



SCHOOL OF
ECONOMICS AND
MANAGEMENT

Get broke or build hope - The implications of woke brand activism

*A Netnographic Case Study on Gillette's "The Best a Man Can Be"
Campaign in the Aftermath of MeToo*

By

Renyo Aslan & Omid Mirkhandan

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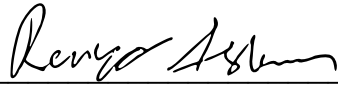
Supervisor: Javier Cennamor

Examiner: Reema Singh

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Renyo Aslan



Omid Mirkhandan

Abstract

Title: Get broke or build hope - The implications of woke brand activism
A netnographic case study on Gillette's "The Best a Man Can Be" campaign in the aftermath of MeToo

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Authors: Renyo Aslan, Omid Mirkhandan

Advisors: Javier Cennamor

Keywords: Brand Activism, FMCG, Consumer-Brand Relationship, Attachment-Aversion Model, Netnography

Thesis purpose: What kinds of consumer-brand relationships emerge when introducing brand activism to the FMCG industry?

Methodology: This study follows an abductive approach to a qualitative research design. Moreover, it adopted a relativistic ontological position, with a social constructionist approach. The data was collected through a netnographic case study

Theoretical perspective: To fulfill its research purpose the study uses Fournier's Consumer-Brand Relationship theories, as well as Park et al.'s Attachment-Aversion Model. These are combined with moral reasoning strategies to enable a rich and nuanced analysis of the empirical findings.

Empirical data: The type of data in the research is of qualitative nature, and collected online from an internet forum thread.

Conclusion: The use of brand activism to make a brand bigger could be an additional stressor for brands in FMCG. The findings also showed that consumers might react negative to brand activism since they do not like to be told how to act. However, there was one consumer group, who we called Robin Hood, who was not customers, but still came out to defend the brand and applauded the initiative and could be potential customers.

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1. Introduction

In this chapter we give a vivid picture of the role of FMCG brands in the lives of their consumers and how brand activism might affect the relationship. We provide a background of the phenomena of brand activism and consumer-brand relationships and then move on to the research problem of the study, why it is interesting to research. This is supported by giving an overview of purpose and the aim of this study and lastly which limitations we have made.

1.1 Background

Imagine it's Monday. You wake up and start to get ready, you turn on your coffee machine loaded with your favorite Colombian coffee beans, you take a shower using your go-to shampoo that has kept you fresh for years. You step out of the shower and make your way to the foggy bathroom mirror, wiping the mirror and preparing your face for an impeccable shave that will make your clients view you with respect and authority. However, today, each stroke with your Gillette razor feels wrong, the blades aren't old and the shaving cream has its usual lather and masculine scent but somehow it feels wrong. You're reminded of the statements Gillette has made about men and their role in society, you feel like you as a man are scolded and made to be at fault for a big problem in society. What will you do if this feeling persists? Will you switch brands, power through or adapt?

This could be viewed as an average morning routine with brands that make up or help to portray our identity. What if the faulty piece in the routine wasn't Gillette, what if we switched the problematic aspect of this morning routine to the coffee beans or the shampoo? None of them are visible elements of your persona yet they might be a crucial part of your identity and identity creation as Belk (1988) suggests. What they have in common is their fast moving nature, being a part of the category, Fast Moving Consumer Goods (FMCG). Unlike e.g. a leather jacket that is meant to last a lifetime, FMCG are made to be consumed and replaced. The attachment therefore is not to the individual products that consumers purchase but the brand or company behind them or the brand relationship as Fournier (1998) would say. When a brand conducts brand activism this has an effect on the relationship between consumer and brand which Fournier (1998) illustrates with the stress model. In the case of Gillette one might argue that their controversial commercial constitutes a breach of trust or trespassing the unwritten rules that exist between the relationship partners. This causes stress between the partners and the severity of the breach might lead to termination of the

relationship which is why it is important to play within the boundaries of expectations. On the flip side, other consumers might identify with their new values and thus strengthen their relationship with Gillette. We may also have consumers who simply don't care about what their chosen brand of razor believes in and supports.

Brand activism is a growing trend among companies as the consumer landscape pushes companies to pick a side on divisive issues in society (Korschun, 2021). By conducting activism and publicly stating the brand's values and opinions on issues it could be argued that they are humanizing the company which is the basis of Fournier's (1998) relationship theory. However what has to be kept in mind is that FMCG companies are low involvement and whose brand activities are possibly not top of mind or relevant for the consumer. In general, the act of choosing a side in terms of societal issues could be detrimental to the performance of the brand as studies show that brand activism might repel more customers than it attracts (Hydock, Paharia & Blair, 2020; Mukherjee & Althuizen, 2020). However, the essence of brand activism is not monetary gain but a value driven agenda that aims at making the world a better place (Sarkar & Kotler, 2018). Mukherjee & Althuizen (2020) mention that the way the marketplace looks right now makes it easier for consumers to switch brands when they disagree with the activism that ensues. Considering FMCG brands are very similar to each other and alternatives are abundant, this should be reflected to a high degree in the FMCG industry.

Brand activism in the FMCG sphere is rare but not non-existent and it is varying in execution, with some examples shining clearer than others. Gillette famously received backlash in 2019 with their commercial "The best a man can be" which turned out to be quite polarizing with one part of the audience commending Gillette for taking a stand while the other demonized the brand. The ad depicts men engaging in unacceptable behavior towards themselves and towards women, alluding to the social state of the world and the power dynamics between men and women. This caused certain people to feel alienated, upset and some remarking that this ad served as feminist propaganda fueling the #MeToo wave and lead to boycotts of Gillette razors (Baggs, 2019; Vredenberger et. al. 2020). The stance that Gillette took didn't align with a part of their consumers resulting in repelling them (Hydock, Paharia & Blair, 2020; Mukherjee & Althuizen, 2020). Depending on the execution of the activism, the reception can vary, in the Gillette case there was misalignment but in other cases the stance can cause confusion or misunderstandings. Burger King caused outrage

when they tweeted “Women belong in the kitchen” during international women’s day which is sexist rhetoric that traces back hundreds of years. They followed the tweet with, “if they want to, of course.” but for the average twitter user, the visible statement was the former. They were highlighting their scholarship for female chefs as the industry is skewed towards men but the misunderstanding led to bad reputation instead. (Heil, 2021). Other times the enemy of the brand is vagueness in the stance they adopt, as Korschun (2021) noted, there’s pressure to pick a side and when the brand isn’t clear with its intentions they face consequences. Pepsi latched on to the Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement in 2017 and made an ad that showed BLM imagery, trying to convey feelings of unity and peace however this was not how it was received. They received heavy criticism for depicting a false image of the state of the protests and outrage as well as using current issues in order to sell more products. The ad showed Kendall Jenner joining in on the protest and solving the conflict by providing one of the police officers with a Pepsi which made everyone cheer. Due to the backlash Pepsi decided to pull the ad within 24 hours (Victor, 2017). These examples allude to the fact that brand activism has consequences for the relationships brands have with their consumers.

Brand activism may have beneficial effects on the brand but may also lead to controversies. These might be big or small, noticed or unnoticed and they may have an effect on the brand’s reputation. As technology progresses this is becoming an increasingly difficult aspect of brand management as word spreads fast online and is hard to control or mitigate (Roper & Fill, 2012). What someone deems controversial arguably depends on their values and beliefs and differs from person to person. Controversies regarding brands taking a stance on social issues or political issues may cause quite a stir since there are many avenues for disagreement. People on the other side of the fence may terminate the relationship with the brand but even the people who share the stance taken might become upset if the brand's actions are lacking or don’t line up with their own values. Defying the market is perhaps more common in the day and age of digitalization, as the accessibility has increased dramatically with the entrance of social media.

With an increasing dissemination of information, brands have the ability to connect to their consumers and vice-versa, and have opened new opportunities for brands to build a relationship with their consumers and become a part of their lives, as suggested by Fournier (1998). To do this, brands can go great lengths because they realize there is a possibility to

generate a considerable profit, and increase their brand equity by generating price premium (Norris,1992).

As brands have embraced a more holistic approach to their relationship with their consumers, brands have become a friend to their consumers that they carry with them in their everyday life (Holt, 2002). This produces a position where the brands want their consumers to display the brands as their friends, and perhaps might start to engage in brand activism in order to add more layers to the relationship, while the consumers become progressively aware of the superficiality of brands. Brand activism was defined by Kotler & Sarkar as “how progressive businesses are taking stands to create a better world”, and mainly addressed the early examples of activism, such as The Body Shop where the founder was determined to instill ethical and values and beliefs in the brand (Sustainable Brands, 2020; The Marketing Journal, 2017). With the emergence of a new generation of consumers, brand activism has experienced a slight change, and is now notably aimed at impact, much owing to the share of buying power owned by Gen Z. 81% of the consumers states that it expects the brand to “do the right thing”, and as much as 71% of the consumers states that if a brand puts profit before people, it will lose their trust (Sustainable Brands, 2020). This re-establishes the view that is suggested by Fournier (1998) that brands aim to form a relationship with their brands, and have succeeded in that considering the consumers have expectations on them.

1.2 Research Problem

When Fournier (1998) conceptualized her relationship theory she interviewed three women about their relationships with several brands, among these were FMCG brands. However, the conceptualization is very focused on the product aspect of the brand and external factors such as their attitudes pre- or post-divorce. She lays a foundation of requirements that facilitate relationship creation between the consumer and brand, one of these being the animation or humanization of objects/brands. She iterates that humans have no issue with attaching human characteristics to brands and thus being able to relate to them. However, at the time of writing her theory, brand activism may be considered to be dormant and not one of the humanizing characteristics that she conceptualized as being involved in the relationship creation process. The closest we come is through the stress model in which Fournier (1998) describes relational or dyadic stress as a force that puts a strain on the relationship due to a trespassing

of unwritten rules, breach of trust or in general failure to live up to expectations. This would also refer more to the quality of product than the actual brand as she likens this stressor to one of the respondents disappointment with the delivery of quality. With the introduction of brand activism we have more possible human features that a brand can obtain, namely, opinions and beliefs that they show in their work. This is something that we believe must be viewed in connection with Fournier's relationship theory. Many consumers have built expectations on how their brands should behave, and what values they should radiate. Brand activism favors a particular set of values and beliefs, and they are mostly known, but it sometimes occurs that a brand conveys other values and beliefs than the favored ones. Brands might also feel obliged to take a stand which might result in an engagement that misaligns with the perception of it. Since brand perception and quality of a relationship between a brand and its consumers are intertwined, they both can take a toll, if there is a misalignment the brand will most probably be damaged (Fournier, 1998; Tarnovskaya, 2017).

Furthermore, studies on brand activism has been done previously where they use a plethora of brands in different industries (Manfredi-Sanchez, 2019; Mukherjee & Althuizen, 2020; Vredenberg, 2020). We feel that lumping FMCG brands together with other brands takes away from their uniqueness of the industry and leaves much for questioning. For example, Mukherjee & Althuizen (2020) argue that consumers have so many alternatives to brands in today's day and age that they are more likely to switch when disagreeing with a brand's stance. This should be especially interesting regarding FMCG brands as the whole industry is made up of similar alternatives that are low involvement and replaceable due to their volume and price. We further find the FMCG industry interesting to evaluate due to the conclusions made by Leahy (2011) that the pursuit of relationships within the FMCG industry is a Sisyphean task and that relationships can't exist within this industry.

1.3 Research Purpose

The purpose of this study is to explore the consumer-brand relationships that exist within FMCG brands when brand activism is conducted. Since the digital age allows for news, both good and bad, to spread faster than ever and gain more reach, we mean to analyze Gillette as a proxy for FMCG brands that constitute less visible elements of a consumer's persona. We aim to gain an understanding of the consumer thought process following brand activism and

how the relationship is affected. Viewing how a change in values or communication that aligns or doesn't align with what consumers expect affects their brand perception and if the fact that they are FMCG brands is of note. Therefore the question we have formed aims to give us a broader understanding of what types of consumer-brand relationships emerge when brand activism is introduced in FMCG brands.

What kinds of consumer-brand relationships emerge when introducing brand activism to the FMCG industry?

1.4 Contribution Aim

We believe that an answer to the posed question would serve to broaden the field of brand activism and consumer-brand relationships while also contributing to shedding light on FMCG brands in this particular field. Answering this question would give insights to brands in the FMCG industry that create activist communication that is subject to controversy, as we are analyzing how brand activism affects consumers and non-consumers. Gauging how consumers react and how their relationship with the brands is affected would serve as guiding information for brands that wish to use this sort of communication, e.g. knowing when it is appropriate or to which degree one should get involved. As companies are getting more involved with the digital sphere of branding and a seemingly increasing need to join in on the ongoing conversation, it is paramount that they understand what is expected of them and how to navigate the digital landscape so as to not cause negative feelings surrounding the brand. Furthermore, considering the industry FMCG in which the products are not visible elements of somebody's identity it is interesting to gain an understanding about whether the consumers pay mind to brand activism or not.

1.5 Outline of the Study

1.0	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Introduction• The chapter provides the reader with a general background and proceeds with a problematization of the topic of the study and ends with a research purpose.
2.0	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Literature Review• The chapter presents a profound summary of the prior research in the researched topic area, in which relevant concepts are defined, as well as a critique of the prior research to delineate what will be this study's contribution .
3.0	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Theoretical Framework• The chapter provides an overview of the theories and concepts that led the study were used as the foundation for the analysis of the empirical findings.
4.0	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Methodology• The chapter overviews the chosen methodology and the scientific research design and approach, including ethical considerations.
5.0	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Empirical Findings• The chapter presents the results of the data collection along with an analysis of it with the theoretical framework applied to the outcomes of the research.
6.0	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Discussion• The chapter provides a discussion regarding the findings in the previous chapter, in relation to the theoretical framework and literature review.
3.0	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Conclusion• The chapter concludes the study by presenting the conclusions of the research and outlining the study's theoretical and practical implications. Included in this chapter are also propositions for future research and research limitations.

2. Literature Review

In this chapter we start by explaining what FMCG is as well as what the characteristics of the industry is following that with previous research on the topic of FMCG in combination with consumer-brand relationships. Furthermore, we explain the concepts of consumer-brand relationships and brand activism followed by prior research on the topic of brand activism. We identify three streams of research that pertain to general knowledge, the brand perspective and the consumer perspective. Lastly we give criticism of prior research.

2.1 Fast Moving Consumer Goods (FMCG)

Fast moving consumer goods or FMCG can be defined as a product category that features high volume and low value consumption. Typical items in this category are grooming supplies, tobacco, beverages and confectionery goods (Shariq, 2019). The fast moving nature implies that FMCG does not require heavy financial investments or mentally demanding research on what to buy (Niekerk & Bean, 2019). Furthermore, the FMCG industry develops dynamically depending on market expectations and market trends. Considering the high competition in this industry it is of utmost importance to change according to consumers expectations to remain on the market (Liczmańska-Kopcewicz, Mizera, Pyłacz, 2019). Because of the high amount of similar products, and a generally high similarity between the products, it is crucial for a brand to create and improve brand value for consumers, which includes building a relationship with their consumers (Malhotra, 2014). By building a strong consumer-brand relationship and through that, attaining a high level of brand loyalty from their consumers, brands can command higher prices for their products and generate price premium (Aaker, 1996). FMCG products allow consumers to develop better knowledge about what they are buying considering the higher frequency of purchase compared to e.g. durable goods such as televisions or refrigerators that require more mental and financial investment (Srivastava, Sharma 2013). The consumer is therefore not as involved when it comes to purchasing FMCG and compartmentalizes the different brand choices to create a routine or habit that simplifies this purchasing process (Howard & Sheth, 1969).

