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Milking the Industry: The Expiration Date of Brand Rivalries

An in-depth qualitative study unraveling consumer attitudes toward an inter-firm brand rivalry in the Swedish milk industry

by

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Abstract

The cultural significance of dairy milk in Sweden is deeply ingrained, with dairy products being a staple at the breakfast table. However, the past decade has witnessed a formidable challenge to the traditional Swedish dairy industry, with the rise of plant-based milk alternatives. The emergence of new preferences has spurred the ascent of brands like Oatly. The Swedish oat drink producer Oatly, who has initiated a brand rivalry by da(i)ring the heritage brand Arla, a representative of the traditional dairy industry in Scandinavia. Arla and Oatly diverge not only in their product offerings but also in their brand values and ideologies. While Arla has built a well-known reputation for their production of dairy milk products, Oatly vehemently challenges the traditional milk consumption with their plant-based products. In this shifting landscape, where consumers' brand choices are not solely about fulfilling their needs, but also about expressing their self-identity, the study delves into the attitudes of Swedish consumers towards the brand rivalry between Oatly and Arla. Drawing on Tajfel's (1974) Social Identity Theory, Graham and Wilder's (2020) Consumer-Brand Identification and Festinger's (1957) Cognitive Dissonance Theory, this study illuminates the wide spectrum of complex consumer attitudes engendered by the brand rivalry in the milk industry. Our findings reveal a nuanced interplay of both positive and negative attitudes, culminating in the proposition of the concept of Ideological Brand Rivalry.

Keywords: brand rivalry, milk industry, consumer attitudes, inter-firm rivalry, brand ideology, comparative advertising, Social Identity Theory, Consumer-Brand Identification, Cognitive Dissonance, Ideological Brand Rivalry

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1. Introduction

This chapter provides an overview of the background for the research topic followed by the presentation of the gap in existing literature. It also explains the problematization behind the study and presents the research question. Additionally, this chapter defines the aims and contributions. Lastly, the delimitations are elucidated and the chapter concludes with the presentation of the outline of the thesis. To clarify, throughout this study the word “milk” is not exclusively restricted to dairy milk but also encompasses non-dairy, plant-based alternatives.

1.1. Background

Milk is “the most argued-over food in human history” (Kurlansky, 2018, p.3). Dairy milk is globally used and inherently embedded into human nature, history and culture. Yet, despite its universal use, milk is a divisive commodity, as preference and use differs between nations and cultures (Kurlansky, 2018). In the last few decades, dairy consumption has undergone a profound transformation following the rise in the commercial use of dairy-free milks. Particularly, consumer attitudes toward the dairy industry have experienced a major evolution in the past ten years through the massive rise in popularity of plant-based milks (Cardello, 2022; Petersen, 2022). While non-dairy milks have existed for centuries, increased awareness of climate change among consumers helped catalyze the evolving landscape of dairy consumption (Petersen, 2022). Consumers are becoming more conscious of the effects of climate change and are therefore choosing to make environmentally-friendly choices such as consuming plant-based food products (Cardello, 2022; Petersen, 2022). As consumption behavior has changed, so have the attitudes consumers bear towards the plethora of different products available in today’s market. This phenomenon of changing consumer attitudes has fueled a noticeable divide among consumers, as some stay loyal to the traditional dairy products, while others embrace the plant-based alternatives. In fact, this split has transformed into a heated relationship between dairy and meat consumers and vegans, which has even been coined as the “war on vegans” (Reynolds, 2019). Arguably, the dairy industry is transitioning into “the post-milk generation”, a slogan which Oatly has adopted and trademarked into their operations (Clark, 2023), as

consumers shift from traditional dairy consumption to welcoming alternative plant-based beverages (Lewis, 2018).

In Sweden, dairy milk is deeply ingrained into its culture and milk consumption does not end after infancy, but rather continues throughout people's lives (Lewis, 2018). Sweden's dairy consumption per capita is one of the highest in the world, some years even the highest, for example in 2007, according to the Food and Agriculture Organization (The Local, 2014). Consequently, dairy producers such as Arla have a long history in Sweden, holding a symbolic meaning to consumers as milk is firmly entrenched into the tradition and habits of Swedes. Amidst Sweden's deep-rooted dairy culture, the tension sparked by the emergence of plant-based milks is visible. At the center of this strife are two Scandinavian dairy producers, Oatly and Arla. Over the past decade, these two companies have come head-to-head in an intense brand rivalry. Oatly, a Swedish plant-based milk company, achieved widespread recognition from their critique of the traditional dairy milk companies (Swain, 2023). While they swiftly gained popularity through these creative tactics among consumers, competitors in the industry were not impressed. In 2014, the Swedish Dairy Association (hereafter referred to as SDA) decided to take legal action against Oatly's "IT'S LIKE MILK BUT MADE FOR HUMANS" slogan (Swain, 2023). Thus, the inaugural moves were made and the brand rivalry had begun. Seemingly, Oatly did not aim its attacks on any specific company, but rather challenged the whole industry with the aforementioned advertisement. Not long after, Arla, part of Arla Foods which is the biggest dairy manufacturer in Europe (The Danish Agriculture & Food Council, n.d.), decided to fight fire with fire, retaliating by using creative advertising campaigns such as their well-known "Milk is milk" campaign (Goldberg, 2019), wherein individuals refer to non-dairy milk products labeled "Brölk" or "Pjök" to show consumers that such products do not compare with Arla's dairy milk (Swain, 2023). Consequently, Arla became the key spokesperson for the dairy industry in the brand rivalry against Oatly. The Stockholm-based marketing agency behind this campaign drew inspiration from the cultural significance of milk in Sweden's culture. A representative from the agency emphasized this by stating in an interview "Milk has been a natural part of Swedes' diet and culture for over a century—it's in the Swedes' souls" (Goldberg, 2019). Oatly's CEO Petersson, however, holds opposing views on the Swedish milk culture, asserting that plant-based alternative milks are "not a trend" but rather that they serve as "a paradigm shift" that will result in the sales of dairy-free milks overtaking those of regular milk (Lewis, 2018).

Oatly and Arla's employing of aggressive and deriding comparative advertisements demonstrate a departure from conventional marketing. While one third of all advertisements are of comparative nature (Grewal et al., 1997) meaning that they have an element of comparison, either to another brand, product or advertisement, the adverts disseminated during the milk rivalry are more ideologically loaded and both companies are thereby making big strides in outmaneuvering and outshining the other. Traditionally advertisements are utilized to encourage consumers to buy a firm's products and services (Dalli, Grappi & Romani, 2011), however, in this dynamic, oversaturated and fast-evolving marketing landscape, companies evidently employ creative and even audacious strategies to distinguish themselves from the fierce competition. Brand rivalries, especially evident in sports (Havard, 2014), such as among football clubs, serve as a dynamic interplay of innovation, brand competition, and customer attitude. Inter-firm rivalries, that is, "rivalry between firms" (Berendt, Uhrich, & Thompson, 2018, p.161), which will be the focus of this study, have permeated various industries, most notable rivalries include Coca-Cola and Pepsi as well as Mercedes and BMW, whose extensive and lengthy rivalries span several decades, during which the firms have resorted to campaigns making a reference or comparison to the rival and its products, thus attempting to smear the opponent and sway consumer preferences (Beard, 2010; Muehling, Vijayalakshmi, & Laczniak, 2018). Such advertising is called attack or comparison advertising (Muehling et al., 2018). While comparative advertising takes place between the firms, consumers are also subjected to this rivalry through the exposure of the ads and marketing material of the firms. Followers or fans of the brands can get involved with the brand rivalry themselves. This involvement stems from the fact that brands have become a pivotal form of self-expression and -identification for consumers (Graham & Wilder, 2020), since consumers project their own values and self-image onto the companies they adhere to (Tuškej & Podnar, 2018). The stronger the feelings of self-identification, the higher the likelihood of them viewing the brand and its advertisements positively (Graham & Wilder, 2020). This notion also applies to everyday commodities such as breakfast goods (Kleine, Kleine & Kerne, 1993) and therefore also to an everyday yet universally used product like milk. Consequently, the dynamic relationship between consumer attitudes and brands in the realm of brand rivalries is worthy of comprehensive study, especially since this rivalry is ultimately deeply rooted in the ideological differences that the brands represent, rather than the brands itself, and also because the consumer attitudes toward the dairy industry are evolving drastically.

1.2. Problematization and Research Question

The ongoing brand rivalry between Oatly and Arla, as evidenced by their comparative advertising campaigns and various lawsuits, is a current and topical phenomenon taking place within Sweden. It has received vast media coverage, yet the rivalry has not been widely studied in academic research.

In 2020, Lerberg and Nilsson (2020) delved into an examination of consumers' attitudes towards brands partaking in a brand rivalry, specifically between Oatly and Arla. Their study shed light on the intricate interplay between consumer attitudes, brand knowledge, leveraging of consumers' emotions, and the coherence of core values with the participation in the rivalry (Lerberg & Nilsson, 2020). While their research marked a seminal contribution by primarily touching upon a limited spectrum of attitudes since their focus was how the rivalry affects consumers' attitudes towards brands, thus leaving a considerable portion of this domain unexplored. Conversely to Lerberg and Nilsson's (2020) study, ours further elucidates the influence of an inter-firm rivalry on consumers' brand adherence. Notably, the prior study rather expounded the notion of word-of-mouth and buzz marketing while overlooking comparative advertisements which are the principal tools through which brand rivalries are carried out. Moreover, given the ongoing nature of the rivalry, numerous new facets and developments have since emerged, necessitating a contemporaneous understanding of the subject matter. The enduring ten-year duration of the rivalry emphasizes the imperative to delve deeper into this topic, as the consumer attitudes may have developed or transformed since Lerberg and Nilsson's (2020) study. Additionally this study employs a larger number of focus groups than Lerberg and Nilsson (2020) and introduces the requirement of familiarity with the ongoing rivalry between Oatly and Arla, by recruiting adherents of each brand for the focus groups, hence encouraging profound and insightful discussion on the ongoing rivalry. Thereby it amplifies the depth and breadth of the analysis and enriches the understanding of this dynamic landscape.

Existing research has also explored Oatly's attempt at delegitimizing the dairy industry (Koch & Ulver, 2022), the strategies involved in this milk war (Agnihotri & Bhattacharya, 2021), as well as consumer attitudes and perceptions toward rivalries between producers of other consumer goods such as Coca-Cola and Pepsi. Nonetheless, there remains ample opportunity for further

exploration, especially within the milk industry. The rivalry between two Scandinavian milk companies provides a compelling business context for examining consumer attitudes toward brand rivalries. Considering these, our study adds to the understanding of brand rivalry by compiling existing literature on attitudes towards the phenomenon as an underlying concept. Establishing this compilation is pivotal as the existing literature was very scattered and dispersed, therefore necessitating the consolidating and identifying of key consumer attitudes toward brand rivalries. Thus, this synthesis serves as a basis from which future research can be built on.

Additionally, understanding this brand rivalry is paramount due to the evolving shift in the Swedish dairy industry through the rapid increase in the popularity of plant-based milk alternatives by companies such as Oatly in recent years. Company motivations are shifting toward values of sustainability and environmental friendliness in response to consumers' growing expectation of brands incorporating societal and environmental objectives into their business activities (Graham & Wilder, 2020). This is exemplified by Oatly, which has become the symbol for disruptive newcomers embracing an ideology of the post-milk generation (Clark, 2023), showcasing this ethos through public activism for plant-based lifestyles (Koch & Ulver, 2022). Following the legal actions initiated against Oatly, the company has taken it upon itself to not only confront Arla, its brand rival, but also the entire Swedish dairy industry. The oat giant has made their stance on traditional dairy milk very clear by publicly criticizing Arla for producing and selling dairy milk and consequently contributing to global warming (Agnihotri & Bhattacharya, 2021). Additionally, Oatly has employed aggressive marketing tactics toward the dairy industry, for example by challenging all players in the industry to publish their carbon footprint on an advertisement paid by Oatly (Oatly, 2023). Oatly's public activism has contributed to the destabilization of the dairy industry (Koch & Ulver, 2022), which the traditional dairy producers and SDA are trying to prevent. This demand for transparency and use of thought-provoking statements from the whole dairy industry symbolizes a shift towards more disruptive, confrontational and wide-ranging brand rivalries, driven by values emphasizing sustainability and animal welfare.

In contrast, Arla Foods stands as a history-rich and deeply-rooted brand in the Scandinavian dairy industry and has its mission "to secure the highest value for our farmers' milk while

creating opportunities for their growth” (Arla Foods, n.d.d). The company accounts for the vast majority of Denmark’s and Sweden’s milk processing, signifying its substantial influence and representative status within the traditional dairy industry across Europe (The Danish Agriculture & Food Council, n.d.). Arla's role in shaping dairy production standards, practices, and potentially market trends across the region underscores its commitment to preserving established industry norms and values. As evidenced throughout research, the production of dairy milk entails several negative consequences on the environment, such as greenhouse gas emissions consequenting global temperature augmentation, water pollution or deforestation to provide additional land for cattle (Pope et al., 2021). These ramifications of the dairy industry is what Oatly is attempting to combat by conveying a more sustainable consumption practice, and advocating for transparency in the dairy industry, as seen in their advertisements (Oatly, n.d.c). This juxtaposition highlights the ideological clash between Oatly’s disruptive, value-driven approach and Arla’s emphasis on tradition and growth within the dairy sector.

As the landscape of the industry evolves, so do the consumer attitudes towards it. A significant number of consumers are becoming more conscious of the availability of environmentally friendly and plant-based products (Linné & McCrow-Young, 2017), such as the likes of Oatly’s dairy-free milk. Evolving consumer preferences in this context not only signify changing tastes, but also the widening ideological and values-based divergence among consumers. Research shows that consumers no longer consume just for the brand, but also for the values, beliefs and principles the brand represents (Luedicke, Thompson & Giesler, 2009; McCracken, 1986; Shepherd, Chartrand, & Fitzsimons, 2015). As this dairy phenomenon represents a division rooted in opposing values, it is fueling a growing friction that provides a novel setting for study to unveil the nuanced attitudes of consumers in this new context.

Among other key reasons, this argument of customers using brands to display their identity and beliefs contributes significantly to the rationale behind prioritizing the consumer over firm perspective into brand rivalries. As the rivalry is acted out by the companies through the use of comparative advertisements, consumers are subjected to the adverts, thus becoming the third party implicated in this rivalry. Consumers’ unavoidable involvement in the rivalry highlights the importance of studying their attitudes toward the rivalry. What’s more, taking on the consumer

perspective can be beneficial to companies, as understanding consumers' take on the rivalry can provide useful information for future marketing strategies and operations.

In regards to the theory utilized to understand brand rivalries, existing literature have widely applied Social Identity Theory (hereafter referred to as SIT) (Dalakas & Phillips-Melancon, 2012; Havard, Ferrucci, & Ryan, 2021; Hickman & Ward, 2007; Kuo & Hou, 2017; Phillips-Melancon & Dalakas, 2014) and its counterpart Consumer-Brand Identification (hereafter referred to as CBI) (Graham & Wilder, 2020). However, in order to comprehensively explore the nuanced attitudes consumers bear toward Oatly and Arla's rivalry, which is seeped in ideological tension, another theoretical lens must be introduced into the conversation. Unlike SIT and CBI, Cognitive Dissonance Theory offers an explanation that explicates the internal conflict consumers may experience in response to the rivalry. While SIT contributes valuable understanding of the personal association consumers form with brands, incorporating Cognitive Dissonance into the academic discourse will cultivate a holistic understanding of brand rivalries and consumer attitudes toward them by taking into account other societal contexts such as political and cultural forces that define the rivalry between Arla and Oatly.

Moreover, research on brand rivalries has predominantly been conducted using quantitative methodologies in recent decades (Berendt et al., 2018; Kilduff et al, 2010). The overrepresentation of quantitative research presents a methodological gap in the current literature, which this study intends to fill. It is paramount to study the chosen topic using qualitative methods in order to capture the nuanced layers of consumer attitudes toward brand rivalries that quantitative methods fail to grasp. Employing qualitative methods also brings originality to the study by revealing novel insights and themes through an alternative methodological lens.

Therefore, it is imperative to problematize the lack of understanding of consumer attitudes toward this unprecedented and animated brand rivalry. Consumer attitudes represent "the tendency to respond to an object with some degree of favorableness or unfavorableness" (Ajzen, 2018, p.530) encompassing a spectrum of positive and negative emotions, behavioral responses and mental processes (Dubey & Kothari, 2022). In addition, by recognizing the need for qualitative research, this study aims to provide a more in-depth and holistic understanding of the

influence of inter-firm rivalry in the Swedish milk industry on consumers that is predominantly carried out in comparative ads. Thus, this thesis explores the following research question:

What attitudes do Swedish consumers exhibit in response to the brand rivalry between a plant-based and a traditional dairy milk brand in the milk industry and how does it influence their adherence?

1.3. Aims and Contributions

Drawing upon the gap mentioned above, the purpose of this thesis is to explore and uncover nuanced and subjective attitudes of consumers toward the brand rivalry between two Scandinavian milk manufacturers, Oatly and Arla. Also, we aim to investigate how this particular inter-firm brand rivalry influences consumers' adherence to their preferred brands. This research delves into the intricacies of brand rivalries and consumer attitudes through the application of qualitative methodology. Such aspects, ordinarily overlooked by quantitative approaches, are crucial in gaining a comprehensive understanding on the topic. Through engaging consumer discussions between focus group participants, this study contributes to existing literature on consumer attitudes toward brand rivalries. As there seems to be different findings on consumer attitudes toward brand rivalries in current literature, we aim at compiling these and investigating if certain patterns can be revealed among our participants. Our endeavor to contribute to current literature further by compiling and consolidating the diverse perspectives and patterns of consumer attitudes. Moreover, the study aims to provide novel insights in the understanding of such attitudes in a brand rivalry between the Swedish dairy industry, which remains previously overlooked in existing research in the realm of brand rivalries. This will be accomplished through the application of Cognitive Dissonance Theory, which has yet to be used in academic research to study brand rivalries. In doing so, applying a different theoretical lens to the research provides the opportunity of uncovering diverse and fresh insights, alongside the commonly used SIT and CBI. Further research into the Swedish milk industry, a rather unexplored and transforming industry, is warranted, thus this study aims to contribute to a holistic understanding of consumer attitudes in the realm of brand rivalries.

1.4. Delimitations

Building upon the preceding section, this study intends to explore Swedish consumers' attitudes in regards to the brand rivalry between a dairy- and a plant-based milk brand. Considering this aim, the need of maintaining a manageable scope and the motivation of producing in-depth and valuable contributions, the study's focus is limited to one particular industry, specifically the Swedish milk industry. By concentrating efforts within a single industry context, the study aims to achieve a more thorough examination of an inter-firm rivalry and consumers' elicited attitudes unique to the Swedish milk industry. Thus, this study is also geographically limited to Sweden due to the predominance of comparative advertisements between Oatly and Arla being published and disseminated in Swedish. It is further worth mentioning that Oatly's provocations are not exclusively restricted to its Swedish competitor Arla but also targets and questions the whole milk industry within and beyond Swedish borders, however the focus predominantly lies on the inter-firm rivalry, thus the rivalry between two Scandinavian brands namely Oatly and Arla. This deliberate focus enables a nuanced analysis that can uncover industry-specific findings and implications, ultimately contributing to a richer body of knowledge within this particular domain. Finally, this study is limited to examining the consumer perspective on brand rivalries between the specified milk producers. Despite recognizing that a holistic understanding of brand rivalries necessitates insights from both consumer and brand viewpoints, this study accepts the scope limitation and focuses on the valuable insights into consumer attitudes provided by the consumer-centric approach.

1.5. Outline of the Thesis

The following sections of this study introduce the reviewed literature and theory that forms the basis of the research. This will be followed by an in-depth explanation of the chosen methodology and a reflection of its research quality and research ethics. The study will present a thorough analysis and discussion of the findings from the primary research. Lastly, we propose a conceptual framework, implications and limitations.

2. Literature Review

This chapter aims to review the existing literature on the key literature streams of brand rivalry and consumer attitudes. The chapter also compiles the existing literature on consumer attitudes towards brand rivalries which will provide the foundation for the understanding of attitudes within this context. Lastly, this chapter aims to critically evaluate the previous research in order to explicate the necessity for this study.

2.1. Brand Rivalry

Brand rivalry is a phenomenon evident across a wide array of industries (Berendt et al., 2018). It ensues when opposing companies perceive the pressure or the possibility to enhance their market position (Porter, 1980). Kilduff, Elfenbein and Staw (2010, p.945) define rivalry as a “subjective competitive relationship that an actor has with another actor that entails increased psychological involvement and perceived stakes of competition”. According to the authors, rivalries are based on a competition between two actors in which one seeks to surpass or outshine the market leader (Kilduff et al., 2010). They highlight its pertinence among different areas, but within the business context they refer to the well-known inter-firm brand rivalries between Coca-Cola and Pepsi, Oracle and SAP, as well as Microsoft and Apple. Their conceptualization of rivalry is widely embraced by scholars in the study of brand rivalries (Alvarado-Karste & Kidwell, 2021; Berendt et al., 2018; Havard, 2021). The authors also highlight the distinction between rivalry and competition by elaborating on the relational and subjective element, meaning that it resides in rival brands’ minds (Kilduff et al., 2010). By “perceived stakes of competition” Kilduff et al. (2010, p.945) point out the possibility of firms deviating from economically sound actions. In essence, engaging in a rivalry connotes that a market actor assigns greater importance to competing against a specific opponent due to their competitive relationships than against others (Kilduff et al., 2010).

Converse and Reinhard (2016) also add to this understanding by stating that rivalry distinguishes from conventional competition by the factor of embeddedness amidst a continuing competitive narrative. Competition is subject to the prevailing circumstances and can be suspended or reinstated. However, if sustained and repeated over an extended duration, it may evolve into a

rivalry (Converse & Reinhard, 2016; Kilduff et al., 2010). Converse and Reinhard (2016) further claim that a rivalry may solely be established between companies when there exists a shared history between the relevant brands and that they might evoke “legacy concerns” to those involved. Thereby, they imply that during a rivalry, brands are not simply concerned about the present, but also about the future perception of the brand and thus emphasize that brand rivalries permeate in the past, present and future, which highlight the magnitude of rivalries. The resonance of brand rivalries in time is especially crucial as Berendt et al. (2018) hint at the negative connotation and the potential risks they can have on companies. Engaging in rivalries is therefore recommended to be avoided, according to Berendt et al. (2018), as it may also include hostile or undesirable behaviors such as *schadenfreude*, deriving pleasure from another person’s misfortune, or taunting. According to Phillips-Melancon and Dalakas (2014), *schadenfreude* may also evolve in consumers who strongly identify with the rival brand. Converse and Reinhard (2016, p.208) similarly mention the “reckless behavior and thoughtless mistakes” that rivalries may entail. Previous research has mainly emphasized the negative aspects of brand rivalries as such.

Conversely, Berendt et al. (2018) also contribute to a more positive understanding of carrying out brand rivalries and highlight the benefits for companies as well as their consumers. They find that the engagement in a rivalry between brands, which they refer to as inter-firm rivalry, contributes to a brand’s distinctiveness and to brand identification. Moreover, it results in interest for a product category as communication among consumers increases (Berendt et al., 2018). If a rivalry is carried out and fueled by consumers, a notion denoted as inter-consumer brand rivalry (Berendt et al., 2018), it may offer individuals a sense of identity, enjoyment, as well as amusement (Muñiz & O’Guinn, 2001; Seraj, Kozinets, & Toker, 2015 cited in Berendt et al., 2018). Thus, in inter-consumer brand rivalries the “competitive narrative” (Berendt et al., 2018, p.162) is established by and targeted to consumers themselves, whereas in inter-firm brand rivalry it is crafted by the brands. Evidently, prior literature is largely split in that both negative and positive attitudes have been captured by scholars studying consumer attitudes toward brand rivalries, reflecting the complex and multifaceted nature of the phenomenon. Given the wide array of attitudes revealed by prior research, it is crucial to review and synthesize these perspectives. The following sections will review the existing literature, exploring both the positive and negative attitudes to attain a comprehensive understanding on the subject matter.

