Leveraging a Brand's Position on Opposition
An Exploratory Study of Mr Charlie´s Communication to Position Itself in the Fast-Food Market

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Foreword

"You'll never be complete, and that's as it should be"
- Tomas Tranströmer

The writing of our thesis has been a long, interesting and challenging journey.

We want to express our deepest gratitude to our supervisor Ilkin Mehrabov for his endless encouragement and interest in our subject.

We would also like to extend our gratitude to the Department of Strategic Communication for serving as a source of inspiration and knowledge. It has been three wonderful years.

Lastly, we want to emphasise our equal contribution to the thesis.

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Abstract

Leveraging a Brand's Position on Opposition

Brand activism has emerged as a prevalent phenomenon where brands engage in socio-political issues to differentiate themselves and build stakeholder resonance. Despite its growing prominence, research on brand activism is limited, particularly in relation to brand positioning. Thus, the purpose of this study is to explore how a newly launched brand engaging in socio-political agendas communicates to position itself in a saturated market. Drawing from previous research, we conducted a single case study of the American fast-food chain Mr Charlie's due to its noticeable resemblance to McDonald's and focus on social and environmental impact. The data collection process involved triangulation of different sources. By means of qualitative content analysis, four main categories were identified in Mr Charlie's communication strategy: *Rivalry, Metacommunication, Community-building,* and *Authenticity*. The results indicate that Mr Charlie's positioning is conducted through brand activism, wherein the brand highlights opposition and integrates contradictory communicative layers. In particular, Mr Charlie's positions itself through the usage of McDonald's as an adversary marker, an act argued to leverage the positioning of an activist brand. The study concludes that the communicative balance of brand activism and anti-brand activism results in a distinct position for Mr Charlie's in the fast-food market. Consequently, the research contributes novel insights into branding in modern times.

Number of characters including spaces: 98 100

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1. Introduction

An increasingly competitive market and transforming consumer expectations have altered the landscape in which organisations operate. As a result, it is more difficult than ever to establish a successful and distinct brand, whilst adhering to fast-developing consumer expectations. In today's society, consumers expect brands to fulfil a higher purpose than profits and hold them accountable for the environment in which they operate (Moorman, 2020). Extensive consumer research reveals that 90% of global consumers are increasingly conscious of environmental and social issues and that these issues have an important function in determining a brand's relevance (Nurko, 2022). In accordance, nearly every consumer finds it important that the companies they engage with have a strong purpose (Zeno Group, 2020).

On top of this, trust in traditional institutions is decreasing, and the public is instead turning to businesses to step in as leaders of societal change (Ricca, 2022). As consumers view businesses as beacons of change, they expect them to be more than a marketing offer. In the fragmented and polarised market landscape, neutrality has come to be regarded as leadership failure, whereas activism is the embodiment (Ricca, 2022). Consequently, more and more brands are taking the lead in the realm of activism, advocating for socio-political issues to strengthen stakeholder relationships and create symbolic meaning (Lee et al., 2023). By doing so, brands have a unique opportunity to leverage what has been conceptualised as brand activism to differentiate themselves from competitors and appeal to the growing number of conscious consumers (Vredenburg et al., 2020). Brands such as Ben and Jerry's, Oatly and Patagonia have commenced the role as activists, aiming for a better world and positioning themselves as morally superior alternatives (Scholz, 2022).

As such, in today's society brands do not only launch campaigns addressing socio-political issues; rather they act as activists to alter consumer behaviours and leverage oppositions to drive societal and commercial agendas (Koch & Ulver, 2022). In this paper, we seek to understand more about how activistic brands communicate to position themselves, looking at a late market entrant. In 2022 a newly launched American fast food chain, dubbed "Vegan

McDonald's", went viral on various social media platforms. The brand, named Mr Charlie's Told Me So (Mr Charlie's), has no official affiliation with the iconic fast-food giant. Yet, its visual branding bears a striking resemblance to McDonald's, and it offers similar products with one distinct difference: everything is plant-based. Mr Charlie's has entered the market with a unique branding approach and a purpose to transform the fast food industry by engaging in socio-political questions. The brand is taking a stance on the climate debate by opposing meat consumption and aiming to alter consumer habits. Additionally, Mr Charlie's claims to be tackling a broken system by partnering with and hiring all staff from Dream Center, which is a residential and resource program for homeless people (Harris, 2022; Mr Charlie's, n.d)

1.1 Problematization

To succeed in today's competitive business landscape, organisations must have a strong strategic direction and demonstrate a purpose beyond mere profits (Ahmad, 2019). In the rapidly changing marketing environment, consumers are increasingly expecting brands to take an activist stance (Swaminathan et al., 2020). As such, they can differentiate themselves from their competitors and foster brand loyalty. However, engaging in divisive issues is associated with many risks, and brand activism requires thorough understanding and strategy (Vredenburg et al., 2020). While previous research has mostly taken a consumer perspective on brand activism (Swaminathan et al., 2020; Mukherjee & Althuizen, 2020; Ahmad et al., 2022; Thürridl & Mattison Thompson, 2023), this paper contributes with insights from an organisational perspective.

Moreover, the primary focus of this paper is to examine brand activism within the context of brand positioning, moving beyond the scope of single marketing campaigns and addressing an existing research gap. As the rise of activist brands represents a new paradigm within brand management, further understanding is needed (Andersen & Johansen, 2023). In particular, there is a need for more research on communication facilitated by organisations that have adopted a distinctive activist brand like Oatly, known for its brand activism marketing and for challenging the status quo (Koch, 2020).

1.2 Aim and Research Question

This paper addresses the emerging field of brand activism, looking at how a new brand engaging in socio-political issues communicates to position itself in a saturated market. Specifically, a brand that targets the dominant competitor to leverage its purpose. This positioning strategy highlights the intersection between brand activism and market differentiation and warrants further investigation. In a broader sense, we aim to develop an understanding of how brands can use communication to position themselves as challengers of the status quo. This case serves as an illustrating example of the complexity faced by activist brands striving to position themselves in a modern market environment. Drawing upon this, it is crucial to understand how the communication is facilitated. Thus, the research question is:

How does Mr Charlie's communicate to strategically position itself in the fast-food market?

1.3 Relevance for Strategic Communication and Digital Media

Strategic Communication is defined as "the purposeful use of communication by an organization to fulfill its mission" (Hallahan et al., 2007, p. 3). Accordingly, this study aspires to enhance the understanding of how brands communicate to position themselves and obtain legitimacy in a highly competitive market. The current market environment entails increasing expectations that brands need to fulfil. As such, this paper provides insights into how purposeful brand communication can be utilised to acquire a favourable position within the new branding paradigm. Additionally, exploring how the brand communicates to balance a market-driven and/or identity-driven positioning will expand the conceptual knowledge of strategic communication. Consequently, the paper acknowledges the interdisciplinary nature of strategic communication and the analysis is oriented at the intersection of branding, marketing and communication research to contribute to the academic field. By examining a brand that exclusively communicates online, this study is relevant in regard to digital media.

2. Previous Research and Theory

This chapter will present the previous research and theories utilised to analyse the research findings. Firstly, we introduce a background to corporate branding. Followed by research regarding brand activism and anti-brand activism. Lastly, brand positioning is introduced as it will act as a means to guide our results.

2.1 Corporate Branding

Falkheimer and Heide (2022) note that research on corporate branding is fragmented. As a consequence of its multidisciplinary nature, there is a lack of consistency and clarity regarding the construct of corporate branding both in academics as well as in practice. Balmer (2001) conceptualises a framework to distinguish corporate identity, corporate branding and corporate marketing. Stating that corporate identity refers to the fundamental character or personality of an organisation, while corporate branding is the process of managing and communicating that identity to internal and external stakeholders. Corporate marketing, on the other hand, is the wider set of marketing activities that a company engages in to promote its products and services. Balmer (2001) argues that the corporate brand is a critical strategic asset for organisations that can create value for a company in several ways.

From an organisational perspective, corporate branding is a strategic and dynamic process to capture an organisation's identity and communicate it consistently and attractively (Maon et al., 2021). Communicating the value of the corporate brand is a means of differentiation from competitors as well as a way to enhance stakeholder trust and loyalty. Additionally, a well-managed corporate brand can help enhance the company's reputation and establish its credibility and legitimacy in the eyes of its stakeholders (Aaker, 1996).

Recent research claims corporate branding has evolved into a network-based perspective, viewing brands as co-created by a firm and its stakeholders (Maon et al., 2021). The paradigmatic shift is characterised by a transition from the product brand to the corporate brand, which includes appealing to multiple and diverse stakeholders leaving behind the exclusive customer-centric focus (Maon et al., 2021). The process of corporate branding entails flexibility and consideration of the potential unfolding of organisation norms and values, as well as its overall character.

The stakeholder involvement has also been addressed by Falkheimer and Heide (2022), defining a corporate brand as a "societal expectations asset" (p. 340). Society has increasingly developed expectations that organisations are expected to fulfil (Moreno & Capriotti 2009, as cited in, Falkheimer & Heide, 2022), including legitimising and justifying economic, social and environmental actions in the general public sphere. As such, researchers claim a shift from corporate CSR to societal-driven brand activism (Kotler & Sarkar, 2021), where corporations take on a role as socio-political citizens. This involves brands actively engaging in communities and contributing to the greater good, integrating these efforts into their value proposition (Biraghi et al., 2017). Consequently, brands need to embody social and ethical commitments at their core to build strong brands and increase their legitimacy (Biraghi et al., 2017; Lahtinen & Närvänen, 2020; Maon et al., 2021).

2.2 Activism

2.2.1 Brand Activism

Brand activism has emerged as a phenomenon that has garnered academic interest in recent years, particularly concerning how it addresses the transformation in societal values (Manfredi-Sánchez, 2019). Firms have been encouraged to contribute to society and enhance equity through social responsibility initiatives (Chabowski et al., 2011; Mishra & Modi, 2015; Pimentel & Didonet, 2021). Bhagwat et al. (2020) suggest that brands' growing engagement with sociopolitical matters is not a result of a newfound sense of moral obligation but rather a response to mounting pressure from a range of stakeholders demanding greater action.

Brand managers traditionally tried not to alienate any market segment by remaining neutral on divisive issues and creating long-term strategic connections with customers. However, current brand strategy has shifted to align with sociopolitical issues, leading to brands taking polarising stances on issues such as immigration, racial equality, social justice, and the environment (Key et al., 2021). Despite the liability of alienating some consumers, activism by brands is increasingly expected by consumers (Mirzaei et al., 2022), hence motivating brands to engage in brand activism (Ketron et al., 2022; Mirzaei et al., 2022; Schmidt et al., 2022; Ahmad et al., 2022). Since brands are considered valuable marketing resources (Hunt,

2019), a brand activism strategy can shape corporations' competitive advantage at different levels (Pimentel & Didonet, 2021).

The notion of brand activism remains a non-consensual concept from an organisational perspective, and researchers define it as a communication strategy (Manfredi-Sánchez, 2019), a positioning strategy (Koch, 2020), or a marketing strategy (Pimentel & Didonet, 2021). The diverse forms of activism present in the marketplace and the conflicting nature of brand activism are to be expected due to its novelty (Pimentel & Didonet, 2021). Despite several valid conceptualisations of the phenomenon, the most established is Vredenburg et al.'s (2020) definition of brand activism as "a purpose-and values-driven strategy in which a brand adopts a nonneutral stance on institutionally contested socio-political issues, to create social change and marketing success" (p. 446).

Andersen and Johansen (2023) argue that an activist brand is characterised by three essential aspects: *critical* as it constitutes a critical stance against prevailing social discourses and conventions, *ideological* as it promotes alternative viewpoints of a better world and *transformative* as it strives to bring social change. Accordingly, Wieser (2019) argues that activistic brands when leading moral debates can shape what is considered "right/wrong, good/bad, or worthy/unworthy in the industries in which they operate" (p. 153). Furthermore, Manfredi-Sánchez (2019) identifies four distinct traits that activistic brands communicate. First, these brands communicate with consumers through symbolic and intangible connections to brand values, instead of linking them to products and services. Second, brand activism is guided by values and social issues. Third, although activist brands often communicate with local audiences, their motivations are directed towards a larger public. Finally, brand activists use digital tools and techniques that cater to the preferences of the digital generation.

