Ideologies Mediating Brands Taking a Political Stance

A Socio-cultural Perspective on How Consumers Draw from Different Ideologies in their Meaning-making of Brands that Take a Political Stance

by

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Abstract

Title: Ideologies Mediating Brands Taking a Political Stance - A Socio-cultural Perspective on How Consumers Draw from Different Ideologies in their Meaning-making of Brands that Take a Political Stance

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Keywords: Consumer Culture Theory, Socio-cultural Perspective, Political Consumerism, Ideology, Responsibilization, Consumer Resistance, Governmentality.

Thesis Purpose: We aim to enhance the understanding of how consumers draw from different ideologies in their meaning-making of brands taking a political stance.

Methodology/ Empirical Data Collection: This research used a qualitative approach, more specifically, case-based approach and netnography. The two cases chosen are campaigns by Nike and Gillette discussing issues concerning racial justice and gender equality. Initially 613 comments were gathered from three online platforms, Twitter, WorldNetDaily, and Flashback. Categorical reduction was then used to reduce the comments to 436 by prioritizing certain themes in an effort to produce a more interesting and manageable set of data.

Theoretical Perspectives: This thesis belongs to the field of consumer culture research. For the theoretical foundation, we employed literature regarding political ideology, brand consumerism and responsibilization, and brand political activism. Moreover, the study explored how consumer draw on ideologies when forming meanings by using the theoretical lenses of consumers culture theory and governmentality.

Findings/Conclusion: Findings in this research display that consumers draw from three themes in their meaning making of brands that take a political stance: they draw from nationalistic ideologies, draw from morality, and draw from consumer responsibility ideologies.

Practical Implications: This research provides brand managers with valuable insights on how consumers can form meanings regarding brands taking a stand. In addition, it offers insights for marketing practitioners and managers who wish to improve their knowledge of what factors to consider when creating a successful political branding campaign. Finally, our research may help managers better understand what drives customers to engage in anti-consumption behaviour when companies take a stand.

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1   Introduction

The first chapter introduces the research domain and background on which the thesis focuses. Following is the problem formulation, which illustrates the problem with the phenomenon and establishes its relevance, and the research positioning. Next, the purpose of the study is described, followed by the formulated research question. Furthermore, the aimed contributions of the study are presented. In the following chapter, we explain the underlying context of our study. Lastly, after the research delimitations are presented, the structure of the thesis is outlined.

1.1   Background

"Brands are critical vehicles of meaning in our world and taking a leadership role is a natural step for these powerful cultural agents that can influence commerce and community life" (Moorman, 2018, n.p.).

As denoted by the quote above, political activism is increasingly becoming the brands' new role in society. This comes as no surprise as consumers increasingly expect brands to take a stance on social or political issues (Hoppner & Vadakkepatt, 2019; Korschun, Martin & Vadakkepatt, 2020; Vredenburg, Kapitan, Spry & Kemper, 2020). Furthermore, consumers gravitate towards brands that exemplify the values they admire, with the most influential brands coming to be iconic brands (Holt, 2004; Korschun, Martin & Vadakkepatt, 2020; Stanley, 2020). Accordingly, brands can be vehicles of ideology, where they concurrently smooth and mirror tensions in society (Pineda, Sanz-Marcos & Gordillo-Rodríguez, 2020). Hence, brands have penetrated the social and cultural spheres where they serve as identity symbols conveying worldviews (Luedicke, Thompson & Giesler, 2010; Pineda, Sanz-Marcos & Gordillo-Rodríguez, 2020). This is further clarified by Klein (2010, p.29) when she states that "[a]dvertising and sponsorship have always been about using imagery to equate products with positive cultural and social experiences". As a result, consumption becomes a socio-cultural practice since the meaning of products is derived mainly from culture (Pineda, Sanz-Marcos & Gordillo-Rodríguez, 2020; Thompson & Arsel, 2004). Since brands are intertextual structures and symbolic, it is thus crucial to concentrate on the connection between brands and culture along with common consumer influences (Holt, 2006; Pineda, Sanz-Marcos & Gordillo-Rodríguez, 2020).

In the present climate, social and political matters have undeniably become a big part of the discussion in daily life, whether it is climate change, Me-Too, or Black Lives Matter movements (Vredenburg et al., 2020). Although brands using marketing to be proactive is not something new, as it has been happening for the last decades, recently, it appears that politically filled advertisements have increased rapidly (Hoppner & Vadakkepatt, 2019; Ulver & Laurell, 2020). It used to be that in advertising, sex sells, but apparently, now it is activism (Holder, 2017). Firms are striving to outshine each other with generous acts, as long as the consumers know about it (Holder, 2017; Hoppner & Vadakkepatt, 2019).

Furthermore, companies are increasingly under demand from stakeholders to generate wealth and contribute societal benefits (Bhagwat, Warren, Beck & Watson, 2020). Thus, to be successful, companies have to engage in corporate social responsibility (CSR), which is a series of socio-moral standards directed at market actors to fulfil the demands of their stakeholders (Alhouti, Johnson & Holloway, 2016; Chandler, 2020; Du, Bhattacharya & Sen, 2010; Shamir, 2008). While social activism is progressively becoming an essential component of the job, companies are also implored to express an opinion on distinctly controversial topics (Bhagwat et al., 2020; Chandler, 2020; Hoppner & Vadakkepatt, 2019; Stanley, 2020; Vredenburg et al., 2020). That is, numerous stakeholders require companies to show their principles by publicly opposing or supporting one side of a socio-political problem (Bhagwat et al., 2020). Furthermore, companies are frequently political marks for consumers and activists and at the focus of attention concerning responsibility-taking since they can have a vital part in mitigating negative impacts on human rights and the environment (Giesler & Veresiu, 2014; Moorman, 2020; Shamir, 2008; Stolle & Micheletti, 2013).

However, to fully understand why consumers expect brands to take a stand, it is necessary to elucidate the notion of individualized responsibility-taking which is individual considerations concerning the societal impact of one's choices (Giesler & Veresiu, 2014; Stolle & Micheletti, 2013; Thompson & Kumar, 2018). That is, consumers should make decisions that are best for society and themselves (Giesler & Veresiu, 2014; Stolle & Micheletti, 2013). A particular type of individualized responsibility-taking or political consumerism is where consumers make use of the market as a stage for politics to alter market practices they find to be environmentally, politically, or ethically unacceptable (Stolle & Micheletti, 2013). Consumers can, on the one hand, refrain from brands (boycott) to penalize objectionable business practices or, on the other hand, purposely buy brands (buycott) to reward them for admirable business practices (Cambefort & Pecot, 2019; Copeland & Boulianne, 2020; Coskuner-Balli, 2020; Gopaldas, 2014; Kozinets & Handelman, 2004; Varman & Belk, 2009). Moreover, Stolle and Micheletti (2013) explain that society is directly implicated in new frameworks of problem-solving. They explain that consumers are engaged in their parts as shoppers through organizations that mobilize consumers through political action. Similarly, it has been proposed that the creation of the responsible consumer subject is a governmental process where the responsibility for societal concerns is moved to consumers (Coskuner-Balli, 2020; Giesler & Veresiu, 2014). As

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a result, consumers are formed into citizen-consumers through a governmentality process as activities between citizenship and consumer culture become interconnected (Cormack & Cosgrave, 2021; Coskuner-Balli, 2020; Stolle & Micheletti, 2013; Ulver & Laurell, 2020). Consumers' demands for action are intended to pressure the market players to implement new production practices and policies (Giesler & Veresiu, 2014; Stanley, 2020; Stolle & Micheletti, 2013). Thus, through their demands, consumers are believed to assume more social responsibility and place pressure on companies to do so (Giesler & Veresiu, 2014; Stolle & Micheletti, 2013).

Although individualized responsibility-taking is a rising phenomenon and likely increasing in Western countries, the level of responsibility-taking presumably differs across nations (Stolle & Micheletti, 2013). Thus, in this thesis, we will seek to understand how consumers draw from different ideologies in their meaning-making of brands that take a political stance.

1.2   Problem Formulation and Relevance

Over the last decades, the topic of political consumerism has been given a great deal of attention within the research field of consumer culture theory (Chatzidakis, Maclaran & Varman, 2021; Kravets, 2021; Smith & French, 2009; Stolle & Micheletti, 2013; Varman & Belk, 2009; Zhao & Belk, 2008). At the same time, extensive research within consumer culture research has been carried out on the process of responsibilization (Bernthal, Crockett & Rose, 2005; Cormack & Cosgrave, 2021; Coskuner-Balli, 2020; Crockett & Wallendorf, 2004; Giesler & Veresiu, 2014; Henry, 2010; Kipp & Hawkins, 2019; Pellandini-Simányi & Conte, 2020; Peñaloza & Barnhart, 2011; Shamir, 2008; Thompson & Arsel, 2004; Thompson & Kumar, 2018). With the concept of individualized responsibility-taking, consumers have been shown as responsible for societal issues and are expected to consider the societal implications of their actions (Giesler & Veresiu, 2014; Shamir, 2008; Stolle & Micheletti, 2013). Moreover, in their daily lives, individuals are empowered as consumers, and have consequently become citizen-consumers (Cormack & Cosgrave, 2021; Coskuner-Balli, 2020; Smith & French, 2009; Stolle & Micheletti, 2013). According to different authors, the governmentality process transforms consumers into citizen-consumers as citizenship and consumer culture become increasingly integrated (Cormack & Cosgrave, 2021; Coskuner-Balli, 2020; Stolle & Micheletti, 2013; Ulver & Laurell, 2020). However, according to Coskuner-Balli (2020), citizen-consumers do not depend on the government to find the answer to their problems, but rather create and coordinate their own market solutions. From this perspective, consumer resistance can be introduced, which is exhibited individually or collectively, and via various activities such as opposing, obstructing, avoiding, or evading marketing strategies and powers (Roux & Izberk-Bilgin, 2018). Lastly, consumer resistance may be viewed as a marker of market change, which is a feature of great

importance to businesses since it will influence not just the company's strategy but also legislation and political action (Roux & Izberk-Bilgin, 2018).

While previous studies with CCT have researched how consumers have accepted individual responsibility to create social change in relation to different ideologies (Crockett & Wallendorf, 2004; Thompson & Coskuner-Balli, 2007; Varman & Belk, 2009), there is a lack of research investigating how consumers draw from different ideologies in their meaning-making of brands taking a political stand. Furthermore, studies that focus on ideology and political consumerism (Pineda, Sanz-Marcos & Gordillo-Rodríguez, 2020; Ulver & Laurell, 2020; Varman & Belk, 2009) only highlight the macro ideological aspects. Hence there is a theoretical gap in addressing a more micro consumer meaning perspective.

In short, we position the study within the field of consumer culture theory, or more specifically, within the research streams of political consumerization, consumer resistance, and consumer responsibilization. Although there is an increased focus on political consumerism, the existing literature on responsibilization and consumer resistance consist of contradictions. Within the literature we identified a particular contradiction. While Carrington, Zwick, and Neville (2016) explain that increased awareness of the social and environmental problems that capitalism creates led to creating the ethical consumer subject, other authors contrast those conclusions. Giesler & Veresiu (2014) propose that creation of the responsible consumer subject occurred as a result of a governmental process. At the same time, Cormack & Cosgrave (2021) agree with Giesler & Veresiu (2014) that the responsibility for more significant societal problems is moved from companies and on to consumers. Similarly, Coskuner-Balli, (2020) states that the creation of responsible citizen-consumers is connected to the state's economic and political goals. Furthermore, these conversations do not focus on consumer meanings, so there is a theoretical gap in the literature. Thus, by investigating how consumers draw from different ideologies, we hope to advance these discussions on the responsibilization of consumers and consumer meanings.

Therefore, with our research we seek to begin filling this research gap by exploring how consumers draw from different ideologies in their meaning-making of brands that take a political stance. This topic has practical importance since the knowledge and discussion of societal issues can be increased when brands successfully take a stand for both market actors and consumers. Finally, it is academically essential to conduct our study to advance discussions on the role of ideologies in influencing consumers meanings in relation to brands taking a political stance since politics permeate everyday life facets in ways it never has before (Korschun, Martin & Vadakkepatt, 2020; Pecot, Vasilopoulou & Cavallaro, 2021).

1.3 Research Purpose

This study aims to understand how consumers draw from different ideologies in their meaning-making of brands taking a stand. In order to fulfil this purpose, the following research question will be answered:

How do consumers draw from different ideologies in their meaning-making of brands that take a political stance?

Thus, intending to understand how consumers draw from ideologies in their meaning-making of brands taking a stand, we strive to discover how consumers discern brands undertaking institutional roles in society. That is when brands take on a more active role in forming society due to taking a stand. We will do a netnography of different digital platforms, seeking to identify consumers' meanings towards brands taking a political stand and understand how different ideologies can impact these meanings. This study's theoretical importance is to expand on the research concerning consumer culture and brands taking a stand. Additionally, this research's practical significance is that society ultimately benefits when brands take an active role in forming society by taking a stand on societal issues.

1.4 Research Motivation and Contribution

This thesis intends to determine how consumers draw from different ideologies in their meaning-making and contributing to the function of expanding research on consumer culture and the marketplace. Thus, this thesis aims to contribute to the wider understanding of consumer culture and investigate the socio-cultural environment's role regarding brands taking a stand. Moreover, gaining a deeper understanding of how consumers draw from different ideologies in their meaning-making can assist future research within consumer culture research.

Our research aims to advance discussions regarding political consumerism and consumer resistance, where individuals communicate their political and social preferences in the market or resist against brands or opponents (Copeland & Boulianne, 2020; Gil de Zúñiga, Copeland & Bimber, 2014; Luedicke, Thompson & Giesler, 2010; Smith & French, 2009) (Gil de Zúñiga, Copeland & Bimber, 2014; Smith & French, 2009). These discussions are also connected to responsibilization, where citizens are assimilated and integrated into the understanding and caring state (Cormack & Cosgrave, 2021. Thus, we maintain that with this research we contribute to the research streams of consumer responsibilization (Bernthal, Crockett & Rose, 2005; Cormack & Cosgrave, 2021; Coskuner-Balli, 2020; Crockett & Wallendorf, 2004; Giesler & Veresiu, 2014), consumer resistance (Luedicke, Thompson & Giesler, 2010; Ulver & Laurell, 2020) and political consumerization (Chatzidakis, Maclaran & Varman, 2021;

Kravets, 2021; Smith & French, 2009; Stolle & Micheletti, 2013; Varman & Belk, 2009; Zhao & Belk, 2008).

Incidentally, the extent to which it is expected of individuals to take responsibility likely differs across countries (Stolle & Micheletti, 2013). Moreover, the concept of individualized responsibility might be increasing in Western democracies and is becoming a rising phenomenon (Stolle & Micheletti, 2013). This illustrates that our research is relevant and a great opportunity to investigate how consumers draw meanings from different ideologies in their meaning-making in different contexts.

Furthermore, as previously mentioned, advertisements with controversial political subject matters are expanding beyond our expectations (Ulver & Laurell, 2020). Therefore, it is vital to research this topic since the lines between political consumption and civic engagement are blurring (Ulver & Laurell, 2020). Furthermore, the partisan essence of societal problems signifies that there are going to be consumers who are resistant while others desire a better world (Moorman, 2020). Therefore, politicized commercials can cause a divide in society and further polarization if taken too far (Korschun, Martin & Vadakkepatt, 2020; Ulver & Laurell, 2020). For that reason, it is crucial to explore this topic to understand the potential short- and long-term implications for society and to advance discussions on this subject. Moreover, by expanding the research regarding consumer culture and political consumerism, we can better understand the polarizing effects of political activity on society.

1.5   Context

To expand on consumer culture and understand brand political activity, it is first essential to comprehend the underlying social, historical, and cultural conditions or the context of contexts (Askegaard & Linnet, 2011). Askegaard and Linnet (2011, p.396) further elaborate that "[i]t is in their everyday social context that society's norms are made relevant to people; this is where they become concrete and manifest themselves as a form of lived ideology". Furthermore, to comprehend how consumers draw from different ideologies in their meaning-making of brands taking a political stance, we conduct our research based on consumers in two countries with different culture-historical and socio-political backgrounds as that should create tension in the material. Furthermore, Stolle and Micheletti (2013) claim that it is clear that countries with comparable economic, political, and geographic attributes are notably grouped when the level of political consumerism is examined. Consequently, we chose to analyse the contexts of Sweden and America as both countries are governed by neoliberal ideology, but in different forms (Carrington, Zwick & Neville, 2016; Fitchett, Patsiaouras & Davies, 2014; Higgs, 2021; Klasson & Ulver, 2015; Molander, Östberg & Kleppe, 2019; Stanley, 2020). Moreover, we decided to explore discussions around two brands, Gillette and Nike, as they created

advertisements concerning the social issues of racial justice and gender equality. These social issues are very pertinent and applicable as Sweden and the U.S. are both multicultural societies that face ongoing discussions around racism and gender politics, so it is crucial to advance these discussions (Askanius & Mylonas, 2015; Bonilla-Silva, 2006; Dawson, 2001; Klasson & Ulver, 2015; Molander, Östberg & Kleppe, 2019; Okin, 1998; Scott & Martin, 2021; Stanley, 2020; Thomas, Cross & Harrison, 2018; Ulver & Laurell, 2020; Veresiu & Giesler, 2018a; Weinberger & Crockett, 2018; Wodak, 2013; Wünsch, 2018).