2.2. Consumer Attitudes in Brand Rivalries

Since consumer identities can be closely involved in brand rivalries, consumer attitudes can be greatly influenced simultaneously. Attitude encompasses an affective, a cognitive and a behavioral aspect. Emotions such as “anger, happiness, shame, distress, guilt” (Dubey & Kothari, 2022, p.50) constitute the affective part of attitudes. The cognitive aspect refers to “beliefs, opinions, knowledge, and information” resulting from prior experiences of an individual and additional sources, whereas the behavioral element encloses behavioral responses and actions of individuals to an object, a person (Dubey & Kothari, 2022, p.50), or in our case to a brand rivalry. However, it has to be noted that the behavioral aspect is limited to the behavioral reactions exhibited within the focus group discussion, in response to demonstrated advertisements.

Within marketing literature, consumer attitudes have been defined by numerous scholars. Ajzen (2018, p.530) aggregated definitions from various academics regarding consumer attitudes, ultimately defining it as “the tendency to respond to an object with some degree of favorableness or unfavorableness”. Individuals display an “evaluative reaction” to an object in focus, which is typically believed to be influenced by their prior beliefs and expectations toward the object (Ajzen, 2018, p.530). As such, the element of favorableness exhibited towards products, brands or advertisements (Madichie & Kapoor, 2012), refers to the spectrum of positive and negative emotions displayed.

Extant literature on brand rivalries reveals a wide spectrum of consumer attitudes displayed toward brands in the midst of a feud. Brand rivalries are often played out by targeted and even aggressive advertising campaigns, thus implicating consumers who are exposed and subjected to the adverts. Consequently, consumers reveal deep and complex consumer attitudes in response. Several authors have investigated the positive impact of such advertisements on attitudes (Del Barrio-García, Munoz-Leiva, & Golden, 2020; Grewal, Kavanoor, Fern, Costley & Barnes, 1997; Lerberg & Nilsson, 2020), while others reveal the negative attitudes expressed from being subjected to brand rivalries (Beard, 2008; Lerberg & Nilsson, 2020). Thus, several topics and findings on consumer attitudes toward inter-firm and inter-consumer rivalries emerge in the literature. As the two kinds of rivalries are closely interlinked, attitudes towards either kind of

rivalry have been reviewed and synthesized into three main attitudes; Brand Superiority, Brand Allegiance and Snarky Satisfaction.

2.2.1. Brand Superiority

Existing literature heralds a prominent theme among consumers which is their keen liking and partiality toward their preferred brand, exhibited by consumers in several ways. As these sentiments encompass the overarching attitude of deeming one's preferred brand to be better than the rival brand, it was amalgamated to represent the attitude of Brand Superiority.

Berendt et al. (2018) contend superiority to be the most common attitude consumers conveyed toward their preferred brand. The study suggests that consumers' stance on superiority can manifest as various emotions among inter-firm and inter-consumer rivalries (Berendt et al., 2018). The authors posit that rivalries strengthen perceived brand distinctiveness among consumers through the mediation of brand identification (Berendt et al., 2018). In essence, brand rivalries help shape the company's distinctiveness in the minds of their customers as consumers' identities become more attached to the brand. In fact, consumer yearning of the distinction between their preferred brand and its group of fellow brand adherents, thus their in-group, from the rival's group, the out-group, is highlighted throughout existing literature on brand rivalries (Havard, 2014; Hickman & Ward, 2007). Consumers' assertion of their favored brand's distinctiveness signifies their belief that the brand is superior to the rival.

As participants demonstrate the attitude of superiority through conveying their preferred brand's distinctiveness, literature suggests that consumers also express superiority through another facet, that is, in-group bias (Havard, 2014). Consumer involvement in brand rivalries enables them to enhance their identity through the separation of their in-group from the out-group (Berendt et al., 2018). Consequently, engaging in brand rivalries seems to be beneficial for the brand adherents as it provides an outlet through which individuals can express and enhance their identity (Berendt et al., 2018). In his study on university sports fan attitudes on sports rivalries, Havard (2014) found that fans tend to develop a tendency to prefer the members of their in-group. Also, the members have a sense of superiority over those in the other out-groups. When inquiring participants about their views on the academic reputation of the competing university, participants felt that their home university was academically superior to the rival university,

despite having limited knowledge about the rival university's academics (Havard, 2014). This indicates a profound bias towards their home university, which contestably influences their judgment toward the rival university. As a result, this psychological attachment fosters biases that affect and influence the students' judgments. Drawing on research on brand rivalries, Havard's (2014) study demonstrating the psychological aspect of consumers' bond to a brand corresponds to the identification of the psychological involvement that encircles brand rivalries, as highlighted by Kilduff et al. (2010). What's more, the aforementioned attachment of the fans to their favorite team indicates the notion of embeddedness, which distinguishes rivalries from traditional competition (Converse & Reinhard, 2016). Furthermore, the fans' demonstration of cognitive biases of preconceived notions and opinions about the rival university team despite contradicting information, highlights that the in-group bias can lead to the formation of stereotypes regarding the rival. The presence of stereotypes among consumer attitudes toward brand rivalry highlights Brown's (2000) contention of members of a group inclination to believe that their own group surpasses those of other groups and cause them to assume stereotypes. Evidently, the in-group bias highlights a deep psychological link between individuals and brand rivalries.

The attitude of Brand Superiority also manifests in other emotions among consumers. A few studies have identified warmth as a prominent emotion consumers had towards their preferred brands' community members in brand rivalries (Hickman & Ward, 2007; Lerberg & Nilsson, 2020). It is conveyed in the consumers expressing that the other users of the same brand, thus the in-group members, are warmer than users of the rival brand (Hickman & Ward, 2007; Lerberg & Nilsson, 2020). Moreover, the study by Hickman and Ward (2007) reveals competence as an attitude consumers expressed, in the sense that consumers viewed the users of their preferred brand as more competent than the users of the opposing brand. Seemingly, the aforementioned emotions are expressed in comparison to the rival, denoting that such attitudes are inherently tied to the competitive aspect of a rivalry which prompts such emotions. Thus, these factors collectively contribute to the construction of Brand Superiority as a significant consumer attitude toward brand rivalries.

2.2.2. Brand Allegiance

Another distinguished theme that surfaced from existing literature on attitudes toward brand rivalries is Brand Allegiance. This attitude serves as an amalgamation of the findings from previous literature that highlight different themes and emotions regarding loyalty that are evoked by a brand rivalry. It encapsulates the unwavering loyalty that consumers exhibit towards their preferred brand, which research shows regularly prompts a form of brand blindness among consumers.

As highlighted previously, consumers can derive meaning and a part of their identity from the brands they support and consume. However, Muniz and Hamer (2001b) contend that people can also derive meaning and identity by opposing a brand. The authors were the first ones to introduce the notion of oppositional brand loyalty (Muniz & Hamer, 2001b). They posit that oppositional brand loyalty materializes in two ways; by the consumers' choice on what to consume and through their expression of their opposition to the rival brand (Muniz & Hamer, 2001b). Since its conception, oppositional brand loyalty has been studied widely in academic literature, particularly in relation to brand communities. A brand community is "a specialized, non-geographically bound community, based on a structured set of social relationships among admirers of a brand" and it is "specialized" due to being centered around a product or service (Muniz & Hamer, 2001a, p.412). Brand communities and in-groups are paralleled as they are both unified social groups formed around shared interests and values. Additionally, the members of the community have the tendency to overestimate the community's performance and conversely underestimate that of the rival group (Tajfel, 1979; Tajfel & Turner, 1985). Scholars have termed this concept in several ways, such as in-group bias (Havard, 2014) as mentioned in the previous section, and in-group favoritism (Kuo & Hou, 2017), however, they encompass the same attitude. Evidently, in-group bias emphasizes deeming one's group to be more distinct and superior as well as fostering strong loyalty to the group one belongs to (Havard, 2014). Havard (2014) discovered the existence of in-group bias among sports fans toward their favorite sports team, whereby the participants considered their favorite team's university to be superior to the competing university even though this judgment was not founded on any facts or evidence. The author contended respondents were effectively blind to the merits of the rival university due to their psychological attachment to the community of the university, thus reflecting bias and

favoritism among them. Graham and Wilder (2020) support this claim, as they found consumers to be blind to negative information about a brand they strongly connect with in order to protect their relationship between their identity and the brand.

Moreover, a notable study in the realm of the relation between brand rivalries and oppositional brand loyalty was produced by Kuo and Hou (2017), who explore oppositional brand loyalty as an aspect of self-brand connection in consumers belonging to online automobile brand communities in Taiwan. Self-brand connection signifies “consumers who not only identify with a specific brand, but also incorporate such brand into their self-concept” (Kuo & Hou, 2017, p.258). Their finding of consumers with a self-brand connection indicates that brands can be utilized to develop or find one’s own self. Moreover, as Kuo and Hou (2017) delved into this connection of consumers with strong affinities toward a particular car brand, they discovered that such individuals are prone to exhibit zealous oppositional brand loyalty. Seemingly, brand communities were found to be conducive environments for fostering such strong brand adherence (Kuo & Hou, 2017). In the communities they studied, brand enthusiasts displayed passionate loyalty towards their preferred brand in that they advocated their products and openly and regularly criticized the rival brand (Kuo & Hou, 2017). Arguably, as consumers identify with and incorporate the brand into their self-identity, they showcase strong loyalties toward the brand.

The robust link between consumers’ identities and brand rivalries was explored in greater detail by Alvarado-Karste and Kidwell (2022), who studied the role of resentment as an attitude within that association. TenHouten (2006 cited in Alvarado-Karste & Kidwell, 2022, p.638) argues resentment encompasses several negative sentiments such as “disappointment, anger and fear”. Similarly, Lerberg and Nilsson (2020), who studied the effect of firm’s involvement in a rivalry on consumer attitudes towards brands, found anger, dislike and sadness in consumers. Resentment, as presented in the aforementioned emotions, is prevalent in consumer attitudes toward rivalries due to the fact that consumers’ identities are involved in the rivalries since consumers tend to choose the brand that matches their “moral self-identity”, and thus, tend to “disassociate themselves from brands that are unfair to others, decreasing their brand attitudes” (Alvarado-Karste & Kidwell, 2022, p.645). Consequently, as consumers disassociate themselves from a brand, resentment plays a prominent role in their attitudes. The authors further explicate

the role of resentment through consumers' embeddedness into the timeline of the rivalry. Similarly to Converse and Reinhard (2016), Alvarado-Karste and Kidwell (2022) contend that consumers' embeddedness throughout the rivalry influences their attitudes, finding that consumers that focus on the past experience resentment more intensely and view brands as stronger than those focused on the future. This may be due to the fact that a stronger resonance of rivalries in the past entails a better understanding of the brand's engagement in the conflict, thereby increasing awareness of and linking one's identity throughout the brand's history in the rivalry. Arguably, as consumers build a stronger association with a brand, they present stronger loyalty towards it due to their embeddedness. This aligns with Muniz and Hamer's (2001b) contention that people derive meaning and identity from opposing a brand. Consumers' showing of resentment toward a rival encapsulates their opposition of the rival as well.

Evidently, in brand rivalries, consumers exhibit not only strong oppositional brand loyalty, but also a fervent in-group bias that manifests as complete disregard for either the merits of the opposing brand or any negative information regarding their preferred brand. The concepts are inherently intertwined and manifest in succession, necessitating an amalgamation that describes the whole phenomenon. Thus, such emotions demonstrate a psychologically involving and unwavering connection to one's preferred brand, thus forming the attitude of Brand Allegiance.

2.2.3. Snarky Satisfaction

Another attitude that emerged from existing literature is what we titled Snarky Satisfaction that reflects a complex amalgamation of the playful nature of the rivalry which may at times be shadowed by a satisfaction at the rival's failure.

In Muniz and Hamer's (2001b) examination into the brand rivalry between Coca-Cola and Pepsi, playful exchanges and light-hearted joking were discovered. Their research unveils a spirited nature of competition among the consumers which is occasionally expressed through backhanded compliments or deprecating jokes (Muniz & Hamer, 2001b). Importantly, these always appear to possess an element of mirth and are not intended maliciously (Muniz & Hamer, 2001b).

Throughout brand rivalry literature the element of competition is evident, however, a multitude of it has found an additional, darker dimension to it, exemplified by the concept of

schadenfreude. Schadenfreude emerges as a notable consumer attitude within brand rivalries in past academic literature (Alvarado-Karste & Kidwell, 2022; Berendt et al., 2018; Havard, 2014; Havard et al., 2021; Phillips-Melancon & Dalakas, 2014). It is described as deriving pleasure from another person's misfortune or failure (Havard, 2014; Phillips-Melancon & Dalakas, 2014). Schadenfreude is likely to emerge in brand rivalries when an antagonistic relationship is present between the brands (Phillips-Melancon & Dalakas, 2014). The sentiment is evident in the attitudes of consumers in a wide range of consumption contexts, from sports to technology companies (Havard, 2014; Phillips-Melancon & Dalakas, 2014).

In sports, teams and players are purposefully pitted against one another to compete and gain victory over one's opponent. Consequently, fans may experience schadenfreude to a very high degree. Companies aim to leverage this by exacerbating this feeling among consumers in order to hike up attendance at sports events and improve media ratings (Dalakas & Phillips-Melancon, 2012). Havard (2014, p.248) studied how a sports rivalry affects the attitudes of university basketball and American football fans. From the research, he identified "sense of satisfaction" as one of four key themes of consumer attitudes, defining it as "the pleasure or excitement fans experience when their favorite team beats the rival in direct competition" (Havard, 2014, p.248). This attitude was displayed by the participants through several different emotions. The participants expressed emotions such as pleasure, satisfaction and excitement at the loss of the rival team. Additionally, in his study, schadenfreude manifested as pride and a sense of belonging toward their favorite team when they beat the rival. Moreover, the participants of this study highlighted that triumphing over the rival team was more important than winning against a non-rival team (Havard, 2014). Dalakas and Phillips-Melancon (2012) discovered similar findings in their study regarding schadenfreude among sports fans. Their research revealed that schadenfreude manifests as joy at the misfortune of a rival team as well as hatred towards a rival (Dalakas & Phillips-Melancon, 2012). Evidently, sports brands serve as excellent examples of how schadenfreude is present and exhibited in the attitudes of consumers. Schadenfreude manifests as a spectrum of complex emotions, from positive and happy emotions such as joy and pride towards one's own preferred team, to strong negative feelings of dislike and hatred for the rival brand. While it is apparent that sports adherents actively express their schadenfreude due to the nature of sports (Boecker, 2021), a similar notion appears to apply to brand adherents of a variety of consumer goods with lower involvement.

Research on brand rivalries in other business contexts have also unveiled schadenfreude as a consumer attitude. Apple and Microsoft have been in a long brand rivalry and as some of the biggest corporations in the world, their rivalry has been one of the most prominent ones. In 2007, Hickman and Ward conducted a study on Apple consumers' reactions to a hypothetical virus affecting Microsoft Windows. Their findings demonstrate the participants expressing their satisfaction at Microsoft's troubles. Particularly, schadenfreude was exemplified by the participants' use of trash talk and negative stereotyping of users of the rival brand (Hickman & Ward, 2007). Building on this research, in another study, Phillips-Melancon and Dalakas (2014) also studied the existence of schadenfreude, however, focusing on highly involved consumers of Apple. Their study presented comparable findings that indicated that consumers that highly identify or are involved with a brand are more likely to take pleasure in the failure or blunder of the rival brand (Phillips-Melancon & Dalakas, 2014). Seemingly, schadenfreude is an attitude that is widely encountered among consumers of many different kinds of brands.

2.3. Brands' Activism and Ideology

Brands and consumer goods often serve as reflections of various values and facets of a society and its prevailing ideology (Holt, 2004; McCracken, 1986; Shepherd et al., 2015). Thereby, they may indicate what aspects consumers appreciate or critique about their culture and its ideals (Shepherd et al., 2015). Brands embed ideologies and values into their operations and marketing strategies, thus giving rise to the concept of brand activism, which has become a prevalent phenomenon in today's business climate. Scholars describe brand activism as "a purpose- and value- driven strategy" (Vredenburg, Kapitan & Kemper, 2020, p. 446), whereby firms advocate for a sociopolitical cause in order to pursue "social change and economic goals" (Haupt, Wannow, Marquardt, Graubner & Haas, 2023, p.1248). A key element that distinguishes brand activism from other marketing concepts such as corporate social responsibility and cause-related marketing is the inherent tendency to create division which can potentially drive away consumers (Garg & Saluja, 2022). Brand activism literature is divided as some claim that activism harms brands as they lose customers who disagree with the issue (Mukherjee & Althuizen, 2020). On the other hand, other scholars assert that market data proves this refutes this claim, since companies like Nike saw an increase in their stock performance following a public controversy (Garg & Saluja, 2022).

This notion of embedding values and ideologies in brands is also seen in Luedicke, Thompson and Giesler's (2009, p.1016) research on "consumers' identity work as moral protagonism", wherein the authors discuss how consumers utilize brands to adopt moral stances, convey values and ideologies that ultimately shape their identities. In their presented example of the Hummer brand, it becomes apparent how brand adherents and opponents carry out a moralistic feud, founded on an ideological tension (Luedicke et al., 2009). The Hummer critics ostensibly portray un-American values, whereas Hummer proponents believe to embody the essence of true American identity, thus depicting the moral system defending protagonists. The conflict between these two parties is carried out and fueled by the Hummer brand supporters and detractors, thus by consumers themselves. Although the aforementioned inter-consumer rivalry typically involves competition between aficionados of one brand with the aficionados of the rival brand (Berendt et al, 2018), certain parallels can be drawn in terms of the consumers attitudes and behaviors that are prevalent in inter-consumer and inter-firm rivalries. As Luedicke et al. (2009) mentioned, the critics demonstrate hostile behaviors such as vandalizing the vehicles, express offensive gestures and show moral superiority.

Similarly to the Hummer brand, Oatly is argued to be a challenger in its industry, disputing the traditional, previously deemed legitimate dairy industry by portraying it as environmentally damaging and ethically challenging (Koch & Ulver, 2022). Oatly demonstrates brand activism and rallies consumer resistance against the dairy industry and continuously works to delegitimize the entire industry, as it has been demonstrated in the research by Koch & Ulver (2022). Their ideology is their belief that society should advance to the post-milk generation (Clark, 2023). Considering the deeply rooted position milk holds in Swedish culture (Lewis, 2018) and its long heritage, it may be argued that comparably to the Hummer defenders of American ideology, Arla vindicates the ideological and cultural significance of dairy products in Sweden, positioning itself as a guardian of tradition and heritage.

2.4. Critique of Prior Research

To conclude this chapter on the reviewed literature produced on the three main literature streams, a critique will be presented to outline the research gap this study addresses. Prior research establishes a sound foundation on brand rivalries and what consequences, whether positive or

negative, they entail. Authors like Phillips-Melancon and Dalakas (2014) and Berendt et al. (2018) produced influential studies that establish foundational understanding into the risks and benefits of brand rivalries. Additionally, Converse and Reinhard (2016) contribute the element of embeddedness to brand rivalry literature, an important contribution which distinguishes the key factor which distinguishes rivalry from competition. The brand rivalry between Oatly and Arla demonstrates the element of embeddedness as their rivalry has an ongoing narrative and Arla's reason for entering the rivalry is based on deep historical connections and tradition. However, as companies are adopting and implementing value-based ideologies into their business practices, as exemplified by Oatly, and using the ideologies in engaging in the rivalry, companies are going beyond embedding themselves into rivalries by also attaching their ideologies to it. Thus, while such studies have laid important groundwork of brand rivalries, this literature stream was lacking an exploration into brand rivalries that are based on and fueled by differing values and ideologies.

Moreover, the literature stream of consumer attitudes has garnered abundant research, exploring a wide array of attitudes exhibited by consumers. In the context of brand rivalries, numerous authors have made significant contributions to the understanding of this stream of literature (Alvarado-Karste & Kidwell, 2022; Berendt et al., 2018; Brown, 2000; Graham & Wilder, 2020; Havard, 2014; Hickman & Ward, 2007; Kilduff et al., 2010; Kuo & Hou, 2017; Muniz & Hamer, 2001b). The reviewed literature on the consumer attitudes regarding a brand rivalry between companies display a spectrum of attitudes that encompass both positive and negative attitudes. On one hand, consumers may possess positive attitudes towards their favored brand and its users, viewing them as better, warmer and even more competent than the rival brand. The positive sentiments seemingly appear in comparison to the opposing brand. This highlights the role of brand rivalry in shaping consumer attitudes by fostering a tendency for consumers to attach strong emotional ties and showcase their allegiance to their preferred brand. On the other hand, consumers may harbor negative sentiments towards the competing brand and its followers. These sentiments manifest as *schadenfreude* and in-group bias. Not to mention, both positive and negative attitudes can be present at the same time, with consumers experiencing warmth toward their preferred brand while experiencing *schadenfreude* toward the rival (Hickman & Ward, 2007). As a result, prior research presented as vastly dispersed, as scholars have studied the presence of certain attitudes in their studies, rather than gaining an overarching comprehension

of the different types of attitudes consumers have toward rivalries. This research gap necessitated the compilation of the wide array of attitudes found from previous literature into three key themes of Brand Superiority, Brand Allegiance and Snarky Satisfaction. By thematically systematizing the diverse array of attitudes, this study contributes coherence and organization to the existing literature. Thus, these three themes represent the overarching attitudes exhibited by consumers toward brand rivalries, providing a more holistic understanding into this stream of literature.

Lerberg and Nilsson's (2020) investigation of consumers' attitudes towards Oatly and Arla engaging in a feud serves as a good starting point for the study of this particular rivalry. The authors provide notable contributions exploring the rivalry in the context of buzz marketing, adequately arguing for the reasoning for the utilization of buzz marketing by companies in order to fuel a brand rivalry. However, buzz marketing lacks the comparative element inherently ingrained in brand rivalries, such as the case of Oatly and Arla. Brand rivalries are employed through the use of comparative or attack advertisements, which spark and fuel the rivalry. Thus, rivalries are shaped by the comparative nature of each marketing campaign employed by either company, making it crucial to apply the element in the studying of brand rivalries.

The linkage between ideology and brands has received limited attention, through the exploration of brands such as Hummer and Oatly (Koch & Ulver, 2022; Luedicke et al., 2009). Koch and Ulver (2022) establish how Oatly is employing their values into activism aimed at delegitimizing the dairy industry. Luedicke et al. (2009) provide a major contribution to the understanding of how opposing ideologies can cause conflict between consumers. Such divergent angles employed to study how ideologies are represented in brands provide a strong basis for this literature stream. Nonetheless, a deeper review of how consumer attitudes are impacted by the tension inflamed by opposing values of rival brands is necessary in order to comprehensively understand the impact of the phenomenon on consumers. Luedicke et al. (2009) gleaned into a high involvement product such as the Hummer cars, therefore everyday commodities deserve the same attention. In conclusion, the prominent ongoing feud between Oatly and Arla provides a novel and seminal setting for the studying of the influence of ideology within branding on consumer attitudes.

3. Theoretical Lenses

In alignment with the purpose of this study, the following theories have been carefully selected as the cornerstone of the analysis of empirical data. The chapter will give an overview on the relation between brands and individuals' self-identity, followed by Social Identity Theory and Cognitive Dissonance Theory.