The authenticity of brand activism has been scrutinised due to brands prioritising profits (Mirzaei et al., 2022). Opportunistic activism has been conceptualised as woke-washing, and multiple brands have been accused of performing this kind of activity rather than authentic brand activism (Joya et al., 2019; Vredenburg et al., 2020). Vredenburg et al.'s (2020) definition distinguishes brand activism from woke washing, which is the "inauthentic brand activism in which activist marketing messaging about the focal sociopolitical issues is not aligned with a brand's purpose, values, and corporate practice" (p. 445). Brand activism that is perceived as inauthentic can lead to perceptions of hypocrisy, backlash (Lee et al., 2023),

and damage to the brand (Mirzaei et al., 2022). Thus, it is critical to effectively communicate the authenticity of brand activism to achieve branding objectives and act as change agents (Vredenburg et al., 2020; Key et al., 2021).

In addition, brand activism efforts must be consistent over time and congruent with the brand's core values. Congruence and consistency between brand communication and actions have been pointed out as underlying premises of a corporation's legitimacy (Gioia et al. 2000, as cited in Falkheimer & Heide, 2022). Hence, to attain authenticity and generate competitive advantage, the issue addressed and positioning must fit with the values and purpose of the brand (Pimentel & Didonet, 2021).

In addition to research conducted on brands engaging in socio-political issues (Manfredi-Sánchez, 2019; Hoffman et al., 2020), numerous scholars have studied Oatly as an activist brand (Koch, 2020; Ledin & Machin, 2020a; Koch & Ulver, 2022). The case of Oatly's brand positioning and marketing is interesting due to its similarities to Mr Charlie's. Oatly is a Swedish oat milk company that has gained attention for its activism and controversial advertising campaigns (Koch, 2020). The company's purpose is to replace cow milk, and they are continuously trying to alter consumers' habits, hence acting as change agents. Koch (2020) argues that brand positioning can break with established categories by assessing and addressing sociocultural contradictions. Oatly's activist positioning focuses on loosening the ideological lock-in of unsustainable food consumption (Holt, 2012). The brand intentionally transcends traditional boundaries by focusing on how food choices affect the well-being of the planetary rather than personal health. Overall, Koch (2020) provides a case study of how a brand can successfully use activism as a strategy to go beyond citizen artistry and become a citizen activist brand.

Furthermore, Koch and Ulver (2022) use the case of Oatly to demonstrate the emergence of a conflict market environment, where brands engage in ongoing societal disputes to legitimise their practices. The researchers draw on Melucci's (1996) conceptualisation of activism "as an irreconcilable opposition between the actor and the adversary" (p. 350). Ultimately, an oppositional stance is considered essential to create meaning as an activist. Their findings indicate that Oatly employed a complexity of framing strategies as an attempt to delegitimize the status quo while legitimising themselves as a market alternative, specifically a rhetorical act referred to as conflict framing.

Moreover, Oatly's communication has also been critically examined in terms of exploiting political appropriation and ethical consumerism (see Ledin & Machin, 2020a). The study presents how Oatly integrates rhetorical devices to simulate features of political debates. As such, metacommunication is identified as one of the meaning-making principles in Oatly's activistic communication. Further, Ledin and Machin (2020a) discuss how the growth of ethical capitalism has increased the presence of products presented with an ethical alignment. Oatly's marketing communications aim to create personal value by loading products with ethical and political notions, providing consumers with a sense of political engagement through shopping. This politicisation of consumption is recognized as problematic because branding intrudes on what is politics and what is political engagement.

In accordance, Low and Davenport (2005) contend that these ethical alignments only support consumerism and do not constitute a serious attempt to challenge the global food industry, despite marketing efforts implying differently. Researchers underscore an internal contradiction in the political appropriation by corporations as they "risk reproducing the structures they seek to change" (Roff, 2007, p. 518). From this perspective, political consumerism is more concerned with consumption instead of the political issue (Maniates, 2001). Thus questioning the long-standing effect of political consumerism.

2.2.2 Anti-brand Activism

Manfredi-Sánchez (2019) highlights the intersection of marketing and activism in communication practices. The author argues that activist brands oppose dominant structures and utilise concepts from social movements when aiming for sociopolitical change. Jean (2011) supports this notion by stating that the use of competing brand-parody and negative humour in advertising resembles the strategy performed by anti-marketing movements.

One communicative expression of anti-brand activism is cultural jamming. It is described as a symbolic protest aimed at disrupting and subverting dominant discourses, cultural establishments and consumer culture in order to promote social and political change (Harold, 2004). This insurgent political movement occurs in many forms, all of which rely on creative activism that ultimately attempts to challenge the practices of global corporations by attacking their symbolic power (Harold, 2004; Odoardi, 2010; Lekakis, 2017). The Canadian Magazine, Adbusters is at the front- line of cultural jamming, performing radical anti-brand activism advocating for consumer resistance and more sustainable practices of capitalism

(Harold, 2004; Østergaard et al., 2015). Dauvergne (2017) contends that anti-brand movements have been empowered by social media, eco-consumerism as well as the corporate turn toward emphasising sustainability.

In modern social movement activism and especially cultural jamming, fun and laughter are identified as crucial elements (Wettergren, 2009). In addition, studies have shown that humorous appeals in advertising are more effective in shifting public opinion than non-humorous content (Eisend, 2008; Kutz-Flamenbaum, 2014). Therefore, the most effective anti-brand campaigns utilise humorous content that mocks and ridicules iconic brands, which can reach more people through social media than traditional corporate advertising (Dauvergne, 2017).

2.2.2.1 Subvertising

Culture jamming often involves the act of subvertising; manipulating brands' semiotic artefacts and iconography, and using the form of well-known advertising campaigns as the basis for new messages (Klein, 2010; Östberg et al., 2018). This type of activity is primarily directed towards multinational corporations that hold an iconic and dominant position in the market, such as Nike or McDonald's (Holt, 2002). Thompson et al. (2006) found that Jammers targeting Starbucks utilised a combination of captivating advertising tools to spread anti-brand meanings on digital platforms, such as parody, satirical imagery and animation. In essence, cultural jammers adopt counter-brand strategies that subvert and reestablish symbols in alternative contexts, twisting or modifying in ways that demonstrate criticism towards the initial discourse and assert the independence of the protestor (Wettergren, 2009). This technique is beneficial as advertising built upon existing knowledge increases the comprehension of the message (Gregan-Paxton & John, 1997).

2.2.2.2 Comparative Advertising

Comparative advertising is a type of advertising that directly or indirectly compares one product or service with another product or service. The purpose of comparative advertising is to persuade consumers that the advertised product or service is superior to its competitors (Beard, 2016). Wilkie and Farris (1975) discuss the usefulness of comparative advertising for

brand positioning. The researchers assert that comparative advertising can serve both differentiation and association strategies, but its effectiveness depends on consumers' brands preference structures (Wilkie & Farris, 1975). On the one hand, comparative advertising can be used to isolate and stress distinct attributes, i.e. differentiation. On the other hand, highlighting similarities can be used to establish a new brand in the minds of the consumer, i.e. association (Pechmann & Ratneshwar, 1991). An association strategy facilitated through comparative advertising can strengthen a brand by exploiting the legitimacy of competing brands (Kotler et al., 2020).

2.3 Brand Positioning

Brand positioning is considered a key concept in marketing, branding, and strategy (Aaker, 1996; Kapferer, 2012; Keller, 2012; Urde & Koch, 2014; Koch, 2020). However, there is a lack of consensus on the definition and application of positioning. The positioning concept has evolved from its initial focus on advertising to its inclusion in various disciplines (Urde & Koch, 2014). According to Kapferer (1994), the concept of positioning is useful because it emphasises that a brand is useless if it is not positioned in the minds of consumers relative to competitors. Keller (2012) argues that all choices are comparative, thus brand positioning is an angle used to attack a market at the expense of the competition, emphasising the main differences to create preferences for the brands' products. From a communication perspective, positioning can be seen as guidance for marketing activities when aiming to establish a strong brand and achieve an intended position (Keller & Lehmann, 2006).

2.3.1 Schools of Positioning

Urde and Koch (2014) identify two approaches to understanding positioning; market orientation (outside-in perspective) and brand orientation (inside-out perspective). The two paradigms delineate a determining question: "(1) To what extent should organisations be guided by its identity? (2) To what extent should it be responsive to others' views and wishes?" (p. 481). Urde and Koch (2014) emphasise that the approaches are different yet synergistic. Thus, an organisation's approach will realistically be a combination of the two paradigms. Table 1 highlights the distinct characteristics.

	Market-oriented positioning	Brand-oriented positioning
Point of departure	External market demand and industry structure	Internal strength-driven brand potential
Approach	Outside-in	Inside-out
Key concept	Image	Identity
Prominence	Market (customer) over resources (brand)	Resources (brand) over market (customer)
Strategic focus	Positioning the brand to satisfy the needs and wants of the customer and non-customer stakeholders	Positioning the brand to satisfy the needs and wants of the customer and non-customer stakeholders – *within* the boundaries of its identity

Table 1: Market- vs brand oriented positioning (Urde & Koch, 2014)

The market-oriented perspective is enacted in Kotler et al.'s (2009) definition of positioning as an "act of designing the company's offering and image to occupy a distinctive place in the minds of the target market" (p. 361, as cited in, Urde & Koch, 2020). The key is that positioning emanates from the brand image. Accordingly, Keller et al. (2002) describe positioning as competitive-driven and highlight the importance of establishing a frame of reference. The choice of reference influences the types of associations that will serve as points of parity (similar features shared by all competitors) and points of difference (distinct brand aspects).

In the realm of strategic brand management, there has been a notable development concerning the connection between positioning and brand identity. This has given rise to the concept of brand-oriented positioning, which adopts an inside-out approach. According to Aaker (1996), brand positioning is defined as "the part of the brand identity and value proposition that is to be actively communicated to the target audience and that demonstrates an advantage over competing brands" (p. 177). Brand positioning is often broader than brand identity and value proposition but should still reflect what a brand aspires to be associated with. Aaker (1996) states that a brand's core identity should be a part of its positioning so that communication is centred around the brand's essence. However, brand positioning can be adjusted without altering the brand identity or value proposition (Aaker, 1996). In the brand-oriented approach, needs and wants of the market are satisfied but within the boundaries of the brand's core identity (Urde & Koch, 2014).

Furthermore, Urde and Koch (2014) provide a categorisation of five schools of positioning, along the continuum of market-and brand-orientations (see table 2). The positioning strategies imply a particular approach along the spectrum, however, brands may adhere to one or more of the defined schools. The proposed scheme of five schools of positioning provides

an applicable framework for the analysis of brand positioning (Urde & Koch, 2014). Further, the authors highlight that the positioning of a corporate brand has received less attention than product brand positioning (Urde & Koch, 2014), hence we aim to contribute to this from a conceptual communicative perspective.