1.5.1   Country Profiles

Sweden has one of the highest standards of living in the world, primarily due to its extensive welfare system and free-market capitalism (Andersen, Kjeldgaard, Lindberg & Östberg, 2019; Molander, Kleppe & Östberg, 2018; Molander, Östberg & Kleppe, 2019; Statista, 2020). Over the last two decades, the role of the market has grown in Sweden as numerous forms of state-sponsored neoliberalism were welcomed (Molander, Östberg & Kleppe, 2019). Namely, Sweden's focus on individual autonomy created a solid foundation for an ideology that asserts that the greatest way to improve well-being is by maximizing individual liberty, entrepreneurship, and free markets (Molander, Östberg & Kleppe, 2019). However, while Sweden is governed by neoliberal ideologies, it follows a different form of neoliberalism than the U.S., because of its comprehensive welfare system (Molander, Östberg & Kleppe, 2019; Veresiu & Giesler, 2018b). For instance, Sweden has a history of strongly intervening with direct social and economic investments into domestic tasks (Klasson & Ulver, 2015). Furthermore, in Sweden, state policies designate the circumstances wherein people structure their lives in terms of participation in the labour force, childcare, and market consumption (Molander, Östberg & Kleppe, 2019). Thus, for individualism to flourish in the Swedish welfare state, gender equality and egalitarianism play an important role and have thus been incorporated through numerous policies and laws, such as the paid parental leave policy for both men and women (Andersen et al., 2019; Kjeldgaard & Östberg, 2007; Klasson & Ulver, 2015; Molander, Östberg & Kleppe, 2019). In this Scandinavian cultural ethos of egalitarianism, it is thus salient to not stand out excessively from the middle and rather strive towards the middle (Bertilsson, 2015; Kjeldgaard & Östberg, 2007). Since the middle is the focus of attention, opposing societal phenomena like open markets and strong state welfarism are formulated to coincide inside the system (Kjeldgaard & Östberg, 2007). Furthermore, in Sweden, the centre-left political party Social Democrats gained the biggest share of parliamentary seats in the 2018 election and has been the biggest party in Sweden for decades with a long history of gaining the most votes in elections (Andersen et al., 2019; Nordea Trade Portal, 2021; Sweden.se, 2021a, 2021b).

The United States is a country that is the epitome of consumerism (Cohen, 2003; Ekström, Ottosson & Parment, 2017; Higgs, 2021). It has followed the neoliberal ideology since the 1970s and experienced unparalleled global economic growth and steadily increasing living

standards (Carrington, Zwick & Neville, 2016; Coskuner-Balli, 2020; Fitchett, Patsiaouras & Davies, 2014). Moreover, one of the first leaders to embrace neoliberalism was Ronald Reagan, the 40th US president (Cohen, 2003; Coskuner-Balli, 2020; Veresiu & Giesler, 2018b). Since the U.S. follows the neoliberal ideology, the responsibility of societal issues is put on individuals and companies and they are actively encouraged to become responsible entrepreneurs (Stanley, 2020; Veresiu & Giesler, 2018b). In consequence of the U.S. being continuously focused on economic growth over the last decades, citizen-consumers were urged to be active in consumption and motivated through the reduction of welfare programs and tax cuts (Coskuner-Balli, 2020). Moreover, the government mostly places emphasis on regulating the market instead of intervening, and favour privatized markets instead of social welfare programmes (Epp & Thomas, 2018; Klasson & Ulver, 2015).

1.5.2   Social Issues

Race has continuously acted as a marker of social position in the U.S. (Thomas, Cross & Harrison, 2018). For instance, black identity has long been marginalized and viewed as having an inferior social status (Weinberger & Crockett, 2018). Consequently, in the U.S., racialized minorities such as black people encounter many exclusions and discrimination (Weinberger & Crockett, 2018). Furthermore, the racial groups of white and black in the U.S. have the most extensive social gap and the greatest spatial separation (Thomas, Cross & Harrison, 2018). In the 2016 presidential election in the United States, deep-rooted cultural tensions regarding equality, race, and immigration were exposed (Weinberger & Crockett, 2018). Moreover, in recent years deep problems, such as social inequality and racial injustice, escalated in the U.S. (Stanley, 2020). For instance, in 2020, there was global outrage after a video surfaced of a white police officer in the U.S. holding his knee on George Floyd's neck, an African American man until he died (Scott & Martin, 2021). This further illustrated the systematic and individual racism rooted in society (Scott & Martin, 2021). Similarly, Sweden, like many European countries, has experienced a wave of racist and anti-immigration discourses and resistance against multiculturalism over the last decade (Askanius & Mylonas, 2015; Ulver & Laurell, 2020; Wahlström & Törnberg, 2019). This resistance escalated in 2015 amid the refugee crisis as masses of people requested asylum in Sweden which strained the social welfare system (Eurostat, 2016; Ulver & Laurell, 2020; Wahlström & Törnberg, 2019). This resulted in polemical tensions concerning multiculturism in Sweden (Askanius & Mylonas, 2015; Ulver & Laurell, 2020; Wahlström & Törnberg, 2019; Wodak, 2013). For that reason, we decided to examine Nike's campaign since they used their platform to discuss this prevalent problem of racial justice that many countries face today.

In 2017 discussions regarding systematic gender inequality and sexual harassment gained attention with the initiation of the #MeToo movement in the U.S. (Askanius & Hartley, 2019; Chatzidakis, Maclaran & Varman, 2021; Wünsch, 2018). The hashtag was a trending topic in

more than 85 countries and became a token for a global empowerment movement, motivating women to protest and fight back (Askanius & Hartley, 2019; Wünsch, 2018). Victims stepped forward unveiled cases from various industries such as the business world, fashion industry, music industry, and politics, with names such as Donald Trump, Bill Clinton, and other respected politicians in other nations being implicated (Wünsch, 2018). In parallel, by international standards, the Nordic countries have sufficiently advanced gender politics (Andersen et al., 2019; Molander, Östberg & Kleppe, 2019). Sweden in particular is noticeable with a distinct gender equality agenda that is occasionally labelled state feminism (Molander, Östberg & Kleppe, 2019). However, Sweden was not exempt from the MeToo movement as the hashtag prompted significant public disputes on the problems concerning gendered power structures, rape culture, and sexual harassment (Askanius & Hartley, 2019). The hashtag quickly escalated into an immense public outcry with public protests across the country (Askanius & Hartley, 2019). This illustrates that issues regarding sexual harassment and gender inequality have underlying roots globally. Thus, we decided to focus on Gillette's conversation since its campaign focuses on these gender discussions that are happening in various countries worldwide.

1.6 Delimitations

Since the thesis aims to comprehend how consumers draw from different ideologies in their meaning-making of brands taking a political stance, the perspective is on the consumer side in these circumstances. Thus, it should be evident that we do not intend to examine the brand management perspective. Hence, the brand management perspective is set aside in this thesis. Thus, we have a narrow focus on consumers' meanings.

To make sure our study delivers theoretical value, we restricted the framework within which the research happens. Therefore, we narrowed the study and will only focus on consumers currently living in Sweden and the United States of America. Our research will also focus on two brand case studies, particularly Gillette and Nike, referring to gender issues and race issues. These two issues are part of both the Swedish and American society, which are considered multicultural. By narrowing our research scope, we expect to yield valuable and focused contributions both from a practical and theoretical perspective.

1.7 Outline of the Thesis

The thesis is split up into seven different chapters. In the first chapter, the phenomenon of brands taking a stand and individualized responsibility was introduced. The problem

formulation section then demonstrated that further research on consumer meanings and perspectives on this phenomenon is needed. The research's aim or purpose addresses the limited research and was afterwards followed by the presented research question, along with the intended contributions. Next, the underlying context of our study was explained, followed by the delimitations.

The second chapter contains a literature review of previous academic research that is connected to the thesis topic. Furthermore, the literature review presents pertinent concepts to explicate the phenomenon. In chapter three, the theoretical lens for our research is explained. The next chapter details the methodology chosen for the study in detail and also includes a description of how the empirical data was analysed. The fifth chapter presents a comprehensive account of the empirical findings. In the following chapter, the findings are developed and discussed. Lastly, the seventh chapter consists of the conclusion and the practical and theoretical contributions. The thesis then concludes with the limitations encountered and suggestions for future research.

2   Literature Review

In the following chapter, we primarily review previous academic research concerning our thesis topic to have a broader understanding of the matter. Firstly, we explore political ideology to understand the aspects of neoliberalism and social protectionism. Then the concept of political consumerism gives us a deeper understanding of consumer responsibilization and how this can lead to consumer resistance. Lastly, brand political activism is covered to gain insight on the general concept of brand activism where both authenticity and congruence between brand and message play a significant role.

2.1   Political Ideology

2.1.1   Political Ideology

Political ideology is a collection of central beliefs and values concerning how society ought to be organized (Pecot, Vasilopoulou & Cavallaro, 2021). Moreover, the philosophies that are socially shared yet clashing assist consumers in understanding the world as well as the effects on their preferences and inspirations (Cambefort & Pecot, 2019). Ideology refers to a worldview easily established within populations, which includes a series of values and notions that are utilized openly to explain political stances, and form and are formed by society (Dawson, 2001). Furthermore, Dawson (2001, p.4) explains that "political ideology helps to define who are one's friends and enemies, with whom one would form political coalitions, and contains a causal narrative of society and the state". Similarly, Veresiu and Giesler (2018b) explain that ideology refers to a collection of principles and ideas that affect a specific political region or nation's political and economic decisions.

2.1.2   Neoliberalism

Within consumer culture theory (CCT) research, various scholars have discussed neoliberal ideologies (Fitchett, Patsiaouras & Davies, 2014; Thompson & Kumar, 2018; Varman, Skålén & Belk, 2012; Veresiu & Giesler, 2018b) and thus displayed that there are many ways to understand the term neoliberalism. According to Egan-Wyer (2019), neoliberalism is a political ideology that sees the market as the perfect economic activity model to solve economic and social issues. In addition to that, she defines the market as a necessity for the consumer to have

extraordinary consumer experiences. Consequently, neoliberalism remakes the subjectivities of the individual consumer, changing the metaphors of self and making people see themselves as businesses or enterprises that need continuous competition, achievement, productivity and efficiency, where their own efforts lead to both success and failures (Egan-Wyer, 2019).

Veresiu & Giesler (2018b) see neoliberalism as a project applied on society where subjectivity is restructured to a sense of self-reliance and self-governance. In addition to that, it is seen as a way of governance that values individual interest rather than collective goals when maximizing economic profits, being completely compatible with capitalism (Veresiu & Giesler, 2018b). Since perfect competition is seen as an ideal scenario and not a natural state, neoliberalism sees the market as given nature, where all socio-moral responsibilities are placed onto the individual market actors instead of the market as a system (Giesler & Veresiu, 2014). In other words, responsibility in society must be shared with economically rational actors and morally prescriptive, top-down regulations are rejected since the system supports freedom of choice models (Giesler & Veresiu, 2014).

Finally, Varman, Skålén, and Belk (2012) refer to the neoliberal discourse as the notion of specific freedom alluding to one as long as the individual is working, psychologically healthy and follows the rules. They then explain that in case this is not fulfilled, the individual is seen as a threat and restricted from freedom. Furthermore, neoliberalism can be perceived as a form of governmentality, where individuals are seen as active and entrepreneurial in respect to themselves and society (Varman, Skålén & Belk, 2012). From this, it can be said that neoliberal governmentality is a way of governmentality that follows neoliberal principles (Varman, Skålén & Belk, 2012). Furthermore, neoliberal governmentality assumes that private initiatives are the best way through which reduction of poverty and economic efficiency can be achieved, where the state has the power to create a regulatory system that the market should follow (Varman, Skålén & Belk, 2012).

2.1.3   Social Protectionism

To fully understand how neoliberalism's political ideology came to control how governments manage economies and structure societies, Veresiu and Giesler (2018b) explain that it is first crucial to go back in time. They clarify that during the beginning of the 18th century, the Western world (North America and Europe) underwent a significant change with the emergence of the market society. They then further underscore that at this time, a shift happened from economies based on agriculture over to industrial societies where individuals started to want to maximize profits. According to them, this transformation resulted in the creation of two competing political ideologies: market liberalism, where the market should be protected from society, and social liberalism, where society should be protected from the market. The tensions

between the two concerning the best way to attain a thriving society and economy gave birth to neoliberalism as a political ideology (Veresiu & Giesler, 2018b).

Furthermore, Veresiu and Giesler (2018b) elucidate that the term social protectionism refers to a political theory that states that governments can regulate the market economy so that the interest of society is not jeopardized by the pursuit of profit maximization. Thus, they explain that society has to be shielded from the free market's excesses. They then further elaborate on this political ideology by naming examples of these protections, such as minimum wage laws, product labelling requirements, consumer rights, and environmental regulations.

The Swedish government has a strong history of intervening in the market, and state policies designate the circumstances wherein people structure their lives in terms of participation in market consumption and childcare (Klasson & Ulver, 2015; Molander, Östberg & Kleppe, 2019). However, in the United States, the government mostly concentrates on regulating the market as opposed to intervening, and favours privatized markets rather than social welfare programmes (Epp & Thomas, 2018; Klasson & Ulver, 2015). Thus, social protectionism has more hold in Sweden. All in all, social protectionism as a political ideology values unity, social justice, and community (Veresiu & Giesler, 2018b). Furthermore, Giesler and Veresiu (2014, p.842) explain that from the social protectionist viewpoint, the market is "like the proverbial fire—a useful servant but a terrifying master". An unregulated market is a harmful influence that deliberately threatens participation by exploiting immoral competitive instincts (Giesler & Veresiu, 2014).

Since we aim to understand how consumers draw from different ideologies in their meaning-making of brands that take a political stance, neoliberalism and social protectionism are ideologies that might be useful to understand as both the United States and Sweden are governed by the neoliberal ideology in different forms. Since Sweden is also a welfare state, the ideology of social protectionism was also elucidated. These ideologies are therefore helpful for our study to apprehend the underlying contexts in the two countries and thus assist us in our analysis of our empirical data.

2.2 Political Consumerism and Responsibilization

2.2.1 Reconfiguring Political Responsibility

Throughout the years, the concept of political consumerism has been widely discussed within CCT (Chatzidakis, Maclaran & Varman, 2021; Kravets, 2021; Smith & French, 2009; Stolle & Micheletti, 2013; Varman & Belk, 2009; Zhao & Belk, 2008, 2008). Stolle and Micheletti (2013) confront the continuous restructuring of political responsibility, and in particular, what part consumers play in the restructuring. Consumers are under increasing pressure to assume

responsibility in their daily activities as a result of the emerging structure for political responsibility (Giesler & Veresiu, 2014; Kozinets & Handelman, 2004; Shamir, 2008; Stanley, 2020; Stolle & Micheletti, 2013). Furthermore, restructuring political responsibility means rewarding and promoting both non-governmental and governmental players for actions that go further than legal requirements (Stolle & Micheletti, 2013). On various policy areas and societal levels, new frameworks promote awareness together with responsibility-sharing through different sectors, actors, and nations (Korschun, Martin & Vadakkepatt, 2020; Stolle & Micheletti, 2013). This reconstruction of answerability depends on the active role of businesses, society, governments, and individuals (Korschun, Martin & Vadakkepatt, 2020; Stolle & Micheletti, 2013).

Political consumerism bridges the gap between private and public domains and is motivated by numerous factors (Korschun, Martin & Vadakkepatt, 2020; Smith & French, 2009). Furthermore, it focuses on the part that family life, companies, and the market can play in politics (Stolle & Micheletti, 2013). Moreover, political consumerism signifies the intentional avoidance or purchase of services and products for political reasons and is a popular type of participation (Cambefort & Pecot, 2019; Copeland & Boulianne, 2020; Micheletti & Isenhour, 2010; Stolle & Micheletti, 2013). Thus, political consumerism is an instrument for individuals to communicate political and social preferences (Gil de Zúñiga, Copeland & Bimber, 2014; Smith & French, 2009). Consequently, Stolle and Micheletti (2013, p. 39) formally define political consumerism as:

> consumers' use of the market as an arena for politics in order to change institutional or market practices found to be ethically, environmentally, or politically objectionable is a specific form of participation that characterizes individualized responsibility-taking.

As a result, plenty of individuals bring their civic and political worries to the market, ignoring specific goods or deliberately trying other products (Gil de Zúñiga, Copeland & Bimber, 2014; Thompson, 2004). Furthermore, political brands affiliated with cultural values allow consumers to strengthen their connection to the country's main values (Smith & French, 2009). When it comes to decision-making in modern society, consumers are confronted with a multitude of different available options and therefore must make decisions and evaluations based on criteria such as quality, lifestyle and political orientation, brand, and price (Stolle & Micheletti, 2013; Thompson, 2004). Moreover, it is now well accepted that consumers buying behaviour is compatible and consistent with their perceived self (Klasson, 2017; Smith & French, 2009). It is also evident that consumers incorporate modern myths to work towards diverse identity projects through consumption (Holt, 2004; Luedicke, Thompson & Giesler, 2010; Thompson, 2004; Varman & Belk, 2009). Myths can also carry out ideological agendas (Coskuner-Balli, 2020; Giesler & Veresiu, 2014; Izberk-Bilgin, 2012; Luedicke, Thompson & Giesler, 2010; Thompson, 2004; Zhao & Belk, 2008). Moreover, consumers have accepted individual responsibility to create social change, for instance, nationalist ideologies of buy local in India

(Varman & Belk, 2009), political ideologies supporting local companies (Crockett & Wallendorf, 2004) and ideologies related to consumption communities (Henry, 2010; Thompson & Coskuner-Balli, 2007). Thus, ideologies, whether political, religious, or national are at the centre of consumer behaviour and can impact consumer choice (Crockett & Wallendorf, 2004; Henry, 2010; Izberk-Bilgin, 2012; Varman & Belk, 2009; Zhao & Belk, 2008).