3.1. Brands and the Self

Research on consumer behavior and -psychology has found that people do not solely purchase products for their utilitarian function but also for the symbolic meaning that products entail (Aaker, 1999; Belk, 1988; Fournier, 1998; Levy, 1959). It has been noted that individuals engage in consumption behaviors that are convergent with their sense of self (Fournier, 1998; Levy, 1959). Thereby, brands have become an important instrument through which consumers identify and express their self (Graham & Wilder, 2020; Fournier et al., 2012; Park & John, 2010) or their aspired self (Aaker, 1997). Brands are consequently not only vendors of products but vendors of symbols (Levy, 1959) that deliver meaning to individuals' selves and lives (Fournier, 1998). The self thereby indicates "a sense of who and what we are" (Kleine et al., 1993, p.209). Fournier (1998), who studied the relationship between consumers and brands, referred to this notion as self-connection, reflecting a brand's ability to provide pivotal aspects of identity that express an integral part of the self.

The desire of consumers to use brands as a means of self-expression has increasingly become acknowledged by marketing practitioners, who consequently emphasize the brand's harmony with customers' lifestyles (Chernev, Hamilton & Gal, 2011). This stems from the notion that brand associations that refer to individuals' self-identities can be a significant provider of brand value (Chernev et al., 2011). According to Escalas and Bettman (2003), if consumers make use of brand associations in order to assemble and transmit their sense of self, they establish a bond with a brand. These brand associations may stem from reference groups, delineated as significant social entities for a consumer serving as benchmarks against which they evaluate themselves (Escalas & Bettman, 2003), that further result in those consumer-brand ties. This contention resonates with the notion of employing brands or consumption in general as a means to signal

belongingness with or differentiation from specific groups of people (Berger & Heath, 2007; Chernev et al., 2011; Ekström, Ottosson, Parment, 2017; Escalas & Bettman, 2003; Kotler & Keller, 2006).

3.2. Social Identity Theory

Social Identity Theory (SIT), predominantly coined by Henri Tajfel (Van den Scott, 2017), is founded on the premise that individuals organize others and themselves into groups, whose affiliation serves as the foundation of their social identity (Brown, 2000). It posits that pertaining to a group is a narrative about an individuals' self and its desire to be perceived by others (Tajfel, 1974). The groups with which one associates refer to in-groups, whereas those one restrains from yet compares its own group with, are denoted as out-groups (Van den Scott, 2017). In general, people will strive for membership with groups that align with their own properties (Havard et al., 2021). To enforce the endeavor to attain or uphold a positive social identity, they contrast in-groups and suitable out-groups. Should individuals find their identity undesirable, they may contemplate leaving their group (Brown, 2000).

In the realm of consumer behavior and brand management, this theory is of great importance as it may sway consumers' brand preferences (Lantz & Loeb, 1996 cited in Havard et al., 2021). A prevalent phenomenon in intergroup relations is the so-called in-group bias, that is, "the tendency to favor the in-group over the out-group in evaluations and behavior" (Tajfel & Turner, 2004, p.281) as highlighted in the previous chapter. The members of a group are inclined to believe that their own group and its products surpass those of others (Brown, 2000), as such that they overvalue the performance of their in-group while underrating the performance of the rival group (Tajfel, 1979). This cognitive process of categorizing people into groups and evaluating them accordingly can result in the formation of stereotypes (Brown, 2000). Brown (2000), however, challenges traditional views of stereotypes as mere tools of information-processing and provides a new perspective, emphasizing their social roles as instruments for comprehending intergroup dynamics as well as rationalizing conduct directed towards members of respective out-groups. Thus, he considers stereotypes as "reliable guides to judgment and action" (Brown, 2000, p.750).

3.3. Consumer-Brand Identification

Graham and Wilder (2020) produced a theory called Consumer-Brand Identification (CBI). The authors define CBI as “the extent to which the consumer sees his or her own self-image as overlapping with the brand’s image” (Graham & Wilder, 2020, p.49). Thereby, consumers' perceived self-identity is intertwined with their perception of the brand’s image. This presents many opportunities for brands because the consumers are more likely to evaluate a brand positively when they experience a stronger connection to the brand and its advertisements (Graham & Wilder, 2020). On the other hand, CBI proposes considerable challenges for businesses. For example, in the current business climate, consumer expectations have shifted, leading to a growing demand for firms to incorporate political or social purpose into their operations and brand in order for consumers themselves to portray their values (Graham & Wilder, 2020). Moreover, consumers can be blind to or overlook negative information about a brand they strongly associate with in order to safeguard their identity affiliation with the brand (Graham & Wilder, 2020). Since identity can be attached to brands, consumers can feel personally involved or attacked when the competitor of their favored brand engages in a brand rivalry (Berendt et al., 2018). This can result in the consumer taking actions on their own in order to defend the brand and inadvertently themselves as well. However, in the contemporary landscape of increasing velocity of communication, these challenges are often exacerbated (Graham & Wilder, 2020). Evidently, consumers can be very closely intertwined with brands.

3.4. Cognitive Dissonance Theory

Human beings aim for internal psychological consistency, such that their opinions, beliefs, values, attitudes, and behaviors, that is the elements of cognition (Festinger, 1957), align and mutually reinforce one another. If the relation between these elements psychologically conforms, one speaks of cognitive consonance (Festinger, 1957). If this consonance is not attained, hence two pieces of information do not harmonize, individuals find themselves in a state of psychological discomfort from which they seek to break free. This state alludes to the so-called Cognitive Dissonance Theory, originally coined by Festinger (1957). The phenomenon may emerge due to several reasons, for instance, due to cultural customs that shape experiences, novel information that lies outside of one’s control, unforeseen circumstances, logical inconsistency

(Festinger, 1957) or unfulfilled expectations. When cognitive dissonance is prevalent, individuals will feel the pressure to diminish it as well as to circumvent any circumstances or information that are likely to exacerbate the dissonance. According to Festinger (1962, p. 94), the state of cognitive dissonance can be compared to the uncomfortable condition of hunger, which consequently causes people to act and appease their hunger, thus cognitive dissonance is also referred to as a "motivating state". By altering one of the inconsistent elements of cognitions, diminishing its significance or creating a new one, the degree of dissonance can be alleviated (Festinger, 1957). However, dissonant situations may not always be resolved as easily as hunger and may consequently abide for a longer period of time. It is noteworthy that while a situation may evoke dissonance for one person it may simultaneously be consonant for another (Festinger, 1962). Cognitive Dissonance Theory is especially pertinent in comprehending how consumers will search for or explicitly shun information (Mattia, Di Leo & Principato, 2021). Consequently, in the realm of marketing research, several studies have applied the theory in the studying of consumer behavior.

3.5. Relation and Rationale of the Theory

The aim of the study is to capture the nuanced consumer attitudes evoked by the brand rivalry occurring between Oatly and Arla. First of all, to aid in the unraveling and comprehending of such attitudes, SIT will be applied. This theoretical perspective has been the most prevalently utilized in this specific area of research as it explicates the relationship between identity in in-group settings. However, as this particular rivalry is steeped in ideological tension, relying solely on SIT, which focuses on brand communities (Tajfel, 1979) may not provide an adequate understanding of consumer attitudes in this setting. Second of all, we also included CBI, which is a branch of SIT (Graham & Wilder, 2020), that captures the relation between consumers and brands better. The concept acknowledges the role of identification with brands in individuals' self-expression and -definition. Looking at CBI, consumers increasingly expect companies to incorporate social and political endeavors into their purpose (Graham & Wilder, 2020). If these expectations are unmet, it will leave individuals in a state of discomfort. Unfulfilled expectations are one way in which cognitive dissonance is triggered. This factor is explored through Cognitive Dissonance Theory (Festinger, 1957) which will be utilized as an additional theoretical lens. Cognitive Dissonance Theory captures a more comprehensive understanding

into the topic and presents a rather underexplored perspective to the realm of inter-firm rivalries. Applying this theory to consumers and their stance on brand rivalry, it may be posited that when consumers encounter information that aligns with their existing beliefs, experiences, knowledge and information regarding their adhered brand, they experience cognitive consonance, reinforcing their positive attitude towards that brand. Conversely, if certain elements of the cognition contradict each other, cognitive dissonance may arise and may trigger negative attitudes. This theory is particularly deemed relevant as it focuses on the cognitive component of attitudes. Furthermore, as cognitive dissonance is claimed to be a motivating state (Festinger, 1962), consumers are inclined to reduce the dissonance. Therefore, in the realm of brand rivalries and the inherent bond between the brand and the self, understanding how cognitive processes influence attitudes can provide insights into how consumers perceive and engage with brand rivalries. In conclusion, through the application of all three theories we are able to grasp and discern the attitudes expressed when consumers face adversary information about their favored brand. Figure 1 illustrates the theories applied in this study to understand the consumer attitudes towards the brand rivalry between Oatly and Arla.

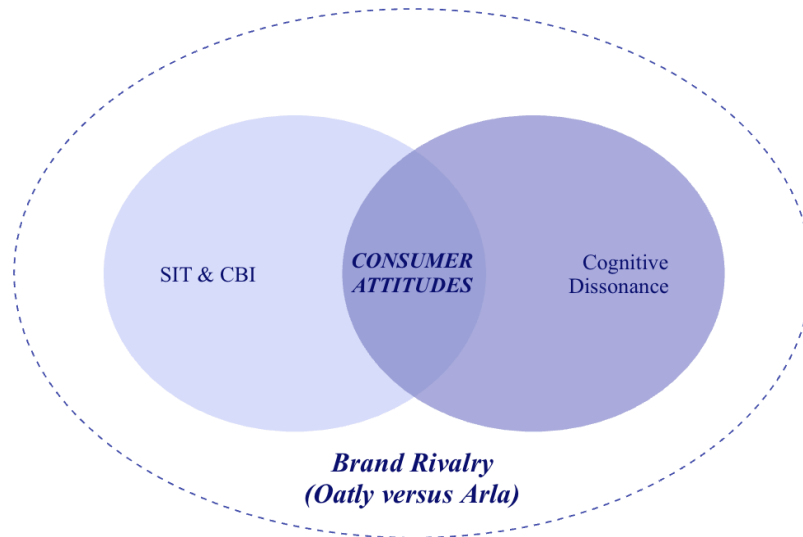


Figure 1. Applied Theories to Reveal Consumer Attitude toward the Brand Rivalry

4. Methodology

The methodology chapter serves as the backbone of this master thesis, outlining the approach undertaken to explore the research question and achieve the objectives of the study. This chapter delves into the research process, encompassing the research design and -approach, the method of data collection, the focus group guide, and the sampling method. Furthermore, the method of analysis, and considerations of validity and reliability are presented before finishing with ethical concerns. Through a meticulous examination of each methodological component, this chapter sets the stage for a rigorous and systematic exploration of the research subject, ensuring the credibility and robustness of the findings.

4.1. Research Approach

The way of conducting research is significantly molded by a range of philosophical underpinnings. Researchers assume a certain position within the philosophy of social science that lays out the cornerstone of their work. Ontology, pertains to the “views about the nature of reality” (Easterby-Smith, Jaspersen, Thorpe & Valizade, 2021, p.70). In this research, an ontological stance of relativism has been adopted meaning that multiple truths are existent and facts vary based on the observer’s perspective (Easterby-Smith et al., 2021). In this manner, we assume that consumers have multiple truths which influence their attitudes toward brand rivalries. Given that our focus lies on individuals' attitudes, which are partly shaped by their prior experiences, opinions, knowledge and beliefs (Dubey & Kothari, 2022), this relativist bearing is considered as most pertinent as facts and truths are manifold.

The epistemology of research is the “assumptions about the best ways of inquiring into the nature of the world” (Easterby-Smith et al., 2021, p.70). Within the epistemological domain, a distinction is made between positivism, wherein the external existence of the social world is assumed, and social constructionism that centers on the notion of reality being shaped by shared experiences and interpersonal communication, rather than by external criteria (Easterby-Smith et al., 2021). While the first position is best analyzed by the use of objective measures, the latter is derived and interpreted subjectively (Easterby-Smith et al., 2021). This research is positioned within social constructionism as it allows us to explore and understand what consumers attribute

to the brand rivalry in terms of attitudes. In doing so, we strive to attain a firm grasp on the phenomenon of brand rivalries. In accordance with the aforementioned two considerations, a qualitative method has been assigned that will be undertaken in the form of focus group discussions.

4.2. Research Design

Easterby-Smith et al. (2021, p.102) define research designs as “a strategy that lays out the principles of the research methodology for a given study”. Appropriate methods and techniques are set up in alignment with the research question for each phase of the research (Easterby-Smith et al., 2021). The aim of this study is to gather a thorough understanding of consumer’s attitudes towards the rivalry of two competing brands within the Swedish milk industry, which is important from a societal standpoint as consumers are subjected to the public rivalry. In order to attain this objective, a qualitative research design with its exploratory nature has been employed (Easterby-Smith et al., 2015). Qualitative research allows to view a certain topic through the eyes of participants and thus dive beneath the surface and illuminate the ‘why’ (Bell, Bryman & Harley, 2019). Additionally, as mentioned in the beginning, prior research on brand rivalries has primarily engaged in quantitative inquiries. Therefore, this research uses a qualitative design in order to unveil the intricate nuances of consumer attitudes towards brand rivalries that quantitative methods overlook.

In this paper, an abductive research approach is pursued. Abduction refers to the “reasoning where we connect an observation or instance to a theory by means of plausible interpretation” (Easterby-Smith et al., 2021, p. 440). The advantage of this mode of reasoning is that it manages to transcend certain limitations that the more prevalent inductive and deductive approaches entail (Bell et al., 2019). The deductive approach has a lack of clarity in regards to theory selection, while the inductive approach is criticized by the notion that accumulating empirical data alone may not always facilitate theory-building (Bell et al., 2019). Abduction was best suitable for this research endeavor as it allows an iteration between the foundational theories and the empirical data. This approach facilitates a dynamic research process, allowing for continual exploration and adaptation throughout the study to accommodate new surprising discoveries instead of confirming what has already been known (Bell et al., 2019). The aim of this study is to unveil the

attitudes exhibited by Swedish consumers towards the brand rivalry between Oatly and Arla, a rather understudied phenomenon. Therefore, we conducted an explorative process in order to produce novel insights by interpreting the empirical observations with a theoretical lens and hence, discovered novel and nuanced consumer attitudes.

4.3. Research Methods

4.3.1. Literature Review Method

Literature review serves as the foundation and context for empirical study containing primary data through which one justifies and explains the chosen research questions and research design (Bell et al., 2019). For this study, existing literature was reviewed and scrutinized to provide a foundation of the chosen research topic. The relevant literature was consequently synthesized into key themes in order to consolidate the diverse findings across the literature. The main three attitudes also lay the groundwork for the conducting of the primary research. Upon reviewing the literature, certain keywords were used in various combinations; brand rivalry, inter-firm rivalry, comparative advertising, attack advertising, consumer attitudes, ideology, brand values, brand activism. Such keywords were utilized to gather the majority of the literature review as they encompass the major themes explored in the reviewed literature of this study.

4.3.2. Data Collection Method

The primary data of this thesis was collected by conducting four separate online focus groups. According to Easterby-Smith et al. (2015, p.135) focus groups are “loosely structured, guided conversations among a group of individuals”. More precisely, a focus group discussion was conducted, in which the main interaction occurs between the participants, whereas in a focus group interview, an assigned moderator exerts tighter control, directing the discussion primarily between himself and the group, instead of among the participants (Boddy, 2005). This exploratory tool is particularly useful for unraveling people’s responses to a specific issue (Bell et al., 2019), in this case the brand rivalry between Oatly and Arla, and for illuminating the reasons behind people's attitudes. Thus, exploring the profound ‘why’ (Bell et al., 2019). This decision was well-founded on literature stating that focus groups enable researchers to acquire understanding of consumer attitudes, among others as emotional attachments (Hackett,

Schwarzenbach & Jürgens, 2016). Focus groups are commonly utilized to acquire understanding of consumer attitudes due to its convenience of interviewing multiple consumers at once and the heightened likelihood of consumer engagement within a group environment (Fern, 1982, cited in Bristol & Fern, 1993).

In facilitating interaction and collaborative development of meaning (Bell et al., 2019; Dubey & Kothari, 2022), focus groups enable the disclosure of attitudes of consumers not only towards the rivalry of the brand itself but also between loyal consumers of the opposing brands. In the focus groups, Oatly adherents were confronted with Arla adherents. It is strongly believed that the mutual exchange of these opposing parties provides engaging and substantive discussions and enables researchers to study participants' responses to the opposing views of the other participants regarding the issue at hand (Bell et al., 2019). According to Dubey and Kothari (2022), an emotionally provocative frame will trigger a cognitive process, prompting individuals to recollect past memories and conversations that are pertinent to the discussion. Also, focus groups allow for the asking of follow-up questions or clarification by the researcher or participants, inducing a more comprehensive exploration.

The choice of focus groups has further been justified by the abundant employment of the method in prior research in order to explore consumer attitudes across multiple industries. Researchers advocated for the eligibility of focus groups for unraveling group attitudes and generating myriad views on a particular subject as well as challenging and instigating others' opinions (Bell et al., 2019; Sargent, Samanta & Yelden, 2016). To exemplify, Prabhakar (2012) applied focus groups for illuminating public attitudes regarding taxation, Coleman (2007) discussed consumers' attitudes about food safety materials, and the aforementioned study by Lerberg and Nilsson (2020) explored the effect of brands' engagement in a rivalry on consumer attitudes toward the brands. Hackett et al. (2016) also assert that focus groups are widely utilized in marketing practice due to their well-suited environment for idea generation. Bell et al. (2019), particularly highlight the popularity of focus groups in the realm of consumer research to test individuals' reactions to goods and advertising campaigns. This adds to the appropriateness of application for this study as certain advertisements are going to be demonstrated to the focus group participants, which will be subsequently explained in section 4.3.3.

That being said, online focus groups come with certain disadvantages. Firstly, as focus groups discussions involve several participants, the discussion may suffer from a group effect, meaning that some participants may dominate the conversation while others fade into the background (Bryman & Bell, 2011). To minimize this risk, a moderator was chosen prior to the focus groups, as recommended in literature (Bell et al., 2019), in order to guide the focus group discussion, avoid unnecessary deviations from the topics of interest (Dubey & Kothari, 2022) and manage the group discussion in a manner in which does not hinder the conversation but rather directs it so that each participant is able to voice their opinions. The moderator also ensured the maintenance of a constructive, thriving, and respectful atmosphere throughout the discussion, remaining ready to intervene if any instances of disrespect arose. Additionally, they remained mindful of time constraints to assure that the prepared topics would be covered. The second author facilitated the recording of the focus group session and managed the technical aspects, including setup and screen sharing for the presentation of advertisements. Another disadvantage can be participants or moderators experiencing technical difficulties before or during the sessions as the focus groups take place online (Bell et al., 2019). To ensure that technical issues or delays do not constrain the collecting of data from our focus groups, we allocated more than enough time for the sessions by reserving 90 minutes for each one.

Moreover, certain scholars have also questioned the use of focus groups for studying individuals' attitudes (Cyr, 2019). Following these voices and the possible disadvantages presented by focus groups, alternative methods of data collection, including content analysis, were contemplated. However, after a thorough examination, it was concluded that suitable platforms facilitating comprehensive interaction among adherents of both Oatly and Arla were lacking in volume and depth, rendering content analysis impractical for conducting an in-depth study of this case. As a result, this approach was excluded from consideration. Furthermore, unlike in traditional one-to-one interviews, participants will often challenge and question each other's views in a focus group setting, resulting in the unveiling of more authentic and honest representations of their attitudes as participants are prompted to contemplate and reconsider their own standpoints (Bell et al., 2019). Thus, the widespread utilization of focus groups in attitude studies, bolstered by scholarly literature affirming their appropriateness, the benefits of interpersonal interaction they afford, and their distinctive advantages compared to alternative methodologies, collectively provide robust justification for the utilization of focus groups in this study.

In total, four online focus group discussions were rolled out, lasting for approximately 90 minutes each. It was strived for approaching saturation, meaning that “no additional data are being found whereby the [researcher] can develop properties of the category”, as specified by Glaser and Strauss (1967, p.61). In literature there seemed to be no consensus on the adequate number of focus groups (Guest, Namey, & McKenna, 2016), therefore Guest et al. (2016) conducted a study to shed light on it. The decision of performing a total of four focus groups was thus supported by Guest et al. (2019) study, who found that the principal themes within data could be discerned by merely three focus groups. Considering our limited experience with focus groups and our desire to ensure comprehensive data collection, we opted for a fourth focus group as a precautionary measure in case the initial sessions did not yield sufficient insights. Nonetheless, our research corroborated the notion by Guest et al. (2019), as the key themes were established in the first three focus groups and re-emphasized in the final focus group, thus, achieving saturation.

4.3.3. Focus Group Guide

As a preparatory measure, a topic guide, here referred to as focus group guide, was established. This guide serves as a summary of the central domains of interest intended to be illuminated during the individual focus groups (Easterby-Smith et al., 2015). The paramount topics are addressed, however it maintains flexibility to accommodate unanticipated themes. Besides the opening and closing questions, the guide comprises the following topics: identity, brand rivalry, attitudes, and engagement. The guide is composed into a table found in the Appendix A.

At the beginning of each focus group the moderator made great efforts to cultivate an environment of trust and receptivity, recognizing that the initial moments set the tone for the entire meeting. Therefore, the discussion was commenced by two opening questions to allow participants to briefly introduce themselves and engage with the topic (Stewart, Shamdasani & Rook, 2007). Respondents were asked to share their views on the two brands, Arla and Oatly, before delving into the discussion on their rivalry. In total, eight main questions were addressed by the moderator. Questions 3 to 7 adhered to the topics in focus and question 8 served as the closing inquiry facilitating a gradual conclusion to the conversation.

The chosen focus group questions were partly oriented on Havard's (2014) study on how rivalry affects sports fans and modified to suit the purpose of this research endeavor. In his study, respondents were asked about emotions that participants are feeling whenever their favorite team beats their rival and further to identify how they felt when their rival teams were defeated in indirect competition. Since Havard's (2014) study focuses on emotions, we deemed it as an appropriate guide in order to spark the affective component of attitudes, which encompasses emotions such as happiness or anger (Dubey & Kothari, 2022). In order not to lead the respondents into a certain direction, our questions remained rather neutral and were crafted as open-ended. This approach allowed for discussions to organically unfold, guided by the stimuli or discussion aids (Stewart et al., 2007) provided through the showcased advertisements, illustrating the brand rivalry in focus.

For the focus groups, five key advertisements were selected to be shown to the participants of the focus groups. These advertisements are attributive to comparative advertisements, which will subsequently be explained in 4.3.3.1. Adverts from both companies were included in order to highlight the ongoing rivalry from both sides. Each advertisement chosen marked a pivotal moment in the rivalry, and the ads span nearly a decade, from 2014 to 2023. Due to the fact that Oatly has been more vocal in the rivalry in terms of publishing more attack advertising than Arla, hence 4 out of 5 advertisements showcased Oatly's advertisements or responses to Arla's adverts. Each chosen advert had an element of comparison or attack either towards the rival brand or opposing milk products, plant-based or traditional dairy. When presented with each piece of advertising media, the participants were inquired on what they thought the ad meant, if they thought it was specifically targeting someone and what kind of emotions were sparked when encountering it.

Inter-firm brand rivalries are commonly carried out through comparative adverts (Berendt et al., 2018; Grewal et al., 1997), thus, lawsuits or other events in the rivalry were not the focus of our presented summary of the rivalry, however the lawsuit against Arla's use of "klimatavtryck" on their packaging was mentioned during the sessions since it was directly linked to Oatly's attack ad "Netto Noll LOL". Nevertheless the main focus remained on comparative advertisements.