Table II Five schools of positioning

	Market-oriented positioning (outside-in)				Brand-oriented positioning (inside-out)
SD Approach					
Positioning metaphor	Puzzle *Finding lacking pieces in the market puzzle and matching them with existing ones*	Wordplay *Exploiting the meaning of words to reach desired brand associations*	Wild Card Poker *Identifying and creating uncontested market space by creativity and innovation!*	Chess *Strategizing to create fit with competition, market demand and company resources and capabilities!*	Domino *Matching identity with selected market positions*
Objective	Optimization: to identify and exploit unmet customer needs and wants	Communication: to find mental space to position the brand's message in the minds of customers	Innovation: to find new, untapped market space and bypass competition	Coordination: to find a fit between the business strategy and the brand strategy	Selection: to select market positions based on brand identity and to fortify them over time
Typical techniques and concepts!	Image Pattern matching Perceptual mapping Gap spotting	Cognitive psychology Customer insights Advertising effectiveness Rhetoric	Economics! Socio cultural studies! Innovation! Cultural myth!	Strategic planning Industry analysis! Resource management! Capabilities!	Identity Brand values Track record Authenticity
Key readings!!	Carroll and Green (1997) Green *et al.* (2001) Wind (1990)	Keller (2012)! Ries and Trout (1986) Rossiter and Percy (1997)	Dru (1996) Holt and Cameron (2010) Kim and Mauborgne (2005)	Hooley *et al.* (2008) Mintzberg *et al.* (2009) Porter (1996)	De Chernatony (2010) Kapferer (2012) Riezebos and van der Grinten (2011)
Case	*Doro:* Extensive market and consumer research revealed senior citizens specific needs as an under served, small but growing market segment for mobile phones.*Coca*	*Cola-Cola:* The real thing campaign, implying something less positive about the main competitor Pepsi, in turn arguing to be the choice of the young generation	*Vitamin Well:* The combination of mineral water and vitamins broke the existing product categorization and gave birth to a new category: Vitamin enriched water	*Electrolux:* Based upon customer insights, global market and competitor analysis, a new brand policy set the strategic agenda for the corporation	*Volvo Cars:* The safety position is based on the mission, the internally rooted core values and identity; a track record of safety features and innovation

Table 2: Five schools of positioning (Urde & Koch, 2014)

2.3.2 Underdog Biography

Paharia et al. (2011) present the concept of an underdog brand biography, addressing a growing trend in brand communication whereby brands construct an underdog narrative in their communication. This biography highlights a brand's humble origins, hopes and dreams, as well as a determined struggle against adversity (Paharia et al., 2011). Previous research has studied the underdog biography in the context of brand communication and states that it can be used as an effective marketing tool (Paharia et al., 2011) and as a competitive positioning strategy (Avery et al., 2010). Thus, an underdog biography can be utilised as a strategic advantage in brand positioning.

Further, Schmidt and Steenkamp (2021) introduce a brand management framework for underdog brands. The authors define the following characteristic features of an underdog brand; niche players that can be unsuccessful, innovative, and actively seek competition with

dominant market players. The researchers findings further showcase that an underdog positioning enables new, smaller players to challenge the existing status quo.

2.4 Summary of Previous Research and Theory

Researchers point to a paradigmatic shift in which brands are viewed as societal-driven assets and reliable to multiple stakeholders. Brand activism has emerged as a phenomenon in coherence with societal expectations and serves as a strategy to achieve branding success by addressing socio-political questions. However, it is a difficult practice to navigate and relies upon authenticity, consistency and congruence, hence the strategy requires internalising and identity-driven communication. Previous research has identified Oatly as an activist brand, highlighting that its communication strategies include framing a market conflict as well as imbuing its products with political values. The brand's communications work in multiple ways to legitimise the brand, asserting distinct marketing strategies to frame a favourable position. In addition, previous research has shown that social movement strategies have been incorporated into brand activism communication. In this context, subvertising, humour and comparative advertising are presented as tools derived from cultural jamming to oppose dominant discourses.

Moreover, positioning is a fundamental component of branding and serves as a guide for marketing activities. Urde and Koch (2014) present two distinct yet synergistic approaches to positioning; market-oriented and brand-oriented. The two orientations delineate in whether it is guided by a brand's identity or image. Along this continuum, the authors present five different schools of positioning, each implying a particular approach. In this study, the schools of positioning will serve as a means to categorise the communication and determine their approach.

This paper draws upon research from brand management, brand activism, anti-brand activism and positioning to explore Mr Charlie's brand communication. Synthesising the previous research will help us achieve the purpose of examining how Mr Charlie's communicates to position itself in the fast food market.

3. Methodology

In this chapter, we present an overview of the methodological framework adopted in our research, including scientific and methodological approaches as well as a presentation of the case. In addition, data collection methods, sampling technique and analysis procedure are explained. Finally, the chapter concludes with ethical and methodological reflections.

3.1 Scientific Approach

This paper adopts a qualitative research approach since we aim to develop an in-depth understanding of the brands' communication within the context of brand positioning. A qualitative research method is advantageous to understand phenomena beyond numerical expression, hence allowing an understanding of the communicative aspects on a more profound level. In addition, qualitative research allows for the interpretation of complex concepts and is preferred when the data are rich in contextual detail (Bell et al., 2019). Given that the purpose is to explore and comprehend the communication methods utilised to position the brand, a qualitative approach is the most suitable choice for this study.

Furthermore, this study was conducted utilising an abductive qualitative approach, in which the researchers moved between theory and data to find patterns and explain the findings (Bryman, 2018). Brand activism is a relatively new and unexplored concept within scientific research, particularly concerning brand positioning. Thus, an abductive approach allows meaning to emerge from the data beyond the limits of current theories. Even though it might resemble an inductive method, the findings partially emanate from theory (Bryman, 2018). As such, this study aims to elaborate beyond existing findings and extend the current body of knowledge.

A research design offers a framework for the collection and analysis of the data, emphasising the range of dimensions prioritised in the research process. This paper seeks to understand the complexity of this particular case, hence the research design is exploratory (Bell et al., 2019). Since there is limited prior knowledge to build on, the flexible nature allows for the exploration of interesting ideas emanating from data. The study is based on a social constructivist ontology to understand the communication and positioning strategies. The interpretations and conclusions about how communication constructs the brand's positioning

are built on the assumption that reality is a social construction (Craig & Muller, 2007). In adopting this ontology, we endorse a view of the social world as constructed within a particular context (Silverman, 2022).

In order to gain knowledge, the epistemology adopted is a constructionist approach. The epistemological stance in this research means that social knowledge is the active product of humans, including that it is situated, relative and dependent on the context (Drisko & Maschi, 2015). Furthermore, it concerns constructive as well as rhetorical aspects of knowledge, recognising that facts are socially constructed within certain settings (Silverman, 2022). Therefore relevant to this study since it aims to explore how communication contributes to the construction of the brand's positioning and enhances the perception of activism through specified cues in the specific case. Further, the interpretations in this study are based on the recognition that there are alternative realities based on individuals' interpretative constructs (Drisko & Maschi, 2015), hence results are contingent upon subjective interpretations.

3.2 Case Study

A case study allows for the exploration and analysis within a specific context utilising various sources of data (Baxter & Jack, 2015). As brand positioning can be studied from different perspectives, a single case study offers the opportunity to explore the complex subject within limited boundaries (Yin, 2014). Accordingly, a single case study was conducted to explore the emerging phenomenon in greater detail (Silverman, 2022). It is advantageous as it allows for an in-depth understanding of the communication from the brand's perspective. Ultimately, the single case is suitable for providing insights into the modern principles of brand positioning and demonstrating diverse communication strategies.

3.2.1 The choice of Mr Charlie's

Mr Charlie's was founded in 2022 in Los Angeles, United States, and at the time of conducting this research, the brand currently operates in two locations: Los Angeles and San Francisco. However, due to its succes in the American market, Mr Charlie's plans to expand internationally the following year (Kane, 2023). The choice of Mr Charlie's is based on three distinct factors. Firstly, the resemblance to cultural jamming movements such as Adbusters is

recognised as a unique characteristic to endorse as a newly launched brand (Kane, 2023). Secondly, their virality on social media and rapid expansion speak in favour of a successful branding strategy (McAboy, 2022). Thirdly, they are explicitly stating an intent to transform consumption habits and being disruptors (Harris, 2022), thus engaging in brand activism.

In addition, similarly to Oatly- a now Iconic brand- Mr Charlie's is a brand with an activist core and distinct branding. Just like Oatly, they challenge consumption by mobilising a political debate around vegan food, thus emphasising a new branding concept in the age of climate crisis (Koch, 2020).

3.3 Data Collection and Selection

3.3.1 Triangulation

The selection of data was retrieved from a variety of sources; a method conceptualised as data triangulation (Flick, 2018). The triangulation of data collection allowed us to extend the research project generating further insight and more profound knowledge (Flick, 2018). In exploring the communicative practices of Mr Charlie's and how these are depicted online and conveyed by the founders, triangulation is used to generate a broader and more comprehensive understanding. By combining the content of Mr Charlie's website, Instagram posts and online news articles with a semi-structured interview, we ought to obtain rich data. The sources include the company's website, including but not restricted to the mission, values, heritage story, menu and advertising. Furthermore, data was collected on Instagram, including all of the brand's posts on their account. In addition, to develop a deeper understanding, an interview was conducted with one of the co-founders, which allowed us to explore their perspective. Consequently, data gathered from different sources allowed a triangulation to examine where the data intersects and substantiate our findings, hence increasing the reliability of the study (Silverman, 2022).

However, we acknowledge that the use of triangulation in data collection does not mean that the research will present a holistic picture of the phenomenon or an objective truth. Instead, the use of multiple sources for data collection is solely intended to provide more depth and broader knowledge (Flick, 2018; Salmons, 2016).

3.3.2 Sample of Data

Sampling is critical in the research process, as it serves to systematically determine what or whom to include. Since this paper aims to entail a more detailed knowledge of the phenomena, a non-probability sampling method is preferred (Salmons, 2016). Accordingly, this paper adopts a purposeful sampling suitable to the focus of this case study.

To establish the sample of the empirical data, we used criterion sampling, which means that data was selected based on a predetermined set of criteria. This is identified as a method that allows the researcher to focus on data correlating with the purpose of the study (Salmons, 2016)

Our sampling frame was set according to the following criteria;

1. A time frame was selected to systematically reduce the online data. The time frame was set from 6 March 2022 to 16 March 2023, i.e. encompassing approximately one year, starting with the opening of Mr Charlie's.
2. All Instagram posts on Mr Charlie's account, as this is their primary source of communication.
3. Online news articles, only including quotes or statements from the co-founders as we are exploring the phenomenon from the organisation's perspective.

In addition, the interviewee was selected by virtue of their role as Co-Founder and Brand Director. Consequently, the sample includes; 27 Instagram posts, 12 online news articles, Mr Charlie's website content and one interview. All the online data was captured at the same time utilising screenshots to ensure consistency.

3.3.3 In-depth Interview

In-depth interviews are a method that provides more information and is beneficial to get a further understanding of the case (Yin, 2018). Interviews are a common method within qualitative research and are advantageous to understand opinions, personal thoughts, intentions and experiences (Bell et al., 2019). The founder of Mr Charlie's can contribute with unique insights as he possesses privileged information and represents the subject of the study. Additionally, in-depth interviews allow for every word to be recorded, transcribed and

used in multiple ways. By doing this, the researchers can capture all relevance and salience of the qualitative information (Aaker et al., 2010).

The interview was semi-structured, a format characterised by a degree of flexibility. An interview guide was prepared, including 16 questions to discover more about the topic (see Appendix I). The questions were formulated after we had started our research and thus adapted to the theories and data already collected. However, the semi-structured format allowed us to ask spontaneous follow-up questions not included in the initial guide so that the respondent could develop his thoughts further. The interview took place via Zoom, which allowed us to record and take field notes simultaneously. Both researchers transcribed the recording to ensure credibility, and this also included laughter, silence and other subtle cues.

3.4 Qualitative Content Analysis

This research adopts a qualitative content analysis, where main categories have been identified and broken down into different sub-categories. A qualitative content analysis systematically organises the data, which works to reduce the complexity of the data through the use of descriptive categories. It is further preferred to understand and interpret the meaning of the data in a given context, thus making it a suitable choice for our study (Flick, 2014). To ensure reliability, the following section presents a transparent and detailed description of the analytical process (Silverman, 2022).

Drisko and Maschi (2015) explain qualitative content analysis as a systematic method to search out and describe meaning within content, including both manifest and latent. The study aims to identify and highlight the most relevant information to explore how Mr Charlie's communicates to strategically position itself in a saturated market. The analysis provided is a summary of the data set where the generated categories relate to the purpose and research question of the paper (Schreier, 2012). Even though the report provides a reductive summary, our research process has interrogated and enlarged the data to explicate its nuance and meaning. Hence, the process of analysing has been expansive rather than reductive, which is a key feature of qualitative content analysis (Drisko & Maschi, 2015). It is further advantageous as it allows analysis of the phenomena in a novel setting, where it is used to explore the new intellectual territory and describe what is found (Drisko & Maschi, 2015). This research is done under the assumption that some contextualised and latent

communication might not readily be apparent to all readers. Hence, the analysis explicitly states how and why interpretations have been made.