Furthermore, in their daily lives, individuals are empowered as consumers and have consequently become citizen-consumers (Cormack & Cosgrave, 2021; Coskuner-Balli, 2020; Smith & French, 2009; Stolle & Micheletti, 2013). Through responsibilization, citizens are assimilated and integrated into the understanding and caring state (Cormack & Cosgrave, 2021). Conventionally, consumers and citizens are regarded as opposites, where consumers are civically removed players that are reckless and interested in fulfilling private material wishes and citizens are civic players who accept bigger public interests and have a political relationship with the government (Coskuner-Balli, 2020). However, over the last decades, the relationship between consumption and citizenship has become intertwined as the constantly changing role of consumers and citizens frequently overlap (Cohen, 2003; Coskuner-Balli, 2020). Examples of citizen-consumer activities are buycotts, boycotts, lifestyle commitments and discursive modes of political consumerism (Cambefort & Pecot, 2019; Copeland & Boulianne, 2020; Endres & Panagopoulos, 2017; Kozinets & Handelman, 2004; Micheletti & Isenhour, 2010; Stolle & Micheletti, 2013; Varman & Belk, 2009). Therefore, the activities of consumer culture and citizenship are progressively coming to be interconnected as the lines between them increasingly blur (Cormack & Cosgrave, 2021; Stolle & Micheletti, 2013; Ulver & Laurell, 2020). However, the responsibilities and rights of citizen-consumers are unclear and variable, and the ideal depiction of citizenship is "infused with the dominant political ideology of the society and time period in question" (Henry, 2010, p.670). Thus, dominant political ideologies can instil particular opinions regarding responsibilities and rights (Henry, 2010).

2.2.2 Consumer Responsibilization

A considerable amount of literature has been published on responsibilization in recent years (Bernthal, Crockett & Rose, 2005; Cormack & Cosgrave, 2021; Coskuner-Balli, 2020; Crockett & Wallendorf, 2004; Giesler & Veresiu, 2014; Henry, 2010; Kipp & Hawkins, 2019; Pellandini-Simányi & Conte, 2020; Peñaloza & Barnhart, 2011; Shamir, 2008; Thompson & Arsel, 2004; Thompson & Kumar, 2018). Responsibilization, specifically presuming and expecting the reflexive moral abilities of several social players, is the pragmatic connection which links actual practices to the ideal system of governance (Shamir, 2008). Furthermore, responsibilizations are essentially based on the structure "of moral agency as the necessary ontological condition for ensuring an entrepreneurial disposition in the case of individuals and socio-moral authority in the case of institutions" (Shamir, 2008, p.7). Furthermore, to be

successful, responsibilization functions at the individual level, reorganizing identities and roles in order to organize appointed actors effectively to carry out and assume self-governing duties (Shamir, 2008). That is, consumers become responsible for their micro-environment where they concentrate on ensuring the well-being of their work, home, and family (Henry, 2010).

The increasing awareness that contemporary capitalism is creating social and environmental ills led to the creation of the ethical consumer subject (Carrington, Zwick & Neville, 2016). Correspondingly, Giesler and Veresiu (2014) explain that responsible consumption usually arises from the growing awareness of consumption ramification on consumer health, the environment, and society as a whole. However, they propose that the creation of the responsible consumer is a result of a governmental process (Giesler & Veresiu, 2014), where the accountability for greater societal issues is transferred from companies and governments and on to the individual consumers (Cormack & Cosgrave, 2021; Giesler & Veresiu, 2014). This happens through four separate but interconnected procedures: personalization, authorization, capabilization, and transformation (PACT; Giesler & Veresiu, 2014). Similarly, the creation of responsible citizen-consumers is connected to the state's economic and political goals (Coskuner-Balli, 2020). However, Kipp and Hawkins (2019) claim that the responsibilization of consumers into "development consumers" as intrinsically troublesome as these processes make development issues simpler and paint individuals as the answer. Through these processes, individual consumers are rebuilt as independent, free, entrepreneurial and responsible subjects who turn to the market to invest in themselves (Giesler & Veresiu, 2014).

Thus, there is an established perspective that it is best to rectify complicated societal issues through market-coordinated actions and decisions of responsible consumers (Coskuner-Balli, 2020; Giesler & Veresiu, 2014; Kipp & Hawkins, 2019; Thompson & Kumar, 2018). The citizen-consumers are therefore often framed as the moral protagonists versus the government which is the antagonist (Coskuner-Balli, 2020; Luedicke, Thompson & Giesler, 2010). For instance, in America, the citizen-consumers have been formed as active moral heroes on a quest to attain the American dream (Coskuner-Balli, 2020). Through the PACT process, an institutional framework emerges which dissuades welfarist subjectivity and rather encourages consumers to consciously measure their own desires, self-govern, and manage the moralized terrain of decisions as a fascinating project filled with growth, freedom, and opportunities to enhance their communities (Giesler & Veresiu, 2014). Thus, citizen-consumers do not depend on the government to find the answer to their problems, but rather create and coordinate their own market solutions (Coskuner-Balli, 2020). They are urged to become self-sufficient and create their own destiny (Fischer, Otnes & Tuncay, 2007). In a similar manner, Stolle and Micheletti (2013) elaborate on the notion of individualized responsibility-taking as a rational individual decision concerning deliberation on the social implications of one's behaviour. Moreover, consumers place emphasis on protecting the well-being of their world (Henry, 2010). Thus, individualized responsibility-taking implores consumers to make reasonable choices even though they are not forced to do so by laws and may mean altering lifestyle preferences

and sacrificing private desires (Giesler & Veresiu, 2014; Kipp & Hawkins, 2019; Stolle & Micheletti, 2013).

Similarly, practices of individualized responsibility-taking are often activated by societal and collective concerns, such as climate change or human rights, and then public consequences, such as better environment or corporate social responsibility, take place (Giesler & Veresiu, 2014; Kipp & Hawkins, 2019; Smith & French, 2009; Stolle & Micheletti, 2013). Responsible consumers do not simply consume but rather use consumption to indicate their concern about society and the environment (Kipp & Hawkins, 2019). As a result, individualized responsibility-taking is becoming more prevalent in the schemes of social movements (Stolle & Micheletti, 2013). The key point is that responsibility-taking is intended to have an impact on societal values, companies, individuals, and other powerholders (Giesler & Veresiu, 2014; Stolle & Micheletti, 2013). Moreover, it is theoretically presumed that in democratic nations, where the citizen's social rights are well-developed and they have relatively higher degrees of socioeconomic assets, there should be a higher degree of individualized responsibility-taking (Stolle & Micheletti, 2013). Although, the extent to which consumers are expected to take responsibility likely differs between nations (Stolle & Micheletti, 2013).

Lastly, a certain manifestation of individualized responsibility-taking or political consumerism is where consumers utilize the market as a stage to alter market practices, they deem unacceptable (Stolle & Micheletti, 2013). In essence, the activities of consumer culture and citizenship have become profoundly interconnected, breaking down conventional societal and academic boundaries (Cohen, 2003; Coskuner-Balli, 2020; Henry, 2010; Stolle & Micheletti, 2013). Thus, consumers can participate in political consumerism activities by, for instance, choosing to boycott or buycott brands to either punish or reward them (Cambefort & Pecot, 2019; Copeland & Boulianne, 2020; Endres & Panagopoulos, 2017; Kozinets & Handelman, 2004; Micheletti & Isenhour, 2010; Stolle & Micheletti, 2013; Varman & Belk, 2009).

2.2.3   Consumer Resistance

"Consumer resistance is by no means something new; questioning and resisting power are as old as human history" (Roux & Izberk-Bilgin, 2018, p.297). This is why there are many points of view and research studies concerning consumer resistance (Roux & Izberk-Bilgin, 2018). As discussed before, political consumerism is a widespread sort of engagement that involves the active avoidance or purchase of services and products for political reasons (Cambefort & Pecot, 2019; Copeland & Boulianne, 2020; Micheletti & Isenhour, 2010; Stolle & Micheletti, 2013). Consumer resistance, on the other hand, can be exhibited individually or collectively, and via various activities such as opposing, obstructing, avoiding, or evading marketing strategies and powers (Roux & Izberk-Bilgin, 2018). Later we will see that there is a difference between anti-consumption and consumer resistance (Cherrier, Black & Lee, 2011), which leads to the

conclusion that political consumerism is a more general and broader concept where consumer resistance and anti-consumption are part of and which express the different types of instrument for individuals to communicate political and social preferences (Gil de Zúñiga, Copeland & Bimber, 2014; Smith & French, 2009). In the case of Roux and Izberk-Bilgin (2018), they refer to resistance as opposing what is perceived to be a force, a burden, an effect, or some effort to influence one's behaviour. The first aspect that they note about resistance is that it involves not only action but also thought and intention.

Secondly, Roux and Izberk-Bilgin (2018) suggest that these perceived operations of power can come from conventional marketing practices that manipulate, exploit, or restrict the consumer. The authors then go on to elucidate that one form of marketing that is used to govern people's lives is gathering information or data. They then further explain how companies make use of marketing to create myths for financial interest. When addressing reflexive resistance, Holt (2002) explains how a few customers may unravel the imposed messages that marketers produce by manipulating the transferred information to their advantage and marketing through communication twisting. However, these discourses can sometimes create a counterculture reaction resistance that may be able to transform the practices or power relationships in the marketplace (Roux & Izberk-Bilgin, 2018). Furthermore, Holt (2002) also alludes to creative resistance, positioning the consumer as a cultural producer where, on the one hand, consumer culture creates a small range of identities that can only be reached by the purchase of goods, and on the other hand, companies define the personalities and pleasures that can only be obtained by their products. As a result, both philosophies call for progressive politics in which people can free themselves from corporate power to the degree that they can free themselves from its cultural authority (Holt, 2002). Hence, it can be said that resistance, and more specifically in the marketplace, is a consequence of power practice on consumers, individuals or groups by making use of discourses (Roux & Izberk-Bilgin, 2018).

When it comes to the difference between anti-consumption and consumer resistance, Cherrier, Black & Lee (2011) make a clear distinction. They explain that anti-consumption's resistance is used to express and depends on multiple concerns and the context. At the same time, they also explain that consumers' resistance is used against antagonists such as brand, corporation and culture and the concerns are based on a broader system that occurs outside of the individual. Anyhow, the authors then express that although in theory both concepts are tempted to be differentiated, in practice, they both intersect, and a richer understanding is reached when applied at the same time. Deeper into anti-consumption, Cambefort and Pecot (2019) explain how this concept is easily assumed to be the expression of the left-wing ideology, but that in reality, anti-consumption also overlaps with other consumerist ideologies and market actors, meaning that individual or small groups from different political ideologies could have similar anti-consumption behaviour.

Furthermore, consumer resistance can be expressed individually or collectively and by making use of different actions such as opposing, thwarting, escaping or circumventing marketing techniques and powers (Roux & Izberk-Bilgin, 2018). Micheletti and Isenhour (2010) explain that in the Nordic countries, there are four different ways of taking action that consumers manage: boycotts, buycotts, discursive action, and lifestyle political consumerism. The authors then elucidate that the last one can be understood as a form of expressing resistance motivated by social, economic, and, most importantly, environmental sustainability. Thus, according to them, political consumers see world challenges through the lens of consumer products.

In the matter of adversaries in consumer resistance, Ulver and Laurell (2020) define five different types and their respective consumer activist actions with their own distinctive ideologies. They elucidate that the anti-capitalistic theme focuses on anticonsumerist activism which ideologically targets the entire economic system. Next, they discuss the anti-colonialist approach and how it reflects on an even more basic feature of capitalism where activists appropriate the nationalist ideology to resist global brands that colonize other countries or regions, meaning they specifically resist the geopolitical dimensions of Western capitalism. The third theme of adversaries they discuss is the antiunethical theme, where the ethical consumption activist criticizes the capitalist economy for its, among others, misconduct and brands immoral business players as corrupt and psychopaths. Here, they claim that the opponent is not so much the economic system and its mainstream consumerism philosophy but how it is applied ethically in terms of human, natural, and animal rights. Following, they elucidate the fourth category as antiexclusion, where activists campaign to protest and reform the "discriminatory" capitalist status quo and the mainstream priorities of large-scale corporations. Finally, Ulver and Laurell (2020, p. 4) define their fifth category as the antiliberal consumer resistance, "where anyone threatening the national identity, especially liberals and foreigners, is constructed as the enemy". In other words, they study consumer resistance against multiculturalism, where far-right resistance is highly present.

In short, Ulver and Laurell (2020) see these first four consumer conceptualizations of adversaries as consisting of excessively capitalist behaviours that are viewed as selfish, antisocial, unethical, or oppressive. Consumers want the market to change to be responsible and inclusive, while consumer activists fight for universalist and liberal values of human, animal and environmental rights (Ulver & Laurell, 2020).

Since consumers take part in many roles in society and attend economic, social, cultural and ethical issues, it can be said that consumer resistance is fundamentally political (Roux & Izberk-Bilgin, 2018). Today's consumers are seen as individuals that challenge the status quo by observing and being critical with the end goal of reform and transform markets (Roux & Izberk-Bilgin, 2018; Thompson, 2004). As a consequence, consumer resistance can be seen as a highlighter of market change, an aspect that is of extreme interest for companies since it will define not only the company's strategy but also the company's regulations and political action

(Roux & Izberk-Bilgin, 2018). At the same time, Holt (2002, p.89) refers to consumer resistance as "a form of market-sanctioned cultural experimentation through which the market rejuvenates itself". From this, it can be concluded that as long as power is used to govern individuals and groups, consumer resistance will persist, leading to more recent forms of it such as making use of the internet to protest or create networked shared resistance between consumers and salespeople, workers, or populations (Roux & Izberk-Bilgin, 2018). Finally, Roux & Izberk-Bilgin (2018) reveal two ways of how consumer resistance can be hindered and, as a consequence, the transparency and accountability that is requested from companies and brands. First, they explain that it is because of the absence of information about power and how it operates. On the other hand, they explain that people may simply ignore the power that brands, companies, and the market have to influence the environment, their conduct or pursue behaviours that are disruptive to society or the climate.

Exploring the study streams of political consumerism, responsibilization, and consumer resistance in depth will be of great assistance for our research to better understand why consumers feel responsible, why consumers expect companies to take a stand, and why consumers may oppose political brands. Thus, the literature mentioned in this chapter is highly relevant for our study as it will significantly help us in our analysis and discussion of our empirical data.

2.3   Brand Political Activism

2.3.1   Brand Activism

In the following sections, we will use literature within consumer research and marketing but outside of CCT. Over the years, a great deal of brand activism concepts have been formulated, such as advocacy advertisements, corporate social activism, cause-related marketing, corporate social marketing, corporate political activity, corporate social responsibility, and political philanthropy (Alhouti, Johnson & Holloway, 2016; Bhagwat et al., 2020; Chandler, 2020; Copeland & Boulianne, 2020; Du, Bhattacharya & Sen, 2010; Haley, 1996; Hoppner & Vadakkepatt, 2019; Korschun, Martin & Vadakkepatt, 2020; Kotler & Lee, 2005; Stanley, 2020; Vredenburg et al., 2020). The formulation of these concepts is the result of the drastic changes in character the market has experienced over the last decades (Korschun, Martin & Vadakkepatt, 2020; Stolle & Micheletti, 2013).

The number of brands coming forward to take a stand on a societal issue is increasing (Hoppner & Vadakkepatt, 2019; Korschun, Martin & Vadakkepatt, 2020). Furthermore, stakeholders are increasingly placing pressure on companies to not only generate wealth but also to contribute societal benefits (Bhagwat et al., 2020; Stanley, 2020). Conventionally, those benefits took the

shape of CSR (Alhouti, Johnson & Holloway, 2016; Bhagwat et al., 2020; Chandler, 2020; Du, Bhattacharya & Sen, 2010), which also allowed companies to display remorse (Alhouti, Johnson & Holloway, 2016). However, now stakeholders demand that companies also display their ideals by publicly supporting or opposing one side of a socio-political concern, that is, participating in corporate social activism (CSA; Bhagwat et al., 2020; Vredenburg et al., 2020) CSA is different from the frequently preferred CSR and has the possibility to both strengthen relationships with important stakeholders (Bhagwat et al., 2020) while also potentially alienating others who disagree (Bhagwat et al., 2020; Chandler, 2020; Hoppner & Vadakkepatt, 2019). Similarly, Moorman (2020, p.388) explains brand political activism as "public speech or actions focused on partisan issues made by or on behalf of a company using its corporate or individual brand name". Furthermore, the partisan essence of the problem is a crucial aspect of political activism (Moorman, 2020). This signifies that there are going to be resistant stakeholders, such as consumers and employees, that do not want to push against prevailing norms on others who desire an improved world (Moorman, 2020). As a consequence, when brands partake in these subject matters, they must choose a side (Moorman, 2020). Bhagwat et al. (2020) further explain that socio-political issues occur at the crossroads of politics, culture, and time, and the debate around them may resolve or change over time. They then demonstrate this point by recounting that a century ago, universal women's suffrage was contentious, but is now recognized in the United States of America.

Taking a socio-political stand is when a brand or a company, for instance, openly take a position concerning a political or social issue (Hoppner & Vadakkepatt, 2019; Vredenburg et al., 2020). Deciding to take a stand is a significant decision since it signifies that the brand or company has officially joined the discussion concerning the societal issue (Hoppner & Vadakkepatt, 2019). The strength or power of the stand is measured by the degree of dedication towards the stand (Hoppner & Vadakkepatt, 2019). That is, it may span from a weak stance, such as hesitant comments criticizing or condoning an issue, to a strong stance with an explicit reaction that requires investing assets in denouncing or endorsing an issue (Hoppner & Vadakkepatt, 2019). Thus, deciding on the stance's strength is a critical decision since the way that a brand joins a discussion indicates the level of visibility the stance gets along with the potential to alienate or strengthen relationships with stakeholders (Bhagwat et al., 2020; Chandler, 2020; Hoppner & Vadakkepatt, 2019).