4.3.3.1. Comparative Advertisements

To clarify, comparative advertisements are ads where the product or service of a brand makes reference to the product or service of one or further competitors (Del Barrio-García et al., 2020). In comparative ads, comparison is drawn either directly or indirectly, contrasting particular attributes of products or services within the same category (Grewal et. al, 1997). When the competitor, who has been referred to or painted in a negative light in the comparative advertisement of another brand, counteracts by releasing a comparative advertisement of its own, the phenomenon is constituted as an advertising war (Beard, 2010). According to Grewal et al. (1997), one third of all advertisements are of comparative nature. Researchers also refer to comparative ads as attack ads, negative ads, or knocking copies (Beard, 2010; Muehling at al., 2018). The principle of attack advertising is especially evident in the political realm among opponents and thus this concept is linked to the metaphor of “marketing as warfare” (Williams & Page, 2013, p.146). This highlights the tension that may be created by employing comparative ads as an instrument of carrying out a rivalry. Consequently, they can be understood as a tool and manifestation of brand rivalry as seen among some of the well-known brand rivalries such as McDonald’s versus Burger King, Pepsi versus Coke, or Apple versus Samsung are that engage in comparative advertising (Berendt et al., 2018; Grewal et al., 1997). Oatly and Arla have both employed strategic comparative marketing campaigns against one another, which has brought the milk war to the attention of the consumers. In light of this, selected communicational instruments are utilized in order to operationalize the heated rivalry between Oatly and Arla within the focus groups. This includes key campaigns published by both Oatly and Arla, representative of the rivalry, that include comparative advertisements, claims printed on product packaging as well as newspaper adverts. Thereby, we intend to stimulate interaction and discussion between the brand adherents as well as spark attitudes.

4.3.4. Sampling Method and Sample

Qualitative research usually goes hand in hand with purposive sampling (Bell et al., 2019). Purposive sampling is a type of non-probability sampling whereby participants are selected due to their relevance to the chosen topic and unit of analysis of the study (Bell et al., 2019). In this case, priori purposive sampling was employed as participants were recruited on an established set of criteria (Bell et al., 2019). This sampling method was utilized in order to select candidates

that possess the requisite knowledge or perspectives required to address the focus group questions. The criteria for participant selection for this study are comprehensive, encompassing multiple considerations. Firstly, each participant must be of Swedish nationality as this study aims to capture the attitudes of Swedish consumers. Additionally, participants are required to be aware of both brands as well as have general familiarity with and awareness of the ongoing comparative advertisements by Arla and Oatly, as this requirement of prior knowledge was recommended in scholarly literature on focus groups (Dubey & Kothari, 2022). The final prerequisite for the sampling entails, the selected participants should have a preference for one of the brands over the other, as their opposing brand preferences and loyalties yield valuable insights for the study in order to discover how brand adherents are influenced by the rivalry. Aficionados of the two rival brand camps were selected also to explore whether the ideological tension is sparked in consumers in relation to the brand and its adverts.

We initially endeavored to attain a diverse representation of brand adherents from various online channels and forums, both brand-owned and independent, in order to adhere to purposive sampling. We scanned Arla and Oatly's public social media accounts on Instagram and Facebook as well as Reddit forums to contact possible participants. To recruit Arla adherents, we focused on their Instagram page "Arlasverige" because this profile was directed at Arla's Swedish consumers since all the communication was handled in Swedish. We sifted through their most recent posts from the last six months, contacting the profiles that had commented on the posts via direct messages. We also joined several online groups on Facebook such as "#SupportArla" and "Slutet är nära...Hjälp! Svenska mjölkbönder utrotningshotade!", to try to reach Arla supporters, while for Oatly's brand adherents we joined "Barn med mjölkproteinallergi" and "Allt om vegansk mat" Facebook groups where we submitted a post informing the group members of our study and that we were recruiting participants to join our focus groups. To further reach Oatly's supporters, we published a post on "oatlyfans.com", an online website owned by Oatly, where customers can publish questions, concerns and other content publicly, as well as Reddit forums called "r/Sweden", "r/TillSverige", "r/Oatly". Unfortunately these efforts were not very fruitful, however, we were able to recruit two Arla supporters through the private messages on Instagram.

Due to the restricted time frame of this research, a pragmatic decision was made towards a partial convenience sampling methodology to facilitate the recruitment of the focus group

participants. Convenience sampling entails selecting study participants based on their ease of accessibility (Easterby-Smith et al., 2015). Nonetheless, the above stated criteria for participation were maintained and ensured by inquiring the necessary information according to the criteria to verify whether the participants were eligible for our study. Through convenience sampling we recruited the rest of the sample. The sample consisted of twenty-one Swedish consumers, of which seventeen were women and four were men. Initially, we aimed to achieve a balanced representation of both genders by having a fairly equal distribution among each focus group. However, time restrictions hindered this objective, and thus the gender representation was not as balanced as initially planned. Nevertheless, three out of the four focus groups included male participants. Moreover, the age range of the sample was between 20 to 72, aiming to include participants across different age groups originating from different parts of Sweden, from the capital city of Stockholm to different cities in the Skåne region. While the age range between the oldest and youngest participants was very wide, the majority of the participants were below the age of thirty. Although it was initially endeavored to include a diverse demographic profile of respondents, the aforementioned time restriction combined with lack of access to unacquainted Swedish participants impeded the recruitment as such that we ultimately recruited Arla and Oatly brand adherents through our network.

Table 1 provides an overview of the members of the four different focus groups and their coded abbreviations used throughout the analysis. The participants have been anonymized on account of ethical considerations and thus have been assigned a coded ID. The participants IDs encompass a “P” abbreviating participant, followed by the respondent’s chronological number, and lastly the first letter of the brand they support, “O” for Oatly or “A” for Arla. The abbreviations are intentionally selected to denote the brand affiliation of the quotations, as this is crucial for the interpretation and understanding of the statements.

Table 1. Overview of focus group participants and their respective IDs

Focus Group	Participant	Preferred Brand	ID
1	1	Oatly	P1O
	2	Oatly	P2O
	3	Arla	P3A
	4	Oatly	P4O
	5	Oatly	P5O
	6	Arla	P6A
2	7	Arla	P7A
	8	Oatly	P8O
	9	Arla	P9A
	10	Arla	P10A
	11	Oatly	P11O
	12	Arla	P12A
3	13	Oatly	P13O
	14	Oatly	P14O
	15	Oatly	P15O
	16	Oatly	P16O
	17	Arla	P17A
4	18	Arla	P18A
	19	Oatly	P19O
	20	Oatly	P20O
	21	Oatly	P21O

The groups aimed to account for a recommended amount of six Swedish participants each (Dubey & Kothari, 2022) and were altogether composed of 17 women and 4 men. The majority consisted of students, but additionally the sample included working professionals from preschool teacher, a university professor, to a few marketing employees. The preferred size of focus groups differs greatly in literature. Some scholars argue the ideal group size to be between six and ten people (Morgan, 1998 cited in Bell et al., 2019), while others recommend three to ten members (Richards & Sang, 2016 cited in Bell et al., 2019). For this study, we opted to include six respondents in each group based on the aforementioned recommendations as six members fall within both of the specified ranges. Additionally, this number of participants was deemed most fitting as it is a big enough group to facilitate a dynamic conversation where all participants have the time to express their opinions. Thus, we aimed to include six members in each group, however, due to unforeseen circumstances, the fourth focus group was made up of only four participants. While initially we deemed this as a shortcoming, the final focus group yielded insights that were equally profound and valuable as those from the previous discussions. In fact,

we observed that the conversation unfolded as effortlessly as the previous ones, as there were less interruptions due to a lower number of speakers.

Furthermore, since the comparative ads that represent the brand rivalry between Oatly and Arla are in Swedish language, the selection of the participant groups was limited to Swedes to assure a linguistic understanding of the ads. However, as this thesis is written in English, the focus groups were held in English. To facilitate participation and reduce geographical barriers, the sessions were held online via Microsoft Teams. Although the internet-based meetings lack the opportunity for in-person, face-to-face interaction (Dubey & Kothari, 2022), they offer convenience and accessibility, allowing for broader participation from diverse geographic locations exceeding the immediate circle of Lund (Bell et al., 2019) and accommodating individuals' busy schedules. Each session was also recorded in order to ensure that exact words and statements are captured, ensuring an accurate representation of the insights provided by the participants (Bell et al., 2019).

4.4. Data Analysis

The analysis of the data from the focus groups was executed using thematic analysis. Thematic analysis, as described by Bell et al. (2019), is the deriving of key themes from qualitative data. This approach has certain criteria in order for a concept extracted from data to be considered a theme (Bell et al., 2019). First and foremost, the topic must repeatedly occur in the data, meaning that the concept must be prevalent throughout the gathered data (Ryan & Bernard, 2003). Additionally, the identified theme must be pertinent and applicable to the research question and aim in order for it to be considered a theme (Bell et al., 2019). This criterion is crucial, as mere repetition does not construct a theme. Lastly, the identification of metaphors and analogies is considered a key criterion for thematic analysis (Ryan & Bernard, 2003). In our analysis, these guidelines were systematically approached and followed for all four focus groups to help uphold internal consistency across the board. The focus groups proved to be an invaluable source of data, yielding a substantial amount of information.

After each focus group session, initial thoughts, interpretation and ideas were gathered and documented to secure immediate notions. The focus groups were carried out over Microsoft Teams, which supplied us with the transcription automatically after finishing the call.

Additionally, with participants' consent, each session was audio recorded via smart phone recording application, in order to capture speakers' tone of voice, laughter, and any emphasis placed on particular words or phrases. The transcription engenders thorough and more reliable analysis (Krueger & Casey, 2015 cited in Cyr, 2019). The transcripts resulted in a comprehensive documentation spanning a total of 114 A4 pages. This extensive transcription underscores the depth and richness of the data collected, providing an extensive foundation for thorough analysis and interpretation.

The analysis process began with each audio recording being listened to while following and correcting the transcript, a process that took approximately 12 hours overall. Thereby, we were able to review the raw material for errors and thus "manage" the data (Bell et al., p.12). Next, recurring patterns were identified and examined to illuminate whether resembling answers and themes arise in the different sessions as well as in the different questions (Easterby-Smith et al., 2015; Cyr, 2019). Quotations considered noteworthy, repetitive and in alignment with the purpose of the study were highlighted, after which they were color-coded according to emerging themes and sub-themes identified in relation to the research question, the study's purpose, the theories and to the consumer attitudes derived from the literature review. Subsequently, the previously color-coded quotations were transferred to a Miro board, an interactive and collaborative whiteboard, and assigned to the themes that were revised in several loops and grouped according to similarities. In consideration of the fundamental theories of CBI, Cognitive Dissonance Theory and SIT, the sub-themes were compiled into superior themes which ultimately constitute the sought-after attitudes, thus responding to the research question. The different components of the attitude, mentioned in section 2.2, are important for the fundamental understanding and interpretation of attitudes, however as the differentiation of the different elements comprising an attitude is not the main focus of this study, but rather the understanding of the attitude as a whole. The explained analytical process is illustrated in the subsequent Figure 2.

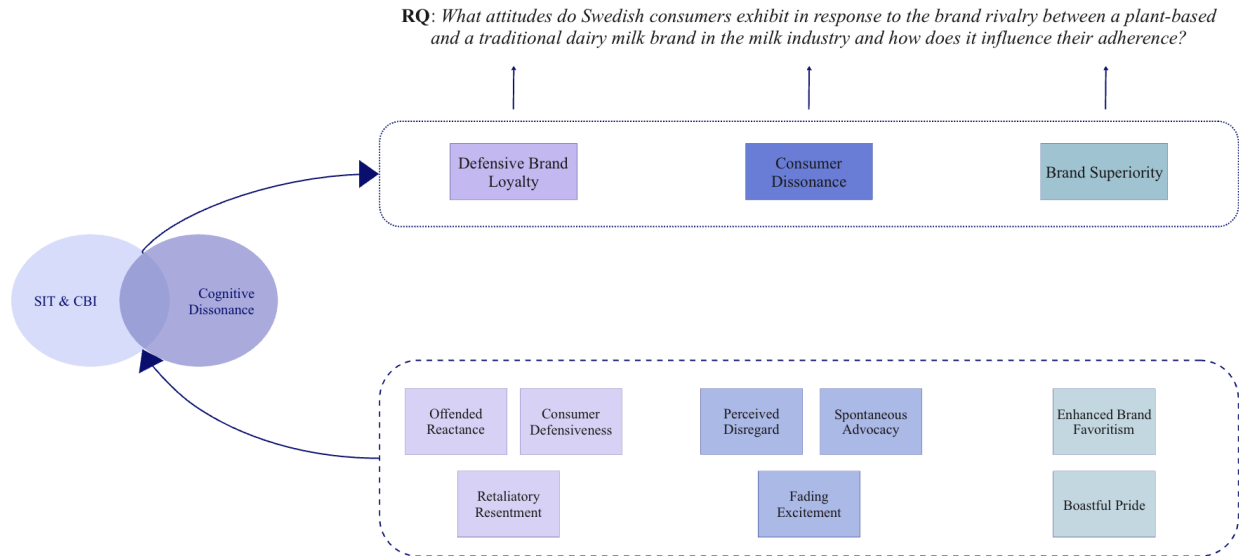


Figure 2. Analytical Process of the Study

4.5. Quality of Research

In order to guarantee quality of the study and its empirical findings, various factors warrant discussion. The methods selected inevitably influence the study’s outcomes, underscoring the significance of thoughtful decision-making. Consequently, the emphasis often lies on assessing the reliability and validity of empirical findings but these concepts predominantly pertain to quantitative studies (Bell et al. 2019). Instead, alternative parameters are approached in the realm of qualitative research that circle around the trustworthiness of the study. These include the credibility, the transferability, the dependability, and last but not least the confirmability of research (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, cited in Bell et al, 2019). Thus, the following paragraphs will provide an explanation of how these evaluative aspects were met.

The first criterion, that is credibility, alludes to the believability of a study which corresponds to the internal validity among quantitative research (Bell et al., 2019). According to Schwandt (2007), it regards the issue of alignment between the respondents' perspectives and formation of reality and the researcher's portrayal of them. As this study is positioned within the epistemological domain of social constructionism, reality is believed to be shaped through social interactions and imbued with meaning by individuals. By employing focus groups as the source of primary data, we were able to capture participants’ attitudes arising in the interaction with

others. Hence, we believe that the data and resulting findings are a coherent and credible illustration of the reality we aimed at exploring. Moreover, following the recommendation of scholars of undertaking a respondent validation (Bell et al., 2019), the participants were provided with the opportunity to reappraise and critically assess the study's findings resulting from the focus groups in order to attain confirmation of the delineation.

The second criterion, transferability, referring to external validity among the quantitative pole, takes the aspect of generalization into account (Schwandt, 2007). It considers whether or not the findings of a study are applicable for another (Bell et al., 2019). Consequently, it is indispensable to furnish readers with ample information and a thorough description of the case such that they may assess the extent of resemblance between the case in focus and the one to which inferences may be made (Schwandt, 2007). Among others, this was attained by the comprehensive portrayal of the studied case in chapter 5, the appended focus group guide that was strictly followed, and the transparently mirrored and analyzed data. These measures ensure that readers can easily understand the context, the nuances and particularities of the study, and the thought-process of the authors. Providing rich descriptions thus allows readers to make informed decisions about the relevance and applicability of the study's findings to their own contexts.

According to Vicsek (2010), focus groups pose concerns with respect to generalization. Since the way of asking questions is not standardized, the discussions may differ between different focus groups and varying themes may arise. The group setting in general may largely impact the conversation. For example the group composition, the relationship among participants, or dominant voices may lead to altered opinions (Vicsek, 2010). In order to mitigate this concern, each focus group consisted of both Oatly and Arla brand supporters, ensuring representation of both brands and preventing any single brand from completely dominating in terms of respondent numbers. Furthermore, we adhered to the focus group guide in order to maintain accuracy and the moderator ensured that all voices were given equal opportunity to contribute, thereby preventing any single perspective from dominating the conversation and excessively influencing other participants' opinions. Lastly, since saturation was found after the fourth focus group, it may be argued that this concern of the group composition did not apply, as the four different sessions yielded similar findings.

The third criterion, dependability, which is analogous to reliability in quantitative research, regards the consistency between the methodology and the results (Hanson, Ju & Tong, 2019). According to Hanson et al., (2019, p.1017), the inquiry procedure ought to be “logical and transparent” in order to obtain traceability and auditability. This was achieved by the recording and subsequent transcription of the focus group discussions. Furthermore, the created focus group guide was attached in the Appendix A to reinforce the dependability of this research.

Finally, the fourth criterion discusses the subject of confirmability that requires researchers to exclude subjective ideals and biases from the assessment of data (Bell et al., 2019). In accordance with objectivity (Schwandt, 2007), it is crucial that findings are derived from the data rather than from the researchers’ own predispositions (Shenton, 2004). This aspect was established by the joint analysis conducted by both authors, who diligently adhered to the focus group questions derived from previous studies. Furthermore, given Oatly’s more dominant and vocal presence in the brand rivalry, as evidenced in the plurality of their comparative advertisements, the study might consequently reference them more often. However, this does not indicate a bias in favor of Oatly, as the research process was marked by ongoing reflection between the authors on potential biases and assumptions to counteract subjectivity. Since neither of the researchers are loyal consumers of either of the two brands, confirmability was enhanced.

4.6. Research Ethics

The undertaking of research inevitably gives rise to ethical considerations that warrant meticulous attention, especially with regard to the participants of the focus groups. In order to protect the interests of the people concerned by this study and not to oversee any issues that could potentially harm or negatively affect them, the key principles in research ethics suggested by Bryman and Bell (2011) were consulted.

While participants are requested to respond truthfully, researchers are obliged to safeguard respondents’ anonymity and privacy (Dubey & Kothari, 2022). Therefore, all focus group participants were fully informed about the recording of the voluntary sessions in advance and briefed on the subsequent handling of the data. Prior to the sessions, respondents were sent a message containing the link to the scheduled Teams meeting along with the purpose of the study

and details regarding privacy and confidentiality. They were explicitly apprised that by accessing the link to the focus group meeting, they would be granting consent for the recording and anonymous utilization of their contributions during the discussions. Nonetheless, a repeated notice of the recording was given in the beginning of the focus group sessions. Thus, all participants gave their complete consent.

At the beginning of each meeting, research objectives were restated and all ethical considerations regarding confidentiality were reiterated to foster complete transparency and trust (Stewart et al., 2007). Furthermore, as recommended by Bryman and Bell (2011), all focus group contributors were provided with the opportunity of inquiring about the study. In anticipation of potential emotionally charged discussions, as proponents of two rival brands were faced, participants were instructed to maintain respectful during the entirety of the meeting and to promptly notify the moderator if they experienced any discomfort.

Anonymity was reinforced by restricting access to the audio files to the two researchers, who immediately deleted them after the completed transcription. The respondents were assured absolute anonymity by replacing their names with an abbreviation as mentioned previously in this chapter.

5. Case Background

Since this research centers on the enduring rivalry between Oatly and Arla, spanning several years, it is essential to provide a comprehensive background. Occasionally, certain events sparked strong reactions from consumers, leading to their involvement in the inter-firm rivalry, which is seen in the following chapter. This contextual backdrop facilitates a holistic understanding of the case, illustrating the brands' strategic maneuvers and the most relevant occurrences within the quarrel. Ultimately, providing a robust foundation for analyzing consumer attitudes towards brand rivalry.

Over the past decade, Arla, a Swedish-Danish dairy manufacturer, owned by a large consortium of farmers, has been engaged in a fierce brand rivalry with its plant-based competitor, Oatly. Arla's heritage dates back to the 1880s when the first Swedish and Danish farmers unified in order to allocate resources towards a shared dairy production infrastructure (Arla Foods, n.d.a).

Ever since the company has grown continuously due to further co-operatives and mergers and acquisitions (Arla Foods, n.d.a). Arla represents a traditional, long-established pillar of the dairy industry, symbolizing the rich heritage and enduring legacy of Scandinavian dairy farming tradition (Andersson, 2019). In comparison, Oatly's historical lineage is relatively recent. The Swedish oat milk manufacturer was established in the early 1990s by two researchers in order to “create a plant-based drink that was in tune with the needs of both humans and the planet” (Oatly, n.d.d). At its inception in 1994, plant-based dairy alternatives occupied a niche market (Swain, 2023). Oatly, from its outset, has consistently emphasized environmental considerations and articulated its firm stance (Oatly, n.d.d), employing a bold, assertive style of communication that challenges competitors (Krampe & Fridman, 2021).

2014

During the early 2010s, Oatly appointed Toni Petersson as its new CEO, and under the creative direction of John Schoolcraft, the company initiated a strategic redirection (Swain, 2023), subsequently repositioning the brand as a lifestyle entity in 2014 (Weston, 2014; White, 2014). In the same year, Oatly released a campaign stating “IT’S LIKE MILK BUT MADE FOR HUMANS” (Figure 3) (Barr, 2014). This slogan led to a huge public controversy followed by a lawsuit filed by LRF Mjölkk, the Swedish Dairy Association (SDA) that was angered by Oatly disparaging milk and being misleading (Lewis, 2018). Ostensibly, Oatly had already been aware of the potential consequences this could entail (Lewis, 2018) but instead of being discouraged, the company took it a step further and initiated a Newspaper entry claiming that the reason behind the lawsuit was Oatly being perceived as a threat by the milk association (Krampe & Fridman, 2023).



Figure 3. Oatly Ad “IT’S LIKE MILK BUT MADE FOR HUMANS” (Werbewoche, 2021)

2015

In November 2015, the Swedish Market Court ruled in favor of LRF Mjölök and imposed a fine on Oatly and a prohibition of advertising of various comparative claims between oat drink and cow's milk (Oatly, n.d.b). However, the company greatly benefited from the attention and traffic it garnered as well as enjoyed a 45 percent increase in sales alongside flourishing profits (Lewis, 2018). Despite the ban on advertising the assertion “IT’S LIKE MILK BUT MADE FOR HUMANS” in Sweden, Oatly did not hesitate to distribute it outside of Swedish borders (Swain, 2023) and later on even attempted to trademark this slogan which was denied at first but eventually Oatly won the case and received the trademark (Swain, 2023). The oat milk manufacturer found a way around the ban of statements comparing oat and cow’s milk by encouraging individuals to inform themselves about milk. Therefore, Oatly disseminated a new campaign stating “Googla Mjölök”, which translates to “Google Milk”, that resulted in a high amount of searches by consumers that elucidated on dairy milks' negative impact (Oatly, n.d.b).

2017

In 2017, Arla faced legal proceedings following a campaign that said “Frukost kan inte bli naturligare än så här” [“breakfast could not be more natural than this”] (Lindström, 2017). A vegan consumer, angered by this assertion, filed a complaint to the Swedish Consumer Agency against this statement arguing that “natural” was not an appropriate characteristic of the entire milk industry and harshly criticized the milk giant (Lindström, 2017). Arla replied to the accusations by bringing forward the argument that the word referred to the product’s natural ingredients and the little to no processing (Lindström, 2017). Concurrently, Oatly advanced its status as a challenger brand (Koch & Ulver, 2022) by undertaking its subsequent initiative. On international school milk day Oatly asked the Swedish Competition Authority to reconsider the EU school milk subsidies “Skolmjölkstödet” (Rågsjö Thorell, 2017), an aspect that Arla picked up in one of its ads in 2018, as mentioned later on. Convinced that the subsidy preserves an unsustainable standard that undermines climate objectives and distorts competitive dynamics (Rågsjö Thorell, 2017), Oatly regularly petitions for the inclusion of plant-based alternatives (Oatly, n.d.e), often also critiquing the amount of greenhouse gas emissions disseminated into the atmosphere as a consequence of animal milk production (Rågsjö Thorell, 2017).