An important distinguishing factor of the FMCG industry is that it is characterized by low loyalty which makes availability one of the most important aspects since alternatives can be purchased instead. The low loyalty aspect creates a need for FMCG brands to figure out new

ways of gaining profit and to maintain an edge through experimentation (Niekerk & Bean, 2019). One possible experimentation could be the creation of consumer-brand relationships.

Research regarding consumer relationships with FMCG companies is limited, however, prior research suggests that the attempt at a relationship within this industry is unnecessary. Leahy (2011) concludes in her study that relationships do not exist within the FMCG industry and that they will not exist. Her study involved a focus group where participants were asked about the contact they had with FMCG companies and the discussion revolved around letters, e-mail and telephone communication lacking a personal touch. Leahy (2011) further concludes that establishing a consumer-brand relationship within the FMCG industry is futile and should be avoided as there is little to gain from such an arrangement. However, one might argue that this conclusion is too narrow. There are many dimensions of relationship marketing, one of them being individualization (Gordon, McKeage & Fox, 1998). We could also criticize the way Leahy (2011) conceptualizes relationships, as Fournier (1998) maintains, a relationship doesn't have to be positive as it is supposed to mirror real life relationships which can be bad. Leahy (2011) remarks that it is evident that the consumers rather want propositions that are in their own interests which is in line with customer-company identification research that suggests that meaningful relationships between customer and company are formed through congruent identification (Bhattacharya & Sen, 2003; Wolter et. al., 2017). What Leahy (2011) remarked might also suggest that brand activism may be a way for FMCG companies to form relationships with their consumers as activism espouses values that people can identify with.

2.2 Consumer-Brand Relationships

Bhattacharya & Sen (2003) argue that companies have been increasingly trying to connect with their customers by building meaningful relationships with them in order to set themselves apart as the market grows more complex. Jennifer Aaker (1997) posits that people ascribe human characteristics to brands that consumers use as Russel Belk (1988) notes, for self-expression purposes. Building on this, Susan Fournier (1998) conceptualized the idea of brands being able to be active relationship partners with consumers as opposed to passive objects for consumption. Fournier (1998) argues that brands are capable of developing and maintaining relationships with consumers, that consumer-brand relationships are a valid form of relationship at the level of people's everyday lives and experiences and that various ways

of specifying these relationships exist using rich vocabulary. Consumer-brand relationships act as a mechanism for building loyalty between consumers and the brand (Khamitov, Wang, Thomson, 2019). Fournier (1998) notes that the fact that consumers are humoring advertisers' attempts at giving brands human characteristics suggests that there is a willingness from the consumer's part to engage in a relationship with brands.

As with a relationship between humans, there are different levels and layers to a relationship between a brand and its consumer, as described by Fetscherin et al. (2014). Aaker (1991) viewed the consumer-brand relationship as a five-step pyramid based on loyalty where the first level is the *switcher*, an indifferent and price sensitive consumer and the last step is the *committed buyer*, who finds pride in buying and using the brand's products. It should be noted that Aaker (1991) points out that the value of the loyal and committed consumer, who is found at the last step of the pyramid, is not primarily for the business they generate, but rather the impact they have on others and the market itself. The typology suggested by Aaker connected to loyalty is supported by Fajer and Schouten (1995) who initially describes consumer-brand relationship as a means to attain brand liking, but may eventually lead to a *higher-order relationship* which bears the characteristics of a friendship and is considered to pertain brand loyalty. There is an evident connection between brand loyalty and consumer-brand relationships as concepts of portraying the link between consumers and brands, though the difference seems to be that consumer-brand relationships add richness to the existing loyalty (Fournier, 1998). The concept of both brand loyalty and consumer-brand relationships, and the research attached to them, dissects how a relationship can deteriorate or dissolve over time. This happens as a result of marketing practices and techniques performed by the brand, which could change the dynamics in the relationship. When a brand engages in activism to either take a stand or as a reaction to a situation it has reluctantly gotten itself into, those interactions can affect the relationship, why brand activism is a concept connected to consumer-brand relationships.

2.3 Brand Activism

In terms of academia, the term brand activism is relatively new to the research sphere with researchers giving different but similar definitions for what the term entails. Novelty aside, the concept of brand activism seems to be here to stay and it is important for managers to understand it as Korschun notes (2021). The term is a result of the mounting pressure that

companies are starting to face while doing business in the 21st century with consumers demanding that they pick a side on certain dividing issues that don't necessarily pertain to the business (Moorman, 2020; Bhagwat et. al 2020; Hydock et. al 2020; Korschun, 2021).

Sarkar & Kotler (2018) view brand activism as an agenda that is value driven that companies adopt for the betterment of future society and the planet as a whole. They further identify six broad areas of brand activism that exist in our world today, reflecting the larger issues that we face. These are social-, workplace-, political-, environmental-, economic- and legal activism. For this study we have decided to focus on social- and political activism also known as sociopolitical activism.

- Social activism encapsulates the social aspects such as equality, diversity, race, gender etc.
- Political activism refers to the act of lobbying, questions regarding privatization, policies and voting.

Moorman (2020) defines brand political activism as actions or addressing the public regarding dividing issues in our society and that it is done through the company or its brands acting as a proxy. Korschun (2021) uncovers two characteristic traits of brand activism, firstly that it involves a publicly stated position as opposed to lobbying and other means of political influence that has more of a private tone. The position is regarded as a public act that is communicated through advertising and other visual means of communication. Secondly Korschun (2021) means that the most important aspect of brand activism is the advocacy part that goes beyond the bare minimum that is expected and involves a proactive approach to societal issues. This entails raising awareness and changing public opinion for the better instead of simply keeping it inside company walls. By advocating for a certain group or cause where the public is divided one of the main risks with brand activism is that you might lose consumers who don't feel aligned with the values and beliefs that brands are advocating for (Korschun 2021; Ulver, 2021; Bhagwat et. al 2020; Moorman, 2020). Bhagwat et. al (2020) further note that brand activism has risen as a new way for companies to form relationships with their consumers and refer to acts of advocacy from corporate entities as corporate socio political activism (CSA) e.g. Nike's support of Colin Kaepernick following the scandalous kneeling incident during the national anthem (Clements, 2016).

2.4 Prior Research on Brand Activism

Research on the topic of Brand Activism is growing steadily with identified focus areas such as consumer-centric (Hydock, Paharia & Weber 2019; Ghosh, 2021; Mukherjee & Althuizen 2020), company-centric (Mirzaei, Wilkie & Siuki, 2022; Vredenberger et al., 2020; Hydock, Paharia & Blair, 2020; Korschun 2021; Bhagwat et. al 2020) and general knowledge about the concept of brand activism (Manfredi-Sanchez, 2019; Schmidt et. al, 2021; Moorman, 2020; Vredenberger et. al 2020). To elaborate, the consumer-centric research focuses on the consumer and how they react to brand activism, this is more often than not quantitative. The company-centric view looks at the results of brand activism and the implications for brands and managers, how it will affect the company. Lastly, the general knowledge part of brand activism serves to educate and map out brand activism as a concept and practice.

Mirzaei, Wilkie & Siuki (2022) argues that brand activism is becoming more popular and is seen by brands as a new opportunity to signal social awareness and responsibility. The view on brand activism as a channel for communicating social awareness and responsibility is shared by Sarkar & Kotler (2018), who mention it along the lines of CSR, as a continuation of CSR. Schmidt et al. (2021) highlights the opportunities brand activism entails for brands, such as the possibility to create an emotional connection when taking a stance but only if it is regarded as more than simply communication and if it aligns with the brand, and alludes to the importance of authenticity of the activism and the risks of engaging in brand activism. The risks with brand activism are that consumers can perceive the activism as the brand has pushed it too far and that the brand exposes themselves to high risk of going against their consumers and eventually losing them (Schmidt et al., 2021).

Owing to the fact that brand activism is a relatively novel concept, although it has existed for some time but perhaps not as an purposive marketing strategy, the similarities to CSR are drawn by several studies but brand activism is differentiated from CSR in the same studies (Mirzaei, Wilkie & Siuki, 2022; Schmidt et al. 2021; Vredenberger et al., 2020; Sarkar & Kotler, 2018; Hydock, Paharia & Blair, 2020). The studies highlight different points of disparity. Schmidt et al. (2021) argues that the difference is that the risks with brand activism are higher than with CSR as aforementioned, while Vredenberger et al. (2020) describes brand activism as a concept that is value and purpose driven instead of being market driven (CSR), and is more focused on practice rather than influencing the target audience. CSR

mostly addresses social, environmental and political issues, which makes it less encompassing than brand activism which contains all aspects of society (social, political, environmental, legal, business or economic) (Vredenberger et al. 2020). Sarkar & Kotler (2018) notes that brand activism is a natural evolution from CSR, which they regard as a slower concept than brand activism, and exemplifies it by explaining that CSR has predefined areas, while brand activism is driven by a fundamental concern about the biggest and most urgent issue that society is facing today. Another difference that is discussed is that CSR involves philanthropic support to generally popular issues, while brand activism involves vocal support for controversial issues and might generate a polarizing response from the public (Hydock, Paharia & Blair, 2020).

When researching and collecting data regarding brand activism and its surrounding research areas, three directions of research have been possible to identify. As a step to slightly clarify the literature and prior research on brand activism, it will be classified into three streams. The first stream is directed towards explaining the concept in a more general way as these studies were written in the initial stages of brand activism and necessary to define the concept and place it in a context and distinguish it from other areas of marketing (Manfredi-Sanchez, 2019; Schmidt et. al, 2021; Moorman, 2020; Vredenberger et. al 2020). The second stream of literature is company oriented and covers brand activism from a brands perspective, how they execute it and if the activism is authentic (Mirzaei, Wilkie & Siuki, 2022; Vredenberger et al., 2020; Hydock, Paharia & Blair, 2020; Korschun 2021; Bhagwat et. al 2020). Finally, the last stream of literature is the consumer directed one (Hydock, Paharia & Weber 2019; Ghosh, 2021; Mukherjee & Althuizen 2020). This stream marks somewhat of a completion of the circle, as it aims to explain how consumers respond to and execute brand activism, offering a consumer based perspective on the topic and the effects of brand activism.

Since the area of brand activism is relatively new, one of the research streams identified looks at the concept as a whole and its different avenues to widen understanding about the phenomena (Manfredi-Sanchez, 2019; Schmidt et. al, 2021; Moorman, 2020; Vredenberger et. al 2020). Manfredi-Sanchez (2019) did a study on brand activism where the goal was to find the characteristics of brand activism by analyzing 45 advertising campaigns. He identifies four categories of brand activism that are similar to Sarkar & Kotler's (2018) six broad areas of brand activism although compressed into four, these are politics and regulatory affairs, economy and business, social and lastly environmental (2019). They find that the

political polarization of today allows for companies to associate their products or services with final values, values that are generic in nature which aims for the common good, and away from instrumental values which are pertaining to the industry that the company resides in (2019). Furthermore, they note that there's a significant absence of conservative brand activism while there's plenty of cases regarding progressive or more liberal views (2019). This suggests that contemporary brand activism generally caters more to liberal values which could be because liberal consumers tend to evaluate the politics of their purchases to a higher degree than conservatives (Jost, Langer & Singh, 2017). Vredenberger et. al (2020) contribute to the characteristics of brand activism with a focus on authenticity by establishing four defining characteristics of brand activism, that the brand is purpose driven as well as values driven, that they are addressing issues that are controversial, contested etc., the nature of the stance is nonneutral i.e. progressive or conservative and lastly that they contribute to the sociopolitical issue through intangible and tangible commitment. Vredenberger et. al (2020) further contributes to the discussion by presenting a matrix that maps out the typology of brand activism. The four identified typologies are, absence of brand activism, silent brand activism, authentic brand activism and inauthentic brand activism. Moorman (2020) notes that their surveys regarding the political aspects of marketing and consumption finds a trend that shows that companies are more likely to take a stance on politically charged topics than before. They further unearth six perspectives that they argue that companies use to guide their decision-making regarding the degree of political influence on business. These are, brand authenticity view, corporate citizen view, cultural authority view, calculative view, brands as educators view, political mission view and employee engagement view (Moorman, 2020).

As the research has progressed, and the world has experienced events (the COVID-19 pandemic and the Black Lives Matters protests, Me too movement i.a.) that has affected most parts of society and will perhaps have long-standing effects. Consequently, the second research stream of brand activism literature has concentrated on the brands perspective and the level of authenticity in their engagement (Mirzaei, Wilkie & Siuki, 2022; Vredenberger et al., 2020; Hydock, Paharia & Blair, 2020; Korschun 2021; Bhagwat et. al 2020). This stream tends to be somewhat critical to when brands engage in brand activism, and aims to find the underlying thought, if there is one.

The term *woke* is frequently used by researchers and is a word with its origin in african american vernacular english which means *to be aware or well-informed in a political or*

cultural sense, and was popularized in the mid 2010s when the Black Lives Matter movement started to get traction due to several murders of unarmed black people (The Independent, 2021). In recent times, it has been used by the right wing as a slur (The Independent, 2021). Vredenberger et al. (2020) questions if the brands are engaged in authentic brand activism or woke washing, a term introduced in 2018 in the aftermath of Nike sponsoring and supporting NFL player Colin Kaepernick after he knelt on one knee during the American national anthem as a protest against institutional racial injustice in America (Vredenberger et. al (2018). When brands match their values and purpose with the activist's message in an altruistic approach and incorporate it in their corporate operation, brands can achieve a social change as well as increasing their brand equity (Vredenberger et al., 2020). However, if a brand conveys a message that is misaligned with their values, purpose and operation they are engaging in activism that might be perceived as inauthentic, which endangers both the social cause and their brand equity (Vredenberger et al., 2020). This view on brand activism as either authentic or woke washing is shared by Mirzaei, Wilkie & Siuki (2022) and Hydock, Paharia & Blair (2020). The main challenge for brands is to find a cause that is aligning with their values and purpose, the actual positioning in the issue will then be authentic (Mirzaei, Wilkie & Siuki 2022; Hydock, Paharia & Blair 2020). While Vredenberger et al. (2020) mentions brand activism as a strategy and an opportunity for brands, Mirzaei, Wilkie & Siuki (2022), Hydock, Paharia & Blair (2020) and Korschun (2021) notes that the consumers serve as an external element which urges and expects the brands to take a stand in issues, and adds that the world is becoming increasingly political. The expectations can pose an additional risk for a brand, because avoiding taking a stand or appearing to be neutral in an issue where the brand has engaged earlier, could backfire since the consumer might perceive it as the brand is withholding its true intentions or beliefs (Korschun, 2021). Apart from the consumers, it is also suggested that brand activism could be a byproduct of the owner's social and political interests, as brand activism is less concerned about economic interests but prioritizes social and political benefits, and the activism is embedded in the brand's values and purpose (Vredenberger et al., 2020).

Since a brand has to adhere to several stakeholders, Bhagwat et. al (2020) discusses the investors response to brand activism by arguing that it depends on the investors opinion in the matter, and that the investor could oppose brand activism as it may divert the brand from focusing on maximizing profit for its shareholders. As for the goals with brand activism, Korschun (2021) maintains that the marketers have two goals when engaging in brand

activism. The first goal is to achieve societal and political change, which pleads to the business performance of the brand and aims to improve it (Korschun, 2021). In order to find a cause to engage in, brands should not wait and jump on trend, argues Mirzaei, Wilkie & Sukie (2022), which Korschun (2021) supports by urging brands to take leadership in issues.