2.3.2 Authentic Brand Activism

As previously established, consumers increasingly expect brands to take a stand on societal issues (Bhagwat et al., 2020; Hoppner & Vadakkepatt, 2019; Korschun, Martin & Vadakkepatt, 2020; Stanley, 2020; Vredenburg et al., 2020). Moreover, when brands partake in authentic brand activism, which happens when the brand's message and values coordinate with the prosocial corporate activities, they generate the strongest opportunity for social change

(Vredenburg et al., 2020). However, if brands separate their activism from their values and practices, they engage in inauthentic brand activism, which consumers see as woke washing (Korschun, Martin & Vadakkepatt, 2020; Vredenburg et al., 2020). Furthermore, in a 2019 report, 56% of consumers were convinced that too many brands utilize socio-political issues mainly as a marketing scheme for selling more products (Edelman, 2019; Vredenburg et al., 2020). Thus, even though brands engage in brand activism, consumers often do not believe them or believe they could do more (Alhouti, Johnson & Holloway, 2016; Du, Bhattacharya & Sen, 2010; Vredenburg et al., 2020).

Similarly, Holt (2002) reflects on how companies should open themselves to the public to become more authentic, since the internet has become a powerful tool to spread the company's attitudes and actions, and the consumer is able to have a look at what happens behinds the scenes, expecting to find the same thing as the company presents for itself.

On the other hand, Moorman (2020) questions how marketing leaders are using brand political activism and sees it as an opportunity. She explains that it seems as if marketers are more focused on what might be lost, since not staying true to a political position may be seen as inauthentic and may push consumers to doubt why the company is doing this. Furthermore, she claims that marketers understand that companies should not take a political stand unless they can be brand consistent and connect with the targeted market authentically. By following this thought, she explains that they lose the chance to develop their brand by engaging in political activism.

However, there are different key aspects for brands to be characterized as activists (Vredenburg et al., 2020). To begin with, the brand should be purpose and value-driven while addressing controversial, contested socio-political issues, which can be progressive or conservative and is communicated through the use of messaging and brand practice (Vredenburg et al., 2020). This last one is an important aspect since Vredenburg et al. (2020) use it as a tool to create different typologies of brand activism, where the degree of activist marketing messaging and the degree of prosocial corporate practice play the main role. Under these typologies, they discuss absent brand activism, silent brand activism, authentic brand activism and lastly, inauthentic brand activism.

Lastly, Alhouti, Johnson and Holloway (2016) reflect on different aspects that might be the cause of consumers perceptions starting with remorse, which can be seen as inauthentic when the consumer perceives a CSR action is done with the goal of repairing some wrongdoing or for the necessity to save face. Another aspect they mention that determines the authenticity of a brand, can be the perception of the fit between the company and the cause. This can become positive when the firm's offering, brand concept and target market's needs follow the CSR actions (Alhouti, Johnson & Holloway, 2016). In conclusion, the aspect of impact also has a great influence on the perception of authenticity, where not only the volume of the donation is

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important, but also the number of initiatives, time and financial support that the company has put into the specific CSR action (Alhouti, Johnson & Holloway, 2016).

2.3.3   Congruence Between Brand and Message

When the literature regarding congruence is examined, Haley (1996) expressed that there are different components to construct credibility of the organizational source. He then explains that there are three main perceptions that consumers have and link when understanding advocacy messages. To begin with, he explains the link between the organization and self. There the consumer perceives how the relationship between the organization and the consumer is, which is considered good when the organization makes an effort to understand the consumer, share common values and is recognizable and likeable (Haley, 1996). Second, the link between the organization and the issue goes together with the consumer's perception of the relationship between the company and the issue (Haley, 1996). In this case, for consumers to understand advocacy advertising, there should be a logical association between the company and the issue (Haley, 1996). In addition, the company should have the expertise, personal investment and intent regarding the issue (Haley, 1996). Lastly, the link between the issue and the self-unwraps the perception of the relationship between the consumer and the issue (Haley, 1996). Here aspects that might influence the consumer's understanding of the message is the importance of the issue to the self, the importance of the issue to society, the action that can be taken to help and if nobody can help (Haley, 1996).

However, according to Hoppner & Vadakkepatt (2019, p.418), moral authority is:

> the potential to influence the morality of others through the use of power and platform granted to an entity based on the perception of its stakeholders that the entity is moral. In a marketplace where 'what should be' does not always align with 'what is', moral authority exists to provide clarity and guidance to others regarding what is right in terms of values and actions. It provides an example to follow; to unite behind to effect change.

For a company to have moral authority, it should bear three main overlapped aspects such as possessing a moral identity, being able to influence through power and a platform, and finally being perceived by the stakeholders as moral (Hoppner & Vadakkepatt, 2019). When it comes to the relationship between moral authority and taking a stance, Hoppner & Vadakkepatt (2019) define three main categories of factors such as entity-level factors, industry-level factors and societal-level factors. In the case of entity-level factors, the role of the issue fit takes a great role. As explained before, Hoppner & Vadakkepatt (2019) elaborate on the degree of the fit between the entity and the issue and how this influences if the moral authority will be used to take a stance. More specifically, on the political ideology-stance fit, Hoppner & Vadakkepatt (2019) refer to socio-political viewpoints and how these political ideologies influence the relationship between the stance and the consequences. In other words, the fit between political

ideology and the stance will moderate not only the relationship between the stance and the consequences for the entity but also for the society, where the higher the fit between these two, the more positive the impact for the entity and society (Hoppner & Vadakkepatt, 2019).

Finally, Vredenburg et al. (2020) conclude that to get consumers to perceive the authenticity of the brand; there must be an alignment of activist marketing messages between brand purpose, values, and prosocial corporate practice.

To conclude, in this chapter we explored literature regarding consumer research and marketing but outside of CCT. However, the literature regarding brand activism, authentic brand activism, and congruence between brand and message is used to gain a comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon of brands taking a stand. Therefore, these concepts are considered relevant to our study to broaden our knowledge of the topic and to better understand our empirical data.

2.4   Chapter Summary

In this chapter, we went over previous academic literature that is relevant to our study. The main literature streams we explored were political ideology, political consumerism, and brand political activism. The first relevant research stream for our thesis is political ideology where we delved deeper into the ideologies of neoliberalism and social protectionism. It is important to understand these ideologies since both the U.S. and Sweden are neoliberal countries, and Sweden is also a welfare state. Thus, knowledge of these ideologies can help us when we start analysing consumers' meanings from the different countries. Next, we explored political consumerism, responsibilization, and consumer resistance as these research streams are crucial to provide us with an understand of why consumers expect brands to take a stand or why consumers may resist against political brands. Lastly, under brand political activism we explored literature regarding brand activism, authentic brand activism, and congruence between brand and message to give us a better understanding of the phenomenon of brands taking a stand. The previous literature mentioned in this chapter will then assist us in analysing our empirical findings.

3   Theoretical Lens

In the following chapter, we introduce the theoretical lenses utilized to analyse the empirical data gathered for the research. First, we explain the concept of consumer culture theory and the socio-cultural perspective. After that, we explain the concept of governmentality.

3.1   Consumer Culture Theory

Arnould and Thompson (2005) explain that consumer culture theory (CCT) refers to a group of theoretical perspectives which focus on the connections between the marketplace, cultural meanings, and consumer actions. Moreover, CCT is a research field that studies culture as a heterogeneous dispersal of meanings rather than a homogeneous structure that occurs within the wider socio-historical framework of market capitalism and globalization (Arnould & Thompson, 2005, 2018). Therefore, consumer culture symbolizes a social agreement where the connection between social resources and lived culture is negotiated through markets (Arnould & Thompson, 2005). Similarly, Holt (2002, p.80) explains that "consumer culture is the ideological infrastructure that undergirds what and how people consume and sets the ground rules for marketers' branding activities". Furthermore, from a CCT position, culture can as well be interpreted as a consequence of symbolic communication, where the group's knowledge, values, abilities, motives, and outlooks all perform as central symbolic features of both out-group and in-group communication (Thomas, Cross & Harrison, 2018). Therefore, CCT seeks to systematically connect individual meanings with various degrees of cultural structures and finally place these connections within the marketplace and historical contexts (Arnould & Thompson, 2005). Furthermore, with a socio-cultural perspective, the focus is on examining how a number of cultural, ideological, and sociological factors form consumers' collective and individual identities and how they consume and produce marketplace assets (Thompson, MacInnis & Arnould, 2018). Moreover, in CCT, the socio-cultural forces impact the consumers' decisions and their subjective encounters with the marketplace (Thompson, MacInnis & Arnould, 2018). Therefore, to understand consumers, it is important to first understand the socio-cultural environment surrounding them.

3.2   Governmentality

Although consumers today in liberal democracies seem to have freedom of choice and actions, only a few of these are viable due to the use of controlling techniques that are very difficult to recognize (Egan-Wyer, 2019). Groups that shape the individual's understanding to perceive these rules as normal and natural, not only have great power over individuals while making them think they have some form of freedom over their choices but also benefit economically (Egan-Wyer, 2019). Therefore, the freely chosen self-discipline is the government of choice, which involves the change of all types of norms, aspirations, desires, rationalities, and points of view on the world (Egan-Wyer, 2019). Thus, governmentality is governing through freedom (Egan-Wyer, 2019).

Similarly, Varman, Skålén, and Belk (2012) define governmentality as giving individuals behaviour an intentional direction. Such discourses are not neutral representations of social reality, but rather foster specific subject positions, rationalities, and state policies aimed at regulating human behaviour in specific ways (Varman, Skålén & Belk, 2012). The end purpose of this is to create connections between personal ambitions and those of the institutions in power (Egan-Wyer, 2019).This occurs by using subtle controlling techniques, called technologies of the self, that refer to the ways in how individuals are encouraged to voluntarily control themselves and are very hard to resist (Egan-Wyer, 2019).

When it comes to the relation with CCT, governmentality has been used to understand how the consumer's subjective criteria is created (Egan-Wyer, 2019). According to Egan-Wyer (2019), three different authors look at this from three different perspectives. First, Shankar, Cherrier and Canniford (2006) see governmentality in the context of consumer empowerment. Next, Zwick, Bonsu and Darmody (2008) relate it to the situation of consumer co-creation. Finally, Giesler & Veresiu (2014) associate it with neoliberalism. In all these cases, the use of governmentality exposes consumers' perspective regarding the power they believe they have, meaning they believe they are less controlled than before (Egan-Wyer, 2019). In other words, individuals are fundamentally just under different types of disciplinary power, which works with the goal to create different types of consumer subjectivities, meaning the empowered consumer is just another type of consumer subjectivity (Egan-Wyer, 2019).

3.3   Chapter Summary

In this chapter, we introduced the theoretical lenses used to analyse our empirical data. First, we explained the concept of consumer culture theory, followed by an explanation regarding the concept of governmentality.

4 Methodology

In the following chapter, the methodological outline applied in this thesis is argued. Firstly, the underlying philosophical stance is discussed, followed by the research strategy which describes the strategy approach and then leads to the qualitative research approach justification. After this, we argue the research design followed by the data collection method. Here we start by explaining the case-based approach and then move on to the netnography. Consequently, the data analysis section explains how this data will be analysed, followed by the ethical considerations taken and finally the limitations.

4.1 Philosophy

"The relationship between data and theory has been hotly debated by philosophers for many centuries" (Easterby-Smith, Thorpe & Jackson, 2015, p.46). Understanding these perspectives can be of great help for many reasons. First, researchers develop a clear understanding of their reflective role regarding the study (Easterby-Smith, Thorpe & Jackson, 2015). Also, it not only helps to develop a straightforward research design, but it also helps to recognize which type of design would be most helpful for the research and even identify unknown or new designs (Easterby-Smith, Thorpe & Jackson, 2015). Since these philosophical positions significantly impact the research quality, we will shortly detail the philosophical assumptions that assist us in devising this research.

Easterby-Smith, Thorpe & Jackson (2015) explain that ontology concerns philosophical assumptions about the nature of existence and reality. Accordingly, this study takes a relativist ontological perspective where there is no single truth to be discovered but rather numerous perspectives (Easterby-Smith, Thorpe & Jackson, 2015). The relativist position presumes that in reality, different individuals can have different perspectives (Easterby-Smith, Thorpe & Jackson, 2015). Similarly, epistemology relates to the theory of knowledge and helps researchers comprehend the most suitable methods of investigating the nature of our world. Furthermore, social constructionism means that people shape reality and that "[t]he focus should be on what people, individually and collectively, are thinking and feeling" (Easterby-Smith, Thorpe & Jackson, 2015, p.52). Therefore, this study aims to obtain knowledge through a social constructionism epistemology approach since consumers' meanings, judgments, and discourses are best captured using this method (Easterby-Smith, Thorpe & Jackson, 2015).

In the case of our research, as observers, we strive to be independent of the studied participants, meaning we apply detached constructivism in a hermeneutic approach to interpret textual material and analyse context-based observations (Easterby-Smith, Thorpe & Jackson, 2015). Since we make a conscious effort to see the matter from different points of view and avoid favoured angles, it can be said that we took a reflexive approach, which means working with different interpretations to avoid traps and have productive results (Alvesson, 2003).

4.2 Research Strategy

4.2.1 Strategy Approach

When it comes to designing a research project, theory can be either tested or built, leading to two reasoning approaches: deductive or inductive (Saunders, Lewis & Thornhill, 2019). Hughes & Lavery (2008) define deductive arguments as substantial premises that are enough to guarantee the truth of the conclusion and inductive arguments as promises that could lead to the conclusion being accurate but do not provide a guarantee. From a research perspective, Saunders, Lewis and Thornhill (2019) define the deductive approach as one which tests theory developed from a previous literature review. On the contrary, Saunders, Lewis and Thornhill (2019) define an inductive approach as one that collects data first to study a topic to build up a theory. As a third option, Saunders, Lewis and Thornhill (2019) introduce an abductive approach as one which is used to analyse a phenomenon, define trends, and describe trends by gathering data in order to create a new or change a current hypothesis, which is then evaluated with additional data.

Since there is only limited information about how consumers draw from different ideologies in their meaning-making of brands taking a stand, the inductive strategy approach seems most fitting for this thesis. Using a netnography, qualitative empirical data will be gathered to explore the topic. This method will be used by gathering empirical data from different social media platforms, news websites, and public forums, namely Twitter, WorldNetDaily (WND), and Flashback. This will allow us to explore consumer meanings of two countries and based on two different brand cases. Out of these comments, it will be possible to analyse how consumers draw from different ideologies in their meaning-making of brands taking a stand. Thus, the method of netnography is highly relevant for this study as it can help us to answer our research question.

4.2.2 Qualitative Research

When it comes to the research strategy, and by following the philosophical positions that impact the study (Easterby-Smith, Thorpe & Jackson, 2015), we can deduce that a qualitative research

approach is most relevant. Easterby-Smith, Thorpe & Jackson (2015) explain that qualitative research manages to be exploratory and open-ended in its nature. Moreover, they explain that, in general, qualitative research aims to obtain an in-depth knowledge of individuals' viewpoints, feelings, and experiences. Therefore, qualitative research is particularly relevant for this study. Easterby-Smith, Thorpe & Jackson (2015) elucidate that qualitative data is collected in a non-numeric shape. The types of qualitative data that are most common are descriptions of what participants did or said, for instance, written observations, interview transcripts, and recordings (Easterby-Smith, Thorpe & Jackson, 2015). However, data is seldom discovered but instead developed by researchers (Easterby-Smith, Thorpe & Jackson, 2015).

4.3   Research Design

"Research designs are about organizing research activity, including the collection of data, in ways that are most likely to achieve the research aims" (Easterby-Smith, Thorpe & Jackson, 2015, p.67). In other words, the essence of research design is to make choices about what is to be observed and how (Easterby-Smith, Thorpe & Jackson, 2015). Easterby-Smith, Thorpe & Jackson (2015) discuss, it is essential to view the philosophical positions taken since they define qualitative research and the research design. In the case of our qualitative research, we decided to apply a detached constructionist design with the methodology of a netnography and a case-based approach. To cover all essential aspects of the research design, Easterby-Smith, Thorpe & Jackson (2015) provide the following questions to be analysed:

1. What data is to be gathered? 2. How is the data to be gathered? 3. From where is the data to be gathered 4. How is the data to be analysed? 5. How well is the question answered?

Coming back to the purpose of the thesis, we aim to understand how consumers draw from different ideologies in their meaning-making of brands taking a political stance. Since we take a constructionist research design to collect text-based empirical data on consumers' debates and discussions, we first select relevant cases while applying them in specific countries. To have a clear understanding of the different consumer meanings, we will analyse the Nike case and their anti-racism campaign featuring Colin Kaepernick. At the same time, we will focus on the Gillette case and their toxic masculinity campaign: "The Best A Man Can Be". Since our study builds upon ideologies, we decided to narrow the empirical data down to the United States and Sweden. These cases and their relevance to our study will be discussed in the following sections.

To identify the needed empirical data based on consumer meanings in these two cases and these specific countries, we use the research method of netnography on social media platforms, news websites, and public forums, namely Twitter, WorldNetDaily, and Flashback.