2018

A year later, the rivalry was in full swing when Arla introduced their “Only milk tastes like milk” (originally “Bara mjölk smakar mjölk”) campaign in which they sought to highlight the distinctiveness of dairy milk and leverage the preference of Swedish milk consumers for the taste of dairy milk. In their imagery they show a variety of foods that are typically consumed with milk, such as cornflakes or cinnamon buns and replaced them with drinks typically considered unsuitable to consume with such foods, as exemplified in Figure 4, in which Cola is being poured over Cornflakes. Within the campaign they further derided milk alternatives by alluding to them as “pjölk”, “brölk”, “trölk”, or “sölk” instead of “mjölk”, the correct Swedish translation for milk (Rågsjö Thorell, 2019a), as, according to Arla, dairy milk did not have any resemblance with that of plant-based alternatives in terms of taste (Nilsson, 2019). Although the video ads demonstrated different target groups and varied settings, they all adhered to a consistent theme: one person wondering “smakar det som mjölk” followed by another person negating it. The video ends by a fist punching a package of “pjölk”, “brölk”, “trölk”, or “sölk” off of the table, accompanied by the jingle “Milk is milk”, and the concluding slogan “bara mjölk smakar mjölk” (Trölk när mjölken är slut? Bara mjölk smakar mjölk, 2019). One of these ads seemingly alluded to Oatly’s petition in 2017 to include plant-based milk alternatives at schools, thus representing yet another indirect comparison.



Figure 4. Arla - Bara mjölk smakar mjölk (Rågsjö Thorell, 2019a)

Oatly, however, did not wait long before its next maneuver and took Arla's "mjölk" synonyms and temporarily printed them on its oat-milk packaging (Nilsson, 2019), which is seen in Figure 5 below. To take things even further, Oatly registered trademarks for the words "pjölk", "brölk", "trölk", and "sölk" (Nilsson, 2019) and thereby indulged Arla's flourishing campaign. In response, Arla prompted legal action as they were the initial users of these words and were persuaded of Oatly's bad intention regarding the registration (Lewis, 2018; Nilsson, 2019). Oatly denied these accusations of acting in bad faith and further elaborated that it was evident that Arla indirectly took reference to Oatly's products. Subsequently, Oatly deemed those made-up words as good and appropriate, so they decided to use them for themselves (Törner, 2019a).



Figure 5. Oatly "pjölk" and "brölk" packaging (Nilsson, 2019)

Simultaneously, Oatly was conducting a campaign in Sweden entitled "Spola Mjölken", respectively its English version "Ditch Milk" circulating in England and the Netherlands (Oatly, n.d.a). The approach used by Oatly sparked a controversy amidst consumers and a series of unfavorable articles as they were drawing on an initiative of the 1970s, called "Spola Kröken" ("Ditch Liquor") which was aimed at fostering a healthy relation toward alcohol. Oatly's "Spola Mjölken" was more or less a duplication of this campaign with the same visuals and intention behind it, encouraging a consumption in moderation and a switch to oat milk, citing a significant reduction in greenhouse gas emissions as a benefit (Billing, 2019; Oatly, n.d.a). The promotion gained widespread attention by consumers, it was well-covered in the media and even politicians responded to Oatly's action (Oatly, n.d.a). This campaign also brought about a large amount of negative publicity in Sweden where people remembered the alcohol-related campaign from the 70s (Billing, 2019). According to Oatly's creative director Martin Rinqvist, this negativity was partly due to Oatly's new Chinese shareholder whereby they were accused of hypocrisy (Billing,

2019). News also reported that the advert infuriated oat farmers who claimed it would create a divide between milk and oat farmers (Billing, 2019). Moreover, Arla did not miss the opportunity to comment on this issue in focus, while highlighting the companies full ownership by European farmers (Westin, 2019).

The rivalry within the Swedish milk industry was further fueled by Arla's launch of three products composed of lactose free and oat milk (Rågsjö Thorell, 2019b). According to Arla, these products are distinct from oat milk and are thus not intended to relate to or compete with Oatly's products. They emphasized that the non-dairy alternatives to this day were not good enough, thus, in reaction to consumer demands, Arla introduced this new product segment (Rågsjö Thorell, 2019b). Arla itself did not perceive this oat infused innovation as an inconsistency or contradiction to its "Only milk tastes like milk campaign" (Rågsjö Thorell, 2019b). The products, however, were met with little response by consumers as dairy milk drinkers did not want to consume oat drinks and oat drink consumers did not want to consume dairy milk and were hence discontinued (Arai, 2021).

2019 marked an eventful year in the inter-firm quarrel. Oatly further provoked its milk competitors by daring the whole food industry to publish their numbers regarding the climate impact (Oatly, n.d.c). Oatly itself had already been labeling its products with the respective climate footprints and wanted to encourage its competitors to follow this transparent approach and hence raise awareness of the seriousness of environmentalism (Törner, 2019b). The call to action was disseminated globally, with particular prominence in Sweden, where the slogan "Hey Food Industry, show us your Numbers" was conspicuously displayed on the street (Törner, 2019b).

That same year Arla declared its commitment to attaining Carbon Net Zero by 2045 in Sweden (Arla Foods, n.d.b) and launched its eco product line that were claimed to have a net zero carbon footprint ("Netto noll klimatavtryck") (Nilsson, 2023). The slogan sparked a string of complaints submitted by consumers to the Swedish Consumer Agency due its incomprehensible and misleading interpretation (Caesar, 2020). While consumers raised the issue that it sounds as if the product does not produce any emissions, the actual meaning implies that Arla offsets the emissions. Arla was consequently summoned to provide proof for their claim and later on adjusted the claim on its packaging as well as on its website (Arla Foods, 2021). Oatly did not

leave Arla’s action uncommented and placed an advert in a Swedish newspaper with the headline “Netto Noll LOL”, as seen in Figure 6. Thereby the rival criticizes Arla and challenges them to replace their confusing words with actual fact-based figures, similar to how Oatly does it itself (Caesar, 2020). Arla’s eco line was awarded with the anti-prize Food Scam of the Year in 2021 by Äkta Vara (Figure 7), a consumer association (Äkta Vara, 2022). After a thorough investigation of the case, Arla was banned from using the claim “net zero carbon footprint” and similar assertions as it was not understandable for consumers that the argued compensation of emissions would take decades (Coyne, 2023).



Figure 6. Arla - Netto Noll Klimatavtryck (Goda, 2022)

**NETTO
NOLL?
LOL.**



Figure 7. Oatly “NETTO NOLL? LOL.” Newspaper Advert (Lindbäck, 2021)

2020

In 2020 the rivalry took on another dynamic. Arla launched its first completely plant-based product line under a new umbrella-brand named “Jörd” to better meet consumers’ demands (Arla Foods, n.d.c). Thus, the company ventured into the alternative milk consumer category, thereby directly competing with Oatly.

2023

Moreover, Oatly engaged in direct comparative advertising in 2023. In an out-of-home campaign Oatly products were prominently pictured alongside a link to Arla’s recipe page and the suggestion to substitute regular dairy for Oatly’s plant-based milk. The intention was to allow consumers to draw inspiration from the extensive recipes of the milk industry and showcase the limitless uses for oat milk (Wedholm, 2023). One billboard of this campaign stated “when you are craving an Arla recipe for pancake without milk”, translated from Swedish, ending with a colon and the image of an Oatly milk carton, with a novelty claim, as illustrated in Figure 8. Representatives of Oatly praised the great recipes created by Arla and hoped that Oatly’s ad would generate a lot of page visits for Arla, doubting that this campaign would paint Arla in bad light (Wedholm, 2023).



Figure 8. Oatly Billboard with Link to Arla’s Recipe Page (Wedholm, 2023)

6. Analysis

In the following chapter, a thorough analysis of the empirical data, gathered through four focus groups, will be provided with the intention of furnishing comprehensive insights that rigorously address the research question, that is “What attitudes do Swedish consumers exhibit in response to the brand rivalry between a plant-based and a traditional dairy milk brand in the milk industry?”

At first, we will facilitate an understanding of the two brands, by showcasing how respondents’ describe Oatly and Arla. Afterwards, three key attitudes are presented, which are Defensive Brand Loyalty, Consumer Dissonance, and Brand Superiority. Each attitude is built of two or three sub-themes gathered through a thematic analysis of the focus group content.

6.1. Brand Descriptions

Subsequently, we will give an overview of the focus group participants before demonstrating their associations of the two brands. To provide context to the following analysis and verify the picture that was painted by us about the brands, this chapter captures the widely-agreed-upon descriptions of Oatly and Arla shared by the focus group participants.

When inquiring the focus group participants on what they think the two brands stand for, Arla was often described as being very traditionally Swedish, illustrating a local and natural image of countryside Sweden and the farmers’ cows on green grass. To exemplify, expressions such as “Arla is Swedish to the core”, “Arla makes me think about [...] green fields and Swedish countryside”, “cows are going around the grass”, “everything is so natural”, and “locally produced” were commonly used to portray this notion. Some of the participants commented that they grew up in the countryside and had acquaintances who were farmers, selling their milk to Arla. Furthermore, the respondents strongly associate the dairy-milk brand with their upbringing, eminently highlighting how it had always been part of their everyday family life and an essential on every breakfast table. It was referred to as being the family’s staple, the impregnable habitual and “safe” milk choice and as “something that feels like home”, “comfort”, “familiar” and “nostalgia”. The statements illustrate the deeply-rooted embeddedness in the participants’ childhoods, which was notably also mentioned by several current Oatly consumers.

Arla consumers mentioned how this made them emotionally relate to the brand. P7A strongly conveyed her relation to Arla by stating:

The older I get, I feel more inclined to subscribe to Arla's values where you consume what is local to where you live. Just because that's sort of a sustainability philosophy I personally live by, that I believe that the best type of consumption is local consumption. [...] I've understood that there's so much integrity in how they treat the farmers they collaborate with and that really makes me respect the fact that they've stayed true to their identity and the simplicity of, of their brand and their heritage.

Examining this quote, P7A's affinity, appreciation, and alignment with Arla's values and practices is discernible, thus highlighting the strong personal connection and adherence to the brand. By conveying how Arla's ethos is interwoven with her own, the respondent operationalises CBI (Graham & Wilder, 2020), which refers to consumers' self-identity being intertwined with the perception of a brand's image. Conversely to this, Oatly consumers mentioned that regular milk did not align with their personal identity and image. P10 also denoted that "if you drink milk, you're kind of in the 1950s", with which he implies that the consumption of dairy milk was outdated and not very timely. The quotation also reflects a form of stereotyping that links milk consumption to a past era, potentially hinting that those who drink milk are old-fashioned or adhering to outdated norms. Ultimately, it is of our interpretation that with this statement P10 reveals his self-perception as being modern or progressive by choosing Oatly over traditional dairy milk and thereby setting himself apart from Arla consumers. By clustering consumers into distinct segments, the participant's statement also alludes to Tajfel's (1974) SIT. He divides individuals into an out-group, that is the dairy milk consumers, who are claimed to be from the 1950s and thus outdated, and an in-group, comprising non-dairy milk consumers who do not adhere to this stereotype. He, himself, belongs to the latter.

Finally, it was also pointed out that Arla was seen as the main player and the spokesperson of the dairy industry, representing Swedish agriculture and its traditional and heritage-based values ("Arla is more like brand heritage" (P14O)).

In contrast, Oatly was portrayed as being the new, innovative, "very trendy", rebellious, and "really funny cool brand" that originally emerged to provide a healthier alternative to dairy milk.

Although participants were aware of Oatly's Swedish origin, they did not relate it too much to Sweden but rather emphasized its internationality. In addition, Oatly was brought into context with being environmentally and animal friendly and having a sustainability emphasis, which was claimed to be part of the brand's DNA. Alongside the health benefits of oat milk, this sustainability aspect of the brand was claimed to be the anchor point of their connection to the brand for some of the respondents.

It was also commented that Oatly was thinking outside the box, trying to battle the dairy industry, being politically loaded, fighting for a bigger cause and hence attempting to make an impact on society in general. P10 even argued this idea to be the distinction between Oatly and Arla:

What really differentiates Oatly from Arla is that they're fighting for a cause in the sense that Arla doesn't, you know. Oatly is out there [...] portraying themselves, at least trying to solve the climate crisis.

The participant distinguishes between the two parties, attributing a positive connotation of being a change-maker to Oatly, which may be alluded to their brand activism. Under the theoretical lens of CBI, this can be interpreted as a desirable attribute, which strengthens the consumer-brand connection as the consumer may like to identify this association. Together, the idea of Oatly being politically loaded and P10's statement underscore the perceived ideological path that Oatly takes on by being concerned about the environment and social responsibility. In contrast, Arla is portrayed as a brand that lacks this level of activism or commitment to societal issues, according to the perspective of this Oatly adherent.

Another quote that compares the two brands was expounded by P18A:

The Oatly fridge, that's like a good looking fridge [...] and the Arla fridge is like, I feel safe here. It's a very different experience.

The Arla fan contrasts the experiences elicited by consuming Oatly versus Arla. The Arla fridge, meaning the consumption of Arla, is associated with a sense of security and comfort, suggesting that the Arla consumer views their brand choice as reliable and traditional. When consuming Oatly, on the other hand, it might be seen as more appealing to others. In another focus group a

very similar analogy was made by comparing the choice of brand to coffee table books, suggesting that having Oatly instead of regular milk in your fridge is akin to displaying intellectual or cultural items like coffee table books when guests visit your home. It implies that having Oatly reflects positively on your image or reputation as a person and is used as an instrument for self-presentation. Interestingly this was also addressed by an Arla respondent, who mentioned that when someone is visiting, offering regular milk conveyed the illusion of living “50 years back”, similar to the comment by P10. Partly, Arla consumers also hinted at having slight embarrassment due to consuming dairy milk. Again, the statements reveal a certain degree of stereotyping and show how participants cluster themselves and others into groups that represent different images, which again draws on SIT (Festinger, 1957) .

Many Oatly aficionados in our focus groups also indicated their transition from Arla to Oatly after moving out from their parents’ home or when starting to consume coffee as young adults. This demonstrates that consumers change the brand to mark a transition in their life, moving from their child- to their adult-self. On another note, it was recurrently indicated how Arla rather appealed to older generations, while Oatly targeted and represented a younger generation.

Contrasting the descriptions of the two brands, the large discrepancy and the ideological difference between Oatly and Arla becomes evident. The participants' associations with the brands and their consumer-brand identification are important as they ultimately shape the attitudes of the brand supporters towards the comparative advertisements and therefore to the brand rivalry in general. Respondents’ inclination to engage in stereotyping and clustering their fellow brand supporters and those of the opposing brand into different groups was revealed, thereby reflecting elements of SIT by Tajfel (1974) that explains how individuals are prone to organize themselves and others into groups and how belonging to a group involves constructing a narrative about one's self and the desire to be perceived a certain way by others.

6.2. Defensive Brand Loyalty

When examining and analyzing the discussions of the four focus groups we identified Defensive Brand Loyalty to the adherent brand as a key attitude expressed by the participants. This theme materialized through three sub-themes; offended reactance, consumer defensiveness, and

retaliatory resentment. To further explain, the attitude encompasses the consumers' feeling of being targeted which thus fosters defensiveness and a snarky resentment in response, to protect the brand. Through the complex interplay between the sub-themes, Defensive Brand Loyalty is cultivated. The sub-themes are inherently linked since the members' reactions to feeling attacked also subtly disclose their defensiveness, highlighting the keen nuances of the overarching attitude. Overall, this attitude outlines the deep and personal relationship the participants have with the brand, moderated by loyalty, which arguably influences their attitude toward the rivalry. Also, at times, the ideological tension became apparent through the participants' clashing opinions on the adverts and the rival companies as well. Certain adverts sparked vehement opinions and retaliations seeped in the ideological differences of the two camps, highlighting how the loyalty is linked with personal values and beliefs. Consequently, this attitude is not only exhibited toward the brand, but also towards the brand values which are synonymous to the participants' own values and beliefs.

6.2.1. Offended Reactance

Throughout the focus groups, participants exhibited a sense of being offended by the attack advertisements they were shown. This sentiment of being threatened by the rival brand was vividly conveyed through the respondents' language and choice of wording. Arla adherents strongly conveyed this attitude, by using words such as "attack", "shaming" and "offended" when describing their attitudes towards Oatly's advertisements. These expressions allude to individuals' identity being under attack. In accord with CBI (Graham & Wilder, 2020), suggesting that the participants' consumption preferences and habits are keenly intertwined with identities, when a product they like to consume is attacked, consumers take this criticism personally and feel attacked themselves. To demonstrate this, the following quotation is an Arla adherent's (P12A) attitude toward Oatly's "IT'S LIKE MILK BUT MADE FOR HUMANS" advertisement:

I feel like the best way to go about it to like make people start buying oat milk wouldn't be to start shaming people that drink cow milk.

Discernibly, this Arla consumer disapproves of Oatly's approach in encouraging people to consume their oat milk, possibly even feeling "shamed" herself for her consuming of regular

dairy milk. Consequently she proposes the use of alternative marketing practices rather than using negative tactics that could offend or belittle dairy milk drinkers. Along the same lines, respondent P7A from the same focus group expressed that Oatly's advertisement does "leave a bad taste in my mouth". Later on, she further emphasized her disliking of Oatly's campaigns:

No one likes being told what to do. Or having some sort of like moral, like some sort of moral agenda pushed on you, so it would definitely stick with me and it'd be effective in that way, but it would not be a positive experience.

The aforementioned quotations provide a clear depiction of the attitude Arla supporters have towards Oatly's adverts, as the consumers deemed the ad a deep attack to their beliefs and habits, a sentiment that stays with them and lingers for some time after being exposed to the advert. P7A expresses discomfort at being subjected to a moralizing or prescriptive message. The statement may even be argued to be resistant as she pushes back against the idea of being told what to do. It particularly demonstrates how Oatly's ideology and strong opposition against the dairy industry may spark an ideological tension among consumers who do not share Oatly's conviction, as Arla consumers do not want to have Oatly's "moral agenda" pushed onto them and rather are opposed to Oatly's brand activism. The intensity of the respondent's reaction suggests that influence of the adverts extends beyond mere difference of opinions. Rather, it deeply strikes the consumer's identity and consumption preferences, leaving lasting impressions that linger in the minds of the consumers later on.

Another Arla adherent P10A exhibited an animated reaction to Oatly's trademarking and utilizing of Pjölök and Brölk nicknames on their packaging:

It's still preaching to the choir. It's. This is a commercial or something made directly for Oatly consumers. [...] It's a direct attack against Arla, that's obvious. [...] I would feel attacked personally as well. They make, they're making fun of me as a consumer of another type of products.

Here the consumer clearly states that they recognize that Oatly's ad is a "direct attack against Arla", making them feel "attacked personally" and like "they're making fun" of him. Through the phrases "it's preaching to the choir" and "directly made for Oatly consumers", P10A notes that Oatly is delivering a message to their current audience that doesn't need to hear it because

they already support the idea being presented by Oatly and thus this advert is not effective in reaching or converting new customers. Instead it ridicules them. Their noting of the ad being targeted toward Oatly consumers underscores SIT, as they emphasize the two camps of consumers, and the vast divide separating them. What's more, this quotation highlights how Oatly's actions in this rivalry evoke feelings of being targeted, attacked, and even offended among Arla consumers for their adherence to Arla and consumption of traditional milk. The CBI, on the basis of Graham and Wilder (2020), appears to be keen which leaves the individual feeling offended by an advertisement targeted at the person's adherent brand. Consequently, we are able to grasp a deepened understanding of the vast underlying tension between the consumers of the two rival camps. Conversely, Oatly brand adherents, such as P19O, similarly conveyed being targeted by the brand rival, referring to Arla as "the bigger kid like picking on the smaller one that just wants to be part of the group". Discernably, many of the participants exhibited indications of being attacked by the brand rival, which was manifested in their offended reactance to the ads as demonstrated above. Such strong sentiments were evoked in both camps, but more prevailing amidst Arla supporters, revealing that the brand rivalry, carried out through comparative advertisements, is a deeply impactful phenomenon influencing consumer attitudes by fostering a sense of targeting and offending among consumers.

6.2.2. Consumer Defensiveness

As there was a consensus that the adverts were offensive and targeting, participants demonstrated defensiveness in their responses to the different advertisements. Within this context, the defensiveness refers to participants arguing on behalf of their favored brand in order to justify the brand's actions in this rivalry as well as deflecting and casting the light back to the rival brand. A vast majority of respondents exhibited this attitude, underscoring the significance of the sentiment among consumers who are subjected to a brand rivalry. Arla adherent P19A defended Arla in response to the last advertisement which featured Oatly linking Arla's recipes:

Come on, give them a break. [...] It's [Arla] not like the most evil corporation ever that you're picking a fight with. But they [Oatly] want it to be seen as like 'it's us against them'.

From here we can glean that the speaker displays defensiveness towards Arla by downplaying its negative characterization by Oatly. This quote implies that the respondent believes Arla is treated and targeted unfairly, thus projecting a protective attitude towards the brand. When a consumer's identity is linked with a brand's, he adopts it as his own and thus has the need to defend the brand, and inadvertently his own identity as well (Graham & Wilder, 2020). The respondent appears convinced that Oatly is the main provoker and the perpetuating actor in the quarrel. From a different focus group, respondent P6A also came to Arla's defense after seeing the same ad:

I really don't like this commercial [...] what I don't like about it is that Arla has spent so [emphasized] much time and so much effort to building this community that they have through the recipe bank like that is the main way that they have built their brand basically and to kind of just take a free ride on that and just you know copy paste the link into the commercial. [...] It's a lazy commercial.

Here P6A argues on behalf of Arla, taking on the role of a brand representative by emphasizing the company's efforts in building a community which should not be taken for granted or used for marketing purposes by Oatly. Disapproval and even slight frustration is conveyed, as the Arla consumer underscores her appreciation for Arla's hard work in the establishment of their community which is undermined by Oatly. Oatly's behavior is viewed as opportunistic and lacking in originality, as indicated by "take a free ride", "copy paste", and "it's a lazy commercial". Ultimately P6A conveys a sense of loyalty to Arla and aversion to Oatly's action. Through the lens of cognitive dissonance, we argue that the consumer's view of Arla's well-established recipe bank being used for the gains of Oatly without contribution is wrongful. Thus, this ad clashes with her pre-existing opinion of the recipe page, leading to discomfort expressed through defensiveness.

As most of the ads presented were those of Oatly's, who has been considerably more vocal in this rivalry, numerous Arla supporters exhibited the element of defensiveness towards Arla. However, Oatly fans also came to the defense of their beloved oat milk producer when it was placed under scrutiny by brand rivals. Notably, they displayed their protectiveness over the brand in regards to Arla's claim of net zero carbon footprint. When Arla supporter P10A questioned Oatly's ad Netto Noll LOL by asking:

Why not focus on your product and try to convince me that it's a good product that I should just try out and I don't see the focus. Why? Why do you need to focus this much on all? And their [Arla's] claims to whether they are true or not?

Participant P11O responded:

I completely see the point because they are like a new product trying to break into a market where Arla is the biggest competitor. So I fully see why they're fixated on like trying to break down that. And to me, it's also really important to point out like, yeah, like short sustainability is obviously key right now. But greenwashing is like directly counteractive to that. So for me, this is like something that would very much make me want to choose Oatly over Arla. It like, it instead made me angry seeing Arla's claim to that.

This statement further highlights the pervasive bond brand adherents have created to their preferred brand. The speaker challenges the Arla adherent by offering their differing take on the advert. What's more, this quote signifies the underlying ideological tension between the consumers as P11O negates Arla's sustainability claims, even going as far as to say that it makes her "angry". She utilizes Arla's actions as further reasoning for her choosing to consume and support Oatly. In doing so, P11O defends and justifies Oatly's actions in the rivalry, demonstrating their keen adherence and loyalty to the brand. It further appears as if her prior knowledge of Oatly is congruent with their responsive advert, thus resulting in cognitive consonance (Festinger, 1962). Overall, this reactive consumer defensiveness stems from their identification with the brand, which hints at CBI. Therefore, they feel the urge to shield the brand's and their own identity from opposing assertions.