The third and final research stream of literature in the brand activism area is directed towards the consumer's response to the activism carried out by brands and how consumers execute brand activism. According to Hydock, Paharia & Weber (2019) brand activism is a fairly new marketing activity, and has emerged in the last decade which marks a considerable turnaround as brands were previously more concerned about the effects it could have on their business performance, than they are today and in consequence avoided taking a stance divisive issues. Previously, brands focused their efforts towards initiating processes that would influence legislation and policies in their desired direction (lobbyism) and to improve the societal well-being by CSR (Hydock, Paharia & Weber 2019). Mukherjee & Althuizen (2020) explains brand activism from the consumer's perspective as a means of determining the level of self-brand similarity according to their own morals, meaning the consumers can determine whether the brands morals align with their own. If the consumers find the level of brand similarity to be high, it will lead to increased purchase intention and higher brand advocacy (Mukherjee & Althuizen 2020). Meanwhile, it may seem as if the level of self-brand similarity were to be on the lower part of the spectrum, the purchase intention and the brand advocacy would fall symmetrically (Mukherjee & Althuizen 2020). Mukherjee & Althuizen (2020) argues that the relationship is asymmetrical because a consumer that disagrees with a brand's morals will not alter their own morals to fit the brand's and the positive brand attitudes that comes with alignment will not reward the brand in a very notable sense, but in the case of misalignment the brand will suffer to a greater extent. Furthermore, Hydock, Paharia & Weber (2019) points out that there is a growing trend of a socially conscious consumer who wishes to aid societal change with their consumption and considers the public consequences of their consumption. This group of consumers also wishes to express their identity and avoid guilt connected to their consumption, which is done by carefully choosing which they consume (Hydock, Paharia & Weber 2019).

As brand activism can be exercised both on- and offline, Ghosh (2021) writes that they are both closely connected, although the online activism can boost the offline activism and urge consumers to act in other ways than simply liking, sharing or commenting on social media.

The importance of immediacy that social media offers should not be neglected, because it gives consumers a quick chance of validation of their opinions surrounding a brand, and concerns mostly the younger consumers (Ghosh, 2021). Despite many consumers responding to the brand activism, they tend to follow through to a lesser extent with moving from words to action (Hydock, Paharia & Weber 2019). Hydock, Paharia & Weber (2019) delves deeper into this and adds that only the “greenest” consumers will make tradeoffs to purchase the most ethically justified brands and contend that it may be a case *situational ambivalence*, because consumers under-request ethical attribute information and behave contradictive on the market. In a short matter of time, consumers may engage in both socially responsible and irresponsible activities, and compensate for the irresponsible one shortly afterwards (Hydock, Paharia & Weber 2019). There are several practices consumers resort to, however, boycotts and buycotts are the most common ones (Warren, 2021; Hydock, Paharia & Weber 2019; Ghosh; 2021). The consumers can reward and punish for their brand activism, activities and standpoints by collectively either purchasing or not purchasing a specific brand to support what they deem to be something worth supporting or something worth punishing (Hydock, Paharia & Weber 2019). Hydock, Paharia & Weber (2019) argues that the possibility for a boycott to succeed is higher than for a buycott, but with the digitalization this has increased, while also adding that stereotypically liberals are more propense to boycott or buycott a brand than conservatives. Warren (2021) suggests that although boycotts receive more attention because of the negativity bias, they die down sooner than buycotts. Apart from that, buycotts could have long-standing effects because they form a connection between the brand and the consumer, which also is an argument for brands to engage in brand activism (Warren, 2021).

2.5 Critique of prior research

The novel aspect of brand activism leads to a lack of consensus regarding the subject but we feel like a foundation has been laid that we can build upon. Moorman (2020) states that the perspectives they uncovered were not validated in the study but that their prediction is that the qualities of the perspectives are likely behind the scenes of companies’ decision-making. This points towards the novelty of brand activism with predictions being laid out for future research to validate or falsify. Vredenberger et. al (2020) note that their investigation is one of the first ones regarding authentic brand activism and that many research opportunities remain to gain an understanding of the phenomenon. Among these opportunities they argue for consumer perspectives and motivations to engage with brand activism from a marketer’s

point of view i.e the brand and management side of brand activism (2020). Manfredi-Sanchez (2019) analyzed 45 marketing campaigns using triangulation techniques using both qualitative and quantitative methods in order to unearth the characteristics of brand activism and look at the relationship between the brand and the socio-political context in which they insert themselves. While interesting, the author looks at highly impactful marketing campaigns in a broad sense, not limiting themselves to a certain industry but all. This leaves room for analysis of specific industries in this regard as not all companies behave the same and industry standards have an effect on brand behavior.

The second stream of literature takes on the role of the brand in regards to brand activism and the outcomes of it, looking at levels of authentic brand activism as an important factor (Mirzaei, Wilkie & Siuki, 2022; Vredenberg et al., 2020; Hydock, Paharia & Blair, 2020; Korschun 2021; Bhagwat et. al 2020). Authenticity from a brand's point of view is suggested to occur when the internal elements of the brand and the activist messaging align and there is congruence while incongruence in this regard would be seen as inauthentic and bad for the brand (Vredenberg et. al 2020; Mirzaei, Wilkie & Siuki, 2022). While focusing on the perspective of the brand what is lost is the perspective of the consumer which we argue is an important aspect to consider since they are the recipients of the activist messaging and ultimately decide whether it is authentic or not. Vredenberg et. al (2020) do mention the consumer perspective but they don't go in-depth into that perspective.

As Bhagwat et. al (2020) note, brand activism signals investors that resources are being spent on areas that might not result in financial gain which indicates more risk suggesting unfavorable outcomes. By adopting this perspective, researchers stray away from the essence of brand activism as put forth by Sarkar & Kotler (2018) as actions taken for the betterment of society and the planet as a whole.

Mukherjee & Althuizen (2020) come to the conclusion that brand activism has an asymmetrical effect on the relationship between the consumer and the brand because the positive effects of brand activism are not notable enough compared to the negative effects. This does not however, take into account the rise of the greener consumer as noted by Hydock, Paharia & Weber (2019) that might offset the negative effects of brand activism. The consumer side of brand activism research looks at the relationships between consumers and brands, it is explicitly mentioned by both Mukherjee & Althuizen (2020) and Ghosh (2021) however, there is no mention of the consumer-brand relationship theory as put forth by

Fournier (1998) or research building on said theory. The consequences of this are a lack of information regarding the relationship between consumers and brands which we argue might be important to note while trying to understand recipients of brand activism. Mukherjee & Althuizen (2020) mention that during consumer-brand disagreements, consumers will likely form a negative opinion and perhaps stop consuming the brand. This is merely one response that consumers may have and seems limiting as there are countless responses to disagreements in real life which brand relationships are supposed to emulate.

3. Theoretical Framework

In this chapter we lay the foundation of the theories we focus on in this paper, starting with consumer-brand relationship theories. These are the AA-relationship model and the BRQ-model that visualize and explain the relationships between consumer and brand. We supplement the BRQ-model with the AA-relationship model to make the analysis more nuanced and layered. We follow this with moral reasoning strategies that consumers may use to develop their judgment during a consumer-brand disagreement or agreement.

3.1 Consumer-Brand Relationships Theories

The main topic and research field of this study is brand activism. There are multiple approaches and perspectives to utilize when researching brand activism, and the chosen one in this study is the consumer-brand relationship perspective. To enable the analysis, there will be a need for conceptualization and visualization of brand activism, for which two models will be utilized. The main model that will be used as the foundation for the analysis is Fournier's Brand Relationship Quality (BRQ) Model (1998), and Park, Eisengerich & Park's Attachment-Aversion (AA) Model (2013) and the moral reasoning strategies put forth by Mukherjee & Althuizen (2020) will be used to enable an analysis of how consumers relationship to their brands of choice improves or deteriorate.

3.1.1 Attachment-Aversion Model

Building on the work of Fournier (1998) Park et. al. (2013) construct a model for measuring the attachment and aversion that consumers have towards a brand. Among their research's contributions to the field of consumer-brand relationship is the proposed notion that the distance that the consumer perceives between the self and the brand, known as brand-self distance. And how accessible the memories of the brand are to the consumer, known as brand prominence, constitute the attachment-aversion relationship (AA-relationship). It essentially boils down to how attachment to a brand is formed. Novik, Pinto & Guirreiro (2017) note that the AA-model is the product of several previous models made by the authors and that it is the more comprehensive version, not only accounting for how brand attachment occurs but also

the involved determinants, motivational strength and the consumer behavior that goes along with it.

According to Park et. al. (2013) brand attachment occurs when the brand is seen by the consumer as an opportunity for self-expansion, the opportunity allows for a more intimate attachment to the brand. Conversely, when the brand is seen by the consumer as a threat for self-contraction it is called brand aversion, evoking a feeling of distance between the consumer and the brand. They paint a picture of a relationship spectrum with brand attachment and brand aversion on opposite sides, furthermore, it is noted that transitioning from one side to the other is possible given time (Park et. al 2013). Aside from the presence of brand attachment and brand aversion on the spectrum, a halfway point is introduced as brand indifference. This state of the relationship is neutral with little to no motivational force supporting or opposing the brand (Park et. al 2013). They further note that the conceptual components that make up the AA-relationship is the level of brand-self distance and brand prominence.

Brand-self distance as a concept is closely related to the self-concept connection, the latter being how a brand fits into the self concept of a consumer or the “me-ness” of a brand. The former is defined as the distance one perceives between a brand and the self. Brand self-distance looks at the association of the relationship, the association of a close relationship between brand and consumer is positive while a distant relationship is negative.

Self-relevance of brand memories is the determining factor and refers to self-relevant cognitive and meaningful memories one might have regarding a brand. It is noted that a lack of said memories about a brand is what leads to brand indifference since the brand isn't occupying the consumers memories or thoughts. Conversely if the consumer has highly self relevant memories about a brand that are meaningful, it allows the consumer to move from brand indifference on the spectrum but the direction is dictated by the association of those memories; negative ones leading to a distant relationship and positive ones resulting in closeness (Park et. al. 2013).

Park et. al. (2013) further elaborate on the brand prominence part of the theory by noting that prominence refers to the accessibility of memories regarding the brand. In a sense, brand prominence refers to the accessibility of the memories that make up the brand-self distance. Self-relevance may be evident with a brand for different reasons, it may provide functional

convenience yet not be a highly accessible memory for the consumer. The AA-relationship as a whole is made up of these two concepts and thus, the perceived distance of the relationship as well as the importance of said distance is the AA-relationship. However, the fact that the concepts make up the AA-relationship doesn't mean that they have to exist together, in fact they can exist independently of each other. Brand-self distance with the parameters of aversion and attachment are opposites however in order to have a feeling of aversion or attachment, brand prominence is needed which is why aversion and attachment have high brand prominence. Park et. al. (2013) make a distinction between types of brand indifference and highlight that indifference between a brand and consumer generally has low levels of brand prominence making the curve between attachment-indifference-aversion form a U-shape as it is high on the two ends and low in the middle, indifference part. However, the distinction they make between indifferences is required, we can call one true indifference and the other forced indifference. True indifference is a result of genuine feelings of not caring about the brand, no positive or negative feelings are controlling the outcome of the relationship whereas forced indifference is the result of both negative and positive feelings surrounding a brand.

3.1.2 Brand Relationship Quality Model

Understanding and rationalizing a somewhat abstract concept as a relationship between a consumer and a brand is a necessary phase in the development of how and why brands engage in certain activities, such as brand activism. The Brand Relationship Quality Model was produced and developed by Fournier (1998) as a model to humanize the relationship in question and facilitate the evaluation of the strength in a consumer-brand relationship. Fournier (1998) underlines that the relationship metaphors permeate most of the marketing discussion and practice, although at the time for the formulation of the model there had not been any empirical research efforts undertaken in the consumer goods area, especially at brand level. The methodism of the model is built on three pinnacles, the view on a brand as partner (*relationship as a partner*), taking the consumer's lived experience of the relationship in account by describing how a relationship can deteriorate or dissolves over time, and the use of human and relationship typology (Fournier, 1998).

A relationship is a bilateral and active concept, and has to contain an interdependence (Fournier, 1998). When describing their relationship to certain brands, consumers tend to

animate the brands and ascribe human characteristics to the brand in order to assist the progress of interacting with the brand (Fournier, 1998). Furthermore, the more commonly occurring efforts to humanize and animate the brands, done by the advertisers, are accepted by the consumers which indicates an increased tolerance to allowing brands to become part of their lives, through the relationships (Aaker, 1997; Fournier, 1998). Using spokespersons or by creating brand characters that bear the most basic human features such as laughing, talking and joking, brands can assume human traits in a more concrete sense (Fournier, 1998). Fournier (1998) argues that these are qualifications the brand must pass in order to contribute to the (inter-)active and dynamic nature of the relationship dyad.

The next step in the BRQ model is using the consumer's lived experience as a method to describe how a relationship between a consumer and a brand may deteriorate or dissolve over time (Fournier, 1998). Fournier (1998) argues that it is meaningful for the determination of the quality of the relationship to include a framework of how and what factors affect a relationship and lead to deterioration or dissolution of it. While brand relationship quality is a well-researched area, many researchers have delved into the different parts of what strengthens and affects a consumer-brand relationship, but there seems to be a limited amount of studies that pinpoints the destructive parts of a relationship (Fournier, 1998). Fournier (1998) argues that a relationship is subject to stress factors, and identifies three factors, *environmental*, *partner-oriented stresses* and *dyadic/relational stresses*. Environmental stresses develop when the physical situation is altered and it makes the continuation of the relationship impossible, e.g. a geographical relocation (*situational imposed stressors*) (Fournier, 1998). *Intrusion of alternatives* is another example of environmental stressors and is explained as the disturbance that occurs when a superior product makes its entry and rules out the existing relationship (Fournier, 1998). The partner-oriented stressors are divided into *personally-induced stressors*, when a change in personality forces a change, *managerially imposed stressors*, when managerial decisions are the basis of a discontinuation of the relationship or alter the brand partner role (Fournier, 1998). The dyadic/relationship stress occurs when there is a breach of rules or trust in the relationship (Fournier, 1998).

Finally, to complete the conceptualization of the model, there is an evident need to develop a typology. Fournier's (1998) work in this area of the model is extensive, and offers a wide range of examples on the different relationship a consumer and a brand may have. E.g., *arranged marriage* relationship is defined as "Nonvoluntary union imposed by preferences of

third party. intended for long-term, exclusive commitment, although at low levels of affective attachment”, and exemplified by likening it to a woman who adopts her husband's favorite brands (Fournier, 1998). While a *fling* relationship is described as short-term, high in emotional reward, although low in commitment and reciprocity, exemplified by a membership trial (Fournier, 1998). Moreover, Fournier (1998) suggests that to understand how a relationship is affected and evolves during a timespan, the six dimensions and alternatives of brand relationships (2.3 Brand Activism) need to be taken into account.

3.2 Moral Reasoning Strategies

Mukherjee & Althuizen (2020) propose that the consumer's reaction to brand activism can be a result of their moral judgment about controversial topics and that this judgment has a part in deciding the consumer's stance on a brand. According to Haidt (2001) moral judgments are not always dictated by the reasoning we do but rather automatic in the sense where we make quick evaluations based on our intuition in order to reach moral judgment and that moral reasoning is generated afterwards. Haidt (2001) further emphasizes the importance of social and cultural ties in the formation of judgments. Mukherjee & Althuizen (2020) question whether these formed judgments about controversial issues are easily transferred to brands and their products and change their stance on them. They suggest that in some cases, a consumer's initial negative reactions to a brand's transgressions might not affect their attitude towards the brand. This might be caused by the fact that a brand's opinion on controversial issues isn't related to the intrinsic quality of the product or product performance. Mukherjee & Althuizen (2020) propose that whether or not a brand should be punished for their perceived transgressions is a matter of moral dilemma from the consumer's point of view, a dilemma that will likely result in a process of deliberate moral reasoning. They further discuss three chosen deliberate moral reasoning processes, moral rationalization, moral coupling and moral decoupling.