4.4 Data Collection Method

4.4.1 Case-based Approach

As discussed in our research design, we decided to take a case-based approach as a tool to be able to understand how consumers draw from different ideologies in their meaning-making of brands taking political stands. Ridder (2017) refers to an instrumental case study as one which is not of main importance in the study itself but is used as a support to facilitate the understanding of a research issue. Similarly, Eisenhardt (1989) expresses the importance of choosing the cases carefully and correctly since these are used to provide, test or generate theory.

As previously discussed, we decided to make use of a case-based approach by juxtaposing two cases instead of only one, which we think will help us get a better understanding of the phenomenon. For our research, we decided to examine consumer meanings' regarding the Gillette advertisement "The Best A Man Can Be" (Ganev, 2019; Stanley, 2020; Vredenburg et al., 2020) and Nike's 2018 campaign "Dream Crazy" (Bhagwat et al., 2020; Boren, 2018; Stanley, 2020; Vredenburg et al., 2020). These two cases were selected since the diversity and equality issues they address are significant and part of ongoing discussions in Sweden and America. Due to their high profile and controversy, these commercials received much attention, leading to a significant number of conversations and debates on social media and platforms, enabling us to explore a higher number of comments. Furthermore, these two cases are recent, ensuring that the data can be collected through online channels and can give us relevant findings of consumers' meanings.

Nike

Back in 2016 Colin Kaepernick, quarterback for the San Francisco 49ers, began kneeling during the national anthem to condemn inequality, police brutality, and racial inequality, creating big controversy in the US (Draper, Creswell & Maheshwari, 2018). Because of his protest, President Trump stated in a series of tweets and statements that he should be fired and countless consumers expressed their opinion on these protests being disrespectful to the national anthem (Draper, Creswell & Maheshwari, 2018). According to Draper, Creswell & Maheshwari (2018), Mr Kaepernick is perhaps the most divisive American athlete of his generation. In 2018 Nike, which has long used controversy to promote the brand, launched the "Dream Crazy" campaign featuring former NFL player Colin Kaepernick honouring the 30th anniversary of its iconic "Just Do It" slogan (Draper, Creswell & Maheshwari, 2018). In the commercial, Mr Kaepernick narrates a montage of athletes overcoming challenges and aspiring to be the greatest they have ever been in their sport (Rucker, 2018). The video ends Kaepernick saying: "So don't ask if your dreams are crazy. Ask if they're crazy enough" (Golden & Thomas, 2018).

This event led a big part of the younger consumers to support the brand (Boren, 2018), while the other part of consumers responded by burning Nike running shoes (Vredenburg et al., 2020). On Twitter, President Trump slammed Nike and drew attention to customer backlash (Rucker, 2018). However, since then, consumers have responded highly positively "due to Nike gradually building a reputation for anti-racist corporate practice, messaging, purpose, and values" (Vredenburg et al., 2020, p.455).

Figure 1: Nike Dream Crazy Campaign (Draper, Creswell & Maheshwari, 2018).

Gillette

In 2019, Gillette launched the "The Best A Man Can Be" advertisement, making a radical change to their 30-years old slogan "The Best A Man Can Get" and focusing on toxic masculinity and the Me-too movement (Taylor, 2019). In the commercial, news stories of the #MeToo campaign, as well as images of misogyny in movies, corporate boards, and kid abuse are visible with a voiceover asking, "Bullying, the MeToo movement against sexual assault, toxic masculinity, is this the best a guy can get?" (Topping, Lyons & Weaver, 2019, n.p.). It also goes on to show examples of more constructive behaviour, such as intervening to stop certain behaviours from occurring in public (Baggs, 2019). According to Baggs (2019), in just 48 hours, the commercial was viewed over 2 million times on YouTube. The goal of the

campaign was to continue the movement by urging men to keep each other accountable for their actions (Taylor, 2019).

Following this launch, Gillette faced backlash as the commercial provoked strong reactions from consumers (Ganev, 2019; Pecot, Vasilopoulou & Cavallaro, 2021; Stanley, 2020; Vredenburg et al., 2020). Among the reactions, some people responded through social media to the ad's message, claiming it was overly political and painted all men as bullies or sexual harassers (Taylor, 2019). According to Baggs (2019), the video has received mostly critical feedback, with audiences claiming that they would never purchase Gillette goods again or that the commercial is "feminist propaganda".

Stanley (2020, p.394), states that this happened due to Gillette's lack of credibility in the cause "with either perplexed customers or sceptical Me-Too activists" while defining masculinity as "endemic to a razor company". On the other hand, Vredenburg et al. (2020) explain an incongruence between brand and cause and considered the razor maker Gillette, an inauthentic brand activist. However, despite the mixed response to the brand's latest message, it has received universal acclaim for its effort to engage in the conversation around what it means to be a modern guy (Baggs, 2019).

Figure 2: Gillette The Best A Man Can Be Campaign (Barr, 2019).

4.4.2   Netnography

There is a need to obtain qualitative data to find out how consumers draw from different ideologies in their meaning-makings. To investigate this, we decided on the U.S. and Sweden's national contexts as the empirical range for the research. Since brands taking a stand are widely debated on various social media platforms and public forums, netnography was chosen as the research method. According to Kozinets (2002, p.62), netnography or internet-based ethnography "is a new qualitative research methodology that adapts ethnographic research techniques to study the cultures and communities that are emerging through computer-mediated communications". Thus, netnography is conceived especially to make inquiries about consumer cultures and communities online (Kozinets, 1998). Additionally, compared to ethnography, netnography is a less complicated and more time-efficient research method (Kozinets, 2002).

Furthermore, Kozinets (2002) explains that netnography can be conducted unobtrusively by observing consumers in circumstances not created by researchers. He then highlights that netnography allows researchers to survey naturally occurring actions and behaviours. Furthermore, since netnography can be both unobtrusive and naturalistic, it provides ongoing access to consumers in specific social circumstances online (Kozinets, 2002). By functioning as passive or complete observers, we intended to obtain rich texts by solely observing and not participating in any discussions (Bertilsson, 2015; Kozinets, 2002). Furthermore, seeing as this research method is incredibly convenient for gathering discussions and communications that are text-based (Kozinets, 2002, 1998), it was used to analyse and gather empirical data of consumers' online debates and discussions.

The netnography was conducted on three platforms, the social media website Twitter, the Swedish public forum Flashback, and the American news website WorldNetDaily (WND). We chose these specific platforms by considering Kozinets's (2002) criteria for selecting online communities. Firstly, these platforms proved to have threads and individuals discussing our topic (Kozinets, 2002). Next, all platforms had many postings and many people or message posters (Kozinets, 2002). Additionally, these websites have detailed data and notable interactions between members, which can help the research (Kozinets, 2002). Twitter was utilized to search for empirical data on both Swedish and American individuals. However, since there was a smaller number of Swedish comments on the advertisements on Twitter, Flashback was chosen to acquire more data on the Swedish consumers. Flashback is one of the biggest online forums in the world and is renowned for individuals conveying racist comments and radical right beliefs (Wahlström & Törnberg, 2019). Thus, this platform is convenient for our study as it engages extreme discussions while simultaneously being accessible to the mainstream (Wahlström & Törnberg, 2019). Moreover, it also attracts individuals with antiracist opinions who partake in the conversations to rebut the most extreme comments (Ulver & Laurell, 2020). Consequently, WND was added to also have a public website for American

users. Furthermore, the website was chosen as it is also renowned for far-right discussions and being politically conservative (C-SPAN.org, n.d.).

Moreover, we adhered to the ethnographic procedures that Kozinets (2002) proposes to have structured research. He suggests first to make a cultural entrée, where we defined our research aims and determined and familiarized ourselves with the online platforms chosen to observe. Subsequently, we collected, examined, and interpreted the textual data (Kozinets, 2002). To find relevant posts on Twitter for American and Swedish individuals, a variety of hashtags and keywords were used, such as #Gillette, #BestAManCanGet, #TheBestManCanBe, #TheBestMenCanBe, #BoycottGillette, #Nike, #ColinKaepernick, #BoycottNike, #BojkottNike, #DreamCrazy. Additionally, Gillette, Nike's, and Colin Kaepernick's original posts of the advertisement on Twitter were found, and the replies and retweets were examined.

Furthermore, to specifically find empirical data from Sweden, we used advanced settings on Twitter to search for words and comments, firstly by location and secondly by language. In a similar manner, to make certain the empirical data we gather on America was truly from American individuals, we used the location setting and the location on user profiles. To find threads on Flashback, we tried certain keywords such as Gillette, Best A Man Can Get, Nike, and Colin Kaepernick until we found relevant discussion threads on the website with numerous comments and discussions around the advertisements. With WorldNetDaily, we searched for news segments regarding the brands and their advertisements by using the website's search feature and the segments' comments underneath were inspected. In total, 613 comments were collected, dating from 2018-2021 for both Gillette and Nike. Out of the 613 comments, 309 were from Swedish consumers and 304 from American consumers. However, before we started to analyse the data, we reduced the comments from 613 to 436 comments from both Swedish and American consumers by prioritizing certain themes.

We then followed the last steps, which according to Kozinets (2002) are to make sure that the interpretations are trustworthy and that the research is conducted ethically. Moreover, throughout collecting and analysing the data, it is critical to adhere to established procedures for the study to be trustworthy (Kozinets, 2002; Wallendorf & Belk, 1989). The final step of the ethnographic procedures that Kozinets (2002) suggests is member feedback, which, unfortunately, could not be obtained for the study due to time restrictions.

4.5   Data Analysis

In this thesis, we use a hermeneutic approach to interpret the comments that consumers post online. The hermeneutic framework is used to interpret consumer meanings in terms of the consumer's personal experience as well as a larger narrative context with defined cultural meanings (Thompson, 1997). This method of interpretation is based on the assumption that

consumers are not voicing a purely subjective point of view (Thompson & Coskuner-Balli, 2007). Therefore, the emphasis is placed on the underlying meaning structure instead of the personal details of a consumer's lifeworld (Thompson & Coskuner-Balli, 2007). Throughout the process, understandings are shaped, disputed, reconsidered and further formed through an iterative process between consumers' comments and the evolving understanding of the whole collection of empirical data (Thompson & Arsel, 2004). Moreover, to guarantee a logical interpretation, the notion of the iterative hermeneutic circle including a part-to-whole reading was applied (Arnold & Fischer, 1994; Thompson, Pollio & Locander, 1994). The hermeneutic circle refers to the notion that a part cannot be comprehended without the whole (Bernstein, 1983). Therefore, the meaning of the whole is ascertained from the individual aspects while simultaneously, individual aspects are comprehended by relating to the whole (Bernstein, 1983). Thus, to gain a holistic understanding, we contrasted separate parts in connection to the whole and also the whole in connection to the individual parts (Bertilsson, 2015). Lastly, to help us analyse the empirical data, we placed the comments in the software MAXQDA to code and determine themes within the empirical data (Rennstam & Wästerfors, 2018). To demonstrate our procedure, the table below is a short excerpt that demonstrates our initial coding of comments concerning Nike and Gillette. We then used categorical reduction to reduce our comments and prioritize specific categories in an effort to produce a more interesting and manageable set of data (Rennstam & Wästerfors, 2018).

Table 1:Extract of Own Coding

Code	Expression
Brands as politicians	"Just worry about making a better razor blade and get out of politics"
Left-wing	"Of course, I avoid companies that are left-wing"
Right-wing	"That the right-wing muppets in the US are going crazy"
National Ideology	"The image of what it means to be an American and a patriot"
Disbelief	"Why were so many upset by this?"
Inauthentic	"They only make these moves to make money"
Boycotts	"I'm proud to have participated in this successful boycott"

4.6   Ethical Considerations

Kozinets (2002) explains the two major ethical concerns regarding netnography: the debate on whether online forums should be regarded as public or private websites, and secondly, when online, what is regarded as informed consent. To manage these concerns, we ensured that all the data collected was publicly available and that numerous users were active on the platforms. Since these websites do not require memberships or logins to access and observe the data, we regarded the platforms as public space and thus not required to obtain consent from community members. Also, we consider the topics to be non-sensitive. Our consideration is founded on Sudweeks and Rafaeli (1995), who consider informed consent to be incorporated when an individual posts in a public space. Moreover, since the users were given pseudonyms, Sudweeks and Rafaeli (1995) assert that informed consent is not essential. Therefore, to follow ethical guidelines and make certain there are no ethical issues in our study, the thread titles and the actual usernames used by respondents are not provided. Instead, the users were given city pseudonyms, with users from Sweden being given names of Swedish cities and users from America given names of American cities.

Lastly, we made certain to abide by the EU's general data protection regulations (GDPR; (IMY, 2021) concerning privacy and the collection of personal data. Therefore, we anonymised everyone and removed any identifying marks such as the individuals' usernames. Moreover, we did not gather any sensitive personal data on our respondents, such as race, religion, or sexual orientation.

4.7   Methodological Limitations

When it comes to the limitations of our research, there are a few that can be considered. In terms of our chosen approach, it can be considered that an alternative approach can be used to reach different consumers with different insights that could lead to other conclusions we cannot reach with a netnography. In addition, the netnography led us to concentrate on online communities, where consumer identifiers or profiles with locations are frequently not available. Since we decided to explore American and Swedish consumers, we had to make certain that the data we gathered was from those two countries. This narrowed the number of social media platforms and public forums we could use. Thus, we encountered limitations regarding the platforms available to us. This limitation also forced us to leave out some interesting posts and conversations surrounding the brand due to the lack of location on the consumers' profile. Furthermore, because of research constraints, we only managed to focus on conversations and posts concerning two brands, Nike, and Gillette. Examining more brands would have made more data available for us to analyse and possible more fascinating discussions. Lastly, due to

time limitations with the research, we were unable to obtain member feedback which is the last step in Kozinets' guide.

4.8   Chapter Summary

Thus, this methodology chapter was divided into seven sections. In the first section, we briefly explained the underlying philosophical assumptions that helped us formulate the study. This study takes a relativist ontological perspective since no single truth is discovered and a social constructivist approach since people shape reality. The following chapters were the research strategy where we elucidate the research approach and then the research design. In the data collection method section, we explain how we used case-based methods and netnography to collect and select empirical data for the study. Following was the data analysis where the hermeneutic approach was explained. The ethical consideration section describes how we dealt with the two main ethical concerns of using a netnography, whether online forums are public or private, and what is considered informed consent. Lastly, we briefly explained the limitations we encountered during our study. The findings of our netnography will then be presented in the next chapter.

5   Empirical Findings

In this chapter, we present the empirical data that was gathered through the netnography. As outlined in the methodology, comments on Twitter, Flashback, and WND were gathered to understand how consumers draw from different ideologies in their meaning-making of brands taking a stand. The empirical data collected that is presented in this chapter is the result of a diverse range of consumer meanings towards the two controversial campaigns chosen, meaning the Nike equality campaign and the Gillette toxic masculinity campaign. Out of these comments we detected three themes to answer our research question: drawing from nationalistic ideologies, from morality, and from consumer responsibility ideologies.
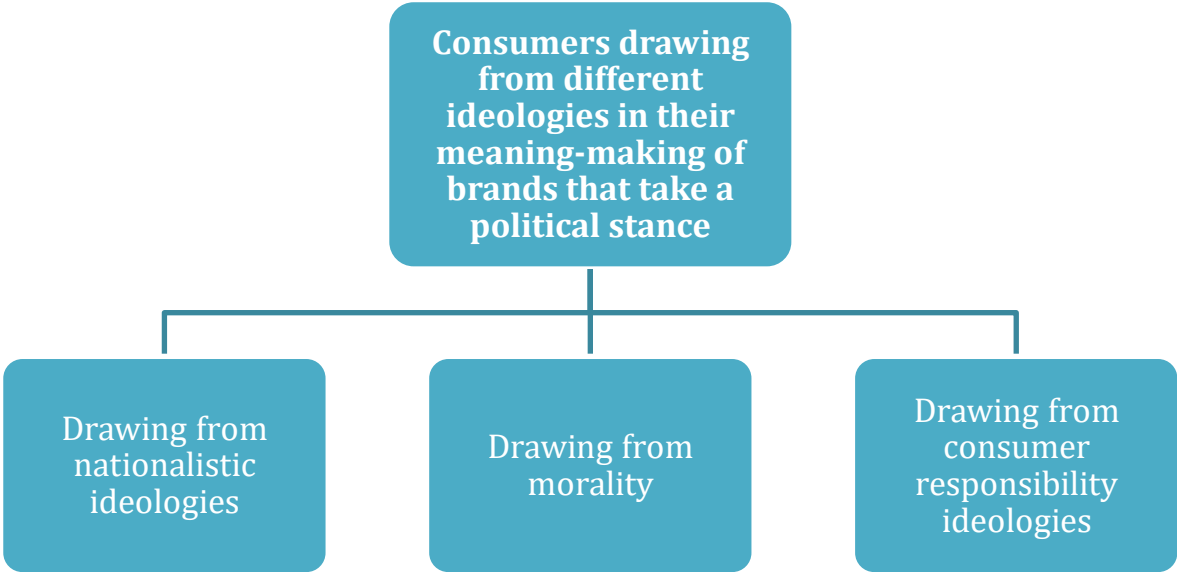

Figure 3: Themes Extracted from our Empirical Data

5.1   Drawing from Nationalistic Ideology

The first theme encountered in the different conversations and comments is the influence nationalistic ideologies have on the consumers. In these conversations, the nationalistic values of the consumers in America are highly present while the Swedish consumers are mostly commenting and reacting to these values that are strongly different from the Swedish ones. Thus, it appears that consumers from America and Sweden draw from nationalistic ideologies in different ways.

