href="https://www.instagram.com/p/Bpj2vQ4g2LD/">https://www.instagram.com/p/Bpj2vQ4g2LD/</a>	201
Twitter	<a href="https://twitter.com/benandjerrys/status/1057274202284285952">https://twitter.com/benandjerrys/status/1057274202284285952</a>	14.300

## Appendix 2. Focus Group (Transcribed)

The focus group is taken from our Qualitative Research course (BUSR31). 10th of March 2020.

Questions	Answers (from the participants)
1. Have you heard about the Nike and Dove campaign before we showed you the video?	<p><u>Simon</u>: Yes, I have heard about both.</p> <p><u>Daniel</u>: Yes, I have.</p> <p><u>Frida</u>: Yes, I have. Nice to see the timeline of what happened.</p> <p><u>Laura</u>: I have seen the Nike campaign before, but not the Dove campaign, but I have seen some similairs Dove commercials that was pretty much about the same.</p> <p><u>Sofie</u>: I have only seen the Dove campaign before.</p>
2. Do you buy stuff from Nike and Dove? After seeing the video would you continue buying stuff from Nike? Did the video make a difference about your view on Nike?	<p><u>Frida</u>: I buy from Nike, and Dove sometimes such as shower gels. It Doesn't affect me that much because my first perception was that they took a big risk with having Colin K, but for me i think its cool that they were using him. Nike stands for something and he also stands for something = good decision. More attention in the US because they are very patriotic/nationalist = gets more attention in US than in Sweden. Not that much difference since they use many athletes, and they can sometimes be commercial. Since I already knew about it, my perceptions of Nike are still the same.</p> <p><u>Laura</u>: Yes I buy stuff from both of them.</p> <p><u>Sofie</u>: Yes I buy from both as well.</p> <p><u>Laura</u>: I will continue buying stuff from Nike and I think that Nike makes me feel more positive about the brand, because Nike supports my own personal opinions. However, if they weren't supporting my opinions - I will never consume from the brand.</p> <p><u>Sofie</u>: I think it was a good action, I will support these brands, since I believe freedom of speech. But that's maybe because we are from Scandinavia and the Americans are a bit more patriotic and</p>



	<p>nationalists</p> <p><u>Daniel</u>: I did buy things from both Nike and Dove, but I would say that I buy more from Dove than Nike. I have actually stopped buying from Nike a long time ago. The video did not make that much difference. I think it's double standards from for example Nike's side to make such a campaign and then still have sweatshops and things like that in the back. It's like they want us to focus on this instead of all the shit they are doing. When it comes to Dove, I have seen the video a long time ago, and I remember that I thought the video was nice and very relevant. Today it is also relevant but maybe not as much.</p> <p><u>Simon</u>: I don't buy that much from Dove, the quality is not that good. However, I do buy from Nike. And yes, I would still buy stuff from Nike. It did not really change my views on Nike. Mostly because I have already seen the campaign, but even though it did not change anything.</p>
<p>3. If the politicians do not go into a topic such as racism (from the Nike example), do you think that it is a good idea that brands are participating in the discussion and creating a debate about the theme?</p>	<p><u>Daniel</u>: No, not really. We live in a capitalist society where every brand just wants to make profit and I think that sometimes we get brainwashed without even knowing. Nike makes ads like this and at the same time has sweatshops. Brands should leave politics alone and let politicians handle that.</p> <p><u>Frida</u>: Depends on the brand. In one way it's good because problems lie that need attention and when big brands do something like that they give the problems attention. Need to talk about it.</p> <p>Brands do something and people talk about it. For example Nike, uses a lot of sports athletes, so it is a good fit between the brand and the person they are using. But they need to be careful so it doesn't turn into greenwashing. Don't go into debates that do not fit into their brands.</p> <p><u>Simon</u>: Yes, I think it is very good since they are creating a buzz and a debate, which hopefully leads to the politicians talking about it. Some organizations are very powerful and they have power to change a lot.</p> <p><u>Laura</u>: I think it's a difficult questions, sometimes it is good to go into some themes, other cases should be left for the politicians</p>