According to Tsang (2002), moral rationalization refers to people's ability to frame immoral actions or behavior to be moral. They say that this is due to conflicting motivations combined with the need to see ourselves as moral. Tsang (2002) further makes assumptions about the moral rationalization process, one of the first ones being whether morality is relevant to the situation at hand and argues that situational factors such as routinization could be grounds for

not viewing morality as relevant in certain cases. This could be the case for the FMCG industry as the products are low involvement and the consumption is likely to become a habit or routine (Howard & Sheth, 1969). Furthermore, conflicting motivations raise the question of costs and benefits. Behaving morally may give you good feelings about yourself and you may get praise from other people and conversely behaving immorally may lead you to condemn yourself or get condemned by others. Thus, if the costs of upholding morality are high we may commence a moral rationalization process in which morality is violated but rationalized in a way that seems moral (Tsang, 2002). Mukherjee & Althuizen (2020) maintain that the controversial issues that brands are involving themselves in are often extensive in such a manner that doesn't allow consumers to avoid them. If the brand's stance on a particular issue leads to consumer-brand disagreement, moral relevance increases since it is in conflict with the consumer's own morality. They further posit that the landscape of consumer products that we have today offers plenty of alternatives for the products we consume; therefore the economic and psychological cost of switching to another brand is reduced. This is relevant to the FMCG industry as the products are more or less interchangeable in function and form which could suggest that there's less moral rationalization in the FMCG industry. Mukherjee & Althuizen (2020) infer that consumers are not likely to morally rationalize a brand's stance on an issue that causes consumer-brand disagreement.

Lee & Kwak (2016) define moral coupling as a psychological process in which a consumer combines their judgment of a brand's performance as well as their morality. Mukherjee & Althuizen (2020) suggest that during consumer-brand disagreements, moral coupling methods will cause consumers to have negative attitudes, intentions as well as behavior towards a brand. This is because moral coupling allows the consumer to view the brand's stance on an issue that contradicts their own as a crucial part of the brand. They further suggest that moral coupling is the purest form of morality for consumers as their morality dictates not only their beliefs but also their consumption choices. Lee & Kwak (2016) distinguish moral coupling from other moral reasoning strategies such as moral rationalization and moral decoupling since they aim at justifying perceived wrongdoings. Mukherjee & Althuizen (2020) argue that moral coupling will be the default choice of the consumer as far as moral reasoning strategies go.

Bhattacharjee, Berman & Reed (2013) conceptualized moral decoupling as an additional moral reasoning strategy that is psychologically distinct from the moral rationalization strategy. This is because while rationalizing, one accepts or condones behavior that is perceived to be negative or immoral but moral decoupling separates judgment of the brand's performance and judgment of morality. This also makes moral decoupling easier to justify than moral rationalization. Mukherjee & Althuizen (2020) problematize moral decoupling by stating that the source of the stand and the brand and the distance between the two is important for moral decoupling to succeed. In the case that the source of the stand and the brand are very closely related, a consumer might turn to a moral coupling strategy as the perceived immoral stand is harder to separate from the brand itself. This could be the case when a brand decides to create and implement an official brand activism campaign that permeates the whole brand. Conversely, Mukherjee & Althuizen (2020) state that when there is distance between the source of the stand and the brand a moral decoupling strategy is feasible. A feasible case would be e.g the private opinions of an employee that do not necessarily reflect the opinions of the brand.

4. Methodology

In this chapter we explain our methodology that we have used in this paper. We begin by outlining the research philosophy that we follow throughout referring to our ontological and epistemological position. We follow this with our research strategy which entails the use of a qualitative method with an abductive approach. We explain our data collection process that involves netnography. This is succeeded by an explanation regarding the selection of case and online platform. Lastly we go over our ethical considerations when conducting this research as well as the methodological limitations.

4.1 Research Philosophy

In order to facilitate the understanding of how the authors interpreted and arrived at conclusions, while rationalizing the choice of research strategy that will be utilized, it is required that the authors explicate their choices. In this research study the authors found it most relevant to approach the research problem and question with an ontological and epistemological method, which will be clarified further. Ontology refers to the researchers assumption of the nature of reality, and epistemology refers to how the nature of the world is inquired into, and how the knowledge can be acquired in the best sense (Easterby-Smith, Thorpe & Jackson, 2015). Utilizing ontology and epistemology to conduct a research, is according to Easterby-Smith, Thorpe & Jackson (2015, p.47) “a combination of techniques used to inquire into a specific situation”. Additionally, Easterby-Smith, Thorpe & Jackson (2015) argues that having an understanding for the concepts regarding research methods and techniques, it can improve the quality of the research and facilitate the formulating the conclusion

4.1.1 Ontological Method

The debate surrounding ontology mainly considers whether researchers should assume a relativistic, nominalistic or internal realistic approach in their research. This debate is almost as old as ontology itself and stems from whether a management research method for natural science is appropriate for social science (Easterby-Smith, Thorpe & Jackson, 2015). The four different orientations of ontology offer different viewpoints on research problems and their outcomes.

The aim of this research was not to find an absolute truth and uncover it, but rather, by observing it through several different perspectives, arrive at additional truths and contribute to the collection of literature regarding brand activism. The authors expected to explore several truths, and did not regard one truth superior to the next one. This was accentuated by the research question which was pointed towards explaining the multiple ways a brand can be affected by brand activism, rather than simply one way. Furthermore, the research question is directed towards collecting large amounts of data and through that generate many different truths. To make it a comprehensible and useful contribution to the brand activism literature, there was a need for synthesizing the response, which was accommodated.

Reaching for the respondents truths, and allowing an abundance of truths to be expressed, it can be said that this research subscribed to ontological relativism as there was a belief that the truth lies in the eye of the beholder and there is not an absolute truth (Easterby-Smith, Thorpe & Jackson, 2015). As a consequence, this research perhaps discovered different truths, depending on who contributed to the thread, because of every contributor's unique standpoint. This further accentuated the need to include a large amount of response in the research. Conducting the research with this approach, the different perspectives and views are expected to add richness to the research as a consequence of the different truths. Moreover, ontological relativism is argued to invigorate the research as it includes many different perspectives, per Easterby-Smith, Thorpe & Jackson (2015).

4.1.2 Epistemological Method

Ontology can be considered the basis for existing knowledge and how to begin an arrangement and processing of the knowledge. This is where epistemology enters. “[...] epistemology is the study of the nature of knowledge and ways of enquiring into the physical and social worlds. It is, as we have indicated, the study of theories of knowledge; how we know what we know” (Easterby-Smith, Thorpe & Jackson, 2015, p. 51). Put in another way, it gives researchers the opportunity to examine and study the theories of knowledge of what we know.

In epistemology there are two main objectives which contrast each other, positivism and social constructionism. As with ontology, there has been a debate on which method should be utilized when conducting a social science research. Social constructionism comes from the

assumption that reality is not objective or exterior, but is socially constructed and given meaning by its inhabitants when they are interactive with each other (Easterby-Smith, Thorpe & Jackson, 2015).

In this research, the research question is posed in a sense that it will generate several different responses and perspectives for the reason that brand activism is a multi-faceted concept. Basing this research on an ontological method and studying concepts that are complex and perhaps not possible to classify as either black or white, the social constructionism method offers the best possibilities to answer the research question and deliver a comprehensive conclusion.

Social constructionism leans on the idea that reality varies from person to person, which is why it is determined by human beings and not external factors and allows us to develop methods to analyze patterns and processes, performed by individuals (Easterby-Smith, Thorpe & Jackson, 2015). Social constructionism offers the strength of being able to view the change of the aforementioned processes over time and to understand the meaning that people place on things and agile when assessing new ideas and issues (Easterby-Smith, Thorpe & Jackson, 2015). Certainly, since there are strengths with social constructionism, there are weaknesses. The weaknesses refers to the collection of data, which could prove to be rather burdensome and consequently pose to be an issue when it is time to interpret it (Easterby-Smith, Thorpe & Jackson, 2015).

4.2 Research Strategy

4.2.1 Qualitative research strategy

The exploratory nature of our research question and direction we have decided to take requires an understanding and more in-depth information regarding human behavior, thus, a quantitative method with an objective look at reality would not suffice. We decided to utilize a qualitative research strategy as it is more focused on exploration and open-ended questions which require interpretation to answer (Easterby-Smith, Thorpe & Jackson, 2015).

Qualitative data refers to non-numerical information and typically consists of what has been said or done by research subjects. This could refer to the notes one has been taking while

observing behavior (Easterby-Smith, Thorpe & Jackson, 2015). The qualitative research strategy thus focuses on words rather than collecting and analyzing data through quantification. By focusing on words and not on quantitative data, one is able to explore how people view the world and how it is interpreted. Qualitative methods have their foundation in the constructionism ontology whereby one views our reality as perpetually changing (Bryman & Bell, 2011). As this study is based on the ontological position of constructionism the choice of qualitative method rather than quantitative is further justified.

Rennstam & Wästerfors (2019) shed light on the importance of qualitative methods and highlight that the methodology enables us to make sense of social interactions and phenomena in specific contexts where they exist. Another important facet of qualitative methods is their explanation power when numbers fail to rise to the occasion. While quantitative methods focus on measuring the quantity, qualitative methods provide us with understanding and meaning regarding subject matters. This further increases the need for a qualitative approach in this study as we aim to make sense of the subjective relationship consumers have with brands combined with brand activism. The data collection will focus on interpreting and exploring the discourse between consumers in the context where they reside which increases the appropriateness of using qualitative methods.

4.2.2 Abductive Approach

Since this study aims to explore the subjective and sometimes irrational nature of human behavior it was important to remain reflexive in our research and not constrain our work with theory. Thus, we came to the conclusion that an abductive approach, sometimes referred to as an iterative approach, to research would be the most fitting as it is characterized by bouncing back and forth between the collected data and the chosen theories (Dubois & Gadde, 2002; Bryman & Bell, 2011).

Dubois & Gadde (2002) argue that while the abductive approach is more in line with inductive reasoning than deductive, it should be set apart from simply a mixture of the two reasoning methods. The abductive method is especially appropriate if the researchers desire to unearth new things in existing areas, focus is put on generating new concepts and developing theoretical models instead of confirming theory.

Dubois & Gadde (2002) further state that the abductive approach acts as a method for refining existing theory. A point of difference is made between abductive-, inductive- and deductive approaches and it pertains to the framework which in abduction is successively altered. It is more dynamic in nature as new findings and theoretical insights are used to fit the framework. New combinations are developed by using existing theory and the newfound concepts one creates when dealing with the reality of a situation. The interplay between reality and theory is an important aspect of this study, allowing freedom and reflexivity in the conceptualization process.

4.3 Data Collection

Researching brand activism with a qualitative method may require a large number of respondents and interviews because it depends on collecting deep-knowledge data and from a diverse group of respondents, to strengthen the validity of the study. For that reason, and because of the nature of the brand activism this study will research, this research will use a combination of Kozinet's (2010) netnography and Eisenhardt's (1989) case study approach to answer the research question. Netnography derives from *ethnography*, however conducted online (Easterby-Smith, Thorpe & Jackson, 2015). This study explores the brand activism that occurs when brands take a stance in an issue, political and social, and since it generated most brand activism online while also playing itself out online, there is an evident argument for the research to be conducted as a netnography. Kozinets (2010) points out that the chosen research method should be directly related to be able to provide the researchers with data and analysis capable of answering the research question. Consequently, a netnographic research method will be beneficial for collecting rich and valuable data that will serve as the basis for the analysis.

Since this research is centered around one event of brand activism, adopting a case study approach allows the authors to generate in-depth knowledge of the case in its real-life context. The case study approach has proven to be a trusted method when analyzing what contributions it has brought, one of them is generating, or extending, theory (Eisenhardt, 1989). Additionally, case studies combine different data collection methods (Eisenhardt, 1989).

Collection of data came from online sources, mainly from internet forums with a great amount of submissions, thus deemed to be rich and valuable sources of data. Collecting the data online was a logical step since the data was there to be found and made available, therefore rather simple to collect. The sources that were collected and used in the empirics were secondary sources for this reason. Using public data, as well as having access to several scientific digital publications via the Lund University VPN, aided the authors and prevented any internal blockage to access (Easterby-Smith, Thorpe & Jackson, 2015).

4.3.1 Netnography

With the emergence of social media and more generally the increasing role the internet has taken in society, there are vast amounts of resources of archived data online available to be used in research, and be the main source of data collection. Netnographic research is an extension of ethnographic research, which in turn is an anthropological method (Easterby-Smith, Thorpe & Jackson, 2018). When researching digital phenomena, netnography is a favorable method and allows the researcher to observe virtual communities and collect a large amount of data from them (Easterby-Smith, Thorpe & Jackson, 2018). Netnography also enables the researchers to delve deeper in the collection with its guidelines, and through that add in-depth human understanding by engaging in the data (Kozinets, 2010). As a research form, netnography further facilitates the understanding of cultural experiences and communities, and could therefore be seen as a method to view data and the world. Since social media and online forums offer the users to create an online persona mainly by letting the user to register with nicknames, the ability to trace the posted content to the human being that posted it, could sometimes pose a problem (Kozinets, 2010). The pseudonyms should be regarded as real names, argues Kozinets (2010) and maintains that the people behind them often care about their reputation on the forum in question.

4.3.2 Data Analysis

In contrast to big data and quantitative methods, netnographic data is analyzed through different types of analysis such as semiotic visual analysis, interviews, social media analysis and in this case, content analysis (Kozinets, 2015). Content analysis can be divided into three areas, conventional, directed and summative, this research was done with directed content

analysis (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005). Directed analysis begins with formulating the theory and after that defines the codes for the data collection and analysis (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005). The utilized codes are derived from theory and relevant research findings (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005). In this research the coding was divided into three main areas, positive, indifferent and negative. To proceed from there, a typology to categorize the data was developed to allow linking to and add to the existing theory. Coding was done manually in this study as it was deemed to be the safest method as opposed to web scraping using keywords. Coding manually enabled the data to be analyzed with a human factor which ensured that the data collection was coded correctly, and resulted in elaborated findings.

The first step was to transfer the thread of comments to an Excel document in the same order as they were originally. The thread contained 508 comments, which were posted over a period of 19 months, from January 2019 to August 2020, though the first 457 comments were made during the first two weeks. 219 unique users contributed to the thread, which meant that some commenters engaged in discussions with each other, and for that reason those comments drifted away from the topic and were not useful, these totaled up to 171 comments. A mere 10% of the comments were positive, 7% of the comments were interpreted as indifferent and 47% were negative, leaving us with 36% of the comments that were irrelevant. Next step was to read every comment and categorize it as either positive, indifferent or negative. Evidently, there were quite a few comments that were irrelevant. These were singled out in order to not disrupt the rest of the data. Since netnography studies qualitative data, there were some comments who had elements of both indifferent and negative or positive opinions. This further supports the choice to code manually as the data was nuanced, and not clear-cut. The final step was to choose comments to include in the research by searching for comments that represented a group in the population of commenters. The typology was then developed when we detected patterns in the thread.

4.4 Selection

4.4.1 Selection of case

A case study entails viewing one or more events, organizations or individuals over a time period and going in-depth into the nature of these events, organizations or individuals.

Researchers that prefer viewing a single case as a basis for their research generally subscribe

to the constructionist epistemology while multiple case studies lean more towards the positivist epistemology. The constructionist view on case studies is more focused on painting a picture of real life and behaviors than concerns of how the use of a case affects the validity of research (Easterby-Smith, Thorpe & Jackson, 2015). As our research subscribes to the constructionist view and is concerned with viewing the behaviors of brands taking a stance, the single case method is deemed appropriate for the research. In order to gain a rich view on the situation we had to set criterias in the search of a single case as that would be the basis of our inferences and interpretations which is why we created criterias to find a suitable case.

The criterias that guided our selection of brand activism case are as follows.