The reactions of the U.S. consumers to Nike and Gillette are mostly defending their nationalistic values. The nationalistic values mean respecting their national anthem, their flag, the military for serving their country, being brave, and manly. These consumers are deeply disappointed by brands that disrespect the national values, such as supporting Colin Kaepernick or insinuating that America is affected by toxic masculinity. As a result of disrespecting the national values, brands are considered unpatriotic and called anti-American, as Columbus demonstrates. These findings are similar to those of Luedicke, Thompson and Giesler (2010) regarding the Hummer consumers, who perceive themselves as hard-working Americans and feel attacked by those who are against the nation's virtues. Furthermore, Ulver and Laurell (2020) also discuss these behaviours as antiliberal consumer resistance where anyone who poses a threat to the national identity is portrayed as the enemy.

> Columbus:
> The Nike Symbol is that of Anti Patriotism towards America. NFL Team Owners in general appreciation of the Fans who crowd each Franchised Team Stadium should remove the Nike Logo from their Teams Uniforms in respect for the Patriotic Majority supporting their Teams both in and out of their respective Stadiums. And, especially those now as Military Personal serving Overseas.

In the comment, it is clear that Columbus disapproved of Nike and even claims that the Nike symbol represents anti-patriotism. Furthermore, Columbus demands that NFL teams should remove all Nike labels from their team uniforms since it disrespects the true patriotic Americans showing up to the games as well as the ones serving in the military overseas. In a similar manner, Phoenix's reaction clearly expresses the outrage that Nike's advertisement caused. Phoenix is obviously disappointed in how un-American Nike is being since the brand is not following the American national values. Thus, it is clear that, once again, Luedicke, Thompson and Giesler (2010) is reflected in this discussion and how the myth of the American dream encourages consumers to honour and justify their own ideological convictions while portraying opposing ideologies as oppositional threats to a sacred moral order.

Phoenix:

#RealMenStand Veterans know #RealSacrifice #Nike should be honoring our Military, our Flag and our #NationalAnthem. Nike Step out of your glass tower, learn about the real Americans that gave all Pick up a Dictionary and look up #Sacrifice We #BackTheBlue #StandForTheFlag

However, some consumers display gratitude and support towards Nike, such as Memphis and Detroit. In the case of Detroit, the consumer not only supports the social issue Gillette covers with the advertisement but also promises to fix the damage done by the ones that are boycotting.

Memphis:

Nike I'm proud of you guys and it makes me want to start buying every product you guys make! Really good move!

Detroit:

I will now be buying MORE of their product to compensate for those who are whining that their masculinity is being threatened. A real man stands up for others.

On the other hand, other consumers disapprove of these nationalistic values and call them old and outdated. At the same time, they are applying nationalistic values without realizing it. In the case of the consumers in favour of the advertisement, their perspective is that the companies are applying the nationalistic values differently. The consumers see the companies' behaviour as heroic, brave and as an example. They define taking a stand as a difficult decision since it might mean sacrificing customers or in the case of Colin Kaepernick, his career. This group sees the heroic act of taking a stand against social issues, like racism and toxic masculinity, as supporting the minorities of America, the ones that have been unseen until now.

Washington:

Thank you for your leadership against racism, racist institutions, structural racism, racism thick as molasses, barely or not even concealed, still segregating schools,

However, when it comes to the Swedish reactions to the cases of Nike and Gillette, there are strong opinions on the American national values. Numerous Swedish consumers, such as Örebro, saw the negative American reactions as exaggerated, as taking the national values too seriously, and the Americans as too easily offended people.

Örebro:

Saw now when I came home from work that they were someone who burned up their Nike shoes because of this .. How easily offended can you be? Oh well

Furthermore, this disbelief also sparked conversations among Swedish consumers as they attempted to understand why people were reacting like this and why they were burning their Nike shoes in America.

> Helsingborg Replying to Karlstad
> Hahaha .. understood that! But think that people in the US only hate him because of Trump's statement against him and everyone who knelt down!

> Kiruna Replying to Helsingborg
> They take the national anthem too seriously. It's a tune …

> Helsingborg Replying to Karlstad
> Sure, but for many in the US it is not so it symbolizes the country of the free etc .. Do we or I think anyway have a hard time relating

> Kiruna Replying to Helsingborg
> Yes, that's it. But they have a hard time understanding things. They do not exactly symbolize freedom nowadays. But good advertising by Nike of course. They probably survive some sock burners.

In these comments, it is evident that the Swedish consumers do not relate to this exaggerated nationalism and even perceive this group of consumers as one which repeats other's sayings without any deeper thought or reflection. This confusion is echoed in the conversation between Helsingborg, Karlstad, and Kiruna, as it can be seen how the actual topic of the commercial and its message is set aside due to how astonished the Swedish consumers are regarding American nationalist reactions. Even though they do not relate to this connection to the national anthem, they are not surprised as they understand that the national anthem symbolizes the national values for Americans. However, Kiruna also indicates that this reaction from the Americans might be slightly ironic as America does not currently represent freedom.

Finally, another Swedish group expressed that these types of reactions, breaking their razors and burning clothes, as outdated and not likely to exist in the future.

> Kristianstad:
> In 2018, people burned their Nike clothes because the company co-signed a pro-black activist In 2019, men break their razors because they saw an advertisement that was anti-rape / macho culture My grandchildren will never believe me when I tell these stories.

Kristianstad reflects on how unimaginable these reactions are and how they are going to make their grandchildren understand that this kind of mentality and reactions on social issues even existed before. Thus, some consumers like Kristianstad clearly believe that individuals will become more evolved and that the future will be brighter.

Thus, from these conversations and posts, it is clear that when it comes to nationalistic ideologies, Americans in our study draw more zealously from their nationalistic ideologies than the Swedish consumers in our study as many Swedish consumers expressed how dramatic the Americans were being. This then indicates that our Swedish consumers may have other ideologies they value more than their national anthem and flag.

5.2   Drawing From Morality

The increased access to information on digital platforms has made it easier for consumers to gather data on company practices and backstage activities. Moreover, it is evident that consumers now pay close attention to brands and their activities, as consumers are increasingly under pressure to consume in a morally responsible way (Giesler & Veresiu, 2014). In addition, the citizen-consumers are often framed as the moral protagonists versus the government which is the antagonist (Coskuner-Balli, 2020; Luedicke, Thompson & Giesler, 2010). When it comes to the discussions concerning the Nike and Gillette controversial campaigns, the consumers' comments echoed feelings of happiness and unhappiness towards the concept of brands getting involved in political issues. In a general aspect, a part of both American and Swedish consumers in our study saw these messages in their morality compass as enlightening and a necessity. At the same time, these consumers were content that companies are starting to take leadership in corporate social responsibilities, leading the market to a better place.

On the other hand, the unhappiness factor delivered many more interesting findings regarding the consumers' morality towards, what they considered, immoral and inauthentic companies. This signifies that there are resistant stakeholders that do not want to push against prevailing norms (Moorman, 2020). From the findings, it can be deduced that some consumers see inauthentic behaviour on the companies' side and construct their consumer meanings from a morality ideology perspective. This inauthentic behaviour is related to imposing political ideologies on the consumers for their convenience, supporting a cause while operating in unethical ways, and investing in advertisements just to fit with the younger generations and gaining profit.

5.2.1   Inauthentic Behaviour of Imposing Political Ideologies

Starting with the American consumers in our study and the aspect of imposing political ideologies, they see these companies as getting involved in issues that do not concern them. These consumers agree that companies should just worry about making better products and not get involved so that consumers can enjoy the service without political commentary or opinion on the side. Here, it is clear that the fit between the company and the cause, which can become positive when the firm's offering, brand concept and target market's needs follow the CSR actions (Alhouti, Johnson & Holloway, 2016), is not strong enough for these consumers and is perceived as inauthentic.

> Seattle:
> A word of wisdom to Gillette. Just worry about making a better razor blade and get out of politics. People don't like to be preached to or in this case 'down to' by a company that thinks it has the right to.

In this comment, it is evident that Seattle perceives the company getting involved in political issues as something that is none of its business. They see this behaviour as inauthentic and express their discomfort out of a moral perspective, where getting involved in a socio-political issue is wrong.

At the same time, American comments in our study take a strong political turn where these types of advertisements are considered socialist propaganda which is used to wrongly accuse and assault the consumers and to alienate them and drive them away. Here it can be seen how the way that a brand joins a discussion indicates the potential to alienate or strengthen relationships with stakeholders (Bhagwat et al., 2020; Chandler, 2020; Hoppner & Vadakkepatt, 2019).

> Boston:
> I've never done any of this crap, but I'm just damn tired of corporations, and networks, and entertainment franchises, and more, shoving their views and politics down our throats. Networks, keep your leftist politics out of your shows, same for the rest.

In this comment, Boston goes a step further and expresses that they see the behaviour of brands taking a political stand as trying to impose political ideologies on consumers. In Boston's eyes, this is seen as inauthentic and as wrong behaviour.

When it comes to the Swedish consumers in our study and the aspect of imposing political ideologies, a negative common idea is held. Essentially, the Swedish consumers in our study express that companies should not take a stand since they only sell basic products that have

little to do with these causes. Here again, we can deduce Alhouti, Johnson and Holloway (2016) referring to the fit of the company and the cause.

> Landskrona:
> I'm absolutely disgusted with #Gillette and the company's horrible attempt at attacking men to then think men will still buy their lousy products. Stop being political for God's sake, Gillette, you're a fucking razor blade maker and that's all. Or rather you were and now you die.

In this comment, Landskrona clearly expresses their disgust and irritation with Gillette taking a political stance. Again, the consumer sees this behaviour as inauthentic and wrong. Additionally, the discussion evolves to the consumers expressing their feelings regarding the advertising companies and how they try to force multiculturalism on the consumers while reaching out to the masses with their activism to wake them up from all these diversity issues that have little to do with the actual product.

> Malmö:
> ...For the advertiser, it is therefore first and foremost important to reach out with their activism, and try to wake the sleeping masses and cure them of their misogyny, racism and (strangely enough) blind consumerism. Selling razors becomes secondary for these woka advertisers, to carry on the "fight" primarily. Probably because they live empty meaningless existences and try to fill their lives with meaning….

Similarly, Malmö also expresses their irritation with Gillette's quest to attempt to educate individuals and fix societal issues such as racism and misogyny. Therefore, Malmö does not view Gillette in a positive light or see their attempt as authentic.

Thus, from this aspect, we can deduce that most of both American and Swedish consumers in our study see brands taking a stand as a behaviour that is used to impose political views on consumers, which is seen as negative conduct in both contexts. In addition, Swedish consumers go a bit further and look at advertising companies through a moral lens, judging them as participants of this bad behaviour.

5.2.2 Inauthentic Behaviour Because of Unethical Business Practices

Going into the inauthentic aspect of brands taking a stance while being involved in unethical practices, many American consumers in our study express their disappointment on how businesses spend billions of dollars on advertising, while they exploit slave labour overseas or had previous contradicting messages that supported unethical values. As discussed by

Korschun, Martin & Vadakkepatt (2020) and Vredenburg et al. (2020), if brands separate their activism from their values and practices, they engage in inauthentic brand activism, which consumers see as woke washing.

Furthermore, when Nike posted a quote from their campaign about not settling for being either a linebacker or homecoming queen, but rather both, New York replied: "[h]ow can they when they're making your shoes in sweatshops 20 hours a day?". Here it is clear that New York views Nike as hypocritical by telling people to reach for their dreams while simultaneously employing people in sweatshops, which is perceived by New York as morally wrong. Thus, New York likely does not believe that Nike truly wants to fight for equality for everyone, leading to a perception of inauthenticity.

Moreover, consumers not only criticized Nike for being hypocrites but Colin Kaepernick as well. Many consumers specifically accuse Kaepernick of being hypocritical for claiming to want to make a difference in society but then being involved with Nike:

> Philadelphia:
> Ah Kaepernick the hypocrisy is really astonishing...Claiming to be a advocate for "social justice" doing a deal with a major brand like Nike which exploits SLAVE LABOR in third world countries....

Many consumers also point out that Kaepernick claims to have sacrificed everything and yet he earns a high salary from Nike for doing nothing. Some users even asserted that Kaepernick should give his money to charity. Similarly, Chicago posted a photo which indicated how ironic it is to claim that Kaepernick sacrificed everything when he knelt and then use child labour to create the products:

Figure 4: Photo Posted by Chicago Regarding Nike Campaign

Even though some consumers may have liked the commercial and believed that Kaepernick is genuine, they still question his decision to team up with Nike. Other consumers also criticized Kaepernick for protesting one bad organization to join another one that is just as bad. Therefore, it appears that many consumers do not believe in Kaepernick.

> Dallas:
> I believe in your cause @Kaepernick7 and in your sincerity. But promoting a company that exploits workers in sweatshops and outsourcing factory jobs around the world is not your finest play. #JustDont OST, How can you be sincere about human rights while directly promoting Nike?

Thus, many American consumers in our study were enraged both by Nike and Kaepernick. The consumers' moral compass activates when companies that are known for their unethical behaviours in the past, get involved in CSR causes. It not only reveals the companies' inauthenticity but that companies are seen as bad because of this inauthenticity.

From another perspective, Swedish consumers in our study noted that the Nike commercial had a good message, eager, stylish, and just the right amount of radical, however, they still pointed out the conditions under which Nike manufactures its products. The fact that Nike manufactures their shoes and clothing in Asia with underpaid workers in miserable conditions while earning millions seemed to disappoint many Swedish consumers. Thus, many consumers are actively enquiring into the backstage activities of companies and the reasons for their success. This refers to Holt's (2002) thoughts regarding the internet as a powerful vehicle for this information. In addition, consumers directed attention to the reality that Nike pays its workers in Asia poorly but simultaneously pays influencers to be in their marketing campaigns:

> Lund:
> Nike is an interesting brand. Have no problem using very underpaid women in Asia to make their shoes, while paying millions to influencers in the West to give the impression of having a social responsibility. It's ... well, buy it whoever wants it

Moreover, Lund's comment emphasizes Nike's attempt to show social responsibility as hollow. Thus, it is evident that Lund does not have confidence in Nike's acts of social responsibility. However, instead of displaying rage, the comment demonstrates the dispiritedness of the consumer, where he appears to have accepted this reality.

Similarly, other consumers in our study underscored the irony of companies that use cheap labour attempting to show social responsibility and educate people: "The same companies that use child slaves in Indonesia will therefore teach us" (Helsingborg). Therefore, some consumers do not believe that Nike or Gillette have the moral authority of teaching others while

simultaneously using cheap labour or unethical messages. Once again, the theories of Korschun, Martin & Vadakkepatt (2020) and Vredenburg et al. (2020) on brand activism and their separate values which are considered as woke washing, are clearly visible in these consumers' comments.

Thus, we can deduce that both American and Swedish consumers in our study perceive these brands as immoral and inauthentic since they get involved in CSR causes while having a poor heritage or reputation regarding these same causes.

5.2.3   Inauthentic Behaviour for Economic Purposes

When it comes to companies investing in advertisements to fit in with younger generations and gain profit, American consumers see these corporations as manipulating consumers with political ideologies to buy their expensive products. In the case of Nashville:

> Nashville:
> [c]all a multimillionaire "Sacrificing Everything" true, I call it corporate propaganda used to manipulate customers to spend $150 bucks on a shoe that costs @nike $25 to make. #NikeBoycott #ColinKaepernick #NikeKaepernick.

Furthermore, American consumers see their investments in products from companies that take a stand as a vote to a specific party. They see these companies spend billions of dollars on advertising not only to push political views to their consumers as discussed before but also to increase their market share and push brand recognition.

> Las Vegas:
> … However when you go to the store every single dollar is a vote. You can legally vote everyday 24/7 (if you want to). Businesses spend billions of dollars on advertising just to increase their market share a few percentage points. They push brand recognition. Do they want your votes? You betcha …

In these comments we can clearly see how Nashville and Las Vegas point out the companies' bad behaviour manipulating consumers to gain profit, leading to the brand's inauthenticity. Luedicke, Thompson, and Giesler (2010) explain how anti-consumer activists' antagonistic arguments generate a sense of moral superiority and the moral certainty of good/us vs evil/them dualisms. Las Vegas is a clear example of this since they go deeper and explain the correlation between brands taking a stance, votes, and profits.

Lastly, most of the Swedish consumers in our study agree that the goal of this type of advertisements and campaigns is to attract new generations by betraying their history, soul, and brand to reach higher numbers of profits.

Malmö:

Gillette probably hires advertising creators to make it easier to find the right grant to reach her intended clientele. As advertisers are most affected by the new activism, they are consequently also most marinated in the new ideological way of seeing the world….

Here Malmö even accentuates that companies just want to reach new consumers. It is the advertisers that want to create these types of commercials since they are the ones knowing the new trends. This comment points out both the disinterest of the brand on the issue and the interest in the profit, leading to inauthentic and bad behaviour. Consequently, consumers are sceptical of the brands' motives as some believe that they primarily take a stand for profits, as can be seen in the answers of Eslöv and Jönköping:

Eslöv:

… [I]f Gillette had taken this initiative a few years earlier, I would have respected them. They only make these moves to make money. They only take a stand when it is difficult to do so.

Jönköping:

... Companies that play moral police should be boycotted as it's just lies to signal goodness. Behind the scenes, it is tax planning and cheap labor that counts!

Therefore, in this aspect, we can see how both American and Swedish consumers in our study perceive these companies as inauthentic and maintaining bad behaviour since they have a high interest for profit and reaching new audiences and low interest in the actual causes.