This paper uses Drisko and Maschi's (2015) conceptualization of the qualitative content analysis process. To ensure reliability, all steps were done independently and then discussed and compared between the researchers (Drisko & Maschi, 2015). The discussions aimed to identify similarities and differences in the interpretation; once consensus was reached, we proceeded to the next step.

Initially, we immersed ourselves in the data to create a sense of the separate parts as well as the study as a whole. Drisko and Maschi (2015) claim that this is advantageous to gain knowledge of the content in context. The immersion was followed by an intense analysis of a small part of the data, specifically the Instagram content. This allowed us to develop provisional categories and was beneficial as it provided a good initial grasp of Mr Charlie's communication (Silverman, 2022). The main categories initially developed were rivalry and community-building due to their recurrence in the data. We then proceed to analyse the online data as a whole to identify further preliminary categories. Following this was an analysis of the interview, a process that started with an initial reading, followed by several rereadings. Finally, the main categories of meta-communication and authenticity were derived through an iterative process between theory and in-depth analysis of all data. To guarantee rigorous coding, we ensured a wide-ranging and in-depth knowledge of the online data set (Drisko & Maschi, 2015). The main categories were collectively confirmed to be mutually exclusive and exhaustive to the main content of the full data set (Drisko & Maschi, 2015).

Once the main categories had been identified, subcategories were developed to elaborate and provide more details and nuanced understanding. The subcategories emanated equally from data and theory. Lastly, after analysing all the data and reaching a consensus regarding categories and subcategories, the process was followed by deductively sorting them into a category of Koch and Ulver's (2014) schools of positioning. This was done to further develop our understanding of Mr Charlie's communications and its contribution to the brand's positioning.

The categories have been used as section headings of the analysis, where each category has been presented in a summary manner and illustrated with pictures and quotations to show the original communication. Further, the summary of all categories is intended to show the reader how contextualised interpretation has been made using latent content.

3.5 Ethical Considerations

Qualitative research involves human subjects, hence ethical issues were given reasonable attention (Silverman, 2022). For this study, we have adopted a virtue ethics approach, which means that personal moral values guide us. Accordingly, all data was gathered after we the Co-Founder's approval to use their content for our case study. Concerning the interview, to not deceive the respondent we ensured to mediate the purpose of the study (Silverman, 2022). Furthermore, the study was conducted to openly explore with dignity and transparency, not to evaluate nor condemn (Salmons, 2016).

3.6 Methodological Reflections

When conducting qualitative research, it is essential to engage in a process of reflexivity, including critical self-reflection on how personal biases may affect analytical decisions (Boyle & Schmierbach, 2020). It is further critical within the analytical method of content analysis since the researcher is the primary tool when coding (Drisko & Maschi, 2015). Considering our background, it is important to point out that we are both from Sweden, thus adopting a Western perspective as well as limited in our knowledge of the American context.

An important point to be noted is that another Co-Founder initially agreed to partake in an interview but later withdrew from the arrangement due to lack of time. Thus, we are aware of the possibility of the single interview appearing subjective. However, the interviewed respondent partakes in his role as Co-Founder and Brand Director, thus ultimately responsible for Mr Charlie's communication. Moreover, regarding the amount of data, we argue that saturation is reached due to applied triangulation of data collection, which enhances the depth of understanding. All data obtainable was gathered and is regarded as sufficient since this paper seeks to be meaningful in the given context rather than universally applicable.

Due to the scope of this paper, this study only concerns the linguistics of communication. Consequently, we are not conducting a semiotic analysis, which could extend the understanding of the case. However, visual elements are included to demonstrate examples and clarify the analysis but not as means for interpretation.

4. Analysis and Discussion

The concept of brand activism has been demonstrated to be effective, as exemplified by Oatly's successful positioning as a brand activist. However, Mr Charlie's has entered the market with efforts to attain a position that Oatly grew into (Koch, 2020). In the following analysis, we explore how Mr Charlie's communicates to position itself in the fast food market. Our study found four main categories that lay the foundation for the brand's (activist) positioning: *rivalry, meta-communication, community-building and authenticity.* Each category ends with a summary of positioning implications.

Rivalry	Metacommunication	Community-building	Authenticity
Conflict-framing	Language games	Co-creation	Congruence
Underdog	Conflicting expectations	Listening	Honesty
Comparison	Dichotomies	Collaboration	Hypocrisy tensions
IMAGE		IDENTITY	
Mr Charlie's Positioning MARKET-DRIVEN/ BRAND-DRIVEN			

4.1 Rivalry

Mr Charlie's constructs its communication and messaging by using McDonald's as a counterpart. The iconic brand is utilised as a frame of reference to leverage the brand's messages, highlighting both differences and points of parity (Keller et al., 2002). This contradicting strategy serves to equally challenge and impose on McDonald's symbolic power in the fast food- industry. The main category of rivalry is enacted through; conflict-framing where Mr Charlie's opens up a moral battlefield, an underdog biography that showcases the quest of taking on Goliath, and comparisons that underpin their positioning.

4.1.1 Conflict-framing

In line with Melucci's (1996) conceptualization of activism, Mr Charlie's demonstrates an irreconcilable opposition against McDonald's, i. e the adversary in this context. McDonald's is portrayed as an ideological enemy, the obstacle to Mr Charlie's totality of objectives; being a mindful and sustainable actor in the fast-food market. By targeting McDonald's in their communication, Mr Charlie's is leaving a middle ground, challenging and provoking the market leader as well as the status quo. This framing opens up an area of conflict and moral battlefield, where Mr Charlie's and McDonald's are portrayed as opposing forces in the market. This conflict framing is viewed to be utilised to legitimise Mr Charlie's practices while delegitimizing McDonald's as well as the fast-food industry (Koch & Ulver, 2022). Additionally, in this context of "us versus them", Koch and Ulver (2022) argue that it is no longer sufficient to simply state that the opponent is bad; it is equally important to emphasise how one is good.

In the following passage, Mr Charlie's frames itself as a better alternative ahead of McDonald's and the current practices;

> "We are the future, the new wave of experiencing fast food, the kinder and cleaner alternative, powered by the people for the people" (Item 1, Appendix III)

By stating that Mr Charlie's is a *kinder and cleaner alternative,* in addition to frequently used terms such as *change, the new wave,* and *transformation*, Mr Charlie's portrays itself as a positive force, opposing conventional practices. Thus, creating a perception of traditional practices as bad. This is amplified from the co-founders' point of view;

> "The idea here is to create better standards and better systems. We are a mirror for every fast-food restaurant, showing that you can add alternatives to the menu and make it work. So why don't they? We are calling them out. I challenge every major store to do just that." (Co-Founder, personal communication, April 27, 2023).

The quote sheds light on how they facilitate a market conflict, where Mr Charlie's questions the legitimacy of the fast-food market, hence symbolising an attempt to disrupt the industry.

Moreover, Mr Charlie's consistently utilises words such as *inspiration*, good, *healthy* and *mindfulness*, which all connote personal well-being, leveraging perceptions of Mr Charlie's

as good. The emphasis on goodness is further strengthened in the following Instagram post, where the positive impact of plant-based food is highlighted;

Item 1, Appendix II

Here depicting themselves as the solution to global climate challenges, legitimising and moralising their practices through factual information, drawing upon personal as well as planetary well-being.

4.1.2 Underdog

In addition to framing itself as the opposite of McDonald's, Mr Charlie's further emphasises its origin as a small, local company targeting the dominant market player. This act symbolises the quest of David taking on Goliath, showcasing a story of a determined struggle against the odds (Paharia, 2011), where Mr Charlie's is the protagonist and McDonald's the antagonist. Consequently, McDonald's is portrayed as the bad player representing the unconscious and broken system of our society. In contrast, Mr Charlie's is framed as an underdog battling a dominant institution, working for the greater good of the world.

The following quote manifests the underdog position by highlighting inferiority, emphasising their smallness along with a dream to change the world;

> "What would happen if you created a *small* business with an idea to employ people so deserving of a second chance but overlooked by a broken system? … Imagine the impact that idea could have on the world?!" (Item 1, Appendix III).

Additionally, the act of emphasising one's humble background is identified as a distinct trait of an underdog brand biography (Paharia et al., 2011). The following quote underscores the founders' origins which are frequently communicated in various media;

Our Story

We're three weird dudes, a lovable Korean chef, a manifesting Brit and a creative, who's honestly an alien. Brave misfits, creators, disrupters and Dada's (!!!), who give a shit about the world and the people we share it with.

Item 1, Appendix III

The founders of Mr Charlie's further describe themselves as *disruptors* which can be interpreted in relation to Schmidt and Steenkamp's (2021) definition of an underdog brand, i.e. a brand that actively seeks competition to challenge the existing status quo of a market.

This narrative is strengthened by the Co-Founder's story about his humbling background, struggling with scarce resources but with a strong determination to overcome obstacles. The co-founders life story has been portrayed in several news articles (Item 1 & 2, Appendix IIII) and was transparently shared during the interview;

> "Eight years ago I was in fact homeless in Los Angeles. I was in a position where I lost everything and moved into a homeless shelter called The Dream Center. I was there for a few months just to rehabilitate and get back on my feet. I was kind of ready to give up on myself and felt like nobody saw me. But fast forward you know, brought by a bunch of beings at the Dream Center, I got a check, which was enough money for me to start my first business. I started believing in myself and I went on a journey to put it all back together" (Co-Founder, personal communication, April 27, 2023).

In addition, the mediation of the co-founder's success story alludes to the myth of the fabled "American dream", thus creating cultural resonance. The national myth of the American dream represents a strong belief that anyone, regardless of background can achieve great success through hard work and strong determination. As such, the underdog's struggle expresses a myth that garners cultural power (Holt, 2006) and is considered a powerful narrative coherent with the American context (Paharia et al., 2011).

4.1.3 Comparison

The rivalry is further constructed in Mr Charlie's execution of comparisons in the communication. Wilkie and Farris (1975) state that comparative advertising can be used as means to achieve objectives of both association and differentiation, depending on the consumers and the initiating organisation. Nevertheless, the two concepts are two fundamental parts of an organisation's positioning. In regard to this, we introduce the concept of *reputational parasitism* as an outcome of Mr Charlie's comparative communication. The term reputational parasitism is mainly known within the Scandinavian legal system and refers to an act where an organisation exploits the reputation and goodwill of a competitor. This is done through imitation of business concepts, selling lookalike products or replicating marketing communication, but without deceiving consumers of the origin (Ursin & Samelin, 2016). In this context, through reputational parasitism, the brand enhances favourable associations, which increases its legitimacy as an actor in the fast food market.

Mr. Charlie's has in an apparent way copied the visual profile of McDonald's, a well-known symbol in the American context for fast food. By establishing an association with the most prominent fast-food chain, the brand attains legitimacy (Kotler et al., 2020). Although the connection to McDonald's is a fixed point mainly for differentiation, we argue that the association leverages the image of being recognised as a fast-food chain and enhancing awareness. Through leaching onto McDonald's iconic brand in an innovative way, legitimacy and awareness are attained. Yet, it is done in a restricted and controlled manner that strategically stresses the attributes that distinguish them. The brand highlights its resemblance by copying well-known products and symbols but makes sure to highlight its distinction through rhetorical means. In this sense, the association is made in a paradoxical way where it is used both for similarity reasons as well as superiority.