6.2.3. Retaliatory Resentment

Another prevalent sub-theme that emerged from the focus groups was a snarky and retaliatory resentment participants displayed toward the rival brand and its consumers. This attitude became evident as indignant comments were made by both sides. At times strong opinions were shared and opposing viewpoints surfaced, contributing to passionate debates. Upon the presenting of the Netto Noll LOL ad by Oatly, Arla adherent P12A immediately voiced her opinion:

I feel like it's so embarrassing for Oatly to do this like it's not like they are. They're probably not perfect when it comes to the, to the sustainability part, so it's just embarrassing that they're attacking another brand. [...] If this was after their own scandals, but it's like “let it let it go. Stop being so immature, you know, like you can't just attack others. It's not going to help you”.

This quotation indicates a strong disagreement with Oatly's reference to Arla's claim to be on their ad. Seemingly, she views Oatly's campaign as uncalled for due to her doubt in Oatly's own sustainability claims. In doing so, the respondent becomes retaliatory by firing back at Oatly, calling them “embarrassing” and “immature”, conveying an ardent resentment towards the rival brand. Following Cognitive Dissonance Theory (Festinger, 1957), the respondent was affected by information that was outside her control, conflicting with her prior attitude towards her supported brand. Consequently, she found herself in a state of discomfort, which, according to Festinger (1957) pressures individuals to resolve it. By requesting Oatly to quit with this “immature” and “embarrassing” behavior, it can be argued that she attempts to prevent further attacks by Oatly that will trigger this dissonance.

Comparably, another fervent Arla aficionado (P7A) displayed her resentment by making snarky and deprecating jokes towards Oatly through a plethora of analogies, referring to the company as “a chihuahua yapping at, like, a great dane” or “an obsessed ex who, like, will not leave you alone no matter what”. The oat milk brand was also called “a whiny brat” by P10A and “childish” by P17A. The usage of such strong language underscores the depth of this sentiment experienced by the participants of the study.

In similar fashion, resentful comments were made by Oatly brand adherents as well. In particular, numerous respondents illustrated this sentiment by criticizing and resenting the tone and message of Arla's campaigns, as demonstrated by the following quote:

I think it's quite stupid. And you [Arla] underestimate the audience, I think. And you use a small child saying the right thing. So it's really, how do you say? That you [...] think that grown up people are like childs. They are like children in their thinking. Yeah, infantile. They make the audience being infantile. (P200)

From the respondent's use of the word "infantile" and reference to children, it becomes evident that she views Arla's advert as patronizing and condescending. Therefore, this statement discloses the respondent's underlying resentment towards Arla for their perceived patronizing treatment. Consequently, the respondent fires back by calling the campaign "stupid". This notion was reinforced by respondents in other focus groups, who also likened Arla's behavior to that of children. Oatly adherent's deeming Arla's actions as patronizing was further exemplified by a respondent P190 stating "I think they're almost, like, overdo it. Like they are explaining the joke", and even further in another focus group by P110 asserting:

I know that the like net zero claim is kind of ridiculous. Like I know it's been under so much like criticism, like not just for Arla but as a concept in general recently and like so to me when I saw Arla had like that they put this on. I was like, yeah, but that's just ridiculous. Like that's it's so dumb to claim that.

Her contention emphasizes the absurdity of Arla's claim as denoted by her complete disbelief in it. Her description of the situation as "ridiculous" and "dumb" highlights her stance that Arla drastically underestimates consumers' intelligence and awareness of sustainability claims. This finding underscores how patronizing she finds Arla's use of such unsubstantiated claims to be. Respondents' slightly offensive counter-reactions, such as calling them "stupid", "dumb", "infantile", or a "whiny brat", may be interpreted as actions to enfeeble the opponents assertions and to ultimately reduce the discomfort triggered by the cognitive dissonance. Finally, it also links CBI, as Berendt et al. (2018) note that a close attachment to brands can make consumers personally involved and take action in response to the brand's engagement in the rivalry, which is manifested in the expression of resentful assertions.

6.3. Consumer Dissonance

The analysis of the empirical data gave rise to consumers' conveyance of Consumer Dissonance in diverse manners. Subsequently, we delineated three discernible sub-themes, each representing a form of dissonance and inquiry, all falling under the overarching attitude of Consumer Dissonance towards the brands and their rivalry. The dissonance triggered by the demonstrated comparative ads or by information emerged within the discussions, resulted in a perceived disregard or a spontaneous changeover in brand advocacy, followed by a fading excitement in

the rivalry. The perceived disregard surfaced prominently, with participants expressing confusion regarding the alignment of brand actions with their typical identities or was manifested in torn responses, as they partly did not know how to mentally organize their thoughts. Also within this sub-theme, consumers displayed skepticism towards the efficacy of the different comparative ads in attracting new customers, questioning the brands' focus, intentions and investment in the quarrel rather than on product benefits or consumer needs. Spontaneous advocacy, however, captures participants' reactions, in which they either endorsed the opposing brand's comparative ad or slightly taunted the ones published by their favored brand and avouched for the opposing brand, indicating a nuanced, spontaneous and ephemeral disassociation from their favored brand's actions. Finally, fading excitement is illustrated in the participants' tedium and fatigue in the brand rivalry, expressed through their desire for the dissolution of the feud.

6.3.1. Perceived Disregard

In response to the showcased advertisements, consumers recurrently expressed the impression that the brands were becoming consumed by the rivalry, thereby losing sight of their core focus, identity, and consumers. One manifestation of this diversion was evident when participants remarked that the brands' actions deviated from their typical identities. This sentiment was predominantly directed towards Arla and is exemplified by the statement made by P18A:

[...] It's also weird to see Arla in this setting because they really left their kind of brand values and everything doing this. I mean, this doesn't look like or feel like [an] Arla ad today or any time.

The respondent perceived Arla's campaign alluding to plant-based milk alternatives as "out of context" and "out of character", departing from their brand values and image. P18A is perplexed by Arla's behavior, feeling that the brand is losing itself and becoming unrecognizable to consumers as a result of this rivalry. In a sense, the campaign is inconsistent with what he would expect from the brand. Comparably, P6A narrated:

Arla always stood for being like 'milk is milk'. [...] I kind of always felt like: Okay, they're doing their thing. They're standing their ground. And now I'm like "OK, but now you're launching Jörd [as an] alternative". So I'm like, "what was this whole feud with Oatly then? If you can't even like, stand your ground?" I don't know.

Here, P6A first accentuates Arla's consistent authenticity and resilience in their identity and positioning and subsequently questions Arla's behavior. Looking at Arla's long-standing heritage and the commonly agreed identity across all four focus groups, deeming Arla as a very traditionally Swedish, nostalgic and local dairy brand, this assertion insinuates a contradiction in their company values and ideology. The firm's behavior has triggered confusion and disappointment in the consumer as well as among other focus group members, who concurred with this notion of Arla deviating from their long-established identity. The aforementioned quotations highlight Festinger's (1957) Cognitive Dissonance Theory. As consumers have certain expectations from prior knowledge and experiences associated with the brand, the new information of identity-conflicting behavior by Arla struck its adherents creating logical inconsistencies and unmet expectations and leaving them with disappointment and a disconnect from the brand's values. Furthermore, as aficionados utilize brands as means of identity- and self-expression, actions perceived as undesirable or disapproved may negatively reflect on the consumers self.

Beyond Arla's perceived loss of identity, consumers further viewed the engagement of both brands in the quarrel as non-productive. This was manifested in participants questioning the efficacy of the feud, particularly in terms of Arla attracting customers from its plant-based rival Oatly. Following the presentation of an advertisement by Arla, in which the brand attempted to convey its superiority in taste over plant-based milk alternatives and invented fictitious synonyms for the Swedish word "mjölk" [milk], participants pointed out that this comparative ad would fail to persuade non-dairy milk drinkers to consume Arla. To illustrate, an Oatly adherent (P2O) stated:

I also wonder how effective this is at targeting people who are not already buying milk. Like, [...] I don't think they're gonna get someone who is buying oat milk and is choosing to buy oat milk to start buying regular [dairy] milk again because it doesn't taste like milk because you're very well aware that's the strength and weakness of milk, that it tastes so specific.

This skeptical tone, echoed by others throughout the focus groups, reflects a broader sense of doubt and critique regarding the attack ad. Respondents elaborated that this ad would only appeal to established dairy consumers and not persuade consumers of plant-based milk. What's more,

they elicited skepticism regarding brands' success in customer acquisition in general, by following this feud. This was raised in all four focus groups by supporters of both brand camps, thus illustrating a recurring attitude. One respondent (P14O) remarked that Arla was merely investing money into commercials to fight against Oatly and not actually to acquire new customers, while P21O doubted that the brand rivalry was the best marketing strategy in the long run. Others also stated that the rivalry was not going to increase customers' loyalty. Essentially, consumers highlighted the brands' perceived misalignment of focus and sole concentration on being active in the feud. Several times it was argued that brands were becoming preoccupied by the ongoing rivalry, consequently detracting both from more important aspects such as their consumers, their mission or purpose, their professionalism or their products' qualities. P13O exemplified by asserting:

It really feels like they're [Arla] not really caring about the customers, [...] It feels like that [it] is made for the wrong reasons, kind of. That is, not to sell milk or to keep their brand. That's actually [to] mock Oatly, I would say.

P13O makes her position clear that by prioritizing the feud, Arla neglects both their consumers and the maintenance of the brand's integrity, hence, following the wrong motives. The respondent strengthened her opinion by conveying that Oatly and Arla were both "getting lost" in this quarrel but she also elicited a very similar stance on her adherent brand Oatly:

They're [Oatly] not focusing on what's important, but now they're more focused on, like, putting down Arla, then trying to explain you know what good you can do by drinking oatly instead of milk. So I kind of feel like they're just losing a little bit of a purpose and their mission there as well and really focusing on this rivalry instead.

Considering P13O's Oatly adherence, this quotation seems to disclose disappointment and a potential nuance of frustration, as Oatly neglects things that she considers important. This critique suggests a deeper concern about Oatly's strategic direction and their ideologically motivated mission. Overall, both statements clearly demonstrate P13O's disapproving stance towards the rivalry in general, as she denotes that both brands predominantly concentrate on defeating their opponent, rather than catering to their consumers' needs.

Finally, participants suggested that the brands should rather focus on communicating the products' benefits (P7A & P16O) and meeting consumer demands instead of becoming too fixated on the rivalry and "spend[ing] hell of a lot of money" on this rivalry, as P18A commented.

6.3.2. Spontaneous Advocacy

Another notable pattern that was retrieved from the focus groups was the switching of brands' advocacy, wherein several respondents took sides for the opposite, non-adherent brand in response to seeing a comparative advertisement. It is important to clarify that this theme does not imply that participants suddenly switched allegiance to the opposing brand. Rather, they endorsed the other brand's attack towards their adherent brand, partly even stood up for the opposing brand or slightly taunted the adherent brand. This attitude appeared among several participants and within different contexts across all focus groups, however, it was occasional and spontaneous.

The first manner in which this notion was manifested, consumers coming into the opposing brand's defense. To exemplify, in response to Oatly's newspaper advert with the title "Netto Noll. LOL", wherein they criticized Arla for making misleading statements on the packaging of their eco product line, several Oatly adherents took Arla's side. While some advocated for Oatly's publication and their clarification of the apparently false claim, it was not well-received by other Oatly aficionados. For instance, P4O explained:

I thought it was kind of petty. I don't really like it. I think. Uh, I don't know. I think it was kind of unnecessary to kind of like scrutinise Arla or like kind of I don't. I don't like it. It's too. It's taking it too far.

By gleaning into this response, we can see that the respondent was hesitant in expressing the disapproval of the ad. It can be interpreted that P4O finds herself in a discomforting position wherein she discloses her critical stance towards her favored brand. The statement is shaped by reluctance as the repetitive use of "kind of" demonstrates. Additionally, the phrase "taking it too far" implies that the Oatly consumer feels the advertisement crosses a line or goes beyond what is considered acceptable. Thus, we conclude that the ad, dissonant for P4O, creates discomfort as she disapproves with and disassociates from Oatly's action. Furthermore, SIT by Tajfel (1974)

suggests that when individuals find an identity they associate with as undesirable, in this case materialized in the scrutinizing behavior of Oatly towards Arla, they may null dissociating from it (Brown, 2000). Although SIT regards this notion in the context of in- versus out-group of brand consumers, it is evident here, underscoring its relevance also in the context where the connection is between brands and their followers.

This opinion resonated with all members of the Oatly camp in the first focus group. They agreed that Arla had done a great effort in turning the packaging more sustainable which should not be so harshly criticized by Oatly, according to them. Conversely, an Arla supporter described Arla's attempt as "like a parent trying to sound like the kids [...] trying to put on the kind of trendy labels in a way that doesn't make sense or or doesn't kind of apply". In contemporary times, consumers increasingly demand companies to integrate political or social objectives into their practices and brand identity, such that they may reflect their values through their brand choices (Graham & Wilder, 2020). According to CBI, this poses challenges to brands. As seen in this quote, the consumer does disapprove of Arla's "greenwashing". Ultimately, these comments illustrate how consumers of one brand suddenly defend the opposite brand and question their favored brand's actions, again alluding to the same notion as highlighted in the prior paragraph.

Similar reactions were sparked in response to Oatly's ad published in 2023, in which they used a link to Arla's recipe page. Two-thirds of the Oatly consumers in our focus groups did not approve of this ad. Comments such as "it feels a bit too much", "unnecessary", "cheeky", and "stupid" were used by the respondents to express their aversion towards the ad. P4O concluded the discussion on the ad by uttering and slightly taunting:

For me, [...] even though I love Oatly and I love their products and stuff, it seems kind of like they are kind of holding on to these like 5 minutes of fame that they got from this like rivalry thing and they're like trying to speed it on, but like Arla's, not really responding.

These quotes depict yet another manifestation of this theme. Participants did not only come into defense of the rival brand, they further slightly taunted the favored brand by suggesting that Oatly is clinging on to a brief moment of attention or recognition they gained from the involvement in the rivalry. In CBI, individuals use brands to reflect their personal values

(Graham & Wilder, 2020). The scholars argue that consumers might overlook negative associations with a brand to protect their own values and identity they express through their consumption. However, this study's empirical material contradicts this understanding. Respondents explicitly highlight the behavior they find inappropriate and cannot relate to, such that they may distance themselves from the diverging values the brand presents.

On another note, a few Arla consumers expressed a contrasting opinion to the previous comments and demonstrated a positive stance towards Oatly's comparative ad. Respondent P10A, to exemplify, remarked it to be the initial instance of an advertisement from the brand that garnered his favor. He appraised the advertisement as being productive, attributing this assessment to its informative nature as it elucidated the utility of Oatly's products and delineating suitable applications for them. He referred to it as being a more clever way to attack Arla than in Oatly's previous attempts. This advocacy for Oatly's action is of particular interest as the well-established Arla consumer claimed dairy milk to be "the best product". It further illustrated the third manner in which this theme was evidenced, that is, endorsing the opposing brand's advertisement. Analogously, other focus group participants argued in favor of the opposing brand, as the following examples highlight:

P6A: I, as a non-oat milk drinker, I love this. [...] I think this is SO [emphasized] genius that they actually take the like the punch line of the, the Arla ad and they make it like, "OK, do you want to call us that, sure? We still have our thing". So we can be called whatever, but it's still better. I think it's really, really genius that they're playing on the punchline, so I can really appreciate it, even though I don't drink Oatly.

Another Arla (P18A) consumer strongly conveyed his liking of Oatly's trademarking of "pjölk", "trölk", "brölk", and "sölk" and its consecutive usage of these words on its packaging: "It's fantastic. Isn't that the most fantastic thing ever? [...] this is funny for real! [They are] just owning it".

Both statements depict consumers of one brand expressing admiration for an ad disseminated by the other brand. They commend Oatly's cleverness and humor in replying to Arla's marketing campaign. Analyzing these quotations, Oatly's approach emerges as witty, funny and confident

as they transform a potential negative scenario, initiated by Arla, into a positive one. These efforts are even paid with appreciation by P6A.

Upon examining these narratives, the prominence of short-term brand advocacy switching becomes apparent. While the selected illustrative statements articulate this theme in various manners, collectively, they underscore the occasional phenomenon of consumers' spontaneous advocacy of the opposing brand. From time to time respondents were able to appreciate the other brands' actions or disapprove of their favored brands intentions. Overall, they still remained loyal to the preferred brands, meaning that they mostly argued in favor of their adherent brand.

6.3.3. Fading Excitement

Throughout the focus group, a striking observation was the recurring theme of fading excitement in the brands rival interactions, which illustrates the important notion of consumers becoming fed up with the ongoing rivalry as a whole. This stance was brought to the foreground in all four focus groups by both camps. While participants at first appeared to derive pleasure from the quarrel, they eventually lost their interest and requested the brands to readjust their strategy. This progression is illustrated in the following narrative.

Initially, consumers expressed enjoyment and excitement regarding the rivalry. To some, the rivalry added a “breath of fresh air”, demonstrating a notable departure from the previous marketing strategies and resulting in memorable campaigns. Over and over it was noted that the comparative advertisement and their back-and-forth between the brands was “funny”, “humorous” and made them laugh. It was further brought to light that a certain proportion of the consumers in our focus groups enjoyed the suspense that the “fight”, as it was partly referred to, created and took pleasure in following the brands' competitive interaction. P17A for instance stressed:

[...] it's kind of interesting to see how it will evolve, 'cause it always sparks more. Like if one attacks the other, how will they respond? So it's like a bit of excitement in a way like, OK, Who Will Win? Who will lose?

This quotation underscores the anticipation that the participant feels when observing the rivalry. P17A speculates the outcome similarly to watching a sports game. It captures the energizing

effect of brand rivalries in generating excitement for consumers. It is to our interpretation that as consumers connect their sense of self with the brand, they want to insert themselves more into the competition and spark excitement, as the support of the consumed brand is also an expression of the individual's identity.

According to the respondents, the brands additionally gain a lot of attention, recognition and traction due to the interactive rivalry, suggesting the further derivation of increased sales. Furthermore, certain Arla aficionados pointed out that, in case they ever sought a plant-based alternative, Oatly would be “top-of-mind”. The comparative ads, especially the ones published by Oatly, were deemed as thought-provoking and led to the questioning of habits among some. Finally, the brand rivalry managed to put the brands into discussion and stand out among other competitors as there does not seem to be equally as much talk about Skånemejerier, as it was mentioned, alluding to increased word-of-mouth.

However, as the discussions progressed and the chronologically demonstrated advertisements were reaching its end, the continuous back-and-forth feuding resulted in many participants losing interest and consequently expressing their fatigue towards the rivalry. In fact, by the fifth ad respondents were asserting that the quarrel is “getting old” (P7A) and that they “would like them [...] to try something new” (P18A) or to “close that chapter” (P6A) and “maybe it’s about time to start letting it [rivalry] go” (P2O). A few adherents to Arla’s brand expressed their fatigue especially towards Oatly’s actions. Respondent P7A puts it like:

I think this is super clever, but once again seeing [showing] how hyper-focused Oatly is at all. I think using their links is like, a comparable metaphor would be like having an obsessed ex who like will not leave you alone no matter what. Which is, I assume, their strategy, because I think as P8O said, it keeps them top of mind and they're very successful in that and I think her take was excellent. But on a personal level, I think just being so centered on Arla as their number one like, you know, find them, dead or alive is just kind of embarrassing for them. It's like maybe let it go and move on, you know, like, you've done it for 10 years.

By gleaning into this response, we can conclude that this quote reflects a strong sense of tedium and fatigue towards the ongoing rivalry. While the respondent highlights Oatly’s clever tactics

and respects their work, she ultimately finds Oatly's persistent fixation on Arla excessive. Thus, the speaker implies that it is time for Oatly to leave the rivalry behind and find new marketing strategies. This opinion was shared by others as most people in the focus groups emphasized their tedium towards the rival in general, such as respondent P13O with the following statement:

It's getting kind of old. So I think once it gets to that point, it could be just like a little annoying almost. But in the beginning, like an interesting thing. But I think it can get to a point where you're just a little sick of it. As a consumer, I just want to buy whatever you feel fits you.

This statement poignantly demonstrates the respondent's exasperation and fatigue toward the rivalry by the end, as she characterizes it as "old" and "annoying" and her becoming "a little sick of it". Evidently, the participants' experienced a drop in the enthusiasm towards the rivalry as it progressed and subsequently the participants nearly unanimously vocalized their tedium towards the feud. From a theoretical perspective, we draw on Festinger's (1957) Cognitive Dissonance Theory again. As evidenced in prior themes, some respondents encountered situations, where the brands' actions, particularly Arla's, conflicted with their prior attitudes or beliefs of the brands. Over time, consumers form their opinions, gather knowledge, and develop expectations about firms. If these expectations clash with new information, such as unseen comparative advertisements, consumers experience discomfort. We argue that if this sentiment, manifested as disappointment, confusion, or resentment, persists over a longer period of time, individuals will seek to move past the rivalry to alleviate their internal conflict and restore cognitive consonance. Thus, we assert that brand rivalries promote a saturation effect, particularly within the milk industry, as all of the focus groups expressed a strong tedium towards and shared consensus on their desire for the conclusion of the rivalry.

6.4. Brand Superiority

The third and final attitude gathered from the focus groups is titled Brand Superiority. Overall, throughout the focus groups it was evident that brand adherents took pride in their favored company when their strategic efforts represented the brand and were handled with charm. Consequently, this attitude encompasses the sentiment of enhanced brand favoritism, which highlights the heightened preference and connection exhibited by the consumers in response to

the rivalry as well as an attitude of snarky pride toward the speakers' preferred brand, thus named boastful pride. Together, these sub-themes comprise the overall attitude of Brand Superiority.

6.4.1. Enhanced Brand Favoritism

Upon auditing the discussion transcripts, a sub-theme uncovered is a heightened preference toward brand and its actions. This manifested in the participants' ardent approval and support of the brand's efforts during the rivalry, consequently reassuring and enhancing their favoring of and identification to the brand and its values, judging them as superior to the rival. Oatly supporters often voiced their opinions of the brand's response of trademarking Arla's nicknames like *pjölk*, calling it "genius", "managed to stand out with it", "they take the point back from Arla", "they're owning up to it", "brilliant", "smart", "clever". For instance, two speakers commended Oatly using the subsequent statements:

They're so smart. That's exactly why I buy them. I like them even more now, to be honest, when I see this, I haven't seen this before and but now I'm like, you're so smart. So for me, it's maybe it's more like I want to identify with them even more or like, because I think they are so funny and creative, and I love it. (P8O)

I also really like this ad. Because I feel like they're making a statement like they also belong on the market. Like all of the other milks kind of [...] And of course, you can have your milk. But I want my oat milk so I really like it. I sympathize more with Oatly right now. (P16O)

Arguably, Oatly's engagement in the rivalry intensifies and reaffirms the consumers' connection to the brand and its values. The first speaker's emphasizing "that's exactly why I buy them" underlines how the consumer is reaffirmed for their decision to consume Oatly's product, ultimately showcasing their strong favoritism and loyalty toward the brand. As the participants reflected on these adverts, they identified with the values communicated in the brand's messaging, thus reinforcing the self and brand relationship. In doing so, the consumers consider their preferred brand as superior to the rival brand.

