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Love or Loathe: Investigating Brand Lover Responses to Controversial Advertising Campaigns

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Abstract

In a designated market filled with many well-established organizations, there are difficulties in capturing the attention of the desired customer base. Consumers are exposed to many advertisements daily, which fail to grab their attention. Provocative or controversial advertising cuts through this clutter by delivering a message that undeniably stands out. This is usually done by breaking a set of societal norms.

While this strategy delivers great results in grabbing people's attention, it can also hurt a brand. Controversy can lead organizations to scandal, boycotts, reputation damage, and revenue loss. There is a fine line between provocation to being seen as progressive, and innovative, or outrageous. Many companies have loyal customers, with whom they engage in consumer-brand relationships. These are bonds in which both partners contribute to the relationship, gain benefits, and consumers develop feelings towards the brand. The problem that arises is whether this bond created over a long period of trust and satisfaction buffers or intensifies the consumers' reaction to controversy in promotional campaigns used consistently. The study ventures into analyzing how emotional connections to a brand affect consumers' attitudes and tries to uncover the reason for continued engagement with the company post-transgression.

A qualitative study using semi-structured interviews is employed to examine how the feeling of brand love, a central element of consumer-company bonds influences people's attitudes when brands misbehave. The study used the theories of consumer-brand relationship, and brand love, among others. The brand chosen for the analysis is Oatly, an oat milk producer that is considered a controversial company for its bold advertisements, and internal company structure. A total of eight Oatly brand lovers from five different countries, both female and male were interviewed. The interviewees watched three of the most provocative Oatly campaigns of all time and were encouraged to share their opinions on the advertisements. They were also inquired about their relationship with the brand and their future intentions concerning the oat milk producer.

The findings suggest that brand lovers are less likely to be affected by the controversy and are reluctant to believe negative information about the company. The respondents also defended Oatly, and their feelings and attitudes towards the company remained largely unchanged. Only one of the respondents decided to reconsider purchasing from the brand upon learning about the controversy.

This study adds to the existing body of literature on controversial advertising and consumer-brand relationships. The interplay between these two areas of marketing research provides new insights into the intricacies of company bonds, their strength, and the amount of transgression that they can withhold.

Keywords: brand love, consumer-brand relationship, controversial advertising.

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1. Introduction

The following section provides information about the research topic chosen. We start by highlighting a case of controversy in advertising and the destructive effects it had on the exemplified brand. It also provides general information about concepts used throughout the study. Toward the conclusion of the section, we present the study's research question and aim.

1.1 Background

In 2017, Pepsi released a two-minute-long advertisement featuring model Kendall Jenner joining a protest. The advertisement included the American model posing for a photoshoot when she decided to join an ongoing protest. The protest was inspired by the Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement that spread throughout the United States of America, with many instances of police violence and victims (The Guardian, 2020). Young, racially diverse, and relatively good-looking, the protesters marched through the streets until they met police resistance. At this point, Kendall Jenner hands a police officer a Pepsi which leads to the mood brightening (Doze, n.d.). The backlash was almost immediate, coming especially from influential Twitter (now X) users. The company was criticized for its poor representation of the political issues at that time. The choice of its main lead was seen as unfitting because she is a white, and wealthy woman, with a controversial family background, and did not have enough authority to represent Pepsi's political stand in a protest resembling BLM (Doze, n.d.). The commercial was deemed "tone-deaf" and "shallow" and was soon taken down by Pepsi, who issued a public apology: "*Pepsi was trying to project a global message of unity, peace and understanding. Clearly we missed the mark, and we apologize.* (Advocate Staff Report)" (Doze, n.d.).



Meme tweeted by King.



Image tweeted by Gobeo.