The following caption is an example of reputational parasitism drawing upon association;
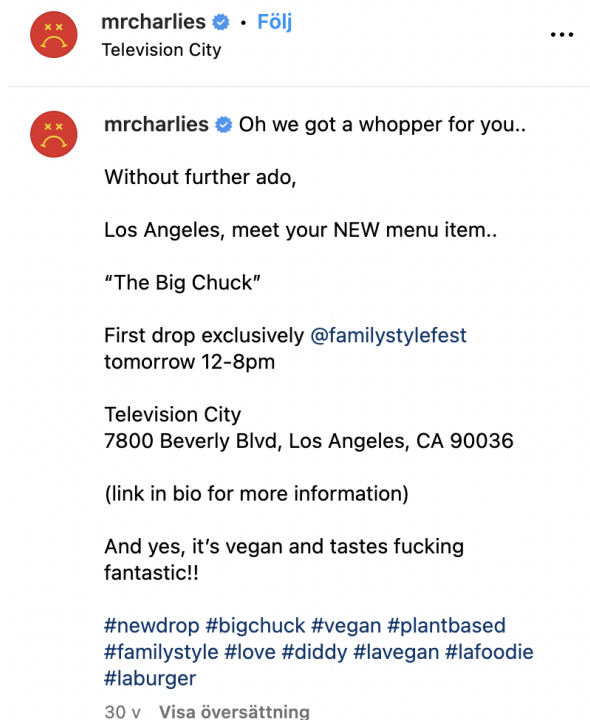
Item 2, Appendix II

In the above announcement of a new product, there is a clear connection to one of the most famous burgers, the Big Mac. It is a well-known and appreciated burger, with its own index (The Economist, 2023). In addition, the witty caption alludes to another big player, the whopper. Big Mac and Whopper have a history of warfare and comparative advertising has been made including the two burgers (Ahmed et al., 2020). Mr Charlie's is throwing itself in the mixer by framing their burger as a new alternative, associating it with what many consumers are already aware of. However, the caption still includes the differentiation as it points out that it is vegan. There is no explicit mention of the products or direct comparison but it has an implicit meaning allowing the receivers to draw their own conclusions. By swapping the original products with their substitute they emphasise that the same things could exist, but in a new way. It underlines that it is a new thing and that the conventional needs to be transformed.

Nonetheless, the high awareness of McDonald's and its intangible asset of being an iconic brand is a reputation that Mr Charlie's is feeding itself on and contributed to its viral success. The brand has utilised the opportunity and leveraged an advantage by highlighting superiority, emphasising the improvement of McDonald's products by recreating them using plant-based ingredients. Thus, enacting reputational parasitism through replicating without deceiving consumers. By positioning the brand in relation to McDonald's, Mr Charlie's simultaneously emphasise similar product offerings, framing itself as a fast-food alternative on the market, while differentiating itself based on its vegan products and in extension values. Attracting consumers based on value superiority (Beard, 2016), and positioning it as an alternative mindful brand. Mr Charlie's communicates a clear balance of association and differentiation, while still positioning as the opposite.

In summary, the communication outlined under this main category is situated within the market-driven orientation of positioning. The communication can be seen as a means to foster a favourable image, where Mr Charlie's practises an invasive strategy building on pre-existing associations and awareness of the market, perpetuating the consumers' minds. This is viewed as a communicative effort to challenge McDonald's, whilst striving to assert a position as top-of-mind. Drawing from this we find that the rivalry category is part of the word-play school positioning. Essential within this strategy is to deposition the competition, thus aligned with Mr Charlie's rivalry communication (Ulver & Koch, 2014).

4.2 Metacommunication

Metacommunication refers to communication that directs attention to the communication, including linguistics that directs attention to the linguistics (Ledin & Machin, 2020b). The rhetorical techniques and wordplay in Mr Charlie's communication are prevalent in different ways. Different conflicting communicative layers are integrated to facilitate parody and sarcasm. The sarcastic, humoristic and playful tone of voice Mr Charlie's employs is a typical approach in traditional advertising (Ledin & Machin, 2020a) and anti-brand advertising (Thompson et al., 2006). Drawing upon previous research (see Ledin & Machin, 2020a) we have identified three types of metacommunication; language games, conflicting expectations and dichotomies.

4.2.1 Language games

Language games are traditionally important in advertising to generate a humorous and playful approach (Myers, 1994, as cited in, Ledin & Machin, 2020a). The brand uses this form of metacommunication, both on its digital platforms and in their personal communication, as a means of conveying its message. On Mr Charlie's website, the brand states;

> "Global change is a daunting task - but there's only one way to eat an elephant: one bite at a time." (Item 2, Appendix III).

This phrase is an analogy, where a comparison of tackling global change is portrayed as equal to eating an elephant. It is humoristic and includes a twofold meaning, both meaning one step at a time by breaking down an issue into smaller pieces as well as referring to changing food consumption habits. Conveying that consumption of Mr Charlie's vegan and sustainable products is a small yet meaningful step to making a positive change in the world. Additionally, this messaging strategy is persuasive and efficacious as it links the message through a transfer of existing knowledge (Gregan-Paxton & John, 1997). By leveraging this technique Mr Charlie's enhances the comprehension of the message, thus underpinning the brand's commitment to the sustainability issue.

Moreover, language games and playfulness are further exemplified in the way it trolls the concepts related to McDonald's, e.g. the *"Frowny meal"* (Item 3, Appendix III). The subversion and play of McDonald's Happy Meal attach new meanings to the meal in the particular context (Wettergren, 2009). The language in the product description is amusing and playful while encompassing implicit meaning and parody.

4.2.2 Conflicting Expectations

The second subcategory of interest is conflicting expectations. In the realm of staging and defining conflicting viewpoints, Ledin and Machin present (2020a) negations and adversary markers. These markers are commonly employed in political debate and are apparent in Mr Charlie's communication.

In terms of negation, an apparent example is that the brand's products are named with the negation *"not"*, eg. *"Not a hamburger"; "Not a cheeseburger"* (Item 4, Appendix III). This

phrasing is built upon a presupposed expectation that it should be what it states not to be, hence calling upon reflection and mediating an irony.

Furthermore, they extend the use of the negation to play upon McDonald's including phrases such as *"This is not a toy"*, implying a contradiction against the expectation that they should offer a toy. This negation draws parallels to McDonald's, which includes a toy in the signature children's menu, and therefore encompasses dimensions of anti-brand activism. Mr Charlie's negation is a way to disrupt the perceptions among consumers and highlight a distinction between the brand while using a rebellious and sarcastic tone. This form of metacommunication constitutes an expression of antagonistic rhetoric against McDonald's (Ledin and Machin, 2020a).

The following picture is a typical example of how Mr Charlie's communicates in a humorous way using conflicting layers. The catchphrase has multiple meanings that are dependent on the context. By promoting a vegan burger through the message that it is not a piece of meat, Mr Charlie's is integrating a common saying. However, it does also challenge the understanding of the text as it contradicts the presupposition that it is expected to be meat. The statement is further a way to make a parody of McDonald's, who have used the same tagline but with a different meaning of their message (Östberg et al., 2018). Hence, Mr Charlie's is altering the message by establishing it in a new context, where the meaning is to be understood as literal.
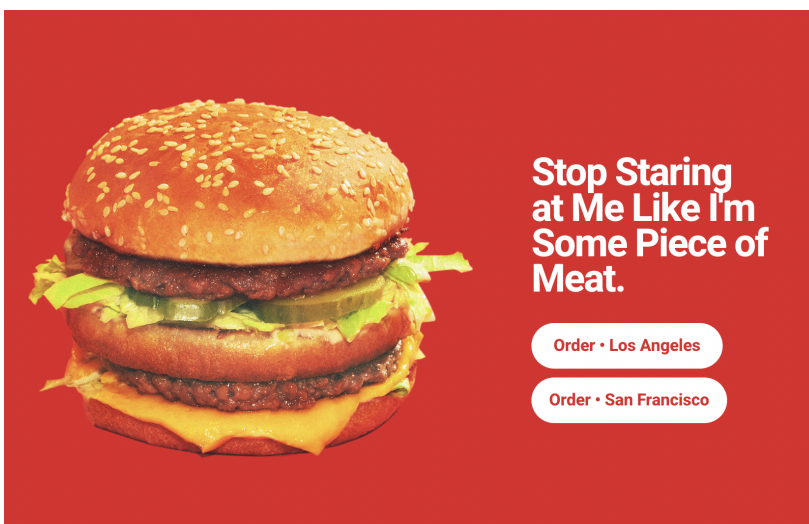
Item 5, Appendix III   *Image: Moskowitz (2023)*

Moreover, adversary markers are linguistic elements that indicate a contradiction to an expectation and draw attention to an exception. The inclusion of adversary markers further contributes to the brand's satirical tonality. The brand plays on words, including adversary markers to advocate against animal-based food consumption.

Item 3, Appendix II

The above statement goes against the presupposition that regular cheese and consumption of dairy products are for humans. Framing a binary opposition between meat-based and vegan-based consumption by challenging cultural perceptions. This formulation frames the issue as revolving around vegan consumption and strengthens the brand's advocacy. It is a statement that subsequently broadens the antagonistic rhetorics against a whole industry. In addition, the quote is used as a famous meme used by others advocating for the same cause (see Cowspiracy, 2017). Hence Mr Charlie's draws a connection to a well-known discourse, strategy well adapted to convey messages in marketing (Gregan- Paxton & John., 1997).

4.2.3 Dichotomies

Moreover, Mr Charlie's is continuously utilising dichotomies and contradictions in their communication; an act that is viewed to leverage their opposition. With the usage of this rhetorical strategy, Mr Charlie's demonstrates a lead in the debate about moral questions, framing what is right/wrong, good/bad in the fast-food industry.

| No Meat | No Dairy | No Trans Fat |
| Good for the Planet | Good for your body | Good for your soul |

Item 6, Appendix III

These values are highlighted on the website and are viewed as strengthening the conflict-framing rhetoric, where they implicitly refer to contradicting alternatives as bad. Instead, Mr Charlie's offers a good choice, compared to the alternatives such as; meat, dairy and trans fat. Thus, challenging the consumers' view of consumption as well as corporate practices. This goes in line with Wieser et al. (2019) who highlight how an activistic brand can propagate a moral debate by framing dichotomies. Mr Charlie's framing discredits and delegitimizes the other, i.e. McDonald's. Ultimately, Mr Charlie's portrays McDonald's as bad and situates Mr Charlie's as the "right" choice. With this rhetorical approach, Mr Charlie's is underpinning the ideological battlefield with two definite sides. Portraying Mr Charlie's as the moral protagonist demonstrates what is "good", whereas the moral antagonist, McDonald's, represents the bad things associated with the industry. This allows Mr Charlie's to benefit from cultural oppositions by framing itself as someone who "fights the good fight"; an act that is concluded to leverage their positioning as activists.

The metacommunication contributes to a communicative expression similar to that of cultural jamming, invoking parody and humour to rhetorically antagonise conventional practices, especially McDonald's. Mr Charlie's metacommunication in the form of combined negation and parody generates a playful yet anti-brand message, strengthening their position as activists. The message conveyed by using metacommunication is that Mr Charlie's is rebelling and standing up against the conventions and establishments. They are trying to enforce a change through messages of righteousness, similar to the strategy adopted by Oatly (Ledin & Machin, 2020a). The brand's metacommunication aligns them with progressive causes and positions them as socially responsible. In addition, the humour and cultural jamming is also a way to downplay the seriousness of the conflict. The antagony is embedded in the humour and Mr Charlie's is continuously connecting to a sarcastic and humoristic approach to tone down the aggressiveness. As such, it becomes an effective way to shift public opinions (Eisend, 2008; Kutz-Flamenbaum, 2014).

To conclude this category, we argue that metacommunication is connected to a market-driven approach to positioning the brand. Mr Charlie's incorporates metacommunication as a way to persuade its message and deliver a brand image. The usage of wordplay is recognized as an effective strategy to cut through the advertising noise with simple and humoristic messages (Urde & Koch, 2014). The communication and positioning approach highlights the brand's differences against market competitors. This is achieved through the linguistic conveyance of distinct attributes, where a key point is featuring brand attributes contrastingly to pre-established associations of the fast-food market. Mr Charlie's strives to position itself as a better market alternative, enhancing their position as a good while simultaneously de-positioning meat-based options. The content frames that the brand is not what consumers impulsively would expect it to be, constructing an image of Mr Charlie's as different and new at the expense of McDonald's.

4.3 Community-building

Mr Charlie's communicates their connection to the community and states that it is all about giving back. With a foundation and business model that incorporates hiring marginalised individuals and caring for animals as well as the planet, it is communicated that the brand is built with the community. By integrating stakeholders the brand's beliefs and values can engage on a deeper level (Lee et al., 2023). The main category is broken down into three sub-categories: co-creation, listening and collaboration.

4.3.1 Co-creation

The co-creation of the brand and its activism is shown through Mr Charlie's including itself as a part of and empowered by the community. The brand boosts the stakeholders' role in contributing and being a part of the initiative, as well as sharing them as crucial for the brand's being. The following captions from Instagram demonstrate this; *"Powered by plants and you, our amazing community"* (Item 4, Appendix II).