To conclude, most of the American and Swedish consumers in our study look at brands taking a stance through their moral lens. This morality ideology points out that these companies are getting involved in these issues for bigger purposes than just willing to be an example in the market. These reasons are, among others, to manipulate consumers which will lead to higher profits. Thus, from a morality ideology, both Swedish and American consumers in this study see these companies as bad and as inauthentic companies. Going deeper into the Swedish consumers in our study, they also involve advertising agencies as part of the immorality in the market. However, it is important to state that there were positive comments regarding the brands, where the consumers supported these CSR actions and saw these messages as necessary, but these were not as interesting for our study.

5.3 Drawing From Consumer Responsibility Ideology

5.3.1 Consumers Boycotting

Although there were numerous discussions and posts about boycotting Gillette and Nike from Swedish and American consumers, their general outlook towards the effectiveness appears to differ between the two countries. This indicates that the American and Swedish consumers view their role in boycotting brands differently, perhaps because of the different levels of individualized responsibility. This is consistent with Stolle and Micheletti's (2013) claims that boycotts involve individualized responsibility which is a rising phenomenon in Western democracies, but the level of responsibility taking is likely to vary across countries.

In America, the consumers in the study were often greatly pleased by the number of people boycotting the brands and the news circulating about the loss of profits. Furthermore, many consumers urged others to join the movement in an effort to ensure Gillette's decline. As evident by Houston's and Charlotte's comments, the boycott became a movement where people banded together to ensure that Gillette would lose profit. One other user, Miami, even explained "I did my part" by refusing to buy Gillette. This demonstrates that various American consumers feel that it is their duty or responsibility to boycott brands. This relates to the fact that consumers are increasingly under pressure to assume responsibility in their daily lives and act as independent entrepreneurs who turn to the market to address problems (Giesler & Veresiu, 2014; Stolle & Micheletti, 2013). Moreover, these comments also indicate that some American consumers in this study believe that it is also their responsibility to encourage others to boycott brands and spread information that could potentially convince others to boycott as well.

> Houston:
> Did you know that Gillette, of "toxic masculinity" aka turning on your customers fame, is the only unit of P&G to report declining sales last quarter? Keep up the good #BoycottGillette work, patriots! Get Woke, Go Broke.

> Charlotte:
> We are delighted that so many jumped on our #boycottgillette campaign we launched the day the moronic insulting ad came out

Furthermore, based on the comments, it is evident that various American consumers believe that it is also their responsibility to attempt to influence the marketplace. This is similar to Kozinets and Handelman's (2004) article where they explain that consumers believe that by refusing to buy the brand they can financially impact the company and therefore motivate the brand to change its actions. Thus, it is clear that many American consumers presume they can change or bring down corporations with their boycotting actions and movements:

Atlanta:

Nike is a loser company. It celebrates a loser. It celebrates an American hater. I've never bought a Nike product, but I'll do my best to make sure that fails as a corprroration.

Here, it is evident that Atlanta is not waiting for anyone to solve this problem for them, but rather taking matters into their own hands and creating their own plan of action to bring down Nike. Therefore, this comment is a good indicator that the level of individualized responsibility is relatively high in the United States. Some consumers even explained how proud they were of themselves for participating in the boycott and how the advertisement caused them to instantly change brands:

Jacksonville:

I'm proud to have participated in this successful boycott. I used Gillette razors for my entire adult life, but switched brands immediately after that horrible advertisement. I'm never going back.

Thus, participating in the boycott may be impacting consumer's perceptions of themselves while simultaneously allowing consumers to feel part of a bigger community, as demonstrated by Jacksonville. This is also brought up by Stolle and Micheletti (2013) when they describe that while typically boycotts are exercised in an individualized manner, certain types of political consumerism can incite collective identities. Furthermore, this comment by Jacksonville also underscores the fact that consumers buying behaviour is consistent with their perceived self (Klasson, 2017; Smith & French, 2009). Similarly, Henry (2010) asserts that elements of responsibility frequently provoke intense feelings about the self and others. Therefore, by boycotting, Jacksonville may see themselves as an activist who resisted a brand that uses a message they do not agree with.

While the Swedish consumers in this study also had many discussions and posts regarding boycotts, their viewpoints, however, were slightly different from the American consumers. Many Swedish consumers displayed their disbelief towards the effectiveness of boycotts, especially for brands such as Gillette that is part of a bigger corporate brand. Stolle and Micheletti (2013) also highlight this when they explain that political consumer activists sometimes express concern towards the usefulness of boycotts. In Sweden, numerous consumers, like Arvika and Göteborg explained that a boycott would not affect the brand financially in the long term and thus questioned why people even bother. This can thus indicate that many Swedish consumers in our study do not feel the same level of individualized responsibility as American consumers.

Arvika:

Just need to ask why boycott gilette? Because in the long run, you then have to boycott all P & G's brands, as the idea of a boycott is to affect the owners financially. Then it can probably be difficult to boycott everyone if you are to work in that way.

> Göteborg:
>
> In Gillette's case, you'll probably have to target the entire parent company Procter & Gamble. So the list of goods will be many more if you want to be consistent. All companies want to make money, which is good as long as it is done honestly.

These two comments by Arvika and Göteborg indicate that some Swedish consumers perhaps do not view it as their responsibility to take action and resist against brands that they do not agree with. Furthermore, other consumers further explained their lack of conviction in political consumerism and the power of boycotts.

> Uppsala:
>
> I'm not boycotting anything. Consumer power is for people who believe that they can shop for a better world.

> Ystad:
>
> You would think so, but unfortunately this whole get woke go broke does not seem to be true. Very few company boycotts I would say and it rarely makes any difference. Woke companies like Nike, Pepsi and Gillette go like the train

Uppsala's comment clearly demonstrates that some individuals do not believe that consumers have power or influence over the marketplace in general, and thus boycotting would be futile. Furthermore, some consumers, such as Ystad, explain that previous movements or protests against brands seem to have been ineffectual or unsuccessful in impacting how the brands generally operate. This further underscores the idea that some consumers do not believe that they have influence over the marketplace. Additionally, some consumers articulated that boycotts, in general, may be too much work, which then further indicates an underlying scepticism towards their usefulness. This further highlights the suspicion that the level of individualized responsibility-taking in Sweden might not be as high as in the United States as a small number of Swedish consumers demonstrated an eagerness to take action or boycott.

Similarly, some consumers explained that although boycotts may gain significant attention, the noise surrounding the boycott online will be bigger than the actual impact on the brand financially as Arboga explains. Thus, boycotts might not necessarily cause a backlash for brands but may rather revolve around consumers complaining online and then not actually changing their consumption behaviour.

> Arboga:
>
> ... But when it comes to the size of the said "backlash" and possible boycott, the media noise will probably be significantly greater than the actual effect. Then it was really the principle that was important here, not the Gillette case specifically.

However, the posts surrounding the boycott also created discourse about the effectiveness of boycotts between those that were sceptical and others who firmly believe in consumer power. What's more, some Swedish consumers were willing to challenge or debate with other consumers who questioned the constructiveness behind reasons boycotts.

> Stockholm:
> Now I understand that you are left and thus not the sharpest knife in the box, but have you heard of "many small streams make a big river"? That if many boycott a company, this will have tangible consequences? Like when gillette lost a couple of billion on her man hatred advertising

Thus, it appears that there are also consumers in this study who believe in the power of boycotts and that it is consumers responsibility to take action and boycott companies. However, our Swedish consumers in general displayed more scepticism towards boycotts than Americans, and that possibly indicates that the level of individualized responsibility-taking is higher in the United States.

5.3.2   Brands Taking a Stance

Deciding to take a stand is a significant decision since it signifies that the brand officially joined the discussion concerning the societal issue (Hoppner & Vadakkepatt, 2019). While American and Swedish consumers displayed slightly different views towards their role in boycotting and its effectiveness, consumers from both countries agreed that brands can use their platform responsibly to improve society.

However, even with this support, some consumers point out that they still want Nike to make a stronger commitment to these causes by donating profits or sponsoring events to educate society about different social issues.

> Portland:
> In my city law enforcement was exposed for use a bait truck filed with Nike products. I think Nike can help mend community ties by sponsoring an event that teaches civilians about police work and encourages a dialogue on how to change community policing for the better.

> Baltimore:
> This ad brought tears to my eyes. I'm so proud of Nike & others who recognize struggles & achievements of others. All I ask is that Nike donate to more community efforts & gun violence education for young people becuz there's a lot of kids that want a chance to succeed

Thus, the comments by Portland and Baltimore demonstrate that some American consumers want brands to take a stand, but more specifically, they want brands to take real action. They want the brands to do more than create a nice message, they want to see actual change and real efforts from the brands. This indicates that many American consumers believe that brands also must take responsibility or operate in responsible ways for the betterment of society.

Similarly, some Swedish consumers also demonstrated that they expect brands to take responsibility. Some consumers like Eksjö and Borgholm expressed that these types of commercials are necessary because they have fundamentally healthy messages.

> Eksjö:
> I think in the long run they have done the right thing when they try to modernize their brand away from the cliché image with a superman shaving in front of a throbbing bimbo with large onions and a half-open mouth.

> Borgholm:
> Can't help but agree with you. Their slogan is brilliant in this context. It is time for all large companies to take responsibility and change the message they have been conveying for decades.

Here it is evident that both Eksjö and Borgholm did not agree with or like Gillette's previous image or what the image symbolized. Therefore, by modernizing its image, Gillette projects a healthy image to society. They encourage brands to be responsible as they are not waiting for the government to solve their problems. Thus, by encouraging brands to be more responsible and take a bigger role in improving society, they are drawing from consumer responsibility ideologies by attempting to create a solution to the problem themselves.

Thus, it is evident that our American and Swedish consumers generally do not draw from the consumer responsibility ideology in the exact same way. American consumers draw from consumer responsibility ideologies in how they boycott brands and the responsibility they feel towards the market. However, Swedish consumers displayed more indifference to boycotts, and thus potentially do not draw as much on the consumer responsibility ideology when it comes to boycotts. Nevertheless, based on our comments, it appears that both American and Swedish consumers draw from the consumer responsibility ideology when it comes to the betterment of society. Numerous consumers from both countries believe that brands taking a stand on societal issues can be positive, especially if they take responsibility and use their platform for good and to enact change in society. Thus, they draw from the consumer responsibility ideology in the sense that they see it as their responsibility to persuade brands to be responsible and take a more active role in improving society.

5.4   Chapter Summary

In the chapter, we displayed the empirical data that was gathered to answer our research question. From the data we identified three themes that answer our research question: consumers draw from morality, draw from nationalistic ideologies, and draw from consumer responsibility ideologies. While there might be other ideologies encountered in our study, these three were the most relevant for us. Together, these three themes demonstrate how the different ideologies can impact consumer meanings regarding brands that take a political stance. Furthermore, we found that those meanings seemed to differ for consumers according to the themes in these different national contexts. The findings will then be further analysed in the next chapter and connected to previous academic literature.

6   Discussion

In this chapter, we examine the findings of the analysis and connect them to previous academic literature. The analysis is organized based on the themes generated in our empirical findings. Firstly, we explore how consumers draw differently from nationalistic ideologies. Next, we elaborate on how consumers draw from morality ideologies, followed by the discussion of how consumers draw from consumer responsibility ideologies. Lastly, we end on a chapter summary where we summarize the most important facts from the chapter.

6.1   Discussion of Findings

The aim of this research was to investigate how consumers draw from different ideologies in their meaning-making of brands that take a political stance. To gain a deeper understanding of this, we employed concepts that are rooted in CCT and governmentality. Furthermore, as we take a relativist ontological perspective, we presume that there is no single truth to be discovered and that different consumers can have different perspectives. We found that the meanings for our consumers seem to differ according to three certain themes in these different national contexts.

6.1.1   Nationalistic Ideologies

When the comments from American consumers are examined, it is clear to see that American consumers zealously draw from their nationalistic ideologies. This comes as no surprise when the underlying social, cultural, and historical conditions are kept in mind (Askegaard & Linnet, 2011), as the American dream has been a central source of identity and influence for the American lifestyle since the late 19th century (Coskuner-Balli, 2020; Luedicke, Thompson & Giesler, 2010). Numerous American consumers were quick to defend their nationalistic values of bravery and freedom and condemn Nike for its audacity in signalling that America needs to change. Moreover, the consumers labelled Nike and Colin Kaepernick as anti-American, un-American, and un-patriotic for the message conveyed in the campaign. These findings are coherent with previous research on nationalism in America and the role of ideologies (Coskuner-Balli, 2020; Henry, 2010; Luedicke, Thompson & Giesler, 2010). In her article, Coskuner-Balli (2020) elucidates how the connection between political ideology and the mythology of the American dream has been employed to formulate the citizen-consumer in

America. Similarly, Luedicke, Thompson and Giesler (2010) show that individuals use mythic structures to modify their ideological opinions into identity narratives. Thus, for decades the underlying neoliberal ideology in the U.S. has been shaping consumers into responsible consumers who should exhibit American moral values in order to achieve the American dream (Coskuner-Balli, 2020). As a result, American consumers have been shaped by a governmentality process into citizen-consumers to behave in a way that is consistent with what society requires of them.

Furthermore, in the U.S., consumers are frequently shaped by the government as the responsible moral protagonists versus an antagonist on a quest to achieve the American dream (Coskuner-Balli, 2020). This further agrees with Luedicke, Thompson and Giesler (2010) findings regarding the myth of the moral protagonist. They described the moralistic identity work as formulated by an alternative of the classical morality myth where a moral protagonist is implored to defend or protect sacred beliefs or values from the activities of unethical opponents. This gives an explanation of why American consumers confront other consumers or label them as anti-American or un-patriotic when they question American values, as they view them as digressing from the perfect normative system (Luedicke, Thompson & Giesler, 2010). The American consumers in our study who were defending Nike, therefore, displayed similar attitudes and behaviours as the Hummer owners in Luedicke's, Thompson's and Giesler's (2010) article who displayed a hyperconsumerist type of defence, mixed with the nationalist ideology of American exceptionalism. In both instances, the American consumers felt the need to criticize the betrayers and educate others about the core values on which their country was founded. Thus, the underlying ideological system in America produces resources and meanings for consumers to play the part of protagonists who are fighting against adversaries that behave in un-American ways (Luedicke, Thompson & Giesler, 2010). Ulver and Laurell (2020) further elaborate on this concept by introducing a category called antiliberal consumer resistance which welcomes a strong nationalist account. In the antiliberal theme, any individual who poses a threat to the national identity is formulated as the enemy. Therefore, the consumers in our study who were boycotting Nike and labelling others as anti-American would fall under the antiliberal theme.

Furthermore, numerous American consumers mention that Nike and Colin Kaepernick do not know real sacrifice or what real Americans look like, as real Americans serve in the military to protect their country. This is comparable to the findings concerning the Hummer owners where they viewed the military in connection to American exceptionalism (Luedicke, Thompson & Giesler, 2010). Thus, sacrifice, freedom, and bravery are values that are deeply ingrained into the American nationalistic ideology. Smith and French (2009) explain that brands being political that are linked to cultural values permit individuals to deepen their ties to the country's core values. This claim can further explain the resistance that various American consumers displayed as supporting Nike would not allow them to deepen their connection to America's main values. Perhaps, those consumers believed they would be belittling or disassociating from

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their national values by supporting Nike. If so, then it is probable that the consumers who resisted against Nike would rather want to support brands that are affiliated with American national principles to strengthen their connection to America's values.

When juxtaposing the American consumers to the Swedish consumers it is evident that Swedish consumers draw from nationalistic ideologies in different ways. Many Swedish consumers displayed incredulity and bewilderment at the outrage that American consumers exhibited in reaction to the Nike campaign and Colin Kaepernick. Thus, it is clear to see that our Swedish respondents generally do not regard their national anthem or flag as seriously as the American respondents, as numerous Swedish consumers did not understand why the American consumers take their national anthem so seriously. However, the fact that Swedish consumers displayed disbelief over the American comments regarding the flag and the anthem says something fundamental about them and their culture. In Sweden, consumer culture has been influenced by the ideologies of gender equality and egalitarianism for a long time (Molander, Östberg & Kleppe, 2019). Furthermore, Scandinavian consumer culture is mostly depicted by the ideology of consensus-making (Bertilsson, 2015). Therefore, our Swedish consumers may regard those ideologies more important and draw more from them than ideologies regarding nationalism. Moreover, since so many Swedish consumers did not comprehend the outrage displayed by the American consumers, it is possible to speculate that the Swedish consumers in our study are less likely to conduct themselves in a manner that would fall under Ulver and Laurell's (2020) antiliberal theme by labelling others as un-Swedish or the enemy for questioning the national identity.

Thus, the comments between the two countries appear to reveal a fundamental cultural difference in how consumers draw from nationalistic ideologies in their meaning-making of brands taking a stand. Furthermore, our study demonstrates how significant nationalistic ideologies can be in influencing consumer meanings.

6.1.2   Morality ideology

Our findings on the theme regarding consumers drawing on morality have brought up many interesting results. It is clear that consumers in both the Swedish and the American contexts have a strong point of view regarding brands taking a stand. Here, the consumers morally judge companies when they are displaying inauthentic behaviour while using social issues to politicize the market. As mentioned by Stolle and Micheletti (2013), consumers use the market to change practices that can be considered ethically objectionable. This is something we can clearly distinguish when analysing the two specific cases of Nike and Gillette. The reactions of the consumers towards these cases have the goal of expressing their own morality in relation to their own specific ideology. In the findings, there are three different aspects that awaken

different consumer meanings related to their morality towards the companies involved in political issues.