Figure 1. Images from Doze (n.d)

Controversy in advertisements has been around practically since their beginning, but a significant increase in the use of this type of capturing the viewer's attention can be seen over

the past few decades. This strategy can be described as off-the-cuff due to its characteristics, which achieves its goal through the use of emotion and shock. It holds the power to generate strong emotions and cut through the noise in the advertisement noise to deliver messages provocatively. In the advertising industry, this strategy holds a position of freshness and boldness, pushing for change in societal norms. Brands use this tactic to differentiate themselves from rivals in crowded markets and make a statement. Shocking ads as a strategy can be beneficial for society because it pushes people to rethink and extend established social norms, bringing in new perspectives (Dahl et al., 2003). Using this approach in the advertising world is similar to balancing a fine line. In history, many controversial advertising campaigns can be pointed out, which were successful in bringing publicity, popularity to the brand, and a rise in the stock market, among other things (The Guardian, 2019). However, there have also been instances of ads that have led to scandal, boycotts, reputation damage, and in extreme cases, brand bankruptcy.

Studies on advertising have demonstrated that it invokes feelings in consumers exposed to them. Both positive and negative feelings predict the effectiveness of an ad, as well as the attitudes toward the brand in question (Edell & Burke, 1987). Controversial advertisement has a shocking factor (Dahl et al., 2003), a powerful sensation that is delivered to consumers who then react to it based on multiple factors. One factor that affects the response is the connection a consumer has with a brand, what is generally referred to as a consumer-brand relationship (Edell & Burke, 1987). Another factor is the emotions developed between the two relationship partners. Since consumers engage with brands daily through consumption, they develop bonds with some of the companies. Both consumers and brands seek to create such connections because they offer value to both partners (Fournier, 1998). From resolving identity anxieties for consumers to generating a loyal base of customers for the organization, consumer-brand relationships are sought after in the modern day (Ahuvia, 2005; Belk, 1988). An important element of consumer-brand relationships is brand love. This is a concept that refers to the feelings consumers develop towards certain brands, having trust as an antecedent (Albert & Merunka, 2013), and ultimately impacting customer loyalty (Carroll & Ahuvia, 2006).

Moreover, emotional branding is a marketing strategy that has gained widespread recognition and adoption in recent decades. Renowned for its consumer-centric, relational, and narrative-driven approach, it has evolved into a powerful tool for creating deep and lasting connections with consumers (Thompson et al., 2006). By leveraging the power of emotions, this approach aims to forge a strong bond between the brand and its customers, thereby creating a competitive edge in the market. In essence, emotional branding seeks to differentiate the brand by tapping into the emotional needs and desires of the consumers, and by crafting a compelling brand story that resonates with them at a deeper level (Thompson et al., 2006).

Lastly, consumers' reactions to controversy when in consumer-company bonds have multiple implications. While some consumers might find provocative advertisements exciting and thrilling if they align with the brand's identity and values, others might find it disturbing, and experience strong reactions to them. The Pepsi commercial was received negatively by most brand fans, who expressed disapproval. Long-term consumer-brand relationships have a better

chance of withstanding wrong-doings by the brand than newly-established relationships (Batra et al. 2012). However, even after missteps, some consumers continue to engage with brands. Academic research has not mapped out in detail the intricacies of consumer-brand relationships when affected by this external factor. In terms of behaviors post-company transgressions, consumers' attitudes and the way they engage with the brands are largely unspecified. Most importantly, the underlying motivations for their ongoing actions seem to escape our understanding.

1.2 Problematization

In the perception of reality, various factors play a major role. Humor, culture, emotion, and other matters such as education, gender, and nationality influence a person's perception of external factors. Advertising is no exception, including those that use controversy to attract the viewer's attention (Noland, 2021; Dahl et al., 2003; De Run & Ting, 2014; Chan et al., 2007). Existing literature takes into account various aspects of controversial advertising, including causing shock, disgust, or brand memorability. Despite this, the interplay between emotional connections with brands and consumer reactions is under-researched.

Controversy in advertising can be intentional and unintentional (Kumar, 2023). However, the first form is described much more frequently, due to its characteristic of intentionally and deliberately shocking the audience. Non-intentional controversy in advertising arises most often because of the characteristics of the product being advertised but can also be significant in the performance of the campaign itself (Dahl et al., 2003; Dens et al., 2008; Waller, 1999). In recent years, the use of controversy in advertising has also reached everyday products (Sabri & Obermiller, 2012), thus attracting the attention of the audience in this specific way. Considering the dynamic nature of consumer preferences for brands and products, there may be a need to study how emotional connections to a brand change over time in response to controversial advertising messages and their impact on consumer behavior.