Moreover, occasionally we gleaned that respondents even took on the role as spokesmen for the brand when in support of the brand. Speaker P10 exemplifies this phenomenon:

It's more like, "OK, milk. You've done a really great job throughout the ages, but you're old now and you're outdated, you know. So we'll take it from here. Our products can do what your products can do. Same result, but more environmentally friendly", you know?

The participant's speaking on behalf of the brand highlights the deep-rooted personal relationship between the speaker and the brand. Their assertion that Arla's regular dairy milk can step aside so Oatly's milk can take over from here proves that the consumer not only thinks of the product as superior, but also of the brand itself. The consumer has confidence in Oatly's ability to satisfy consumer needs while simultaneously being more environmentally friendly. Oatly consumers largely demonstrated this attitude, while Arla consumers did display favoritism towards the brand, it did not appear as a heightened or enhanced favoritism that was sparked by the brand rivalry. With this in mind, Oatly fans' relationship with the brand appeared stronger in response to the brand rivalry, resulting in the showcasing of superiority toward the brand. Arguably, the consumers' demonstration of heightened favoritism and preference toward the brand highlights cognitive consonance because as they regard that brand's actions highly, their inner cognitive consonance is magnified (Festinger, 1957), thus resulting in the reaffirming of their self and brand connection. Furthermore, the endorsement of their adherent brand might also stem from the strengthened identification with the brand, ultimately enabling them to present their personal identity through the brand. Thus, this theme of enhanced favoritism insinuates Graham and Wilder's (2020) CBI theory.

6.4.2. Boastful Pride

During the discussions, comparative Brand Superiority arose as a prevalent sub-theme among participants. While the previous sub-theme highlights the enhanced favoritism towards the favored brand, this one emphasizes the comparative nature of superiority in contrast to the rival brand exhibited by the respondents. Particularly, comments tinged with pride, superiority and schadenfreude contribute to the formation of this sub-theme. Due to the setting being a rivalry, Arla and Oatly were constantly pitted against one another, resulting in the consumers' constant comparing of one to another.

Oatly's supporters described the brand as "funny" (P10), "smart" (P8O, P10O, P14O, P15O), "cool" (P5O) in relation to Arla. They also called attention to their pride toward the oat milk company for standing up for their values, with respondent P13O expressing their revelry in Oatly for trademarking nicknames created by Arla:

I really like just the simplicity of their ads compared to Arla. [...] It's a power move but it's a very subtle one 'cause now they're really responding, responding to what was actually said in an ad. But in a very, I don't know if it's the right word either, but classy way. I would say they're not making like "milk is milk" or "f* you guys", but it's more like you said, owning up to it and sort of taking back that power, [...] owning that. Like they [Arla] meant it as an insult, but now they're just owning it and saying "yeah, that is exactly what we are and we're great at what we do". [...] So I really like it.

From the first focus group, respondent P21O held a similar opinion, commenting on Oatly's trademarking of Pjök, "They took the high road and they won. Like they didn't fell back. They were like, yeah, we're like this". These quotations exemplify the consumers' pride and schadenfreude toward Oatly's response to Arla's maneuvers in the rivalry. The choice of wording, "power move" and "owning it", also corroborated by P11O, suggests that the participant admires the brand for staying true to themselves and doing things with confidence. She believes that Oatly is taking back the power by trademarking the nicknames used by Arla to mock plant-based milks. Furthermore, the mentioning of Oatly's taking of the "high road" emphasized their preference for Oatly's actions in the rivalry over Arla's, which ultimately underscore an aura of superiority that they view Oatly to possess. In their CBI theory, Graham & Wilder (2020) mention that consumers tend to form a more favorable opinion of a brand when they experience a deeper connection to the brand and its advertisement. This idea is perfectly illustrated in aficionados' exhibited sense of superiority for Oatly in their demonstration of a positive view on the brand by stating it as superior in comparison to the opponent.

The sentiment of superiority became incredibly apparent among Arla supporters as well. They showed their pride and respect toward the brand by praising them for their integrity in their work:

There's so much integrity in how they treat the farmers they collaborate with and that really makes me respect the fact that they've stayed true to their identity and the simplicity of their brand and their heritage as opposed to Oatly, which is I think a lot more controversial and a lot more politically loaded. (P7A)

This notion was corroborated in another focus group by participant P3A who reacted to the final advert with the following quotation:

Arla, I guess keeps their higher position because they haven't been as targeting to Oatly. So I would say fun for Oatly, but it wouldn't make me like buy it, buy Oatly instead of Arla.

Upon reviewing these excerpts, the speakers' admiration and pride towards Arla is revealed. This sentiment of superiority is emphasized by both respondents who remark that Arla maintains their "integrity and a "higher position" in comparison to Oatly for their more restrained strategies. Hence, they elucidate this attitude within Arla supporters, which appears to be driven by their pride in the firm's honor and respect for its values. Oatly, on the other hand, is deemed inferior for their aggressive and controversial tactics. Thus, boastful pride is defined by the division between the brands in that the brand adherents believe one brand to be superior to the rival brand. This belief creates a divide that can be gleaned into from the perspective of SIT. The theory outlines that people try to uphold a positive social identity by comparing their in-group to other out-groups (Brown, 2000). In doing so, the members of a group deem their group and the brand's products to be superior to those of the rival (Brown, 2000).

7. Discussion and Conclusion

In this chapter the research aim and question will be restated, followed by a summary of the discovered attitudes from the empirical data and a comprehensive discussion on the key findings of the conducted research, first elaborating how our data correlate to and expand prior studies, accompanied by the discussing of new findings in relation to the literature. Subsequently, a new framework will be presented. The aforementioned discussions intend to answer the fulfilled aims and research question of the study. Additionally, contributions will be presented as well as the explaining of theoretical and practical implications to highlight the impact and significance of

this study. Finally, the chapter will conclude with recommendations for further study and closing remarks.

7.1. Research Aim and Restating the Research Question

The aim of this study was to explore the nuanced attitudes conveyed by Swedish consumers towards the brand rivalry of Arla and Oatly. In particular, the context of this research was the brand rivalry between two well-known Scandinavian milk producers, one producing a plant-based milk while the other traditional dairy milk. In doing so, our goal was to contribute to the literature streams of brand rivalries as well as consumer attitudes by providing novel insights that aid in their understanding in this new rivalry setting. Before proceeding with the discussion, the study's research question is as follows:

What attitudes do Swedish consumers exhibit in response to the brand rivalry between a plant-based and a traditional dairy milk brand in the milk industry and how does it influence their adherence?

7.2. Summary of the Findings

In the focus groups, participants described Arla as embodying traditional Swedish values, emphasizing its connection to the countryside, local farming, and Swedish heritage. Many associated the brand with their childhood, attributing a sense of comfort and nostalgia to it. Oatly, in contrast, was portrayed as innovative, rather trendy, and politically active, thereby showcasing brand activism by fighting for a bigger societal and environmental cause. The two brands were thus portrayed in a very distinct manner.

In response to the brand rivalry between Oatly and Arla, three key attitudes appeared to be recurrently exhibited by respondents, namely Defensive Brand Loyalty, Consumer Dissonance and Brand Superiority. Within Defensive Brand Loyalty, brand adherents were observed to be taking offense by the opposing brand's marketing practices, predominantly by the messages of their comparative ads. Individuals, mostly Arla consumers, felt as if they were subject to ridicule or burdened with a moral agenda by Oatly's brand activism, that shines through some of their

advertises, because of their consumption preferences. We argue that alongside a sense of targeting, participants reactively took on a defensive stance to protect their favored brand and shield it from the competitor. Brand adherents demonstrated their aversion and partial frustration regarding the other brand's deemed unfair actions. The strongest manifestation of Defensive Brand Loyalty, however, was seen when aficionados displayed resentment by making snarky and deprecating jokes. It may even be argued that they take on a similar behavior that they previously criticized in the opposing brand, thus targeting and firing at an opponent. Again, this was mostly noticed among Arla consumers. The attitude of Defensive Brand Loyalty results from a close connection between the brand and consumers and individuals' own self-image and -identity. We claim that when participants' favorite products are criticized, they feel personally attacked because their consumption preferences are closely tied to their identities, thus prompting them to take action. They see the brand as part of themselves, so any criticism of the brand may feel like a criticism of them. This connection makes them defend the brand, as they are also safeguarding their own identity. Furthermore, if the perceived identity of their favored brand and themselves is not in line with the rival brand's disparagements, they find themselves in a state of discomfort and consequently react with resentment and defensiveness towards the rival to counteract this sentiment.

The second key attitude found from the focus groups is Consumer Dissonance, which is defined by the adherents' perceived disregard, spontaneous advocacy of the opposing brand as well as fading excitement in the rivalry. The participants expressed a deep perplexity and skepticism in the different actions taken by the two companies, from the comparative adverts to Arla's producing of their own oat drink. Respondents denoted that brands appeared to be losing their identity and being sidetracked by the quarrel. Consequently, they questioned the overall efficacy of engaging in the rivalry, the brands' misplaced focus, for instance not properly conveying the products' qualities, and their deemed wrong intentions. The attitude was further shaped by spontaneous advocacy. The moments of switched advocacy occurred in response to some of the ads throughout the sessions by several different participants, highlighting that while brand adherents can fervently support a brand, they can also showcase strong disliking for certain adverts and actions of a brand. Similar to the preceding attitude, logical inconsistencies and the argument of insufficiently conveying the products' qualities and inadequately catering to their consumers may further be interpreted as unfulfilled expectations. Furthermore, when consumers

identify closely with the brand and they do not support the brand's actions as they do not match their personal identity, they want to distance themselves from this behavior by pointing out the wrongfulness. On the contrary, when they view a consonance between the brand's behavior and their identity, we argue that they may want to associate themselves with these transported values, even if that means spontaneously and shortly switching their brand advocacy. Over time, we discerned a sentiment of tedium and annoyance amidst respondents. The interest in the rivalry decreased and consumers were highlighting the childish behaviors, voicing a recommendation to quit the conflict and turn to a new strategy.

The final attitude detected from the empirical data is Brand Superiority. As described in the last chapter, this attitude manifested in two sentiments; enhanced brand favoritism and boastful pride. Among encountering comparative advertisements, aficionados elicited a reaffirmed and heightened favoring of their adherent brand. Arguing that certain advertisements represented the reason why they supported the brand so much or adopting the brand's voice and becoming its spokesperson depicted this sentiment. Notably, this element of the attitude was solely found among Oatly consumers. Participants also released a sense of superiority for their advocated brand in comparison to the rival brand. Thereby, they expressed pride in their favored brand and even exhibited *schadenfreude* towards the rival.

Overall participants acknowledged the brand rivalry between Oatly and Arla. They recognized the potential merits of a feud as such, that is, heightened attention and sales, word-of-mouth, entertainment and excitement, thus spurring the milk industry. However, it was advised not to push the boundaries too far as it may face adverse reactions and result in a decline in respect by consumers and professionalism.

7.3. Discussion of the Findings

The following section will discuss the findings in relation to prior research. The findings prove that consumers exhibit several different deep yet nuanced attitudes in response to the brand rivalry between Oatly and Arla, many of which were similar to those found in the literature.

The finding of Defensive Brand Loyalty corresponds with the attitude of Brand Allegiance found in the reviewed literature, showing significant similarities, particularly in the element of

consumer defensiveness, retaliation and resentment displayed by consumers. As such, this attitude parallels the concept of oppositional brand loyalty explored in previous literature (Kuo & Hou, 2017; Muniz & Hamer, 2001b), which expounds on the attitude of loyalty in brand rivalries by stating that loyalty is exhibited through the consumer's choice of what to consume as well as what not to consume (Muniz & Hamer, 2001b). Kuo and Hou (2017) expand the understanding of oppositional loyalty through the self-brand connection, which claims that brand adherents develop their self-identity through their advocating of a brand. In this case, advocating can occur through supporting the brand while criticizing the rival. Consistent with previous research, we found the respondents doing both. They openly supported and cheered for the actions of their preferred brand while also regularly opposing and fervently condemning the attack advertisements published by the rival brand. A particularly interesting discovery in this realm was how the consumers from both camps became brand representatives for their favored company, not only through justifying their actions but also through emphasizing their merits. Respondents were observed assuming their adherent brand's voice which indicates this novel phenomenon. Oatly consumers also specifically mentioned identifying or sympathizing more with the company. Accordingly, we argue that the brand rivalry strengthened the consumers' loyalties while also deepened the self-brand connection.

Furthermore, oppositional brand loyalty highlights the consumer's adherence specifically to the brand. Our results strongly support this notion, yet we also identified a correlation between participants' loyalty and the brand's values and ideologies. In response to certain adverts, particularly Arla enthusiasts asserted that not only were their consumption habits questioned but also their values and morals by the brand activism that shines through Oatly's adverts, resulting in the frequent emergence of defensiveness and opposition, underscoring how the ideological tension between the brands can occasionally extend to affect the consumers as well. Consumers' identities are linked with the brands and products they consume, as well as the values represented by the brands, so when these aspects were questioned by the rival, participants were inclined to respond through defensive mechanisms, as evidenced in section 6.2.2 and 6.2.3 in the analysis.

In addition, in literature, resentment was found as a key aspect constructing brand loyalty (Alvarado-Karste & Kidwell, 2022). Similarly, our study highlights the prevalence of resentment

throughout the focus group sessions, a finding that is consistent with scholars' conclusion of the widespread presence of this sentiment among consumers toward such quarrels (Alvarado-Karste & Kidwell, 2022). Alvarado-Karste and Kidwell's (2022) understanding of the role of resentment is explored in relation to the consumers' embeddedness in the rivalry. In agreement with their study, as the participants of focus groups are brand adherents of one of the milk producers, arguably, their resentment stems from their strong connection to the brand. Our findings did not reveal stronger resentment among those who are more focused on past interactions and experiences with the brands (Alvarado-Karste & Kidwell, 2022), but instead resentment stemmed from viewing specific adverts and from the prolonged duration of the rivalry, disclosing their desire for resolution of the feud, commonly displayed through an aura of snarkiness and retaliation. While this finding is consistent with the existing literature (Muniz & Hamer, 2001b), we conclude that these types of comments occurred also in relation to Defensive Brand Loyalty as well as to Brand Superiority. This is due to the fact that while the discussion remained respectful and light-hearted at times, certain snappy comments were clear jabs to the rival brand, rather than playful jokes as suggested by the literature. Therefore, this finding indicates that certain attitudes can be demonstrated by a wide variety of consumers toward different brand rivalry contexts, albeit in different ways, ultimately underscoring the complexity of the attitudes.

As mentioned previously, our findings indicate Brand Superiority as a prevalent attitude among consumers towards brand rivalries, a discovery parallel to the one established by prior research. Most notably, the sub-theme of enhanced brand favoritism corroborates the literature's depiction of superiority through the elements of keen liking and brand distinctiveness, which enable consumers to express and enhance their identity (Berendt et al., 2018). Our study corroborates this notion as we saw the respondents' supporting and endorsing their favored brand's efforts and activism in Oatly's case, instanced in the "IT'S LIKE MILK BUT MADE FOR HUMANS CAMPAIGN" campaign, during the feud which magnified their favoring and identifying with the brand. Furthermore, the favoritism as exhibited with the attitude of superiority highlighted also the element of loyalty, aligning with the notion of in-group bias which also encompasses loyalty to one's in-group (Berendt et al., 2018). This finding is significant, because it establishes a positive type of loyalty, distinguishing from the defensive loyalty exhibited by our respondents. This form of loyalty denotes the connection one has toward the brand and its products, and is

demonstrated through supportive actions like advocating for not only the brand's products, but also for their values and mission in the case of this ideologically steeped brand rivalry. Ultimately, we can conclude that the rivalry fosters stronger partiality and adherence to the brand among brand supporters.

Hickman and Ward's (2007) study of inter-consumer rivalries confirmed Brand Superiority to be conveyed in relation to the out-group members. In particular, their study found consumers to regard other members of their in-group as warmer and more competent than members of an out-group. While our study focused on consumer attitudes toward inter-firm brand rivalries, we discerned similar notions but rather in the relationship between the consumer and the brands. Oatly fans described the brand's response to Arla's ad as smart, brilliant and clever. Arguably, highlighting the consumers' regard for Oatly's competence and brilliance in their work. Furthermore, as the participants experienced a heightened preference and favoritism toward Oatly, they subsequently described identifying and sympathizing even more with it. While Oatly was not explicitly described as being warmer than Arla, it is still reasonable to argue that this sentiment is highlighted in the participants' viewing Oatly as superior.

What's more, prior research established stereotyping as a representation of the cognitive bias stimulated by in-group bias which highlighted the notion of Brand Superiority (Brown, 2000). Stereotyping was found in our empirical data, particularly in the first focus group in the participants' description of Arla. However, this was not a significant theme as it pertained only to one focus group. Therefore, from our study we cannot definitively determine this factor as a prevalent element of Brand Superiority.

From the compiled attitudes, we have also separated *schadenfreude* from superiority as found in previous literature. This was due to the fact that within literature, *schadenfreude* did not appear to be linked with superiority, but was rather a more sinister attitude of taking pleasure in the failure of the rival. In our study, however, it was evident that superiority and *schadenfreude* were associated, as participants often expressed their happiness when companies were owning it and taking back the power, claims that relate to superiority. In this case, consumers demonstrate *schadenfreude* in the sense that when their preferred brand takes back the power and regains the leading position, the opposing brand "loses" the lead. Thus, this revelry and pleasure in the triumph of their favored brand illustrates *schadenfreude*. Thus, our findings widely support and

expand prior research through several different aspects as highlighted above. With that being said, also several original findings emerge from the primary research, revealing new dimensions of consumer attitudes toward brand rivalries.

The attitude of Consumer Dissonance surfaces as a major finding from the empirical data, distinguished as a prevalent stand-alone attitude appearing consistently across all focus groups. As elaborated above, this phenomenon is characterized by the participants' conveyance of skepticism towards the brand rivalry and consumers' stance of brands disregarding their identity, strategic focus and customers, while occasionally exhibiting spontaneous advocacy for the rival firm and ultimately experiencing fatigue towards the entire inter-firm feud. In contrast to the existing body of literature, this attitude serves as a novel finding as it was not evidenced in prior studies. The establishment of Consumer Dissonance as an attitude challenges existing literature in that brand rivalries can backfire and create incongruity, confusion or even frustration and disappointment among the brand adherents. In fact, as the data illustrates, participants viewed certain ads and actions taken by the firms as deviations from their brand identity and values, fostering the internal dissonance which led them to question the authenticity and integrity of the brand. This finding is particularly noteworthy, as it appears to be an opposite attitude to loyalty and Brand Superiority which were prevalent among participants as well. At certain times members regarded the brand as superior and displayed their passionate adherence to it, while at other moments they queried the brand's actions and seemed confused. This divergence highlights underlying innate tensions and conflicts experienced by the consumers when being subjected to a brand rivalry.

Another significant finding pertains to the phenomenon of brands losing their identity and focus amidst the intense rivalry. This was evident in several aspects but most strongly conveyed by Arla consumers who initially described Arla as traditional, nostalgia and familiar, after witnessing Arla's engagement in the rivalry Arla fans were unable to recognize Arla's distinctive traits in its advertisement, claiming it to deviate from their authentic identity and core principles, thus alienating consumers. The brand's dismissal of their ethos resulted in confusion and disappointment among its aficionados, as it creates a discrepancy between consumer expectations, grounded in prior experience, and the actual behavior exhibited by the brand. With the exacerbation of the rivalry, the two brands appeared increasingly entangled with the conflict

to the extent that many consumers highlighted how the brands prioritized the involvement in the quarrel over consumer acquisition and satisfaction, as well as the maintenance of their authenticity. Thereby the brands were observed deviating from economically sound actions, which relates to Kilduff et al.'s (2010) element of “perceived stakes of competition” in their definition of brand rivalries. Consumers voiced their concern towards the brands deemed wrongful intentions and remained skeptical about the brands’ ability of persuading new customers. This highlights that the preoccupation with the brand rivalry elicits the tendency of brands losing their mission, neglecting and derailing from their true brand identity and values in the minds of consumers.

Within the attitude of fading excitement, another noteworthy discovery, consumers were initially observed to become more psychologically engaged with the brands, often approaching the rivalry with anticipation and excitement, as indicated in the analysis. This psychological involvement aligns with Kilduff et al.'s (2010) definition of rivalry. The engagement was apparent in respondents frequently emphasizing the entertainment value sparked by the competitive interaction between brands, describing the ads as funny and humorous, and noting that it elicited laughter. The creativity and freshness in the brands’ communications, enhanced by the rivalry, resulted in consumer enjoyment and appreciation. Additionally, the brand rivalry increased visibility and sparked discussions about milk consumption, prompting consumers to reflect on their deeply-rooted habits, especially in the case of Arla aficionados. Notably, Oatly emerged as a top-of-mind option for dairy consumers in case ever desiring plant-based milk alternatives. This highlights the potential merits for brands engaging in an inter-firm rivalry, that partly corroborate prior research, such as the aspect of entertainment and pleasure (Muñiz & O’Guinn, 2001; Seraj, Kozinets & Toker, 2015 cited in Berendt et al., 2018). However, with that being said, this study revealed the striking, unexpected and unexplored phenomenon of fading excitement. During the focus groups, individuals expressed growing fatigue with the ongoing rivalry between Oatly and Arla. After having encountered a handful of comparative advertisements that operationalize the milk feud, the supporters of both firms admitted weariness and frustration with the constant back-and-forth quarreling between the brands. Despite initially recognizing the overall merits of the rivalry, deeming it attention-grabbing and entertaining, the participants responded to the comparative advertisements more with negatively charged attitudes, manifested in Defensive Brand Loyalty and Consumer Dissonance than positive, found

as Brand Superiority. Over time, the initial interest in the feud waned, with consumers perceiving the brands' behaviors as increasingly childish and ridiculous, advocating for the brands to move on and explore a new strategic path. This attitude of fading excitement, as it was titled by us, was echoed in all four focus groups, thus underscoring its representativeness. Hence, we assert that brand rivalries, particularly within the milk industry, can lead to saturation and ultimately foster annoyance, aversion, and desire for resolution of the feud among the brand adherents.

Notably, the vast array of attitudes were not equally observed within both brand camps, necessitating the comparing and discussing of such findings. To begin with, the attitude of Defensive Brand Loyalty was predominantly driven by Arla aficionados. In contrast to Oatly consumers, Arla adherents were observed to take offense to the adverse brands' comparative advertisements, due to their consumption preference of dairy milk, a practice challenged by Oatly. Furthermore, they were more vocal and harsher in expressing their resentment. This may be due to two reasons. Firstly, we were able to discern that the majority of Arla advocates dated the beginning of their consumption back to their childhood, whereas Oatly consumers started their allegiance much more recently. According to the long established habit and their claimed nostalgic and comforting association with the brand, it could be contended that the longevity fosters a strong link to the individuals' identity. Thus, when questioned by the opponent and feeling personally attacked, they protect their identity and react with more emotionally-loaded assertions. Secondly, in the focus groups the majority of attack ads shown originated from Oatly, as the brand was more dominant in the feud. The predominance of these comparative ads may have sparked this Defensive Brand Loyalty, as manifested in consumers' offended reactance, defensiveness, and retaliatory resentment. In the second attitude of Consumer Dissonance, notable distinctions between Arla and Oatly supporters were not apparent. Lastly, the overall theme of Brand Superiority, however, was more evidenced amidst Oatly consumers as the enhanced brand favoritism, evoked by the comparative ads, appeared mostly among Oatly consumers. It was also present amidst Arla's adherents, however not as significant. We argue that this occurred due to the fact that the Arla fans were able to recognize some of the brand's actions, specifically their false claim of net zero carbon footprint, as inaccurate, as well as deem Arla's engagement in the rivalry as a clear deviation from their brand identity. Contrary to Graham and Wilder (2020), individuals in our focus group highlighted instances where they perceived their preferred brands as behaving poorly towards their opponent. The authors assert

that consumers deeply connected to a brand, associating it with their values and identity, are prone to being blind towards negative and dissonant information about their favored brand and will overlook negative information to preserve their personal identity. However, our study does not corroborate this assertion but instead presents a contrasting viewpoint. Respondents did not automatically condone the brands' actions, particularly in instances where they perceived them releasing undesirable attacks against their rival brands, as previously stated. Instead they made their disapproval clear and distanced themselves from this behavior which was manifested in the spontaneous and ephemeral switch in advocacy. This raises the question whether a milk brand can be so inherently ingrained to one's identity to prompt blindness towards adversary information concerning societal and environmental issues, such as Arla's misleading claim on their packaging that was deemed greenwashing by several participants. Thus, showcasing how an ideological brand rivalry has the potential to overpower existing beliefs toward their adherent brand.