- Big impact
- Strong reach
- Non-ambiguous activism
- Sticking to their stance
- Novelty

In order to explore how consumer-brand relationships are affected by brand activism within the FMCG industry we needed a strong case that had an impact that wasn't negligible, preferably reaching globally. Notable cases of FMCG brands that have conducted brand activism include Pepsi, Gillette and Ben & Jerry's. It was also important that the selected case showed clear signs of brand activism, taking a stance that is socially or politically relevant without being ambiguous. This excluded e.g Pepsi's ad with Kendall Jenner because while they were portraying Black Lives Matter imagery, it was never clearly stated and the ad was ambiguous on their stance on the issue at hand (Victor, 2017).

Other criteria for the selection of case include not apologizing or backtracking on the stance that the brand is taking, again, Pepsi would not be considered by this parameter as they removed their ad 24 hours after posting it and issued an apology (Victor, 2019). We further believe that exploring a case where the brand in question has not previously engaged in full-scale brand activism would be more interesting as the response to the advertising might be more unexpected and vocal. Therefore, Ben & Jerry's were ruled out as the company has a history of multifaceted brand activism and it's seemingly a crucial part of their business (Ben & Jerry's, n.d.).

That left us with Gillette which is a strong case of brand activism with many interesting factors, one of the main ones being that the advertising targeted the negative behavior of their target demographic. By using a case where the brand activism could be construed as unexpected, we believe that it will shed more light on possible outcomes for other FMCG brands without a history of brand activism and how relationships (d)evolve by including it in the business.

Without a history of brand activism, especially activism regarding equality and the treatment of others, Gillette piqued our interest. The previous ads have had a much different nature, showing men being “manly”, providers, strong, powerful and irresistible to women. By contrast the activism advertising showed a “softer” side of what it means to be a man and how certain behavior is bad for progress between the sexes. The reach and impact that the Gillette ad had makes this an excellent case to look at from a brand activism and consumer-brand relationship point of view. On youtube where the ad was posted, it quickly became one of the most disliked videos on the platform combined with a flood of negative comments ridiculing and berating the brand (Baggs, 2019). Since the type of socio-political brand activism used wasn’t limited to a niche group of people or context like e.g taking a stance against police brutality and the dynamics between police and people of color which arguably pertains more to the United States. It allowed more people to join in on the conversation and speak their mind resulting in greater impact. Because of this we are able to view individual countries’ discourse surrounding the ad and view it in that geographical context, we are thus granted more options.

A study by Jost, Langer & Singh (2017) showed that out of 15 surveyed European countries, Swedish consumers, both right- and left leaning were most likely to “vote with their wallet” i.e. have their ideological beliefs guide their consumption. Therefore, the Swedish market became an interesting context to pursue for our research as the activism at hand divides people with values on opposite sides of the ideological spectrum.

Gillette Ad

In 2019 Gillette issued a campaign that led to a big divide online, the advertising referenced toxic masculinity, the metoo-movement and bullying. By playing on their previous slogan

“The best a man can get” they introduced “The best a man can be”, calling on men to hold each other accountable regarding bad behavior.

The ad garnered support and outrage with some people praising Gillette for raising this issue and others demonizing them and calling for boycott (Baggs, 2019). According to Baggs (2019), the ad quickly became a viral sensation, being watched over 2 million times in the first two days of uploading it to youtube; others say 4 million during the same timespan (Topping, Lyons & Weaver, 2019).

The narrating voice asks the rhetorical question, “Is this the best a man can get?” and then imagery of bad male behavior starts playing e.g. bullying and sexual harrasment. Later on they switch to showing positive behavior such as stepping in when two kids are fighting instead of simply watching, highlighting how we ought to treat each other (Baggs, 2019).

The response was varied with notable figures chiming in for and against the advertising and the brand. Notable figures include Bernice King who is the daughter of Martin Luther King, speaking in support of the brand by claiming that it isn’t anti male but pro humanity (Topping, Lyons & Weaver, 2019). Famous actor James Woods also chimed in on the conversation however, against the brand and claimed that Gillette was simply capitalizing on the trend that men are bad and argued that people should boycott the brand (Topping, Lyons & Weaver, 2019).

This campaign caused many consumers globally to weigh in on the conversation, mostly negatively with the ratio of positive to negative comments on the video being 1:10 (Taylor, 2019). The ad breached many social media platforms with people commenting that what they had produced was feminist propaganda, that Gillette had done a great job in alienating their target demographic and people calling for a boycott on their products, effectively ending their relationship with Gillette (Baggs, 2019).

Baggs (2019) further explains that many consumers called for an official apology from Gillette for their perceived wrongdoings however the brand’s president Gary Coombe doubled down on the advertising, claiming that it aligns with the new slogan and the future of Gillette. They further combined the ad with a pledge to donate one million dollars a year for

three years to non-profit organizations that aim to help men in their lives and create better role-models for coming generations (Topping, Lyons & Weaver, 2019).

4.4.2 Selection of online platform

The selected forum for this study was Flashback.org, a Swedish web page that goes by the tagline “Yttrandefrihet på riktigt” (*Freedom of speech for real*) and as the name prescribes has a liberal set of regulations for which views can be expressed and what information can be shared (Flashback, n.d.). Kozinets (2010) guidelines for selection of sites and platforms were used to find and ensure that the selected platform held the standard. Kozinets (2010) advises researchers to use platforms that are:

- “1. Relevant, they relate to your research focus and question(s)*
- 2. Active, they have recent and regular communications*
- 3. Interactive, they have a flow of communications between participants*
- 4. Substantial, they have a critical mass of communicators and an energetic feel*
- 5. Heterogeneous, they have a number of different participants*
- 6. Data-rich, offering more detailed or descriptively rich data “*

In the following paragraph the selection will be clarified in relation to the guidelines.

Flashback is one of the most visited web pages in Sweden and is the fourth most used media site or platform in the country, with 33% of the population reporting that they have used it sometime during the year, and approximately 1% of the population are daily users (Svenskarna och internet, 2018). Flashback is also a more common forum to use for men than women, as 40% of the men use Flashback versus 26% of the women (Svenskarna och internet, 2018). There is also a correlation between income and use of Flashback, 45% of the population who earned more than SEK750 000 per year used Flashback versus 27% of the population who earned up to SEK150 000 per year (Svenskarna och internet, 2018). Concerning the age, it is most common to use Flashback in the ages 26-35, as 60% of the males in this age bracket used Flashback, 49% of the males in the ages 16-25 and 53% of the males in the ages 36-45 used Flashback (Svenskarna och internet, 2018). This made for a good ground for the sample of this study, as there is a good spread of members in the community and from the part of the population that consumes Gillette products and are

subjects for the ad. Evidently, it is impossible to ascertain demographics of the examined thread due to the nature of Flashback, although it could be expected that the contributors to this thread represents a part of the population. There are 219 unique contributors to the thread who actively interacted with each other and accumulated a substantial amount of replies, with opposing and heterogenous opinions. The relevance of the chosen platforms is conspicuous and the amount of replies, exceeding 500, gives richness to the data collection.

Flashback does not allow its users to delete their accounts, thus a post to a thread can not either be deleted. This was beneficial to this study because it implies there has not been any manipulation of the data, and the possibility to track the original comments from the replies also offers a chance to get a more encompassing view and connect the dots of what a certain pseudonym actually thinks. Furthermore, research on online communities and platforms have shown that they follow the same set of rules for physical gatherings between people, but the online communities and platforms, particularly Flashback, bears the prerequisite to stay anonymous under pseudonym which can create an unique opportunity for interactions that are not hindered by participants suppressing their opinions (Kozinet, 2010).

4.5 Ethical Considerations

Kozinets (2002) argues that researchers who wish to utilize the nethnographic method are bound to certain ethical guidelines that they need to consider and follow. The two main matters of concern are whether the online platforms are to be considered public or private and how the matter of informed consent fairs in cyberspace.

Regarding the public or private debate, we define a private space to be one that isn't readily available to the public and thus requires some sort of membership or invitation to participate. Flashback forum is a forum that invites anyone to join in on the conversation, isn't hidden from search engines and doesn't require membership to view what is posted and discussed. The participants of the discussion participate on their own volition and common practice on the website is that people choose online usernames that are pseudonyms that don't trace back to them. We concluded that the forum should be regarded as public and thus fits within this study without breaching the trust of cyberspace discourse.

Regarding informed consent Sudweeks & Rafaeli (1996) argue that the use of public posts on public forums should be exempt from requiring informed consent as long as matters are taken to ensure the privacy and anonymity of the participants. Even though the posts on the forum thread are already anonymous with users using pseudonyms, we decided to further anonymize to participants to add a further layer of protection. This follows guidelines set by Kozinets (2002) in ensuring anonymity and confidentiality of participants. The forum thread is not named or linked to.

Furthermore, precautions have been taken to ensure that the research doesn't breach the European Union's general data protection regulations (GDPR). In order to not breach GDPR we have made sure that no use of names, social security numbers, addresses etc. are present in any presented data that combined or individually could identify a living person (IMY, n.d).

4.6 Methodological Limitations

By using the method of netnography we lose valuable insights from other methods although the same could be said about using another method. The netnographic method that we applied focuses on existing comments about the issue at hand, meaning that we are not able to gain specific insights that are tailored to our research like you would when conducting e.g. semi-structured interviews. Another aspect of netnography that you have to have in mind is that the anonymous angle of cyberspace raises the issue of whether participants in the community are being truthful or not. On one hand, you have no reason to lie because the information will likely not be tracked back to you; on the other hand, you have no reason to be truthful for the same reason. We conduct the research with the assumption that participants in the discussion are being truthful.

The choice of netnography when studying brand activism implied that the offline reactions and behaviors could not be researched. However, it is nowadays more common for consumers to engage in activism online than offline (Ghosh, 2021). Since people personify themselves differently online, it is much more likely that they will engage in brand activism online than offline (Ghosh, 2021).

Due to the netnographic approach, the relationship angle of our research views how the relationship (d)evolves after brand activism occurs but not how it has progressed to date. Furthermore, although we find Gillette to be an excellent case for exploring brand activism in the FMCG industry and we managed to gather a breadth of data from the selected platform; using several cases might give a richer picture of the FMCG-landscape. Due to time constraints, this was not possible.

5. Empirical Findings

In this chapter we will present the findings of our netnography which are a result of scouring an immense flashback thread regarding Gillette's ad campaign "The best a man can be". The comments on the thread showcase diverse attitudes towards the brand and the activism they conducted as well as how their relationship with the brand (d)evolved through their actions.

In order to build upon the typologies that Fournier (1998) introduced, the concept of AA-relationships that Park et. al. (2013) evolved from Fournier's work and the moral reasoning strategies that are used when morality is introduced to the judgment of a brand (Mukherjee & Althuizen, 2017; Tsang, 2002; Lee & Kwak, 2016; Bhattacharjee, Berman & Reed 2013); we have discovered three themes that facilitate our research, positive, negative and indifferent. These themes are introduced with multiple facets to distinguish the type of response the commenters had towards the brand activism and guide us to answer our research questions. As expected by looking at the global response to the activism the majority of the comments followed the negative theme, although it was not a ratio of 1:10 positive:negative, the overwhelming response was negative. Our findings resulted in the following identified relationship forms.

Relationship Form	Definition	Case examples
Casual Friendships (Indifferent)	Friendship low in affect and intimacy, characterized by infrequent or sporadic engagement, and few expectations for reciprocity or reward.*	Frodo's relationship to Gillette prior to the activism. Elrond's indifference to the ad.
Contractor (Negative)	Platonic acquaintance guided by functionality, relationship stays within the boundaries of the task.	Theoden's negative response to Gillette's activism, not because of the stance but because they are a corporation..
Committed Partnerships (Positive)	Long-term, voluntarily imposed, socially supported union high in love, intimacy, trust, and a	Frodo's relationship to Gillette after the activism.

	commitment to stay together despite adverse circumstances. Adherence to exclusivity rules expected.*	
Enmities (Negative)	Intensely involving relationship characterized by negative affect and desire to avoid or inflict pain on the other.*	Lurtz's anger towards Gillette for allegedly using their platform to spread political propaganda.
Robin Hood (Positive)	Socially supported union which increases intimacy where the partners have no relationship to each other prior to the catalyst event.	Arwen's support and defense of Gillette despite not being a consumer or target demographic for the brand.
Champion (Positive)	Voluntary support to a party that is facing hardship where beliefs guide the relationship instead of the intrinsic qualities of either party.	Boromir standing up for the beliefs and values that Gillette espouses without involving Gillette.
Obsessive Negative (Negative)	Obsessively involving relationship where steps are taken to make sure that one party stays down in the face of adversity.	Balrog goes to a great length to find info that contradicts and disqualifies the brand's current stance in one issue.

Table 1: Identified relationship forms

*Fournier (1998)

5.1 Positive

Although most of the comments were negative in nature there was a surprising amount of support from the participants on the forum. This goes along with conclusions made by Mukherjee & Althuizen (2020) that companies facing public backlash for the stance they have decided to take generally see a marginal increase in attitude to the brand. We unearthed different types of positive messages surrounding the brand and the cause, some stronger than others. What became an interesting find was that brand activism seems to widen the brand in the sense that the brand becomes a part of a cause and thus becomes bigger, capturing new audiences that may support or oppose. Literature regarding brand relationships and identity creation point us towards thoughts that closeness and the ability to identify with a brand

creates a stronger relationship, a means for self-fulfillment and identity creation (Belk, 1988; Fournier, 1998; Bhattacharya & Sen, 2003). However, what we notice is that the use of brand activism creates closeness and identity creation in non-consumers as well, people that don't necessarily have any self-relevance regarding the product offerings of the brand but relevance in terms of the cause. In essence it seems like brand activism bridges the gap between brand and non-consumers.

The themes we notice when analyzing the positive comments regarding Gillette and the ad are different in nature. We have those who defend Gillette and their stance, here we see both consumers and non-consumers arguing for Gillette's cause. Their stance relies on the fact that they enjoyed the ad and that Gillette did a good job in raising this issue, joining in on the conversation by stating their opinions or replying to negative comments. The defenders of the ad also expressed somewhat of a need for taking responsibility for the next generation, in the sense that someone, in this case Gillette, needs to correct the mistreatment previous generations have been subjected to. A common theme amongst the defenders was to discuss whether the attitudes and message in the previous Gillette ads signaled toxic masculinity, a concept they wanted to get rid of and believed the ad was a beneficial first step to erase those attitudes.

Then we have comments that outright attack the people who are offended by the activism and engage in ridiculing rhetoric. This could be construed as pro-branding behavior much like attacking someone for liking the brand would be anti-branding behavior. It could be said that this behavior shows signs of brand attachment with feelings such as loyalty, commitment and solidarity shining through (Park et. al, 2013).

5.1.1 Knight in Shining Armor

The act of defending a brand that has negative comments raining down on it could be construed as a pure form of pro-brand behavior. Viewing the relationship between consumer and brand through the lens of AA-relationships, defending the brand would be on the brand attachment part of the spectrum (Park et. al. 2013). By being on one end of the spectrum, Park et. al. (2013) suggests that brand prominence but not necessarily brand-self distance must be high. We know that brand-self distance refers to how self-relevant a brand is to the consumer, for example the convenience it brings but that it doesn't always act as a prominent

memory. For a lot of consumers that use Gillette the self-relevance part of the equation is given as people use their products to get a clean shave. However, the low involvement and routinized aspect of FMCG products lead us to expect that prominence is weak regarding brand memories. While this might- or might not be true, when introducing brand activism and the campaign gains wide reach and controversy one might argue that it creates a spike in brand prominence, creating a memory that is highly accessible and connected to the brand. It could further be argued that introducing brand activism and connecting the brand to a bigger issue creates avenues for relating with the brand as the product takes a backseat to the values they espouse.

Aragorn writes:

“What’s wrong with treating women with respect?

You guys might be too young to have children of your own, daughters for example, but you must have mothers, girlfriends, roommates, wives or at least some living female family members in your lives. Ask them about their experiences and how some of the people who carry male genitalia have behaved throughout the years. In my opinion #metoo should have had its start in the beginning of the 60’s when I was younger.