Controversy in advertising can be perceived by the audience in different ways. In the case of going beyond the social acceptance canons of the topic presented in the ad, we are likely to find more critics of the ad than allies (Tansey and O'Riorden, 1999; Satrio et al, 2020; Sabri and Obermiller, 2012). The shocking content used in advertisements attracts attention. However, finding a balance between the positive and negative effects of such campaigns is crucial. Advertisements target a particular audience, but there is always a risk of reaching a wider audience than expected (Dahl, Frankerberger & Manchanda, 2003). The question that arises here is whether the company is then exposed to the negative consequences of exploiting the controversy. Certainly, there will be supporters and opponents of the campaign, whose judgment will be influenced by their personal preferences. Many factors influence the reception of this type of content from gender to education (Dahl et al., 2003; Arnaud et al., 2018).

However, there is no connection in the literature between a less critical response to controversy and a consumer-brand relationship that involves emotions, which can be described as emotional

connections to a brand. Although there has been extensive research on controversial advertising and consumer reactions, there is a research gap that describes emotional connections to brands and their impact on the reception of such marketing campaigns. The topic of emotional connections in the context of controversial advertising messages is under-researched. Existing analyses describe the mentioned phenomena as two separate issues. The relationship between consumers who like a brand, or brand lovers, and controversial advertising campaigns does not find sufficient understanding in the existing literature. Instead of focusing on the emotional aspects of the consumer-brand relationship, the existing literature describes basic consumer behavior and perceptions caused by exposure to controversial content (Arnaud & Waguespack, 2018; Dens et al., 2008; Dahl et al., 2003). Some studies confirm the existence of emotional connections between brands and consumers. Among such are observations on the concept of "Brand Love." With these, the mitigation of consumer reactions to controversial advertisements can be acknowledged if the consumer has a brand-love relationship. However, despite the recognition of this potentially moderating effect, the literature does not provide empirical evidence on this topic (Albert & Merunka, 2013; Joshi & Garg, 2021; Carroll & Ahuvia, 2006). Finally, it is noticeable that there is an absence of research linking emotional involvement to controversial advertising. The literature on the consumer-brand relationship focuses mainly on aspects of the emergence and effects of such a relationship. However, there is a lack of understanding of the role of emotional connections, such as Brand Love, in shaping responses to controversial campaigns. As well as how these connections affect the perceptions and behaviors of consumers exposed to controversial ads (Fournier, 1998; Rodriguez, 2023; Albert & Mernuka, 2013; Joshi & Garg, 2021).

During the creation of an emotional relationship between the consumer and the brand, a certain kind of personification of the brand occurs, and the brand becomes like a partner to the consumer. This means that the brand becomes an active participant in building this relationship. However, the concept of emotional connections with brands is multifaceted and includes various elements, including satisfaction, trust, commitment, or even brand love (Gabarino & Johnson, 1999; Joshi & Garg, 2021). Brand love turns out to be an explanatory factor variable for loyalty and commitment (Joshi & Garg, 2021), which may suggest a difference in the perception of controversy by consumers with emotional connections and those who do not have them. However, the exact nature of these connections and their impact on consumer responses to advertising controversies remains unclear. Like all other relationships humans experience during their lives, the consumer-brand relationship is variable and evolves. In the process, the strength of emotional arousal decreases as the relationship strengthens and brands are incorporated as part of our identity (Reimann et al., 2012). Consumers whose emotional connection to a brand can be described as strong prioritize trust and commitment in their relationship with those brands (Gabarino & Johnson, 1999). Understanding how these evolving relationships with varying degrees of commitment shape responses to controversial advertising can provide an understanding of the resilience of emotional connections to provocative marketing tactics.