The brand and its purpose are driven by the consumers and their willingness to make a change. By incorporating consumers in this mission, they become active participants, emphasising the notion that the brand is co-created with its stakeholders. This approach

underscores the importance of sustainable consumption and the consumers' role in achieving it, highlighting the shared responsibility between the brand and consumers to enact change. As such, Mr Charlie's communicates that it is the collective undertaking of the mission that will have an impact;

> "Together we can make small mindful choices to create true global impact.
> Check out @omd4theplanet for a great resource on plant-based eating" (Item 1, Appendix II).

Additionally, this caption can be viewed as an attempt to mobilise a movement encouraging consumers to make sustainable choices through which they are a part of making a change. The above statement also induces a sense of Mr Charlie's creating a community of plant-based consumption advocates as they share another account serving the same cause. The co-creation and mobilisation aspects are of the highest importance according to the Co-Founder, who states; *It takes a village to start a transformation and to build a successful brand"* (Co-Founder, personal communication, April 27, 2023).

Furthermore, the communication of Mr Charlie's as taking a stance together with the stakeholders is underpinned by combining it with words linking to the planet and the environment. The following caption excerpt is a further example of this; *"Cheers to another trip around the sun, Together."* (Item 5, Appendix II). The language is playful and positive, mediating the stakeholders as being part of a fun joint journey with Mr Charlie's. This highlights that it is neither the brand nor the followers themselves that will make the change but the collaborative effort. By bolstering the consumers as part of the transformation, the brand infuses feelings of doing something good when partaking in Mr Charlie's quest. It is not the business per se that is the change but rather the debate that they are addressing together.

In addition, Mr Charlie's does not present themselves as the leaders of industry reform or as a lone player in the endeavour. Rather, they align themselves with the local community and other actors supporting the same initiatives. This suggests a humble and selfless approach, which could be interpreted to evoke feelings of genuineness and approachability. They are not trying to induce a sense of being radical or innovative concerning sustainability, instead, they view themselves as part of an already existing movement. This is highlighted in the following statement by the Co-Founder;

"We feel like we're spokes on the wheel of transformation. "I say 'spoke' because we're not trying to reinvent the wheel here. Many people did that before us, and I think we're just a part of it. I like to think of [Mr. Charlie's] as a little red and yellow spoke on that wheel." (Item 3, Appendix IIII).

On the one hand, it is evident that the brand was launched in line with an ongoing societal transformation, hence their activism is more about engaging rather than leading the movement. It portrays Mr Charlie's as a company striving to be a responsible and ethical player in the market, acting beyond societal demands. On the other hand, this statement can be seen as opportunistic activism where they are leveraging a competitive advantage on the politicisation of consumption. This can be viewed as undermining the activist position as they do not seek to lead the change in this cause, but rather just as following emerging trends.

4.3.2 Listening

In addition, the brand leverages its Instagram platform by inviting stakeholders to contribute to the formation of the brand's content, demonstrating that their opinions are valued and listened to. The followers are a part of forming and building the content and brand;
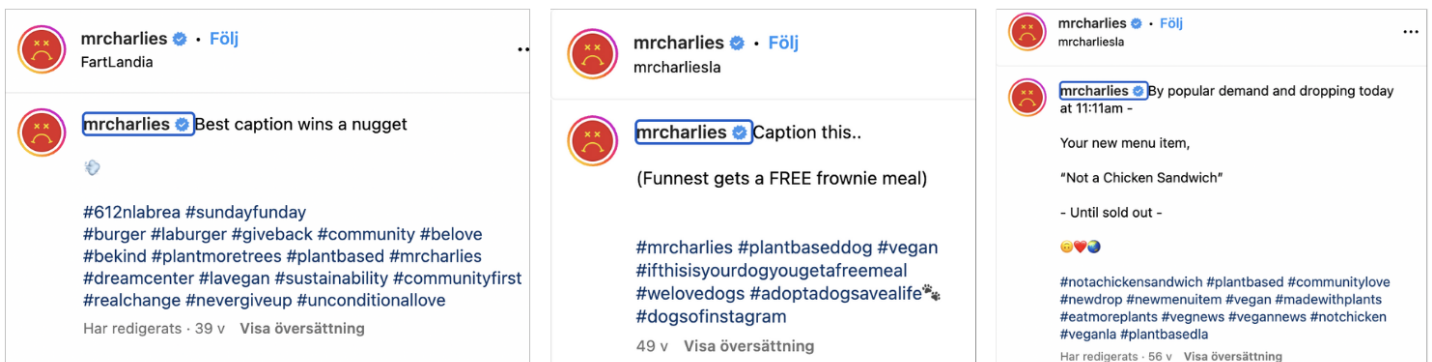
Item 6 & 7 & 8, Appendix II

The incorporation of the consumers' suggestions, opinions and co-creation of content highlights them as important. By actively listening, the brand cultivates a two-way relationship with its consumers, which fosters a strong connection and enforces reciprocity between the brand and its customers.

The importance of listening is also something the Co-Founder mentions in the interview stating *"Two ears, one mouth. Learning how to listen is a great thing."* (Co-Founder, personal communication, April 27, 2023). It shows the emphasis on understanding the consumers, he further mentions the importance of always meeting every stakeholder halfway. The communication can therefore be seen as a medium through which Mr Charlie's strengthens an online community and forms a relationship with the consumers.

4.3.3 Collaboration

Beyond the consumers and community, Mr Charlie's frequently incorporates collaboration with other actors that are also striving to shift consumer behaviour. On Instagram, the brand refers to external actors that are offering similar products.

Item 9, Appendix II

By highlighting what could be viewed as competitors they underpin their activism regarding sustainable food consumption. This frames Mr Charlie's as more concerned about their mission than the business bottom line. Further, this communication indicates that the brand's identity, of being a force for change, is the key consideration and fosters authenticity. It also

creates an association with other legitimate actors, which substantiates their role as changemakers (Vredenburg et al., 2020).

Furthermore, the brand expresses goodwill by offering to help and support other fast-food restaurants, which further elevates the mission of transforming the fast-food industry;

> "If you have a failing fast-food restaurant anywhere in the country and you need the help and it's something that we can support, we are down to Mr Charlie your space and partner with you. We can work with your staff and retain those jobs." (Item 4, Appendix IIII).

Here depicting Mr Charlie's willingness to assist and collaborate with other restaurants in the industry. They are not conquering or outcompeting other fast-food restaurants, portraying hostility. Instead, the wording is friendly and communicates them as amicable, using wording such as support, partner and work with you.

In addition, the partnership with Dream Centre (housing for the homeless) is considered a crucial aspect of the business operation and is frequently communicated (Co–Founder, personal communication, April 27, 2023; Item 5, Appendix IIII). This kind of partnership with a non-governmental organisation is viewed as a means to drive the problem frame in the matter of homelessness, which showcases its investment in the community. It further increases the authenticity of advocacy efforts and advances the messaging (Vredenburg et al., 2020).

An analysis of the positioning concerning community-building indicates a brand-oriented positioning strategy. It can be seen as an inside-out approach, where the brand is accentuating its activism core by engaging with and building a community. The stakeholder co-creation of brands has been highlighted as the foundation of societal-driven branding (Falkheimer & Heide, 2022), hence the strategy to ensure a wider us-perspective contributes to fostering trust and legitimacy. Mr Charlie's socio-political activist role is strengthened as it relates itself to the community as well as the common good (Biraghi et al., 2017). Further, the focus on local messaging is a common communicative feature within brand activism (Manfredi-Sánchez, 2019).

The brand-oriented approach defines positioning as the part of the identity that is actively communicated. Hence, the community-building category strengthens Mr Charlie's identity by positioning themselves as a responsible actor, driving agendas for positive change. The communication is centred around the brand's values, highlighting the well-being of the people and the planet. In community-building efforts Mr Charlie's strengthens the activism identity through mobilisation, hence it becomes representative of the positioning. Additionally, collaboration strengthens their mission-and purpose-driven messaging, which further drives their activist agenda. The domino school of positioning highlights identity as a focal part of the positioning. Consequently, communication concerning community-building can therefore be seen as oriented within this strategy.

4.4 Authenticity

The final main category presented in this study is authenticity, which is partly derived from theory since it has been highlighted as a crucial part of brand activism (Vredenburg et al., 2020; Moorman, 2020; Mirzaei et al., 2022). For Mr Charlie's to be perceived as a change agent, as well as achieve marketing objectives, authenticity needs to be communicated (Vredenburg et al, 2020; Key et al., 2021) The subcategories regarding authenticity have emanated from the data and contribute to a more nuanced understanding of Mr Charlie's positioning. The first is congruence because the legitimacy and authenticity of brand activism are dependent upon this (Pimentel & Didonet, 2021). Following this is honesty, which is a key concept to fostering consumer trust and upholding authenticity. The last subcategory identified is hypocrisy tensions, which is a misalignment between what a brand says and what it does. Thus, the line between authenticity and hypocrisy depends on whether a brand delivers on its promises (Lee et al., 2023).

4.4.1 Congruence

The concept of congruence is an alignment of corporate practices, brand identity and values (Vredenburg et al., 2020; Pimentel & Didonet, 2021). Further, congruence is fundamental for a corporation's legitimacy, creating a perception of approval for an organisation's actions (Pimentel & Didonet, 2021). Accordingly, this category looks at how Mr Charlie's attains consistency in their communication and drives agendas congruent with the identity.

In the case of Mr Charlie's, its actions and communication include two main areas related to the brand's purpose. Those are caring for people and the sustainability discourse, including the consumption of vegan food. Their practices are aligned with the communication in regards to hiring marginalised groups and ensuring above minimum-wage pay. Additionally, they serve exclusively plant-based food, which is what they frame their sustainability discourse around. The alignment between the purpose and activism becomes clear and reasonable by combining pro-corporate social practices with powerful marketing statements (Vredenburg et al., 2020).

The central component of Mr Charlie's purpose is contributing to societal goals and the common good. This is consistently communicated and permeates all organisational activities. The Co-Founder explicitly highlights that brand are not spurred by monetary incentives;

> "It is not about making money, it is about creating a movement and spurring change and thinking in society. So we act out of love in every decision we make. From how much we pay our staff, to how we look after people, how we treat our customers, you know how we give to charity. "(Co-Founder, personal communication, April 27, 2023)

Accordingly, there is a congruence between their communication, purpose and practices as the business is conducted beyond economic interests; making all decisions in line with its values. By internalising the mission and conducting business dependent upon this identity, Mr Charlie's facilitates legitimacy and authenticity. The alignment of the brand's purpose, values and corporate practice contribute to the mediation of an activistic core.

Moreover, all communication highlights the same key messages and values of the brand. The sustainability discourse and the right to employment for marginalised groups are prevalent on Mr Charlie's digital platforms, as well as in personal communication. This congruence strengthens Mr Charlie's positioning as it reinforces the identity (Aaker, 1996) and contributes to ensuring their credibility in advocating for these causes.

4.4.2 Honesty

The concept of honesty relates to authenticity as it entails being truthful and transparent. By being honest Mr Charlie's gains trust among stakeholders, thus establishing credibility as a legitimate actor in the market (Lee et al., 2023). The Co-Founder emphasises honesty as a

crucial part of Mr Charlie's communication, highlighting the importance of never letting people down. The Co-Founder explains their tactic as *"We only communicate what we have done"*, substantiating all claims with proof to avoid giving false promises (Co-Founder, personal communication, 27 April, 2023).

Additionally, the co-founders are transparent with their own personal backgrounds along with the background of their employees. This disclosing of information can be seen as a way to communicate honestly about their organisation and the people who are involved. Their personal troubled stories are featured in several news articles (e.g. Item 1 & 2, Appendix IIII) and their owned media. By honestly disclosing personal information that relates to the business, Mr Charlie's attaches emotional values to their activist message. Further, this honest communication reveals the underlying drivers for engaging in socio-political issues, hence increasing the authenticity of the brand. Honest communication about the co-founders' background as homeless is viewed as an effort to promote an authentic motive to support and partner with Dreamcenter. Hence, gaining consumers' trust and motivating them to support the intended cause. As such, we argue that in order to integrate social causes as part of a brand's identity the brand must exhibit and communicate a thorough understanding of the issue.