Gillette is doing the right thing because there will always be new boys with peach fuzz who see the commercial and hopefully have good fathers who confirm that the razor company is right.”

In this comment we clearly see a person who is defending the ad and calls for other people in the comments with negative views on the matter to rethink and evaluate their own lives. This person’s morals and values clearly align with Gillette and it can be said that the relationship we encounter is one of brand attachment, feeling closer to a brand by using it as a means for self-expansion or improvement (Park et. al. 2013). What this means is that no matter the previous relationship this commenter had with Gillette, the brand activism and their public stance brings them closer to the brand, creating a self-relevant memory. Regarding brand prominence it is likely that FMCG brands don’t give rise to highly prominent memories considering the nature of the products, replaceable and low-involvement. However, brand activism might open this up to reconsideration, this user had to read the responses, collect their thoughts and post a comment that opposed attitudes of the majority. That will likely create a prominent memory that is easily accessible, the day this user stood up for a brand and a cause.

When it comes to moral reasoning, with the assumptions that this person subscribes to the morals and values that Gillette holds, this could be seen as moral coupling. Combining their thoughts about the morals in question and the performance of the brand. Mukherjee & Althuizen (2020) mention that moral coupling during a consumer-brand disagreement will negatively affect the consumer's attitudes and behaviors towards the brand, this would suggest that the same would apply but reverse in case of consumer-brand agreement. This user agrees with the brand in terms of morality and values, their attitude of the company increases and new behavior regarding the brand and their communication is introduced. One might argue that prior to the brand activism, this behavior of defending the brand in the face of adversity would never have happened, if anything linking moral values that align with consumers have brought the consumer closer to the brand. The feelings linked are ones of commitment and solidarity which are tenets of brand attachment on the spectrum of AA-relationships (Park et. al. 2013). This is further reinforced when another user decides to reply to Aragorn's comment, ridiculing them and attempting to ruin their message. The message included a positive message that on the surface corroborates Aragorn's stance but they linked an image of an old Gillette marketing event where there are young women in tight outfits with "Gillette" plastered on their lower behind area.

Saruman writes:

"Of course Gillette is doing the right thing. They basically have the same view on women as me:

[LINK TO PICTURE OF SEXUALISED GILLETTE AD]"

To this Aragorn stays committed and chooses to reply in a way that suggests, what is done is done but what is important is that they are changing for the better.

"At least Gillette has redone it and done it right"

This illustrates the strength of the relationship even though it pertains to the FMCG sector, it is not easily tarnished. Mukherjee & Althuizen (2020) argue that morally decoupling a brand's transgression is more likely than rationalization, especially since the market houses plenty of alternatives for brands and they expect consumers to not opt for a moral rationalization strategy. Aragorn does not seem to rationalize this prior transgression of

morality as in fact moral but they engage in moral decoupling to justify their support for the brand. With moral decoupling one is dealing with the distance between the source of immoral stand and the brand itself, since this event happened in the past, Aragorn perceives a distance between the source and stance and therefore sees no issue. This shows signs of a relationship that Fournier (1998) calls committed partnerships, a relationship that is high in love, trust, is socially supported and strong commitment in the face of adversity.

Frodo writes:

“Great urging commercial, and big thanks to such a big company that decided to use their slogan against these “men” that seem to think it’s OK with sexual harrassment, and don’t do anything when they see it out in society. I buy my razors from Gillette and I will continue to do that in the future!”

This is a more clear cut example of a committed partnership as Fournier puts forth (1998), it is also worth mentioning that this comment was posted relatively late in the forum thread with previous comments being predominantly negative. Why this is worth mentioning is because it could be argued that when faced with an issue and the general opinion is negative, it might be easier to pile on than to defy. The commentor’s morals shine through clearly and make it easy to see the moral reasoning strategy they have used, coupling their morals and their perception of the performance of the brand (Mukherjee & Althuizen, 2020). But we also notice that their morals stretch further than simply agreeing with the stance that Gillette took, they believe that it is a good thing that the brand decided to use their slogan against the “men” that find the commercial bad. They believe that we should engage in proactive behavior and that Gillette set a good example.

Because of the semantics used in the comment, big flowery words that give a sense of a happy surprise, we can assume that the commenter didn’t have such a strong relationship with Gillette prior to the ad. When it comes to FMCG products it could be argued that most relationships that exist mirror what Fournier (1998) calls “casual friendships”, characterized by low intimacy and affect, they are used sporadically with little to no reciprocity. This ad seems to have strengthened the relationship between Gillette and this consumer, from a casual friendship to a committed partnership as seen with the last comment. They support the brand and its actions publically in the face of adversity and they stand up for the brand when so many others decide to demonize them. Viewing this comment through the lens of AA-relationships (Park et. al. 2013), we can extrapolate that this is a case of brand

attachment, feelings of love and support combined with pro-branding behavior i.e continuing to support Gillette by buying their razors and standing up for them. The brand is seen as a means for self-expansion and by continuing to buy the brand it contributes to their self-image and their moral values. The use of brand activism in this case has decreased the distance between the consumer and the brand and arguably adds a layer of brand prominence regarding the consumer's brand memories (Park et. al. 2013).

5.1.2 Robin Hood

Defending of the ad was not carried out in one single approach. Most prominent apart from the commentators who mostly praised Gillette's initiative and standpoint in the issue, were the ones who were not consumers of the brand but still weighed in on the issue and supported Gillette. Concerning customer segments, the main segment for Gillette is men who shave with razor blades, however it could be argued that this ad was aimed at men and masculinity in general. There were no razors visible in the ad, and men of all races and ages were represented which further confirms the perception that this was perhaps not an ad for razor blades, but a direct step into brand activism.

Naturally, an ad is a way of attracting new customers, although it might not be the main purpose of it. This becomes clear when analyzing the following comments, who appear to be non-customers, but expresses a wish to start consuming Gillette, or praises Gillette. If these commentators are assumed to have little to a non-existing relationship history with Gillette, there has been an emergence of brand attachment thanks to the ad (Park et. al 2013). The brand attachment in this case derives from the self-concept connection, which builds upon positive associations to the brand and how a brand fits into the self concept of a consumer or the "me-ness" of a brand (Park et. al 2013). The association is central in the self-concept, as positive associations signal a close distance between the brand and the consumer, whilst negative associations signal a longer distance (Park et. al 2013). This first interaction between the non-customers and the brand indicates a decreasing distance, and thus a positive association which increases the self-concept, and could potentially turn them into customers. The commentators could see their own values be incorporated in the brand and experience a closer relationship to the brand. Although they did not have a relationship with the brand previously, it can be assumed that they have some awareness of the brand and therefore a brand memory exists.

As with the comments analyzed under the previous rubric, the following comments praise Gillette's standpoint and their initiative. What distinguishes these comments from the ones aforementioned, is that these commentators do not seem to have a notable relationship to the brand, but still decide to stick up for it. This is a type of relationship we call Robin Hood, because of their will to step in and offer support to someone who is in need, much like the heroic partisan who stood up for the people in need, although he did not have a connection to them. These comments are examples of when consumers' moral judgment regarding controversial issues decides how they respond to brand activism (Mukherjee & Althuizen 2020). Commenting on an issue similar to this, without having any apparent link to the brand as a consumer, further strengthens the idea that moral judgments are closer to the automatic instinct of the human and her personal opinions and preferences rather than a result of reasoning (Haidt, 2001). Although it is suggested that a brand's intrinsic values does not reflect the brand's opinion in one matter, perhaps because it is an FMCG low involvement product, these comments lead us to believe that the brand activism could turn them into customers (Mukherjee & Althuizen 2020).

Sam writes:

“Oh my God you’re such low intelligent trash. To get upset by an ad that encourages men to act like normal human beings really proves that this ad is a necessity. It’s a tragedy that there is a need for it. You’re some fucking inbreeds. Go and buy your razors at Lidl instead, but suit yourselves the day your daughter gets raped and you didn’t do shit to prevent it.”

“Important ad that is needed because men seem to be totally incapable of knowing better. Men are like children, they don’t understand, that’s why you gotta bang some sense into their brains. Will only buy Gillette's razors now.”

In these comments, the commentator expresses their opinion on the topic while also insulting the dissenters, as well as pointing out that the ad is important by commenting on the topic with the tone of a hector and implying that this ad is a step in changing attitudes regarding masculinity and aiding equality. The first comment ends with a statement to rhetorically appeal to the fear of the public urging the people to buy their razors from Gillette while attempting to find a common ground and moral coupling with the dissenters (Lee & Kwak

2016). It could be viewed as a way of befriending the opponents, and an attempt at presenting themselves as the one fighting for the vulnerable. This also connects to the conflicting motivations, where **Sam** argues that the cost of criticizing and opposing messages and ideas like the one conveyed in ad, could ultimately end in a tragedy (Tsang, 2002). By pointing out the high costs of the dissenters' moral rationalizing of their opinions that could contribute to a rape culture, Sam attempts to gain their trust and win the argument (Tsang, 2002). Lastly, the commentator ends the comment by stating that they will only buy Gillette from now on, implying that they were not a customer previously, or did not exclusively consume Gillette, and is the purest form of moral coupling as the morals of the consumer dictates the consumption (Mukherjee & Althuizen 2020).

Pippin writes:

- “1. Prefer shaver*
- 2. Think's it's correct when it comes to morals towards women, nothing wrong about it.”*

In a concise comment, **Pippin** explains that they are non-customers and supports the message the ad is conveying. This comment matches the Robin Hood theory by clearly linking the moral judgment of the ad to the commentator, by being clear about not having a dependence on the brand, viewed from the consumers perspective. As the comment begins with explaining that the commentator prefers to use a shaver instead of a razor, they attempt to gain legitimacy by demonstrating objectivity in the issue. This bridges the BRQ model, where the consumer's lived experience is included with AA model, since it is a result of **Pippin's** moral coupling of the issue (Fournier, 1998; Lee & Kwak, 2016). The lived experience in this case, is that the commentator seeks legitimacy by not regularly using Gillette for most of his life, and for that reason the comment is more valid.

Arwen writes:

“... or you're too wussy to stand up against people who are a pain in the ass and feel threatened. Of course it's a good ad. Women of all ages think these Gillette men are admirable and tough and real men. It's only embarrassing that you react as hard as you do to something that is so obvious – that you should stand up against the bullies.”

“What’s the contradiction? It’s cheesy and they emphasize the good old decent man’s role: to stand up for what’s right. Good ad creation. They know it’ll move and upset. Look at the thread that’s been created by upset nice boys.”

In the same fashion as the first comments by **Sam**, **Arwen** resorts to the moral coupling and ends their first comment with pointing out that the message in the ad is to ‘stand up against the bullies’, much like Robin Hood did. In this comment, Arwen critiques the dissenters for their moral coupling of the issue. Moral coupling occurs when consumers combine their judgments of a brand’s performance with their own morality, and during disagreements consumers will have negative attitudes, intentions and behavior towards the brand (Lee & Kwak, 2016; Mukherjee & Althuizen, 2020). Arwen praises the ad while maintaining the importance of opposing bullies and argues that this is the masculinity that is desired, questioning the critique it received and insists that the backlash it received is a justification of its importance. Again, using the consumer's lived experience, the first comment emphasizes what is negative and should be stopped, while highlighting what is desired by women and society (Fournier, 1998). The conflicting motivations these comments discuss, clearly makes a distinction between the costs and benefits. Arwen uncovers the possible costs and the benefits, and encourages people to follow the advice on standing up for the vulnerable in order to not get condemned by others (Tsang, 2002).

5.1.3 Champion

As mentioned previously, by conducting brand activism we notice that the brand sometimes takes a backseat to the activism and the discussion progresses using the brand as a medium for getting their opinions out. Through scouring the forum thread we noticed a pattern of people on both sides of the spectrum that used Gillette as an object to hurt the opposing side figuratively. The relationship between the brand and the consumer in these cases don’t seem to go that deep but they are leaning towards either positive or negative attitudes to actions taken by the brand. We argue that the brand is used as a stepping stone to get their opinions out and showcase their moral position and demonize opposing moral positions.

It seemed fitting to dub the people who had more positive attitudes towards the actions taken as champions. Much like a person in the old days of Rome could appoint a champion to fight their battles or have someone volunteer to fight their battles when they are incapable of

fighting themselves. These people volunteer to fight Gillette's battle, not because of their devotion to the brand but for the betterment of society, for their beliefs. Showcasing their perceived superior morality instead of superior physical prowess. While this type of relationship might not be viewed as the strongest and possibly only temporary in nature, it shows great impact as the goal is to defeat those whose morals go against the brands. The far ends of the AA-relationships are characterized by pro- or anti-brand behavior and is a sign of strong relationships, by supporting the cause and by extension the brand one can argue that these people form some sort of brand attachment signified by solidarity and sacrifice.

Boromir writes:

"The commercial shows a modern worldview for a modern man.

The problem is that this is a breaking point where a few very loud "men" still refuse to grow up and become an integrated part of a civilized society. They want everything served to them and can't fathom a worldview where they aren't in the center for everyone's benevolence, a little bit like a child.

These apes usually live alone since they can't find a partner that wants to "tend to them". It leads to frustration and even more monkey screaming from the bachelor jungle.

In time they will be phased out since their reproductive fluids will unlikely find a woman that is prepared to have their children.

Some of you who read this will probably be pissed off, but I'm convinced that you in fact KNOW that your time has passed forever. That certainty lies inside you, gnawing and worrying. And it is manifested in condescending comments towards women, immigrants and towards men that you will never be able to compare yourself to. In worst case scenarios this can lead to things like bullying and hate- or sex crime.

Truth."

The way the comment is structured and the language used shows us that it is in support of the brand activism, they support the cause and by extension, the brand. However, the focus of the

comment is not defending the brand it is rather about attacking those who are against it. If we liken the brand activism to an umbrella with the brand being underneath it, reinforcing or maintaining the umbrella (activism) you indirectly protect the brand underneath it. The relationship here could be construed as the protector and the protected.

Relationship theory is highly focused on one's possessions and the relationship we have with the brands that create them (Belk, 1988; Fournier, 1998). The AA-relationship and the level of attachment and aversion is seemingly not as bound to possessions as prior theories as it is noted that closeness (distance) is dictated by perceptions of self-expansion (self-contraction) (Park et. al. 2013). Brand activism, what the brand stands for publically can therefore create a means for self-expansion (self-contraction) where there wasn't one prior. This can be said about the brand-self distance and brand prominence aspects of the AA-relationships as well, by publicly standing up for Gillette and their stance the commenter is creating self-relevant brand memories connected to the controversy. The prominence of those memories might also be quite high considering the time and passion required to produce a text that does their opinions, morals and attitudes justice. As the activism wasn't focused on the products they sell, the brand Gillette becomes more than just their product offering and it embodies the activism. Interestingly enough this gives rise to new avenues of relationship creation as the brand becomes more human, having opinions that you can agree or disagree with. The nature of these created relationships are different and may be strong in certain aspects and weak in other aspects much like real world relationships. This commenter may e.g hate Gillette's product offering but support their moral stance.

The moral reasoning strategies used by the commenter could be viewed as moral coupling, the most morally pure reasoning strategy (Mukherjee & Althuisen, 2020; Lee & Kwak, 2016). Their own morals and values align with Gillette's messaging and therefore their attitude reflects that, to such a degree where they are willing to come to its defense in a forum where the majority of comments demonize their actions. However, what is interesting with this comment is the way it is invalidating the moral stance of others through rationalization. Moral rationalization refers to the interpretation of immoral actions as moral ones (Tsang, 2002), but what this commenter is doing is rationalizing other people's perceived moral stance as in fact immoral. Justifying why there are so many people with negative things to say about this commercial. While there is no expression for this yet, it could be suggested that

this is a new type of moral reasoning strategy, one that is external rather than internal and aims to invalidate the morals of others, moral invalidation.