With reference to the research question, it is also important to discuss how the participants' adherence to their favored brand was influenced by witnessing the brand rivalry. Within the theme of enhanced brand favoritism, appendant to the attitude of Brand Superiority, we were able to discern a positive influence on their brand adherence. The enhanced brand favoritism describes how consumers showcase a strong favoring for their brand upon encountering comparative advertisements that materialize the quarrel. Being opposed to their brands' behaviors manifested in the ads, resulted in approval and reassurance of the firm and their allegiance as well as in an enhanced identification with the brand, as they claimed it made them sympathize and identify more with the brand. Conversely, aficionados' adherence was also observed to be negatively shaped by the actions spurring from the rivalry. At times, participants were unable to relate to their favored brand's behavior, questioning their allegiance and consequently spontaneously switching their advocacy when they viewed the brand, most notably Oatly, going "too far" or "below the belt" in their actions. Following Mukherjee and Althuisen (2020) who mentioned that brand activism may harm brands and lead to the loss in consumers, we argue that the participants considering the brand overstepping boundaries is partly because of Oatly's inherent brand activism resulting in disapproval by consumers. Thus, their activism has prompted dissonance within their own brand adherents, illustrating how Oatly's brand activism can be misaligned with and going beyond the consumers' ideologies. Hence, corroborating

Mukherjee and Althuizen (2020) that brand activism can be disadvantageous to brands. This understanding is grasped in the theme of spontaneous advocacy within the overarching attitude of Consumer Dissonance. These indications illustrate that brand rivalries may in fact influence consumers' brand adherence in both a positive and negative way. However, as the data was captured within focus groups, we cannot know if these notions extend to real-life behavior.

7.4. Proposed Framework

After the in-depth exploration of consumer attitudes elicited in response to the Swedish milk brand quarrel, we draw on our empirical analysis to advance the definition of rivalry stated by Kilduff et al. (2010, p.945). Their definition of rivalry is commonly adopted by scholars in the context of brand rivalries (Alvarado-Karste & Kidwell, 2021; Berendt et al., 2018; Harvard et al., 2021). Therefore, we have chosen to use it as the foundation for our proposed definition and framework to explain Ideological Brand Rivalry, abbreviated as IBR. We crafted a framework that extends existing research of brand rivalries by incorporating the ideological tension inherent between the two brands, which acts as the underlying catalyst for the identified consumer attitudes. Thus, we constitute Ideological Brand Rivalry (IBR) as with reference to Kilduff et al. (2010):

the subjective competitive and conflicting relationship that a brand has with another brand which is based on opposing ideologies and entails increased psychological involvement for the brands and temporarily for consumers and perceived stakes of competition.

In essence, IBR captures not only the rivalry orchestrated by two firms, but also the underlying yet extensive, value-driven strife which boosts psychological involvement and perceived stakes of competition. We further the definition proposed by Kilduff et al. (2010) by incorporating the element of conflict present in this brand rivalry. It is particularly pertinent in the case of ideologically-loaded brand rivalries, as this serves as a key source fueling the feud, and takes it one step further from competition to ideological conflict. As the case of Arla and Oatly demonstrates, the rivalry transcends mere competition for market share and customers, extending

to a constitutional dispute on preserving traditional dairy consumption versus tackling climate change through changing consumption habits of the masses.

In addition to the brands involvement in the inter-firm rivalry, we advocate for the inclusion of consumers, more specifically brand adherents, since they become the third-party subjected to and implicated in the conflict. The comparative advertisements, lawsuits, packaging and articles all add up to the public feud, which is why consumers are inevitably exposed to the feud one way or another. However, beyond the repeated exposure, the ideological conflict serves as a catalyst for consumers' involvement in the feud. As shrewdly demonstrated by the three attitudes sparked by ideologically-loaded brand rivalry, it is evident that adherents not only incorporate their preferences and beliefs into the rivalry, but also their identity and values, hence showcasing consumers' heightened psychological involvement as well. With that said, we suggest that consumers' psychological involvement is temporary as they eventually experience a fading and saturated excitement toward the quarrel. Nevertheless, we argue that these factors necessitate the acknowledgement and inclusion of consumers in the definition.

Finally, in the context of IBR, the perceived stakes of competition, as indicated by Kilduff et al. (2010), were also alluded to by consumers in the focus groups viewing brands losing their way in the rivalry and assigning too many resources to the engagement in the ideologically-charged quarrel.

This expanded definition acknowledges the presence of identity and cognitive dissonance as the fundamental concepts, while recognizing that brands no longer serve only as providers of goods and services but also as carriers of societal or environmental ideologies that increase the psychological attachment, sparking the attitudes of Defensive Brand Loyalty, Consumer Dissonance, and Brand Superiority among consumers of the brands.

The above stated definition is conceptualized in our framework, titled Ideological Brand Rivalry. The conceptual framework illustrates the consumer attitudes elicited in response to an inter-firm brand rivalry that is manifested by two competing brands in ideological conflict. While the brands are the main representatives of the quarrel, their consumers, thus the respective brand adherents, are indirectly affected by their actions. Thus, the rivalry which is carried out through ample comparative advertisements, sparks different consumer attitudes, which are depicted on

the right hand side of the framework. The model, illustrated in figure 9, encompasses the element of identity, which represents the notion that individuals consume brands not solely due to their utilitarian function but also for the symbolic meaning that they entail (Aaker, 1999; Belk, 1988; Fournier, 1998; Levy, 1959), thus representing Social Identity Theory (SIT) and Consumer-Brand Identification (CBI). Furthermore, it captures the consonance and dissonance that are evoked when consumers encounter the mentioned comparative advertisements that are either in alignment or conflict with their prior cognitions. Thereby we link our model to Festinger’s (1957) Cognitive Dissonance Theory.

The long lasting feud results in increased interest and attention for the milk industry among consumers, flourishing new innovations, creative campaigns, and consumer engagement and consequently expanding the entire dairy and plant-based milk industry. This is indicated by the extending arrows.

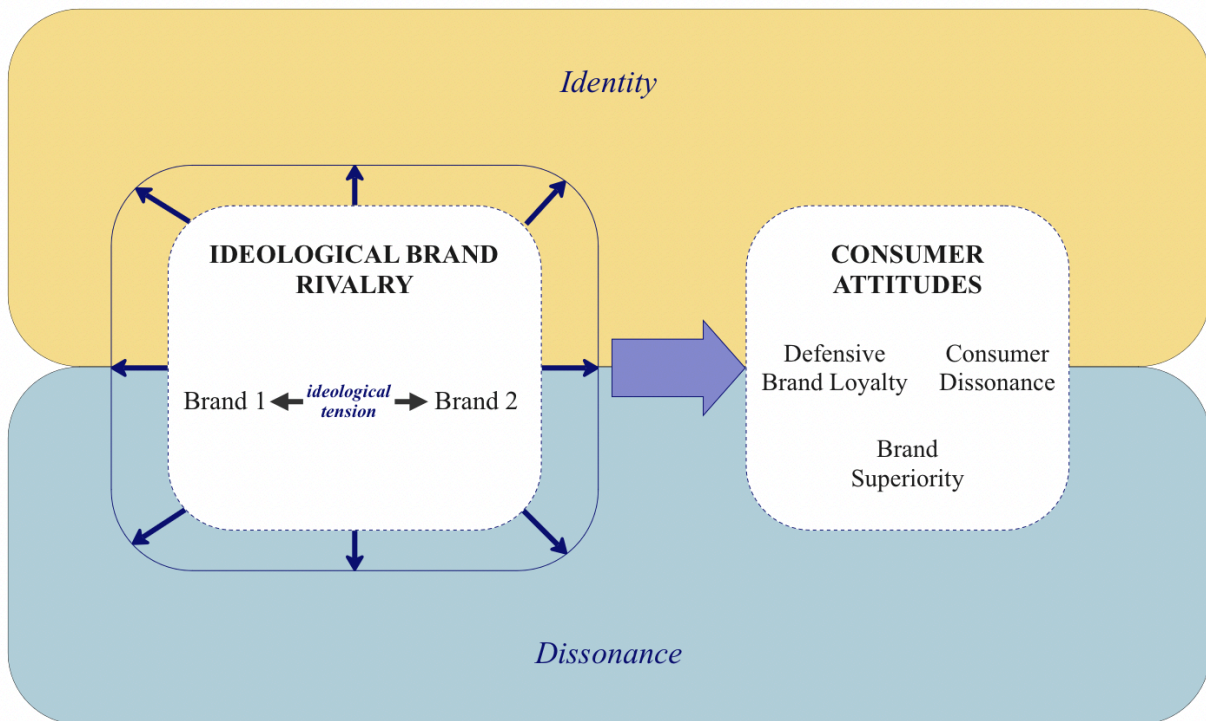


Figure 9. Ideological Brand Rivalry Conceptual Framework

7.5. Answering the Research Question

As highlighted in the beginning of this chapter, the research question we aimed at answering with this study is:

What attitudes do Swedish consumers exhibit in response to the brand rivalry between a plant-based and a traditional dairy milk brand in the milk industry and how does it influence their adherence?

Firstly, we address this research question by identifying three consumer attitudes evoked in response to the inter-firm brand rivalry within the milk industry: Defensive Brand Loyalty, Consumer Dissonance, and Brand Superiority. Secondly, our study demonstrated that consumers' brand adherence can be both positively and negatively influenced by bolstering enhanced brand favoritism, but also provoking a spontaneous and fleeting switch in advocacy.

7.6. Contributions and Achieved Aims

The aim of this study was to explore and unveil the complex attitudes consumers display in response to the brand rivalry between Oatly and Arla to reveal the rivalry's impact on their adherence. This endeavor was certainly met, as illustrated in the preceding sub-chapter 7.5 where we explicitly respond to the study's research question. We further directed our efforts to reviewing and compiling prior research, which was achieved as we thoroughly synthesized literature and consequently contributed to it by amalgamating the attitudes established by scholars into three concise consumer attitudes of Brand Superiority, Brand Allegiance and Snarky Satisfaction. Our research also produced new findings within the context of the rivalry between Oatly and Arla, which are Defensive Brand Loyalty, Consumer dissonance and Brand Superiority. Thus, we not only corroborate the existing consumer attitudes in the realm of brand rivalries but also contribute with original ones.

Moreover, we intended to accomplish this aim through qualitative methods, specifically focus groups, in order to foster lively discussions from which to disclose profound and rich attitudes. From our conducted primary research, we were able to gather more than enough valuable data for the meeting of this study's aim. Our empirical findings illustrated pivotal insights into the

multifaceted and deep attitudes consumers have toward the milk feud that is permeated by the opposing ideologies.

Lastly, through the utilization of the additional theory of Cognitive Dissonance by Festinger (1957), we have discovered the necessity of applying a new theoretical lens to this field of research in order to further our understanding of the attitudes exhibited by consumers. Particularly, the presence of a plethora of negative attitudes warrant the usage of Festinger's (1957) theories as dissonance was widely prevalent in them. Thereby, this study contributes to a more thorough understanding of the subject matter.

7.7. Research Implications

By delving into consumer attitudes towards brand rivalries, our research adds to the existing body of knowledge. It entails both theoretical and practical implications, which are presented subsequently.

7.7.1. Theoretical Implications

With reference to our study's aim, problematization and prior research, we have several theoretical implications. Other scholars have previously noted the theoretical gap in brand rivalry research, particularly in relation to consumer attitudes within different industries (Havard, 2021; Phillips-Melancon & Dalakas, 2014). Attitudes in this context have been explored to a certain degree, however, a meticulous compilation of attitudes had not yet been conducted. Systematizing attitudes established in previous studies served as a pivotal foundation, facilitating a profound analysis and comprehension of our empirical findings. Additionally, it enabled our contribution to the existing body of knowledge by establishing attitudes in this rivalry context. In doing so, enrich prior research by identifying the complex attitudes consumers exhibit towards this inter-firm rivalry. This study corroborates existing literature in the revealing of comparable attitudes, confirming and validating the recurring attitudes exhibited by consumers. We also produced original findings in the form of novel attitudes not previously found in research, underscoring the complexity and diversity of the spectrum of attitudes in this business context. In regards to Havard's (2021) suggestion of utilizing different methods, our study employs a

qualitative approach and thereby augments existing research, which has been predominantly quantitative by nature.

Building upon the findings from Lerberg and Nilsson (2020), our study delved deeper into the notable rivalry within the milk industry honing in on a specific focus. While Lerberg and Nilsson (2020) shed light on how firms' involvement in brand rivalries affect consumers' attitudes toward brands, our study explored consumer attitudes sparked by the inter-firm rivalry and its influence on consumers' brand adherence. Thus, we contribute to prior research with a new perspective on attitudes in the context of the Swedish milk quarrel between Oatly and Arla.

What's more, this research is the first of its kind to specifically bring the ideological tension between the brands into focus. By delving into the consumer attitudes toward the quarrel of these ideologically loaded brands, we uncovered significant distinctions between Oatly and Arla enthusiasts. Notably, Oatly supporters exhibit a lower degree of defensiveness compared to Arla consumers. This disparity may be attributed to Oatly's tendency for employing aggressive and unconventional strategies, resulting in their adherents being accustomed to challenges and less inclined towards defensive reactions. Understanding the ideological underpinnings of this rivalry is crucial, particularly through the lens of CBI, as individuals often intertwine their personal identities with the brands they support.

According to our knowledge, this study is the first to introduce Cognitive Dissonance Theory to the realm of brand rivalries. By applying a new theoretical lens, we revealed how consumers' attitudes such as Consumer Dissonance, alongside sub-themes of retaliatory resentment and offended reactance, can be elucidated through this theoretical lens. Specifically, the discomfort displayed by the consumers implies an urge to combat the dissonance in order to return to the state of cognitive consonance. When consumers' identities are closely intertwined with the perceived brand image and values, and the brand's actions align with their expectations, beliefs, and other elements of the cognition, a state of cognitive consonance is achieved. However, inconsistencies in these cognitions can trigger cognitive dissonance, leading to an unpleasant state that consumers seek to resolve. This theoretical framework not only enhances our understanding of consumer behavior within the context of brand rivalries but also contributes to a deeper comprehension of how consumers navigate conflicting cognitions in their brand affiliations.

Finally, we enhance existing knowledge on brand rivalries by advancing the commonly applied definition by Kilduff et al.'s (2010) on rivalry. We add the elements of consumer involvement and ideological tension to it, as they are inherent in the quarrel at hand. Alongside this updated definition, titled Ideological Brand Rivalry, we propose a conceptual framework, encompassing the key findings of our study (see chapter 7.4).

7.7.2. Practical Implications

Based on the conducted research, there are several practical implications to consider. To begin with, the findings indicated several negative attitudes presented by the brand adherents, from retaliatory resentment to perceived disregard of brands' identity, focus or consumers in consequence of the rivalry. Despite people showing more negatively charged attitudes towards the comparative advertisements, participants generally regarded the rivalry as interesting and attention-grabbing. They highlighted their personal opinions stating their excitement towards the feud that entertained them, even fostering a strengthened adherence to the brand and its aims. As such, in practical terms, this presents companies a new avenue to differentiate and market themselves in order to not only build their public attention and awareness, but also deepen the self-brand connection to loyal customers.

In point of fact, our findings further suggest that the rivalry energizes the milk industry. With the media amplifying the conflict, as showcased in chapter 5, the brand rivalry generates increased attention and interest for the entire industry. As the news are not uniformly of positive nature, it is disputable if the effects are consistently beneficial, nonetheless the participants of this study noted the heightened visibility and discourse around milk consumption, hence people were deemed to be more informed about the milk industry. We argue that the conflict has a generative effect, prompting the brands not only to challenge their opponent but also to innovate and improve themselves, to maintain competitiveness and consequently to milk the benefits of the competition. During the rivalry both brands have released new products. Arla unsuccessfully attempted to distribute its new innovation composed of lactose free milk and oat milk, later on they launched their own oat-based product range. Oatly also used its comparative ads, for instance the one directly linking to Arla's recipe page, to display its freshly introduced products. From the firm's perspective, we argue that the rivalry sparks novel innovations, fostering

memorable campaigns and new product introduction. It further enables the brands to exploit its resulting attention for prominently showcasing their products and even prompting current dairy consumers to contemplate consuming Oatly, in case they ever sought for a plant-based alternative. Arguably, the inter-firm rivalry has the potential to benefit the entire dairy and plant-based milk market.

With that being said, companies ought to be cautious in how they conduct themselves in a rivalry, as a plethora of negative attitudes were also displayed. The consumers deemed certain adverts petty and below the belt while others were viewed as deviations from the brand's ethos and values, causing confusion and skepticism in what the brand they support actually stands for. This highlights an important implication for companies because in the partaking of a brand rivalry they may risk weakening and tarnishing their brand identity, underscoring the importance of clear and consistent marketing communications. Furthermore, consumers can get lost and disregarded in inter-firm rivalries, as they are the third party implicated in it and firms risk focusing on rivalry over consumers. Thus, marketing strategies should primarily cater to their customers and avoid becoming sidetracked by a feud that could result in disappointment, annoyance and the disregarding of one's customers.

Additionally, as more and more ads were presented to the participants, they showed a growing sense of tedium and fatigue towards the quarrel, calling into question the lifespan of the effectiveness of a brand feud. Overuse of comparative advertising attempting to smear a rival may backfire thus resulting in more harm than good. Therefore, we conclude that brand rivalries offer numerous benefits from which consequently the entire industry may indulge, energizing the market, businesses and consumers. However, the rivalry should not be the sole focus of a firm's marketing strategies and should not be overdone, because our study revealed that even milk rivalries have an expiration date.

7.8. Limitations and Future Research

While our study provides novel and valuable insights into the consumer attitudes displayed toward brand rivalries, specifically the one between the two Scandinavian milk giants Oatly and

Arla, there were several aspects that limited this research and thus there remain several avenues for further study.

Firstly, our study is not without its limitations due to the restricted time frame. The pool of participants was gathered mostly through convenience sampling. Hence, it does not entirely represent the diversity of opinions within the target populations and does not encompass consumers across all potential demographics. The sample was also not balanced in the genders or age, as female participants outnumbered the male by a lot and the majority of the participants were also within their 20's. This may have influenced the results as people in the same age groups may hold similar views on issues, such as sustainability, which were discussed during the focus groups. Moreover, owing to the imperative of publishing this study in English, the focus group sessions were conducted in English. Nonetheless, it is noteworthy that both the native language of the participants and the comparative advertisements showcased during the focus group discussion are of Swedish origin. Consequently, the messages articulated may have been slightly impeded from this linguistic disparity.

Secondly, this study solely explored one case of brand rivalries. We therefore recommend that consumer attitudes displayed in regard to brand rivalries to be studied in a wide variety of contexts, with different industries as well as between firms that have an ideological tension like Oatly and Arla do. In line with this, our study serves as the first of its kind to apply Cognitive Dissonance Theory to the exploration of consumer attitudes in response to brand rivalries. Consequently, we suggest that future studies implement the theory in their work to expand our comprehension on the topic.

Additionally, as the brand rivalries may also affect consumers' consumption behaviors, which cannot be captured within focus groups, we suggest future research to bridge this gap, by the utilization of alternative methodologies to study this phenomenon, such as ethnography or netnography to further understand consumers' behavioral responses.

Lastly, brand rivalries have largely been studied from the consumer perspective, however, investigating the subject matter through the lens of the firms involved in a rivalry can enhance our understanding on the literature stream of brand rivalries. What's more, comparing and

contrasting the two different perspectives also remains to be done which could also contribute to a holistic understanding.

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Appendix A

INTRODUCTION

Hello and welcome everyone!

Thank you all for participating in today's focus groups.

I am [Elisa/Maria] and I will guide you through this discussion today. Before we begin I would like to inform you once again that we will be audio-recording this session but all files will of course be deleted after everything has been carefully transcribed. We will also not use any of your names in our thesis so nothing of what you say can be traced back to you personally.

Before we start our discussion, I will quickly repeat the purpose of this focus group. [Maria/Elisa] and I are looking at a brand rivalry within the Swedish milk industry, specifically between Oatly and Arla and we want to explore consumers' attitudes in response to that. Further background information will be provided later on alongside the demonstration of selected advertisements by Oatly and Arla, but for the beginning, we don't want to take away too much.




As a final remark: there are no right or wrong answers and we would like to encourage you to really engage in a proper discussion, refer back to what other people have said and argue a bit, but of course in a respectful way. I will step in every now and then and ask new questions and make sure to keep the time in sight but other than that the conversation should be between you.

Do you have any questions?

QUESTIONS

Topic	Number of Question	Question	Further Information
Opening Questions	1	Why did you start consuming the brand?	
	2	What do you think the two brands stand for? (Values, Attributes)	Give them 1 minute to reflect before they answer
Identity	3	Can you relate to the brands' values and attributes that you mentioned?	
Brand	4	How and where did you notice the	e.g. online, out-of-home ads, TV etc.

Rivalry		feud/rivalry of Oatly & Arla?)	
<p>Short Background of the Rivalry:</p> <p>We will now share a short presentation with you and give you a little recap of the brand rivalry. You will see five different key advertisements or activities that were published by Oatly or Arla. They are in chronological order but we only picked a few of the many and after each ad we will ask you the same two to three questions after each one.</p> <p>The brand rivalry has been going on for roughly 10 years. The two brands have been referring to each other in a variety of campaigns, mostly without stating the competitors exact name. Since Oatly generally challenges the whole dairy industry, the Swedish Dairy Association has also been involved in the feud and several times certain misleading claims or slogans used in advertisements had even been taken to court.</p>			
Attitudes	5	<p>a) What do you think this ad means?</p> <p>b) Do you think this ad is directed towards competitors or the industry? Can you argue why?</p> <p>c) What emotions are sparked from seeing this ad as a consumer of Oatly or Arla?</p>	<p>Advertisements/key events representative of the rivalry will be demonstrated to the participants and questions a), b), c) will be asked after each ad.</p> <p>Advertisements shown to participants:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Oatly: “MILK BUT MADE FOR HUMANS ”  <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 2. Arla: Bara Mjölks smakar mjölk + pjölk/trölk/brölk/sölk commercial https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2uj75C7_Ack (A short introduction to the campaign was given before the commercial was started) 

			<p>3. Oatly: Oatly’s response of printing it on their packaging and trademarking the assertions</p>  <p>4. Oatly: Netto Noll Lol (show Arla’s packaging that goes with it)</p>  <p>5. Oatly: Reference to Arla’s recipe page</p> 
Engagemen t	6	What do you think about the brands’ engagement in the rivalry? Do you think it is a smart move or should they rather avoid it?	
	7	Has your view of the brand (rivalry) changed in any way after seeing the ads, and in that case in what way?	
Closing Questions	8	Does anyone have any final remarks about the brand rivalry?	

CLOSING

- All participants were thanked for their participation and the contribution to the study.
- Lastly, participants were notified of the opportunity to reappraise and critically assess the study's findings resulting from the focus groups in order to attain confirmation of the delineation.