4.4.3 Hypocrisy Tensions

Brand hypocrisy arises when there is a distance between "assertions and performance" (Shklar 1984, p. 62, as cited in Lee et al., 2023, p.). That is when a brand claims to be something that it is not (Lee et al., 2023). The notion of brand hypocrisy is frequently discussed in regard to brand activism, authenticity and credibility, as the concepts refer to a brand delivering on its promises (Lee et al., 2023; Moorman, 2020). In the case of Mr Charlie's hypocrisy tensions refer to misalignments between words and actions, as well as a discrepancy between promises and actual possible outcomes. If Mr Charlie's distinct characteristics as an activist come under scrutiny it could impact the image among consumers and have consequences for the positioning.

Firstly, Mr Charlie's communication is all about love and emphasises the importance of honesty in their communication. Yet, the conflict framing is highly prevalent and there are similarities to anti-brand rhetorics targeting McDonald's. Based on this, a contradiction is

identified as Mr Charlie's performs a communicative (implicit) warfare against McDonald's, while refusing to acknowledge this. The Co-Founders deny any connection to McDonald's and when asked about this, their answers are such as: *"McDonald's who?"* (Item 6, Appendix IIII) and *"I have no idea what you're talking about"* (Item 7, Appendix IIII). Denying all connections and claiming to not know about McDonald's, we argue, is dishonest and creates a discrepancy between words and actions. In a humoristic and satirical manner, these statements can further be seen as a way to mock the brand by not even acknowledging their existence, while still copying their visual identity and products. Furthermore, the Co-Founder states that do not have any competition at all;

> "We don't see ourselves as competition or up against anybody. Instead we see ourselves as a part of the loving vibration that is life. Mr Charlie's is just a part of that" (Co-Founder, personal communication, 27 April, 2023).

The contradiction in emphasising that there is no competition implies that the reputational parasitism of McDonald's is simply a marketing ploy and a positioning tool. Mr Charlie's communication is paradoxical and creates hypocrisy tensions due to simultaneously pursuing an industry-transforming mission while denying any opposition. By explicitly stating to not be up against anybody diminishes their sociopolitical stance and undermines their position as activists.

Moreover, Mr Charlie's underscores an effort to change the world, but is at the same time making a market for the alternative, emphasising that they simply aim to be an option;

> "We would never say anything bad about anybody or anything ever. We would never say stop killing animals, stop eating animals and come support us. We will never say that. That doesn't work. We're just an alternative." (Co-Founder, personal communication, 27 April, 2023).

This unclear messaging creates a paradox in not wanting to be top of the spear - but still wanting to change the world. Mr Charlie's is engaging in the collective atmosphere propagating a moral debate but lacking involvement on a macro policy level. In contrast to Oatly, Mr Charlie does not mobilise any movement in the form of trying to alter political regulations, or consumer habits on a wider scale (Koch, 2020). Instead, they opt to be a simple alternative. This contradiction establishes a divergence between the promises and the brand's actual impact, which could lead to perceived hypocrisy.

Further, Vredenburg et al. (2020) state that authentic activist brands should use precise definitions of their advocacy and avoid making broad general claims. Thus, Mr Charlie's mission of transforming the fast-food industry could be difficult for consumers to substantiate (Vredenburg et al., 2020), and the message could be overlooked.

Mr Charlie's draws upon an activist positioning that resonates with current ethical consumption trends. However, as brands address socio-political issues for opportunistic reasons, perceptions of hypocrisy can result (Vredenburg et al., 2020). By framing the sustainability discourse around vegan food consumption and proposing themselves as an ethical simple solution to a highly complex problem, Mr Charlie's can be seen as seizing an opportunity to leverage trending eco-consumerism and the increased popularity of plant-based diets (Ledin & Machin, 2020a).

Further, communicative efforts offering consumers a sense of moral and ethical participation can be recognized as a way to politicise consumption (Ledin & Machin, 2020a). Mr Charlie's adopts a rhetoric that infuses a perception of moral alignment between the brand and consumption, contributing to stakeholders perceiving it as performing social activism. Previous research (Low & Davenport, 2005) has stated that this political consumerism is questionable as the marketing rather encourages consumerism than constitutes a serious attempt to challenge the global food industry, hence becoming hypocritical. In line with this, anti-brand activist movements have been criticised for challenging corporations while at the same time being one (Sommer, 2012). The same reasoning can be applied to Mr Charlie's and creates a distance between the assertion of transformation, and its performance, as they are operating in the same industry that it aims to reinvent.

To conclude, the communication presented under this category is situated within the brand-oriented approach to positioning. Mr Charlie's purpose is to transform the fast-food industry, and the brand's identity is built on caring for people and the planet. Accordingly, the category of authenticity revolves around the brand's identity and how they communicate it to substantiate the activistic core. The identity is utilised to differentiate the brand, and requires that Mr Charlie's communicate in an authentic, honest and congruent way. The concept of authenticity is highlighted as an essential characteristic within the domino school of positioning, as a brand's values constitute the foundation of the positioning. Thus, a brand must be perceived as authentic to succeed with a brand-driven positioning. Mr Charlie's

congruent and honest communication contributes to building trust and reinforces the brand's commitment to the socio-political cause, thus efficiently communicating the identity.

In regards to the hypocrisy tensions, Mr Charlies are dependent upon consumers perceiving their communication as authentic. Facilitating an identity-driven approach to the positioning, by highlighting their activism could lead to a de-positioning of the brand if accusations of hypocrisy arise. In essence, this means that the perception of hypocrisy could lead to a discrepancy in the communicated identity and the perceived image, hence causing perceptions of inauthentic activism and diffuse positioning.

Studying Oatly transition from a lifestyle position to an activist position, Koch (2020) suggests that activist brand positioning is situated within the new branding principle of citizen activism. Oatly is considered an agenda-setter for an emergent industry of planet-based food, actively challenging established practices and mobilising social movements to create social change. In contrast, Mr Charlie's practices are limited to the organisation and they are not engaged in a debate on a higher policy level. This may entail implications for their positioning as an activist brand, as their advocacy may not involve actual socio-political change. In extension, this could lead to accusations of hypocrisy if the brand fails to fulfil the expectations it has communicated.

5. Concluding Remarks

The following section presents the main findings and conclusions from our exploratory study of Mr Charlie's communication. Followed by a general discussion about theoretical and practical implications. Lastly, recommendations for further research are presented.

To conclude, this study has explored how Mr Charlie's communicates to position itself in a competitive market. In today's market, there is a growing demand from both society and stakeholders for brands to take a clear position on issues and express their values. Mr Charlie's presents a clear stance on socio-political issues and challenges the practices of the fast-food giant McDonald's. This dual role has made Mr Charlie's a provocative and intriguing player in the saturated marketplace. This study presents that Mr Charlie's communication involves four main categories; *Rivalry, Metacommunication, Community-building* and *Authenticity*.

Firstly, the research concludes that the brand draws upon multiple points of parity and differences vis-á-vis McDonald's. Mr Charlie's is leveraging their activist brand by positioning itself as a subject with a clear opponent. This includes conflict-framing to open up a moral battlefield, where Mr Charlie's simultaneously legitimises their practices while de-legitimises McDonald's. In addition, by portraying itself as an underdog, the brand further challenges the status quo. McDonald's is communicatively portrayed as the bad antagonist; an unsustainable and unhealthy giant corporation. In contrast, Mr Charlie's communicates itself as a sustainable, moral and friendly actor. Furthermore, the brand adopts the language and imagery of cultural jamming that invokes anti-branding against McDonald's, loading the communication with both political and humoristic messaging. Consequently, constructing a mixture of an antagonistic and humorous approach where Mr Charlie's utilises the power of communication to politicise and position the brand.

The key insight based on this is that an adversary marker is considered a fundamental aspect of the brand's activist positioning. By using McDonald's as a frame of reference and opponent, Mr Charlie's attaches activistic values to the brand as well as establishes itself as a legitimate fast food restaurant. Consequently, Mr Charlie's can be stated as defined in and by its opposition, against which it positions itself and constantly orbits.

Moreover, Mr Charlie's as the protagonist mobilises and builds a community where people are valued, loved and appreciated, which fosters emotional connection and trust in the brand.

In addition, the usage of social media as a prominent communication platform enables interaction and co-development of the brand with the stakeholders. By facilitating aspects of community-building and authenticity, the brand generates legitimacy and communicates its activistic core identity.

However, Mr Charlie's activistic communication facilitates hypocrisy tensions. This shed light on the importance of honest and congruent communication to mitigate perceptions of inauthentic activism. Accordingly, the communication carries risks that could diminish the activist positioning. Further, it is undeniable that the brand's politicisation of consumption could be problematic. In addition, to integrate authentic brand activism on a core level, it can be argued that one has to be a citizen activist. Merely relying upon changes in consumer behaviours is asserted as insufficient to achieve sustainable transformation. Consequently, to mitigate hypocritical tensions, brands need to address issues on a higher, systematic level, advocating for political and regulatory support in line with the brand purpose.

Further, the four main categories represent two market-oriented, respectively two brand-oriented communicative positioning strategies. Rivalry and metacommunication have their foundation in creating an image among consumers based on their preexisting knowledge, de-legitimizing the competition. Contrastingly, community-building and authenticity have their foundation in delivering the identity and are characterised as an inside-out approach. Mr Charlie's positions itself through using McDonald's as a counterpart, creating a dichotomy, while underpinning the activism by framing it as their fundamental reason for being. The mixture and balance between the two approaches contribute to the legitimization of the brand's positioning.

Lastly, Mr Charlie's communication enacts a synergistic approach contributing to what could be related to a blue-ocean branding strategy. By communicating itself as the sustainable alternative through simultaneously imitating and antagonizing an iconic symbol, it taps into an uncontested *market(ing)place* as the morally responsible *"Vegan McDonald's"*. The breaking of "established rules" associated with fast-food is a disruption, concluded as a strategy for overcoming marketplace conventions (Holt, 2012; Urde & Koch, 2014). Ultimately, by performing a balancing act of brand activism and anti-brand activism, Mr Charlie's underpins its purpose and manages to create a distinct position in the fast-food market.

5.1 Theoretical and Practical Implications

This study provides insights into how an activistic brand communicates to position itself in a crowded market. The findings offer valuable insights for other brands looking to adopt similar strategies to differentiate themselves in a saturated market. Our findings suggest that strategic communication can leverage sociocultural discourses through addressing and framing the brands' positioning on contradictions. Furthermore, the study showcases that brands can strengthen their position by communicating themselves as in opposition.

Based on our findings, this study adds to previous research that brand-infused anti-brand activism is effective when positioning a brand as an activist. This study demonstrates that a brand can effectively enhance its legitimacy by engaging in communicative delegitimisation of an adversary. As such, adversarial markers are identified as crucial for strategic activist positioning.

Moreover, the research also points out several possible hypocrisy tensions that apply to all brands engaging in socio-political issues. Communicating an activist stance as part of brand positioning poses several risks that are challenging to navigate. Therefore, brands seeking to align themselves with activism should demonstrate a comprehensive understanding of the issues at hand. Brands should be cautious when making commitments they might not be able to deliver on, particularly by politicising consumption and presenting it as an easy solution for global issues. Lastly, it is crucial to maintain the activistic communication and establish congruence as a discrepancy could result in depositioning.

5.2 Future Research

Brand activism is an emerging phenomenon for both managerial and academic interest. However, research regarding brand activism and positioning is limited. Consequently, we encourage researchers to explore this further, studying different examples and cases. In addition, future research is advised to study the complexities of brand activism and positioning from a stakeholder perspective, as research on this is scarce.

In regards to the phenomenon of Mr Charlie's branding, we suggest conducting additional research applying a semiotic analysis. As studying the visual elements of the communication

and its contribution to constructing an intended brand position could enhance the understanding.

Moreover, this case study explored a brand engaged in socio-political causes concerning climate-change and homelessness. As such, future research is encouraged to look at brands engaging in more polarising and controversial questions to bring more nuance to the understanding of brands' positioning.