5.2 Negative

Much like brand activism makes the brand wider to receive support from audiences that they previously didn't reach, it conversely makes it wider to receive backlash as well. Taylor (2019) wrote that the ratio of negative to positive comments on the ad were 10:1, making us expect that the reception on Flashback Forum would follow along those lines. And it did. The negative responses shared many similarities and allowed us to find common themes to distinguish them. Mukherjee & Althuizen (2020) suggested that during a consumer-brand disagreement, the most common moral reasoning strategy was going to be moral coupling which the data supports. Among the commonalities were consumers calling for boycott which according to Warren (2021) is one of the most common responses that consumers use.

Another thing of note is that Fournier (1998) shows in her stress model that certain transgressions lead to the dissolution of relationships. However, what we notice with the negative comments is that it goes beyond that, instead of dissolution, a new negative relationship is created, more in line with Park et. al's (2013) AA-relationship, ones that are governed by hatred and aggression. The consumers don't simply cease their relationship, they actively engage in anti-brand behavior, trying to change other people's opinions and tarnish the brand.

5.2.1 Unhappy about propaganda

When collecting our data we identified 25 direct mentions of Gillette producing propaganda saying that feminists and liberals are trying to change men, with many other agreeing and wording it differently. Some of the negative commenters that argue that the ad is propaganda seem to create their own narrative regarding the meanings and messages in the ad, pointing out that it is "obviously" anti-white, anti-male, anti-western, culture marxist etc. By viewing this ad that wasn't in line with their own morals and values, Gillette created distance between them, creating a brand aversion relationship as characterized by hatred and aggression (Park et. al. 2013). In the creation of this relationship the moral reasoning process suggests that moral coupling is taking place and their attitude towards Gillette worsens as a result of their

perceived immoral stance (Lee & Kwak, 2016). It is possible that the resulting hatred and aggression blows the ad out of proportion, creating new meanings where there are none. This following commenter is responding to a comment that asked what the big deal was, that the ad simply preached that we shouldn't misbehave.

Lurtz writes:

"You, just like every other apologetic in the thread to Gillette's defense, are using Cherry Picking in the discussion.

While you pick out a part of the content in the ad for your argument, you ignore the rest of the aspects.

A kind of tunnel-vision that is very common among people who are stuck in so-called filter bubbles.

Same type of ridiculous algorithms you see on Facebook:

"What's wrong with it? It's just telling people not to be assholes"

"Looking at the comments is clearly why this message is needed"

You almost think that that ridiculous phony-copy pasta comes from some russian software or something.

I see hundreds of the same comments that are showered with "likes"

The big problem is multinational companies with big customer bases, using their platform to spread political propaganda. "

This commenter has constructed a narrative of Gillette using russian bots to further their "agenda" and that the person they are responding to fails to see what they see, the truth in their eyes. We see that there's a clear misalignment between Gillette and this commenter, morally coupling their judgment with the brand itself, since the stance is immoral, the company must be immoral (Lee & Kwak, 2016). They believe that there's something fishy underlying the positive comments that they have seen online and that Gillette is a cog in the machine to try to control the masses. On the AA-relationship spectrum, the activism has caused this person to develop brand aversion, negative feelings accompany their view of Gillette (Park et. al. 2013). Trying to delegitimize other people's opinions by claiming that they are suffering from tunnel-vision and claiming that there are fake positive comments

surrounding the ad is interpreted as anti-brand behavior suggesting a strongly negative relationship. Fournier (1998) would characterize this type of relationship as an enmity, intense relationship with negative affect or where the consumer wants to inflict pain on the brand. Furthermore, it seems like the commenter has delved deep into the controversy, looking at different channels to see what people write about the ad and speculating about the nature of these comments. Seemingly guided by invalidating Gillette, the commenter is intensifying their negative relationship with the brand, creating negative brand memories.

Grima writes:

“Fucking hell this company has gone down the marxist rabbit hole! This was one of the worst ones so far. Their marketing department probably thought they were smart and that all PR is good PR. We should show them that this is going to sting their skin! Dumped their shitty overpriced multi blade razors during the 90’s for safety razors with real razorblades. That’s how a man should shave!

Now I’m going to boycott all of their products, and there are plenty of alternatives that are much better.

Gillette is losing market share and they are desperate. Sad that it has taken the brand a century to build up and then get destroyed in one day. It was a good company at one point in time.”

This was an interesting comment to analyze because from the looks of it, they had already dissolved their relationship with Gillette a few years ago due to their displeasure with the brand. However, the brand activism has had a very negative effect on this consumer, claiming that it is working for marxist values and that this commercial was one of the worst ones they had seen. The displeasure manifests itself in the consumer to a point where they are actively calling for boycotts, not only for Gillette but alluding to boycotting all of P&G’s products. We can extrapolate that this person was previously on the brand aversion side of the AA-relationship spectrum, the brand-self distance was far as the price aspect of Gillette’s razors caused distress. The act of saying goodbye to Gillette is a prominent memory for this consumer as well as their switch to safety razors which may have been a rebound relationship in the beginning that later turned to a committed partnership (Fournier, 1998; Park et. al. 2013). After the brand activism the consumer has moved farther away from Gillette, creating

a brand aversion relationship with harder to enact anti-brand behavior i.e. boycotting all of P&G's products which is quite an arduous task. The relationship to Gillette prior can be construed as an enmity relationship (Fournier, 1998) but what is interesting is that that enmity has spread like an infection to P&G's other brands due to the brand aversion.

5.2.2 Skeptic

A common theme among opponents to the ad was to label the ad and the political stance as inauthentic, and to some extent ridicule it. Commentators tended to bring up past ads or details in previous marketing efforts by Gillette, to turn them against them. This led us to consider this type of behavior as an obsessive negative relationship between the brand and the consumer. The nature of the relationship is deep, but not necessarily positive. These commentators, who have a relationship either to the brand or are invested in the topic, went a step further to prove their point and disqualify the ad. The goal was to, by doing their own research, prove Gillette's inauthenticity by finding something that contradicts their current political stance. The skeptic's behavior follows the unhappy about propaganda consumer in the sense that it is on the end of the aversion spectrum, far away from the attachment (Park et al., 2013). Aversion for a brand occurs when a consumer feels a brand is threatening their personal views and opinions they find important, as opposed to brand attachment which builds on the consumers feeling a possibility of self-expression (Park et al., 2013). Feeling aversion for a brand at this level leads the consumers to engage in anti-branding behavior, which can appear as expressing anger or even hatred, and not consuming a brand.

Isildur writes:

“We should just ignore the previous Gillette ads who advocated the traditional man role and signaled to long haired men “get a haircut and get a job”-attitude? I can't remember Gillette ever flirting with subcultural men, as goths or punkers, the alternative styles are conspicuous with their absence, which indicates a projection of how they assume all men act and dress from the perspective of Gillette. They have to choose if they want to eat the cake and have it too, if you're supposed to be critical towards the traditional man role, then their future ads have to stop with the “grow the hell up, you're a grown man”-signaling”

Sauron writes:

“I have thrown all my Gillette stuff in the trash now. May they who have destroyed such a beautiful brand burn in hell forever. As a last goodbye to Gillette I want to give you this amazing ad from 1989. No diversity, only beautiful white alphas. [LINK TO A GILLETTE AD]”

Balrog writes:

“After watching the ad and listening and reading some comments on it, on different channels, I looked for the classic ad from 1989 on Youtube. That ad that probably most of us thought about when we heard Gillette (until now, that is). That ad signaled success. It’s business men on Wall Street, athletes and astronauts in that ad. As well as fathers and real men. In short, men who were successful in different ways. But I can’t see any type of superiority in them. But rather a consciousness about if you want to succeed you have to work for it. Look at the one who gets complimented by the boss. The guy who asks for the car keys from his dad. The man who runs to embrace his woman. They get a reward for their “hard work”. And these successful men shave with Gillette.”

Being of obsessive nature, this behavior goes even further. The obsessive negative consumer is more focused on inflicting pain and damaging the brand than the unhappy about propaganda consumer, and is prepared to go to greater lengths to dig up compromising information about the brand. This type of anti-branding behavior can be likened to Fournier’s (1998) enmity, though additionally unhealthy. What was seen when the data was analyzed, was that the obsessive negative consumers used old ads, or pictures that were not ads, but where the logo was visible or such, and analyzed them in a criticizing manner, to deem The Best a Man Can be campaign as inauthentic. The comments above display consumers who have had a relationship with Gillette, but feel hurt by their brand activism in this issue. They all mention the Gillette ad from the end of the 1980s, and reminisces it with joy and analyzes the differences between that and the new one, clearly criticizing the new one and implying that they relate less to it than the old one. **Sauron** engages in the most obvious anti-branding, **Isildur** takes a little more analyzing role and critiques the shift in attitude regarding masculinity from Gillette.

Gothmog writes:

“Surprise that the director of the ad is a ‘diversity hire’.

‘The commission for Gehrig was itself consciously social activism on the part of P&G, who found her through Free the Bid, a non-profit which tries to raise the profile of female and non-white advertising directors’” [Quote from Daily Mail]

Saruman:

“Of course Gillette’s doing the right thing. In many ways, they share my view on women: [LINK TO SEXUALIZED PICTURE OF GILLETTE MODELS]”

Gollum responds to Saruman:

“Haha, beautiful! It’s a picture of a bunch of super hot chicks in tight overalls in some rubber material, with “Gillette” written on the buttocks. Hot as hell. That says a lot about the company’s “moral”: you do what the fuck you think is efficient marketing for the moment, without any respect to any ethical compass. Sometimes it’s about objectifying women, and sometimes it’s about criticizing the objectification of women.

Clowns.”

The Witch king of Angmar writes:

“Gillette leads the way.

[LINK TO SEXUALIZED PICTURES OF GILLETTE MODELS]

I sent these pictures to Procter & Gamble and reminded them about Gillette’s ads but never received any response.”

Shelob writes:

“Extra fun when you don’t just dump Gillette because of the ad, but your politically correct girlfriend as well because she appreciated it. The famous actor Laurence Fox: Speaking on ‘The Delingpod’ podcast, the British actor explained they broke up because of their opposing views on the 2019 Gillette advert that addressed toxic masculinity.

'I don't know how we ended up together,' Fox said. 'It was a very short relationship. We were walking down the road and she was talking about how good the Gillette advert was. I just looked at her and went, 'Bye. Sorry, I can't do this with you.'''

Other comments of obsessive negative nature were quick to bring up pictures that were not part of a Gillette ad, but bore the Gillette logo and contradicted their current stance in the equality issue. The picture shows women in close-fitting racing suits in Gillette's characteristic blue color, with the logo on the bottom, on the podium. Bringing up these types of old material that are not officially used by the brand, denotes the commentator has been aware of it for some time, and perhaps waited for an opportunity to use it against the brand. Carrying out this type of anti-branding also sheds light on the discussion on cancel culture, as a brand, or a person's past can be brought up against them at any time by someone who finds it wrong and wants to frame them. The following comments did not contain much analysis of the ad, but mostly ridiculed Gillette and brought up other factors to prove their point. The choice of director of the ad was criticized because it was deemed to be a "diversity hire", and another commentator mentioned that a comedian ended his relationship with his girlfriend on the basis of her positive reaction to the ad. These comments show little to non motivational force to support the brand, but oppose the activism and mainly oppose the brand (Park et al., 2013). The moral coupling of these commentators is what causes them to have negative feelings towards the brand, during this consumer-brand disagreement (Mukherjee & Althuizen, 2020). The brand's stance in this issue contradicts the commentators in a rather prominent way, which the moral coupling enables by letting them view this as a crucial part of the brand (Mukherjee & Althuizen, 2020).

5.2.3 Defiant

Among the negative comments were people who commented that the advertising and the message wasn't the problem. Thus, the brand activism message and call to action was not what gave them a negative attitude towards the brand and caused them to look for alternatives. It was the fact that multinational companies feel like they have the right to act as morality police and tell their consumers how to behave. At least that's how these commenters interpreted the commercial. This is an act of "raging against the machine" so to speak, by boycotting the brand they are defying and they view activist messaging from corporations as

potentially self-contracting as Park et. al (2013) would put it. Therefore they move towards brand aversion and enact anti-brand behavior such as boycotting.

Eomer writes:

“I don’t see any bigger issues with the ad itself, the message is relatively good. That a company uses this type of moralization to sell more products bothers me however.”

Theoden writes:

“I don’t have anything against the content, but I’m so sick and tired of all these companies that want to raise their customers with political messaging, no matter what it is. So I’m going to buy other razors going forward.”

To which Eowyn replied:

“That’s exactly the point. A company will not raise me. They should provide me with things I want to buy without any fuss.”

Why these defying comments are interesting is because Mukherjee & Althuizen (2020) claim that during a consumer-brand disagreement, moral coupling will be used to form a negative attitude towards the brand. Conversely then when a consumer agrees with a brand, moral coupling would dictate that they will form a positive attitude towards the brand since their moral judgment lines up with the brands. We see something different in these cases where activism isn’t the issue but simply the fact that there’s a company behind the messaging tarnishes their relationship with the brand. Viewing Fournier’s (1998) stress model we can equate this kind of stress on the relationship as relational/dyadic stress where there has been a trespassing of unwritten rules in the relationship. The rule being that the company exists solely to provide their products and what they do outside of that isn’t important and shouldn’t be important. Moral decoupling as put forth by Bhattacharjee, Berman & Reed (2013) shows us that a consumer is able to decouple the perceived immoral stance and the brand and that it is used to shield companies from negativity. We see the opposite here, the consumers are decoupling the perceived moral stance of the brand and the brand itself and create a negative image regarding them. This type of consumer prefers the low involvement nature of the FMCG relationship and trying to change that causes friction.

We conceptualize this type of relationship as “Contractor”, because it reflects the relationship many perceive they have with a contractor for hire. You hire them to fix whatever you need

fixing, what they do outside of that, what they like/dislike (within limits) is not important unless the information they provide regards their service.

5.3 Indifferent

Lastly, we observed a type of consumer that stood in the middle of the two groups commenting on the ad. These comments were characterized by not taking anyone's party, but rather questioning the response the ad received, and in some cases pointing out the faults in comments by other contributors. It could seem as if these commentators had a goal with their comments to set things straight, and to be a sort of moderator in the thread and a counterweight. Indifferent comments did not express or reveal anything about their opinion to Gillette, though their attitude towards the ad can be interpreted as brand activism from an FMCG brand is something that passes unnoticed or does not get any traction (Mukherjee & Althuizen, 2020). Also present in the indifferent comments is the expressing of contradicting opinions, such as calling themselves conservative and using extremely offensive racial slurs.

Galadriel writes:

“They are provoking with purpose because wimps like you are gonna carry out the marketing for them, all PR is good PR”

Gimli writes:

“Hmm, but for once this ad doesn't seem to appear to be directed against white men? Since I don't find it to be the typical politically correct racism against whites, I think I'll just ignore it. When it comes to the “message”, I never turned on the sound, so I don't really have an opinion about it. I just wanted to see if it was the typical racism against whites.”

Elrond writes:

“[...] But how the fuck do you get upset over this? Who cares about ads for razors?”

Haldir writes:

“Is this really something to have a hangup on?”

Bilbo writes:

“Real men are attacked quite as much as most in today's society. For this to get such a reaction surprises me... Just goes on to prove too many lack a good life...”

Also visible in these comments is some commentators' efforts to look through the ad and only perceive it as just another ad to create attention around the brand, which further strengthens their view on it as inauthentic. The indifferent attitude showcased by these comments shows traits of moral decoupling because it separates the brand's performance and judgment of morality (Bhattacharjee, Berman & Reed 2013). Apart from the moral decoupling, these comments convey traits of brand indifference (Park et al., 2013). Brand indifference places itself in between the attachment and the aversion on the spectrum (Park et al., 2013). The relationship is neutral and lacks motivation for the consumer to be for or against the brand (Park et al., 2013). The commenters do not express any sort of attachment or aversion for Gillette, nor do they reveal if they have any past or present relation to the brand. This further establishes that they are unaffected by the ad, and it is perhaps because it is an ad for FMCG, which is characterized by low involvement when purchased.