	<p><u>Sofie</u>: I think that racism is a topic that the politicians have not touched enough and therefore I think it's a good idea that a brand such as Nike participates in the discussion</p>
<p>4. Do you think that brands are a better option for more positive change than for example law makers, politicians or activist groups etc?</p>	<p><u>Frida</u>: I still think politicians and lawmakers have the power to do the change. With brand, its better that they give the problem attention. The final decision will be on the lawmakers. Tension towards the problem, making people discuss it = awareness.</p> <p><u>Laura</u>: Maybe more relatable when a brand is doing it. Because, when you are already supporting a brand it is easier to change your behavior. I will support brands more than political makers. I think brands are having a more positive effect on the population.</p> <p><u>Sofie</u>: I really think it depends on the brand, if they go into different topics, that are not a part of their core-competencies it might be a little bit weird.</p> <p><u>Simon</u>: I still think that lawmakers and politicians make the changes, but brands can be a good 'start' for talking about a certain subject or problem.</p> <p><u>Daniel</u>: No, as I said before. It kind of ruins the whole reason why brands are brands. They now know that they can make money on being 'activists', and so thus I think we will see more from random brands who talk about social issues just to stay relevant. Politics is not about staying relevant.</p>
<p>5. What do you think about brands participating in social and political debates?</p> <p>And could you imagine consuming products from a brand for that reason? (for example you don't buy so much from a brand, but then they have a campaign about brand activism and could you then imagine start buying from them?)</p> <p>These kinds of commercials/campaigns is that someone you remember?</p>	<p><u>Frida</u>: Depends about the brands, how it fits with the values. Dove = beauty products = show a theme and go with it. "The things we see are not reality". If nobody mentions it, then people will not know much about it. Brands also need to be careful and not take it too far.</p> <p><u>Laura</u>: I think they should be very careful, but I think that brands should engage in social and political debates.</p> <p><u>Sofie</u>: I agree.</p> <p><u>Daniel</u>: I think they want to hide something and that is why they want us to focus on what they have to say and what they think is "important". I call bullshit.</p>

	<p><u>Interviewer:</u> Could you imagine consuming products from a brand for that reason?</p> <p><u>Frida:</u> No, I don't think so. Because, no when i start thinking about it, i think it's good.</p> <p>When I think about Dove, I think about the campaign with the women. BUT when I choose products, I think about other factors -&gt; but it helps with the perception of the brand. I still think I will go with other products, such as design, quality, price, what I am used to buying etc. I don't think I buy a product because they have done a commercial, but somewhere in my mind I have it such as perception. More about the perception of the brand. When I think about Dove they have done a good job and this is in my mind.</p> <p><u>Daniel:</u> No, when brands start with the activism, I lose interest. Mainly because many brands are hypocrites, especially the bigger ones and I always try to do research about the brand before deciding what to do.</p> <p><u>Simon:</u> It depends on what type of brand it is. I don't look at the brand that much when I shop, I look more at style and quality. But if a brand would stand up for something that I believe in, I would maybe consider buying from that brand next that I am shopping for a certain product and they have it.</p> <p><u>Laura:</u> If I have to choose between 2 similar brands I would choose the brand supporting the same opinions as mine, but I will not directly consume products from a brand only because of that.</p> <p><u>Sofie:</u> If they are supporting my values, then yes I can imagine buying products from them</p> <p><u>Simon:</u> I think that it is good in one way. Especially powerful brands have so much impact on our society and can make a lot of changes. However, it can also be dangerous if the brands participate in debates that the majority of people do not agree with, that could maybe destroy the company's reputation.</p> <p><u>Interviewer:</u> Do you remember these kinds of commercials?</p> <p><u>Frida:</u> I remember these more than other brands</p>
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	<p>because they have a theme they are following, such as Dove = easier to remember. For example Nike, I think more about sports stars etc. However I remember this Nike campaign because it got a lot of attention.</p> <p><u>Daniel</u>: I remember the Nike and Dove that you showed. I also remember the Pepsi and Gillette one. None of them were that good to be honest, which shows that many brands do not really think that much before doing something.</p> <p><u>Simon</u>: Yes, since they are very different from other commercials, and because the media talks about it all the time, it kind of gets stuck in your head</p>
<p>6. Do you actively support brands that are vocal about their involvement with social and political issues or does it not make a difference to you? - According to the social media, could you imagine showing your support on that platform?</p>	<p><u>Daniel</u>: It does not make a difference to me. They are not going to make our society better, right? They are not changing laws, right? They are not helping homeless people, right? And no, I do not use social media that much.</p> <p><u>Frida</u>: I don't think I would use social media, but I would tell my friends about it. But I won't use social media because I don't use it otherwise. According to the social media, it depends as well if they are raising a question which is closer to your heart. If you for example really like sustainability and they make a campaign about sustainability = you think about the campaign a bit more.</p> <p><u>Laura</u>: I don't think I will show it on social media, but I am not so active on social media in general, so it would be weird for me. I would not engage in the debate, because then there will be a discussion and people will start hating and behaving rude online.</p> <p><u>Sofie</u>: I could imagine posting on social media from the brand I support, but I will not write any text related support, so it would be more indirect support, if you can say so, by showing and not saying.</p> <p><u>Laura</u>: I think it's the same with me</p> <p><u>Simon</u>: It does not really make a difference, unless they are vocal about something that I really do not agree with. Then, I would boycott that brand. On the other hand, if the brand supports something that is close to my heart, I would support them on my social media, and if the support something that I do not stand for, I would not try to give them too much</p>