Lastly, brand positioning is identified as an ongoing process that requires strategic maintenance and we find it meaningful to study how a brand communicates to maintain an activist status. Hence, future research could adopt a longitudinal study of an activist brand positioning to address this.

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Appendix I

Interview Guide

1. Could you tell us about your background? Just a few words about yourself and your role.

2. How would you describe the main purpose behind Mr Charlie's?
   Follow-up questions: how is this communicated? What is the main message of the communication?

3. What would you say is most important in your marketing?

4. What would you say is the main reason behind your success?

5. Do you see any potential risks with your marketing strategy?

6. How would you describe Mr Charlie's current position on the market, and what position do you aspire to achieve?

7. What other brands do you consider to be your competition and how do you differentiate yourself?

8. What is Mr Charlie's main target group?

9. You have stated that you want to reinvent that fast-food industry, in what ways do you want the industry to change?

10. How do you address the sustainability question in your operations?

11. Your mission states that "Mr Charlie's is tackling serious issues, with a not-so-serious approach", what motivates this approach?

12. You state one of your goals as "connect mindfulness to everyday living" - how would you explain this in relation to your brand?

13. How do you want consumers to perceive your brand?
    Follow-up question: Mr Charlie's has been described as an underdog (provocateur, activist), do you think that this image applies to you? Is it something that you have strategically worked to achieve?

14. People have drawn parallels between Mr Charlie's and the anti-brand movement, such as Adbusters, how do you reflect upon this?

15. Previous brands pursuing brand-driven activism have been criticised for riding the wave of sustainability and utilising this as a branding/marketing strategy, how do you reflect upon this?

16. Would you like to add something?

Appendix II

Instagram

Item 1

Mr Charlie's [@mrcharlies]. (2022, August 16). We are the gateway-drug to mindfulness. By replacing one meat-based meal per day with a plant-based option, over the [Photo]. Retrieved April 6, 2023.

Item 2
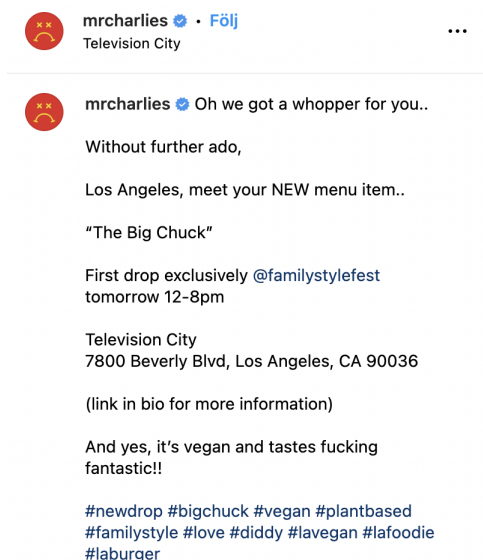
Mr Charlie's [@mrcharlies]. (2022, October 8). Oh we got a whopper for you… Without further ado, Los Angeles, meet your NEW menu item…"The Big Chuck" [Photo]. Retrieved April 6, 2023.

Item 3

Mr Charlie's [@mrcharlies]. (2022, September 6). People, good news! You aren't lactose intolerant, you're just not a baby cow! [Photo]. Retrieved April 6, 2023.

Item 4

Mr Charlie's [@mrcharlies]. (2022, March 17). Powered by plants and YOU, our amazing community. Without you, this dream isn't possible so cheers to Y'all![Photo]. Retrieved April 6, 2023.

Item 5

Mr Charlie's [@mrcharlies]. (2022, February 14). A year ago today we opened our doors, both knowing and not-knowing how we would be received. We knew there [Photo]. Retrieved April 6, 2023.

Item 6

Mr Charlie's [@mrcharlies]. (2022, July 10). Best caption wins a nugget [Photo]. Retrieved April 6, 2023.

Item 7

mrcharlies ✔ · Följ
mrcharliesla

mrcharlies ✔ Caption this..

(Funnest gets a FREE frownie meal)

#mrcharlies #plantbaseddog #vegan
#ifthisisyourdogyougetafreemeal
#welovedogs #adoptadogsavealife🐾
#dogsofinstagram

50 v   Visa översättning

Mr Charlie's [@mrcharlies]. (2022, May 29). Caption this.. (Funnest gets a FREE frownie meal) [Photo]. Retrieved April 6, 2023.

Item 8

mrcharlies ✔ · Följ
mrcharliesla   ...

mrcharlies ✔ By popular demand and dropping today at
11:11am –

Your new menu item,

"Not a Chicken Sandwich"

– Until sold out –

🙃❤️🌎

#notachickensandwich #plantbased #communitylove
#newdrop #newmenuitem #vegan #madewithplants
#eatmoreplants #vegnews #vegannews #notchicken #veganla
#plantbasedla

Har redigerats · 57 v   Visa översättning

Mr Charlie's [@mrcharlies]. (2022, April 15). By popular demand and dropping today at 11:11am Your new menu item, "Not a Chicken Sandwich" [Photo]. Retrieved April 6.

Item 9

mrcharlies ✅ · Följ
mrcharliesla

...

mrcharlies ✅ Thanks for the highlight @lamag
Means a lot to all of us ❤️

To our inspiring friends,

@nativefoodscafe @plantpowerfastfood @doomiesnextmex
@vegangloryla @veganhooligansla

We're honored to be mentioned next to you and grateful to be
on this journey of change, together.

Eat more plants people 🙃

#veganfoodfamily #community #vegan #veganla #mrcharlies
#plantbased

Har redigerats · 32 v   Visa översättning

Mr Charlie's [@mrcharlies]. (2022, September 25).Thanks for the highlighting @lamag.
Means a lot to all of us To our inspiring friends, @nativefoodscafe @plantpowerfastfood
@doomiesnextmex @vegangloryla [Photo]. Retrieved April 6, 2023.

Appendix III

Website

Item 1

> ## Our Story
>
> We're three weird dudes, a lovable Korean chef, a manifesting Brit and a creative, who's honestly an alien. Brave misfits, creators, disrupters and Dada's (!!!), who give a shit about the world and the people we share it with.
>
> What would happen if you created a small business with an idea to employ people so deserving of a second chance but overlooked by a broken system? Maybe a burger joint only serving plants in order to better the planet and inspires you to connect to your inner child. Imagine the impact that idea could have on the world?!
>
> We had a little crack at it, and it's called Mr.Charlie's Told Me So. We have earned a reputation of unconditional love, good food, and a beacon of positivity in the community. We are the future, the new wave of experiencing fast food, the kinder and cleaner alternative, powered by the people for the people.
>
> Love,
> Mr.Charlie's TMS :(

Mr Charlie's. (n.d.). *Mission*. Retrieved April 6, 2023, from https://mrcharlies.co/mission

Item 2

> ## Mr.Charlie's mission is to bring approachable plant based food, fun & support to communities.
>
> We are tackling serious issues, with a not-so-serious approach. We are about having a good time and paying it forward. Our goal is to offer more sustainable choices, connect mindfulness to everyday living, & support those who are ready for a second chance.
>
> Global change is a daunting task - but there's only one way to eat an elephant: one bite at a time.
>
> Mr.Charlie's is here to redefine fast food.

Mr Charlie's. (n.d.). *Mission*. Retrieved April 6, 2023, from https://mrcharlies.co/mission

Item 3

Mr Charlie's. (n.d.). *Mr Charlie's*. Retrieved April 6, 2023, from https://mrcharlies.co

Item 4

Mr Charlie's. (n.d.). *Menu*. Retrieved April 6, 2023, https://mrcharlies.co/menu

Item 5

Mr Charlie's. (n.d.). *Mr Charlie's*. Retrieved April 6, 2023, from https://mrcharlies.co

Item 6

Mr Charlie's. (n.d.). *Mr Charlie's*. Retrieved April 6, 2023, from https://mrcharlies.co
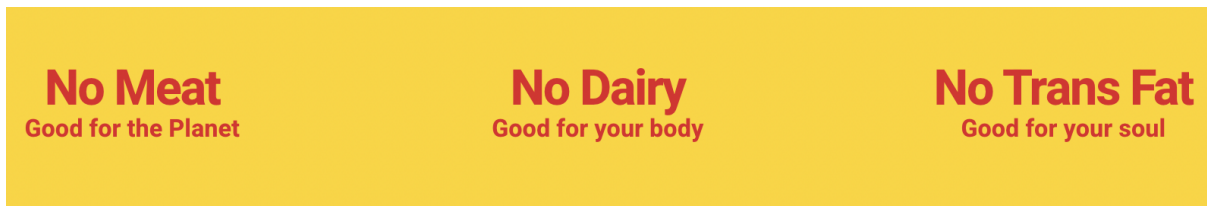
Appendix IIII

Online News Articles

Item 1

> "I had nowhere to go," McKinnon told The Standard. "I was so scared and very suicidal—my mind was crazy."

Kane, A. (2023, February 19). *Formerly Homeless Co-Founder of This Plant-Based McDonald's Alternative Has Never Heard of the Golden Arches.* The San Francisco Standard. https://sfstandard.com/arts-culture/formerly-homeless-co-founder-of-this-plant-based-mcdonalds-alternative-has-never-heard-of-the-golden-arches/

Item 2

> **Alright, so thank you so much for sharing your story and insight with our readers. To kick things off, can you tell us a bit about how you got started?**
> I found myself homeless in LA around eight years ago. I just hit rock bottom, the world felt too much and I had completely given up on myself. I was offered a space at the Dream Center. I had a lot of trust issues which really stemmed from my childhood, I think so many of us feel that weight which leads us to reacting out of fear, self-sabotaging and hurting those closest to us. Deep down I could still feel my heart asking me not to give up so I accepted the help, something I was never good at and something that really changed my life.

Voyage La. (2023, February 6). *Meet Taylor Mckinnon.* Voyage LA. http://voyagela.com/interview/meet-taylor-mckinnon-of-los-angeles/

Item 3

> "We feel like we're spokes on the wheel of transformation," he says. "I say 'spoke'
> because we're not trying to reinvent the wheel here. Many people did that before us,
> and I think we're just a part of it. I like to think of [Mr. Charlie's] as a little red and yellow
> spoke on that wheel."

Martinez, J. (2023, January 19). *When One McDonald's Closes, An Even Better Vegan One Opens.* Veg News. https://vegnews.com/vegan-recipes/restaurants/vegan-big-mac-create-jobs

Item 4

> "If you have a failing fast food restaurant anywhere in the country and you need the
> help and it's something that we can support, we are down to Mr. Charlie your space
> and partner with you," he said. "We can work with your staff and retain those jobs."

Harris, J. (2023, March 16). *The story behind the 'vegan McDonald's' on TikTok.* Los Angeles Times. https://www.latimes.com/food/story/2022-03-16/vegan-mcdonalds-los-angeles-tiktok

Item 5

> "If you're [unhoused] and you don't have any ID, it's impossible to get a job," McKinnon says. "Our
> partnership with the Dream Center is [Mr. Charlie's way] of stepping up as an organization and saying, 'We
> don't care about what you've done in your life. We have no judgment. We believe that if you want to start
> again … we are a safe haven to welcome you back to society. And we're not going to scold you for it—
> we're not going to pay you low wages.'"

Martinez, J. (2023, January 19). *When One McDonald's Closes, An Even Better Vegan One Opens.* Veg News. https://vegnews.com/vegan-recipes/restaurants/vegan-big-mac-create-jobs

Item 6

"McDonald's who?" Kim said on a recent phone call.

Harris, J. (2023, March 16). *The story behind the 'vegan McDonald's' on TikTok.* Los Angeles Times.
https://www.latimes.com/food/story/2022-03-16/vegan-mcdonalds-los-angeles-tiktok

Item 7

"I have no idea what you're talking about," he said, when asked if he's afraid of getting sued. "Our logo is inspired by something very personal: It's OK to be sad sometimes."

Kane, A. (2023, February 19). *Formerly Homeless Co-Founder of This Plant-Based McDonald's Alternative Has Never Heard of the Golden Arches.* The San Francisco Standard.
https://sfstandard.com/arts-culture/formerly-homeless-co-founder-of-this-plant-based-mcdonalds-alternative-has-never-heard-of-the-golden-arches/