6. Discussion

In this penultimate chapter we begin by discussing our findings, noting things of interest and how it is related to previous research. We follow this by going over our theoretical contributions that this study has resulted in, novel aspects connected to previous research and theories.

6.1 Discussion of findings

In the empirical findings we found plenty of varying attitudes about the brand activism that Gillette conducted, the most common responses were negative but we did find positive attitudes as well. This goes along with Mukherjee & Althuizen's (2020) findings that when a brand conducts activism and receives backlash there's a marginal increase in brand attitude but the negative effects weigh heavier. While the growing trend of a greener consumer that aids social justice with their consumption as Hydock, Paharia & Weber (2019) propose might be prevalent in society. We don't find that they are as prevalent on Flashback forum as the majority of comments had negative connotations. However, it is possible that the offline attitudes of consumers towards Gillette might show different results. Especially considering Jost, Langer & Singh's (2017) study that showed that left-leaning consumers in Sweden were more likely to "vote with their wallets" and it could be argued that the ad has values that coincide more with that demographic.

Regarding the types of consumer-brand relationships that emerge when brand activism is introduced in the FMCG industry we managed to find some interesting information. Firstly, it seems as if Leahy's (2011) conclusions about the futility of relationships within the FMCG industry might need a rework as the data shows attitudes about the brand with many ranges of emotion and characteristics of a consumer-brand relationship. This might however be due to the brand activism aspect as the brand takes on a bigger role, there's more to support and also more to oppose. This doesn't necessarily disprove Leahy (2011) but it shows that relationships within the FMCG industry become a reality when the brand conducts activism and preaches values that facilitate identification (Bhattacharya & Sen, 2003; Wolter et. al., 2017).

When adding brand activism as a layer to Fournier's (1998) typologies of consumer-brand relationships we see some of the same typologies emerge but also new ones that were not prevalent prior. Among the positive theme we notice that some consumers might have improved their relationship with Gillette as a result of the brand activism, possibly going from a "casual friendship" to a "committed partnership". Mukherjee & Althuizen (2020) propose that during a consumer-brand disagreement, the natural choice of moral reasoning strategy would be moral coupling. Looking at the findings when the consumer agrees with the brand, i.e consumer-brand agreement this is the natural choice as well in most cases.

Engaging in brand activism can evidently lead to polarization among the customers of a brand. Depending on the type of brand activism, the response will be different from case to case. Engaging in social issues as equality in the wake of a major societal appeal that addressed attitudes regarding sexual harassment, rape culture and masculinity proved to evoke a massive response from the consumers, both customers as well as non-customers. The non-customers' response and ability to come out to defend Gillette for their activism was one of the most prevalent among the positive response. We call this Robin Hood in the typology we suggest. It somehow contradicts that brands in the FMCG market should not engage in brand activism, as they are merely selling low involvement products. The contradiction is that it generated this amount of response and engagement, which could be explained by the level of activism, rather than the level of engagement connected to the purchasing of the offered product. The activism is not a low involvement type of activism, but rather a high engagement with a wide scope, especially in this case when the customer segment is men. With this in mind, it could be argued that Gillette succeeded in their marketing as the ad generated a substantial amount of attention, though at the same time most of the attention was negative. Since there was barely any razors visible in the ad, the ad was perhaps a commodification of a social issue and opinion, and a wish to instill particular values in the brand, rather than marketing their product.

Furthermore, we see that the brand activism can facilitate some kind of temporary solidarity depending on the values the brand embodies through activism but having limited relation to the brand itself. This led to us conceptualizing the "Champion" relationship. It seems as if this type of consumer comes to the brand's aid and protects it much like a knight in shining armor but doesn't expect any reciprocity, their relation to the brand seems unimportant but the values they embody is an identifying factor. We argue that there's moral coupling for this

consumer as well as attacking the opposing forces must indicate that there's a feeling of solidarity much like a brand attachment relationship as Park et. al (2013) conceptualize. However the wording used by the commenter causes some confusion when it comes to moral reasoning strategies, in their comment they are invalidating the opposing forces' opinions through rationalization. We play with the idea that this might be signs of a new type of reasoning strategy we call moral invalidation, an external type of rationalizing where you rationalize why someone's perceived moral actions are in fact immoral.

While Hydock, Paharia & Blair (2020) and Korschun (2021) deem the world as becoming more political and that consumers therefore expect brands to take a stance might be true. Our findings show that when the stance doesn't align with the consumers they may choose anti-branding behavior such as calling it propaganda in an effort to invalidate the stance. This goes along with Mukherjee & Althuizen's (2020) predictions of consumer-brand disagreements and moral coupling. The consumers create elaborate narratives about the brand as a result and call for retaliation. Fournier (1998) calls this type of relationship "Enmity" and is guided by negative affect. However, while Fournier's theories suggest that transgressions dissolve relationships, we argue that the relationship is still active but in a negative manner, more in line with Park et. al. (2013) conceptualizing a relationship as a spectrum. In the same vein we notice that perhaps a relationship on this spectrum may go beyond the drawn line as one of the commenters already had a brand aversion-/enmity relationship but the activism created another pain for them and that lead to harder to enact anti-brand behavior such as calling for boycotting the company behind it as well.

Continuing on the anti-brand behavior, the consumers who perhaps put the most effort into this were the obsessive negative ones. It was obvious that these commenters felt very resentful towards Gillette, as they felt that a brand they trusted they shared values with betrayed them. Since these consumers have had a relationship with Gillette, and come across as slightly entitled in the sense that they believe they are entitled to privileges such as having a superior opinion or saying in an issue. When compared to Park et al. 's (2013) findings on brand aversion and anti-brand behavior, it became clear that the commenters in this thread attempted to influence others in a relatively stealth manner, something that the AA-model does not cover. This was done by posting comments that intended to ridicule and disqualify Gillette's new focus, by attempting to affect the other participants in the thread by showing them the *true* nature of Gillette and their ads. Although Gillette fulfills Vredenberger et al.'s

(2020) criteria for brand activism, as well as placing themselves in the high-high part of the brand activism typology, the consumers still express contempt and disbelief for the ad. The high-high in brand activism signals “high activist marketing messaging, high engagement in prosocial corporate practice, explicit prosocial brand purpose and values, framing and driving solutions to problems of public interest”, which after our analysis we found the ad to be (Vredenberger et al., 2020). Though, again returning to the type of message in the ad and the type of brand activism, since it was perhaps not a low involvement message, the consumers refuted the Vredenberger et al’s (2020) typology to some extent.

The most interesting and mind-boggling finding in the negative theme was that of defiance. Since moral coupling involves coupling moral judgements and the brand (Lee & Kwak, 2016), a consumer-brand agreement would dictate that agreeing with the stance should result in positive attitudes towards the brand. What we find with some consumers however is that the source of activism deeply affects their overall judgment of the brand. These consumers showed their displeasure with the fact that a multinational corporation is trying to teach them how to live, how to behave etc. Agreeing with the stance but taking an issue with the brand and therefore forming negative opinions about them. The moral reasoning process is interesting as there’s evident decoupling but not in the way it is proposed in theory by Bhattacharjee, Berman & Reed (2013). They are decoupling the source of the activism and the moral position that they in fact agree with to form a negative attitude. This might be due to the nature of the FMCG industry of simply providing products that are used and disposed of, no fuss. We propose that this type of relationship is a new addition to the relationship forms called “Contractor” as it could emulate the relationship one has with a contractor they hire for a job. There’s just a professional relationship, what they believe and/or do outside the job is not important (within limits) and has no effect on the relationship.

Finally, the consumers that positioned themselves in the middle of the AA model which we called the indifferent ones, in accordance with the findings of Park et al. (2013), were the odd bunch of the data collection. Bearing the traits of a human being with a mature mindset who is unfazed by messages and activism as this, they were the one group that fitted the description that razors are low involvement products and that the communication regarding them does not affect consumers in a distinct manner.

6.2 Theoretical Contributions

Leahy's (2011) study on FMCG brands and consumer-brand relationships showed that relationships within the FMCG industry was a futile pursuit that was unlikely to lead to gain of any sort. She concludes that relationships can't exist within the FMCG industry and that it is unwanted. Our analysis of the comments in the forum thread points towards the fact that consumers are able to have relationships in the FMCG-industry using Gillette as an example. This said, while the relationships people have with FMCG brands might be negligible, it seems as if brand activism facilitates the relationship creation process. However, while Leahy (2011) maintains that relationships can't exist within the FMCG industry. Our findings suggest that it is possible to have relationships in the FMCG in the manner that Fournier (1998) and Park et. al. (2013) conceptualize. The contribution in this manner doesn't necessarily disprove Leahy (2011) but it shows that through activities such as brand activism, it is possible to create and maintain consumer-brand relationships within the FMCG industry.

Consumer-brand relationship theory as put forth by Fournier (1998) is elaborated on through viewing consumer-brand relationships with brand activism as a volatile element in the mix. Brand activism acts as another stressor that might be added to her stress model of external stressors that affect the quality of the relationship and acts as a foundation for dissolution and deterioration. What we further contribute to Fournier's (1998) theories is new relationship forms that could be construed as unique for brands that conduct activism. These are, *Robin Hood*, *Champion*, *Contractor* and *Obsessive Negative*. Fournier's conceptualization of the relationship between a consumer and a brand is very focused on one's possessions. What the discourse around Gillette and the proposed relationship forms show is that a brand's values and beliefs (brand activism) may act as a bridge to a relationship without necessarily being a consumer and possessing items from the brand. This was especially noticeable with the *Robin Hood* relationship form as it shows non-consumers and consumers that are not in the target demographic of Gillette who give praise and show interest in becoming consumers.

The AA-relationship model by Park et. al. (2013) acted as a helpful layer to add to Fournier's (1998) conceptualization of a consumer-brand relationship to analyze the data we collected. What we contribute to the AA-relationship is a proposition that the state of the relationship might stretch further than simply Attachment and Aversion. Park et. al. (2013) view Brand Aversion as the negative end of the AA-relationship spectrum and that it is characterized by

anti-brand behavior and notes that this might be switching brands etc. What we uncover in the findings is that some consumers might take it a step further and the formed hatred results in some sort of obsession with the brand. A need to uncover facts that invalidate the moral position they have adopted and a strong urge to make them right their perceived wrongs.

Using moral reasoning strategies we were able to better understand the underlying motivations and moral adjustments that occur when consumers agree or disagree with the brand (Mukherjee & Althuizen, 2020; Lee & Kwak, 2016; Tsang, 2002; Bhattacharjee, Berman & Reed 2013). Our interpretation of the moral reasoning used by some of the commenters could suggest a new form of moral reasoning strategy we call *Moral Invalidation*. A moral reasoning strategy that aims at external reasoning rather than internal and aims at rationalizing other's, by them, perceived moral actions and behavior as immoral as a means of justifying their position. We further found inconsistencies regarding moral coupling when brand activism is conducted. Mukherjee & Althuizen (2020) and Lee & Kwak (2016) suggest that during a consumer-brand disagreement moral coupling is used which results in an overall negative attitude. Conversely then, a consumer-brand agreement would suggest that moral coupling is used to form a positive overall attitude. What we found and what resulted in the *Contractor* relationship form is that brand activism may have a negative effect even when the consumer agrees with the activism. The problem, it seems, was that the source of the activism was a big company with high market shares in line with Hydock, Paharia & Blair's (2020) conclusion that large market share companies lose more customers than their smaller counterparts when conducting activism.

7. Conclusion

In this final chapter we go over what we have concluded with the following research, answering our research question and purpose of the study. Lastly we give an overview of the limitations of the study combined with suggestions for future research to broaden the topic of consumer-brand relationships and brand activism.

The purpose of this study was to explore which consumer-brand relationships exist within FMCG brands when they decide to conduct activism. What we've found is a combination of old faces that Fournier (1998) conceptualized, *Casual Friendships*, *Committed Partnerships* and *Enmities*. As well as new faces that are unique to this study, *Robin Hood*, *Champion*, *Obsessive Negative* and *Contractor*. We believe that the use of brand activism in the FMCG industry makes the brand bigger than simply their product offering and can be viewed as an additional stressor to the relationship that enables relationship creation and destruction.

Our analysis of the netnographic data suggests that when FMCG brands conduct brand activism, the majority of the responses online are negative. Not only when there is conflict between the consumers' values but also when people feel reluctant to listen to and be told by big corporations how they should and shouldn't act. Since FMCG brands generally target the masses and are prevalent in many corners of the world, they are regarded as big corporations that offer products for people's convenience and not lifestyle brands. We view this anger and reluctance as unique for FMCG brands that don't have a history of activism but that companies that do incorporate activism in their business model might not face the same type of backlash.

However, we also see positive aspects of brand activism within this industry and not only from consumers that subscribe to the new values of Gillette but also non-consumers. The relationship form *Robin Hood* became very interesting when analyzing the comments in the forum thread. People who don't use the brand's products and even people who weren't a part of Gillette's target demographic such as women came to their defense and supported Gillette in the face of adversity. The activism created avenues to support Gillette where there were none previously and thus made the brand bigger for support and conversely, for opposition. The *Champion* relationship form was interesting for the same reasons, people who were so

adamant about their values that they came to the aid of the brand under backlash but focused on their beliefs instead of the brand.

Our findings further show consumers who embody the notion of FMCG being low-involvement and focused on functional aspects. Even though the activism sparked outrage with many divisive opinions, some consumers still treat the brand as a *Casual Friendship* as Fournier (1998) posits or brand indifference on the AA-relationship spectrum (Park et. al. 2013).

7.1 Limitations and Future Research

The study we have conducted has added and provided several insights to the existing literature and prior research on brand activism, however due to the nature of the data naturally there are limitations to it. Conducting research on an anonymous forum on the internet, known for housing people on the farsides of the political spectrum, might perhaps not yield a correct rendering of the reality we find ourselves in. The possibility to lie and over exaggerate one's opinions and experience are perhaps not higher than usual, but the repercussions of lies and exaggerations are far less on Flashback than in reality. To solve this, we suggest a shorter background check and tracing of the users previous comments on Flashback (it is possible since there is no delete function of either accounts or comments, and they are stored at every user's profile). Although it seems feasible, the time frame limited us from doing it during our research, since it would be immensely time consuming to track down and conduct a background check on over 200 contributors.

Moreover, Flashback is a Swedish webpage that only contains threads in Swedish and therefore only attracts Swedes. The Best a Man Can Be-campaign was a global campaign aimed at, mostly, men all over the world. For this reason, doing research on only one forum in a country that accounts for less than 1% of the population of the world can be slightly narrow. Again, this is a matter of time, as well as resources, as we are aware that there are several other platforms to include in a research of this kind to enhance the richness of the data collection. Ultimately, we chose to focus on the Swedish response to the ad, as it is the most relevant to us, and Sweden is a well established country in the western world, which gives a rather good hint on the way the political wind blows.

This research is focused on the consumer perspective and the consumer response of an ad and the brand activism surrounding it. In the initial stages of this paper, we identified a need for it when collecting data and scanning prior research in the area. There is however much to be researched from the other perspective, the brands perspective. To include the brand's perspective in the research would have given it a more all-embracing design and result, and would have improved its contribution to the research. There would also have been better possibilities to examine the effects, long and short term, of the ad and the activism on the brand. Also, the underlying reasons for Gillette to engage in this issue would have been unearthed, and it would be interesting to research whether there were any other reasons than the philanthropic moral and ethical ones. If there had been another time frame there would perhaps be an opportunity to extend this from being a case study to study the effects of brand activism on FMCG in general. This is perhaps the main possibility for future research, that this study leaves.

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