First, the aspect of brands imposing political ideologies to the consumers for their convenience. In this aspect, both the Swedish and American consumers feel negatively towards brands taking a stance and their perspectives are similar. The American consumers take a political turn and accuse the commercial of socialist propaganda, while the Swedish see this as an attempt to push multiculturalism into the consumers' mindsets. From this, it can be assumed that both nationalities see these types of commercials with the purpose of pushing political views which the companies are trying to impose. This aspect can be related to Cormack & Cosgrave (2021) and Giesler & Veresiu (2014) which explain how the responsible consumer is actually a result of a governmental process to which the accountability is transferred from companies and governments and on to the individual consumers. In other words, it can be deduced that both American and Swedish consumers have a slight assumption of this manipulation and transference of responsibility and, consequently, perceive this as an immoral behaviour of brands taking a stand. Consumers of both contexts prefer companies to stay out of these societal issues and just do what they are in the market for, sell products. From our findings, it is clear that the Swedish and American consumers in our study are empowered and are citizen-consumers who feel they do not depend on the government to find the answer to their problems, which contributes, among others, to Coskuner-Balli's (2020) research.

When it comes to the second aspect of brands getting involved in a cause while acting unethically, American, and Swedish consumers feel disappointment in the brands based on their morality. When it comes to the American consumers, it is clear in the empirical findings that they are enraged by the brands and severely question their authenticity for supporting these types of causes and being unethical at the same time. In the case of Nike, with their way of manufacturing its products in sweatshops and in the case of Gillette for their previous strong macho messages. This reaction contributes to Ulver's and Laurell's (2020) "antiunethical activist", that criticizes the capitalist economy for its misconduct and brands immoral business players as corrupt and psychopaths and who do not so much see the economic system as the opponent, but rather how it is applied ethically in terms of human, natural, and animal rights. From another perspective, in the findings, we can perceive how the citizen-consumer in both contexts see themselves as ethical consumers. The fact that these consumers demand the same behaviour and responsibility from companies, which in some way aspire to be an example in the marketplace, reflects on Smith's & French's (2009) theories on consumers' buying behaviour, which is compatible and consistent with their perceived self.

Lastly, the aspect of brands investing in advertisement with an economic goal provokes the American and Swedish citizen-consumer once more. American consumers see these corporations as manipulative since, in their opinion, the purchase of a product stands as a vote to a specific party. This contributes to Coskuner-Balli's (2020) investigation which expresses

that the American state combines political ideology in a specific representation of moral ideals in order to attain political and economic goals. From the Swedish consumer perspective, the economic goal of political brands is to fit in with the new generation by betraying their heritage. Here, the empirical findings contribute to Holt's (2002) theories, which stated how online sources have become a powerful tool to viralize backstage activities of corporations, leading to both American and Swedish consumers seeing these brands as inauthentic.

In general, it can be said that the findings also contribute to Coskuner-Balli (2020) and Luedicke, Thompson & Giesler (2010), who explain that the citizen-consumer are often framed as the moral protagonists versus the government which is the antagonist. This is the case for both contexts in most aspects of inauthenticity. Finally, Luedicke, Thompson, and Giesler (2010) go on to explain how anti-consumer activists' antagonistic arguments generate a sense of moral superiority and the moral certainty of good/us vs evil/them dualisms. This is also something that can be noticed in different comments from both contexts which explain how other consumers are being manipulated and are not aware of it. However, it is also important to address that there were many positive responses to both the Nike and Gillette case from both contexts. Since the negative responses delivered a more interesting aspect to the morality ideology, this study focuses only on this.

6.1.3 Consumers and Responsibilization

When examining our empirical findings, it was evident that political consumerism in America and Sweden is particularly pronounced as consumers in both countries demonstrated a fundamental awareness of the political meaning behind their consumption choices. This fits with Stolle and Micheletti's (2013) assumptions that higher-income nations are more likely to have higher-rankings of political consumerism. Moreover, Stolle and Micheletti (2013) also theorized that in Western democratic nations, where the social rights of individuals are well developed, there should be a higher level of individualized responsibility-taking. Furthermore, they explain that one reason individualized responsibility might have higher levels in Western countries is that responsibility-taking necessitates access to information and capacities to analyse, which is connected to educational and socioeconomic assets. Thus, it came as no surprise that consumers from both America and Sweden are engaged in political consumerism as both countries have access to numerous resources, have highly developed social rights, and very high standards of living (Andersen et al., 2019; Cohen, 2003; Ekström, Ottosson & Parment, 2017; Molander, Kleppe & Östberg, 2018; Molander, Östberg & Kleppe, 2019). However, while consumers from both countries displayed fundamental knowledge concerning political meaning and responsibility, the consumers reacted in slightly different ways regarding certain themes. This finding is in an agreement with the assertion that the level of responsibility-taking likely differs across nations (Stolle & Micheletti, 2013).

Our empirical data on American consumers supports the claims by Kozinets and Handelman (2004) that consumers believe they can change the actions of companies, in this case, Gillette and Nike, by boycotting them and causing them financial harm. Furthermore, consumers' demands for action are intended to pressure the brands to carry out new policies (Giesler & Veresiu, 2014; Stanley, 2020; Stolle & Micheletti, 2013). With these demands, consumers are presumed to take on more responsibility and place pressure on brands to do the same (Giesler & Veresiu, 2014; Stolle & Micheletti, 2013). However, in the case of the Swedish consumers, it appears that they are more incredulous that boycotting Gillette and Nike can cause lasting change. This result is surprising as Stolle and Micheletti (2013) assert that political consumerism is especially pronounced in Sweden. Although, various Swedish consumers demonstrated disbelief towards the effectiveness of boycotts since Gillette belongs to a larger parent company, and thus boycotting one of their brands is unlikely to cause Procter and Gamble financial harm in the long run. By looking at the context of contexts (Askegaard & Linnet, 2011), we speculate that Swedish consumers perhaps do not view the actions of Gillette and Nike or their campaigns as reprehensible or unacceptable enough to resist against. Furthermore, it is also possible to speculate that the campaigns caused a larger outrage in the United States by arguing that the issues of gender equality and racial justice brought up by Gillette and Nike are more controversial and delicate in the United States than in Sweden.

When the answers regarding boycotts were examined, it appears that Swedish consumers generally display more disbelief and incredulity towards the power and effectiveness of boycotts than American consumers. Some Swedish consumers underscored previous boycott movements against woke companies that appear to have been unsuccessful and not made an impact in how the companies have continued to operate. Furthermore, underlying disbelief towards the power that consumers have to influence the market can be detected in many of the Swedish consumers' posts. Therefore, they may not necessarily view it as important or their responsibility to boycott brands or resist against them. By exploring this with the context of context in mind (Askegaard & Linnet, 2011), where the Swedish welfare state has a history of strongly intervening and designating the circumstances wherein people structure their lives (Klasson & Ulver, 2015; Molander, Östberg & Kleppe, 2019), it is understandable that the Swedish consumers in our study showed less accountability towards the market. By contrast, various American consumers were delighted to witness the number of people posting about boycotting online and encouraged others to join the boycott movement. Moreover, boycott communities were formed online in the U.S. where people applauded each other and celebrated the potential loss of profit for the brands. This indicates an underlying belief that they have the power to influence the marketplace and that it is their responsibility to boycott brands and ensure the brands' decline. Although both countries are governed by the neoliberal ideology, Sweden's comprehensive welfare system potentially impacts how much individual responsibility is expected in Sweden (Andersen et al., 2019; Carrington, Zwick & Neville, 2016; Fitchett, Patsiaouras & Davies, 2014; Higgs, 2021; Klasson & Ulver, 2015; Molander, Östberg & Kleppe, 2019; Stanley, 2020). Thus, the meanings seem to differ for consumers

regarding the level of individualized responsibility-taking and how they draw from the consumer responsibility ideology.

However, both Swedish and American consumers expressed that these types of advertisements with socio-political messages are necessary, meaning that they support brands taking responsibility for the well-being of society. Essentially, these American and Swedish respondents support the perspectives of Giesler & Veresiu (2014) Kipp & Hawkins (2019) and Thompson & Kumar (2018) that a way of rectifying complicated societal issues is through market-coordinated actions and decisions of responsible consumers. Thus, the consumers in our study have accepted responsibility in an effort to create social change. Moreover, they draw from consumer responsibility ideologies by attempting to modify the market practices of Gillette and Nike (Stolle & Micheletti, 2013). This further agrees with previous literature that ideologies are at the heart of consumer behaviour and can influence consumer choice (Crockett & Wallendorf, 2004; Henry, 2010; Izberk-Bilgin, 2012; Varman & Belk, 2009).

Thus, consumers have been shaped into responsible consumers, who in return expect brands to operate responsibly. Our respondents draw from the consumer responsibility ideology in the sense that they see it as their responsibility to resist against or modify market practices they find unacceptable. Furthermore, our consumers also draw from the consumer responsibility ideology when they attempt to persuade brands to be responsible and take a more active role in improving society.

6.2   Chapter Summary

In the chapter, we examined our findings and linked them to the previous academic literature on our topic. By examining previous literature, we set out to understand how consumers draw from different ideologies in their meaning-making of brands taking a stand and how those meanings differed according to certain themes. We found that consumers drew from three ideologies in their meaning-making of brands that take a political stance and that those meanings differed according to certain themes in the different national contexts.

When it comes to nationalistic ideologies, we can conclude that through a governmental process, American customers are encouraged to become citizen-consumers who behave in accordance with what society expects of them. Furthermore, the underlying ideological structure in America generates resources and meanings for consumers to play the role of protagonists battling against un-American enemies. Consumers in Sweden, on the other hand, potentially value ideologies of gender equality and egalitarianism more, and potentially draw from them rather than ideologies related to national anthems and national flags.

The morality ideologies of Swedish and American consumers lead to a strong point of view regarding brands taking a stand. On the aspect of brands imposing political ideologies on the consumers for their convenience, Swedish and American consumers in our study agree on a slight assumption of the governmental process to which the accountability is transferred from companies and governments and on to the individual consumers. Consequently, the consumers in both contexts perceive this as immoral behaviour. On the aspect of brands getting involved in a cause while acting unethically, American and Swedish consumers feel disappointment in the brands based on their morality. Consumers demand the same behaviour and responsibility that is demanded of them from companies. The last aspect of brands investing in advertisement with an economic goal reflects how consumers of both contexts see the American state as one combining political ideology in a specific representation of moral ideals to attain political and economic goals. However, it is valuable to say that there were also positive responses towards the cases from both contexts.

Finally, when it comes to consumers and responsibilization, both consumers from Sweden and America act as responsible consumers, who want companies to act properly in return. Our respondents draw from the consumer responsibility ideology while believing it is their obligation to oppose or change market behaviours that they find objectionable. Furthermore, respondents of both contexts draw from the consumer responsibility ideology when trying to urge brands to be more responsible and involved in helping society.

7 Conclusion

In the following chapter, we first recount the research objective and summarize the main findings of our study. Next, we discuss the theoretical contributions, followed by the practical implications of our study. Lastly, we end with the limitations of our study and suggestions for future research.

7.1 Research Objectives

The objective of this study was to examine how consumers draw from different ideologies in their meaning-making of brands that take a political stance. To fulfil this objective, a structured literature review and a comprehensive empirical study were performed. As previously mentioned, advertisements with controversial socio-political messages are expanding beyond our expectations. Furthermore, the politicized advertisements can lead to further polarization and instability in society if taken too far. Therefore, this topic is highly relevant as the lines between political consumption and civilization are blurring. Correspondingly, it is important to explore this topic and advance these discussions to comprehend the short- and long-term consequences for society. Going back to our research question, we found that consumers draw from different ideologies in their meaning-making of brands that take a political stance in three ways, they draw from nationalistic ideologies, draw from morality, and draw from consumer responsibility ideologies. We expand on these findings and what they mean for the future in the following chapter.

7.2 Theoretical Contributions

In this study, we contribute to previous academic literature within consumer culture research. To begin with, our study contributes to the research stream of political consumerism (Henry, 2010; Smith & French, 2009) and responsibilization (Cormack & Cosgrave, 2021; Coskuner-Balli, 2020). We contribute to these literature streams by expanding on Coskuner-Balli's (2020) and Henry's (2010) studies as our findings display how consumers draw from different ideologies in their meaning-making of brands that take a political stance. The discussions around this topic are important to advance as the lines between political consumerism and civilization are blurring. We also further advance discussions on the mobilization of ideology

and how ideologies can influence consumer meanings (Crockett & Wallendorf, 2004; Henry, 2010; Izberk-Bilgin, 2012; Varman & Belk, 2009; Zhao & Belk, 2008) by demonstrating how consumers draw from different ideologies in their meaning-making of brands that take a political stance.

In addition, we aimed to contribute to the existing literature on the morality of the citizen-consumer. Our findings add to Stolle and Micheletti's (2013) discussions as well, where they show how consumers utilize the market to modify institutional or market-based activities that might be regarded as ethically unacceptable. Furthermore, our study adds to Cormack's & Cosgrave's (2021) and Giesler's & Veresiu's (2014) studies which explain how the responsible consumer is a result of a governmental process where the accountability is transferred from companies and governments on to the individual consumers. Our study adds to this discussion by displaying how American consumers are shaped into responsible citizen-consumer behaving according to American morals. Similarly, this study agrees with theories reflected by Coskuner-Balli's (2020) on empowered citizen-consumers who feel they do not depend on the government to find the answer to their problems. Finally, our study reflects Smith's & French's (2009) theories on consumers' buying behaviour, which is compatible and consistent with their perceived self.

We also contribute to the literature on consumer resistance within CCT (Kozinets & Handelman, 2004; Luedicke, Thompson & Giesler, 2010; Ulver & Laurell, 2020). Firstly, our research further advances Luedicke, Thompson and Giesler (2010) discussion on the significance of nationalistic ideologies in relation to consumer meanings. Moreover, we further advance research on how myths, such as the American dream, can assist ideological agenda by exploring the nationalistic behaviours of American consumers. Furthermore, our study revealed that numerous American consumers display strong nationalistic identities by defending the national identity and labelling others as their adversaries. Therefore, the insights acquired from this research can advance Ulver and Laurell's (2020) discussion concerning antiliberal consumer resistance by providing more examples of consumers that fall under the antiliberal theme. Lastly, our study is also consistent with claims regarding "antiunethical activists" from Ulver's and Laurell's (2020) study.

In conclusion, this study contributes to the literature streams of political consumerism, responsibilization, and consumer resistance.

7.3 Practical Implications

Besides the theoretical contribution presented above, this study also provides insights for marketing practitioners and managers who want to enhance their understanding of what to consider when creating a successful political branding campaign. As previously mentioned, we

found that three themes answer our research question of how consumers draw from different ideologies in their meaning-making of brands taking a stand. Having this in mind, marketers and marketing practitioners should take the following into account.

First of all, although companies understand that they should not take a political stand unless they can be consistent and connect with the targeted market authentically, this can be a great opportunity for the brand when done correctly. However, brand managers should be aware of the fit of the message with the brands. If this is not done correctly, the message could be interpreted in the wrong way or even be used by the competition or opponents for counter-political purposes. Lastly, since consumer resistance can highlight market change that defines not only the company's strategy but also the company's regulations and political actions (Roux & Izberk-Bilgin, 2018), our study can give managers a better understanding of what motivates consumers to practice anti-consumption when brands take a stance.

7.4   Limitations of Study

The research aimed to provide insight into how consumers draw from different ideologies in their meaning-making of brands that take a stand. However, we encountered certain limitations that are pertinent to consider given our reflexive approach. One limitation we encounter with our study is that the research is only focused on ideologies. Thus, our research has a lot of weaknesses in respect to that our findings are in terms of our research question, and therefore we have not explored many different perspectives. Since we had a narrow focus on consumer meanings' we have not explored other aspects such as consumer practices, purchase intentions, and consumer lifestyle.

Furthermore, the scope of this research was limited in terms of the consumers as we only included consumers from America and Sweden. Including more consumers from more countries might have provided us with a deeper understanding of the role of political ideologies concerning consumers' meanings. Furthermore, including participants from other countries would likely culminate in a different outcome. Hence, our study can be extended by including more consumers from different countries with other ideologies.

Lastly, since we were investigating consumers' meanings, the perspective was on the consumer's side and the brand management perspective was disregarded. Understanding the brand management perspective related to brands taking a political stance might provide a deeper understanding of the future implications for society at large.

7.5   Future Research

In this section, we deliver a few suggestions on possible future studies. Since our study is only based on American and Swedish consumers, as discussed in the limitations, we recommend for future studies to include consumers from different countries with different culture-historical and socio-political backgrounds.

From another perspective, the method of netnography brings virtual observations which are highly different from, for example, in-person interviews and focus groups. Due to this aspect, we advise future researchers to go deeper into the data collection methods and even combine these for richer findings. In addition to that, it is highly recommended for other scholars to collect further empirical material to enhance the quality of the results.

Moreover, when it comes to the chosen brands for the study, these are all highly popular corporations with strong brands that have created their own heritage over decades. For future research, it might be interesting to investigate how consumers draw from ideologies in their meaning-making of brands taking a stand when it comes to smaller, mid-sized or relatively unknown companies. Furthermore, since the number of cases used in the study were limited, it could be interesting to further investigate this gap by making use of several cases as well as from different industries.

Lastly, as previously mentioned, it is important to be attentive to the context of contexts as it impacts how consumers form meanings. Thus, for future research, it would be fruitful to investigate how consumers drawing from ideologies in their meaning-making of brands taking a stand can change over time and evolve in different contexts.

7.6   Chapter Summary

In this chapter, we started by presenting the research objective with a summary of the main findings. Then the theoretical contributions we discussed, followed by the practical implications. Lastly, we reflected upon the limitations of our study and gave suggestions for future research.

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