	attention.
<p>7. Do you think that it is beneficial for big brands to be ‘woke’ in today's society?</p>	<p><u>Frida</u>: Yes, I think it’s important, especially to know what is going on in society and sometimes it is good to take a stance and sometimes it is better now to. But then I still believe that for example Dove are playing it a bit more safe, and then I think its important that they know what is going on in society because a lot of their brand is about empowering women = important for them to know what is going on in society. Maybe during the year of that video photoshop was a problem = good that they take a stance and talk about it.</p> <p><u>Daniel</u>: No, it is not. It is pretty hard to make a ‘successful’ campaign showing that you are ‘woke’, especially if you are a multi-billion dollar company. I do like Colin Kaepernick for example, and I agree with everything he stands for. On the other hand, I do not like Nike, so it is hard to explain.</p> <p><u>Laura</u>: I think that today most brands need... or depends on which brands.. maybe in America it is very important, and other countries not so important to be politically active.</p> <p><u>Sofie</u>: It is so easy to say you are taking care of the environment by being sustainable- but in reality you are just doing very little and because you kind of need to do it, and therefore I think that it is of course beneficial to be woke, but brands need to go in 100 procent to get my attention.</p> <p><u>Simon</u>: Yes, as I said before. It shows that they are not just there to earn money, but also to make society a better place. It also sheds light into the problems we are facing in our society.</p>
<p>8. Have you encountered any other brands participating in political/social debates in society? Which one: - Do you remember other brands taking part in these debates?</p>	<p><u>Frida</u>: Yes, I think i remember for example Body shop since they are against animal testing. Pepsi was also trying to take a stand with Kendall Jenner, but that backfired, but I liked the campaign. But I know that especially with social media, if some people don't like the commercial they will make their voice heard. It’s easy to share your voice and get support from other people and maybe it turns to more politics than you think in the beginning.</p> <p><u>Interviewer</u>: But did you like the Pepsi campaign,</p>

	<p>and when you are mentioning the social media, do you think that it somehow create a community</p> <p><u>Frida</u>: Yes, because people can share their thoughts. I can't come up with any other brands for now.</p> <p><u>Simon</u>: Yes, nowadays it has become very popular for big brands to participate in social and political debates. Brands such as Gillette, Pepsi, Patagonia etc which is nice to see. However, when too many brands do it, it kind of loses its authenticity and it will be harder to understand if they do it for attention and money, or because they really care.</p> <p><u>Daniel</u>: Giant brands such as Pepsi and Gillette have also been activist and gotten a lot of backlash for it, mainly because it does not reflect who they are as brands.</p> <p><u>Laura</u>: I remember "Chick-fil-a" which is chicken burger, and they are very much against gays and against abortion. They were creating a lot of social media debates and wanted to tell people about the normal family, and I don't like this point of view, so in the end I will never purchase any products from them.</p> <p><u>Sofie</u>: I was thinking about the platform 'To good to go', they don't have a specific campaign, but their message is to reduce food waste, which I really like.</p>
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