An important aspect when it comes to the perception of advertisements of various types is the presented concept of "brand love." This state can be described as an emotional attachment on

the part of the consumer to the brand, describing the degree of emotional attachment that a satisfied consumer feels toward the brand (Batra et al., 2012; Carroll & Ahuvia, 2006). Brand attachment is an important component of "brand love" (Carroll & Ahuvia, 2006; Barta et al., 2012; Thomson et al., 2005; Albert et al., 2008). Brand love describes the emotional bond between consumers and brands, which can significantly influence consumer behavior and their decisions, loyalty, or support for a brand. However, the literature does not describe the extent to which the concept of brand love moderates or mediates reactions to controversial advertising. The concept is often associated with long-lasting and loyal relationships between consumers and brands. Examining the impact of this relationship on controversial content can provide valuable information on the relationship between the two components for managers using provocative advertising tactics.

Brands have an important role in the process of creating our identity. They are an integral part of it, which is used by consumers to shape their self and express themselves, but also to resolve identity conflicts and fears. By incorporating a brand as part of one's identity project, a bricolage is created, enabling self-expression within consumption (Ahuvia, 2005; Rokka & Ulver, 2023). The concept of identity projects describes a continuous process of identity formation and transformation, influenced by various factors such as individual experiences and social norms (Rokka & Ulver, 2023). Due to the dynamics of these processes, controversial advertising messages can change an individual's attitude toward a brand. However, the nature of the relationship between the brand and the response to controversial topics used in advertisements is not known. Taking these aspects into account, it is possible to understand the relationship between emotional connection to a brand and further consideration of it in one's identity project.

Social identity and identity theory, on the other hand, provides a basis for understanding an individual's sense of self, expressed through role, community, and group membership, including brand communities (Stets & Burke, 2000). Group and community play the most important role in identity in this case. Consumption is an important part of belonging, but it is only an element that allows an individual to join a group, through which he or she expresses his or her identity. Reactions to controversy in ads in this case will be shaped through the lens of the group. When congruence is found within it, a reinforcement of the sense of belonging will also be present. The consumer is willing to perceive reality differently, even when there are issues that are incompatible with his conscience, to remain in a community that is an important part of his identity (Belk, 1988; Ahuvia, 2005).

Brand communities are a form of platform through which consumers come together to form relationships, rituals, and traditions centered around a brand. Members of such communities, through the bond that develops between them, share a collective emotion toward the brand and its activities (Isisag et al., 2023). A community formed in such a mode tends to sympathize and share reactions, including to controversial ads. However, the durability of such a community cannot be ruled out by provocative marketing content. Groups formed around brands, engage in value co-creation activities, where consumers and the brand are responsible for building these values (Cova et al., 2023). This process can be disrupted by controversial advertising,

affecting value-creation processes, community cohesion, and direction. Reactions to such ads can range from excitement and engagement to anger, alienation, or abandonment (Isisag et al., 2023). Emotional connections to a brand can mitigate these reactions, and examining this relationship can provide insight into the resilience of the consumer-brand relationship in the face of marketing provocations. Brand communities are a very important area that, through the use of the co-creation aspect of the content, represent an important part of the interaction in the consumer-brand relationship. However, controversial advertisements can disrupt the dynamics created in this community, affecting value-creation processes and emotional connections. Research on the resilience of the consumer-brand relationship in the face of such provocations is important to understand the mechanisms behind the strengthening or weakening of the brand community, and the use of this relationship in marketing strategies.

Existing research has extensively analyzed the impact of emotional connections to brands on consumers' decisions and behavior, addressing their attitudes toward traditional marketing strategies. However, there is a research gap in understanding how emotional connections affect the response of audiences to controversial marketing messages. In the existing research, a focus on positive aspects and emotional effects can be seen, in the framework of traditional advertising messages. What is missing from the discussion is an understanding of the moderating aspect of the role of brand love, the effects of strong emotional connections, and other concepts that describe the consumer-brand relationship. The existing research has a gap in understanding the importance of emotional connections to a brand and their impact on the perception of controversial content in advertisements. Exploring this issue will provide an understanding of the importance of emotional connections and guide how organizations can leverage this consumer-brand relationship for controversial ads.

1.3 Aim and Research Question

This study aims to investigate the influence of emotional connections with a brand in reactions to controversial advertising campaigns. The focus is on capturing and analyzing the reactions of loyal customers to shocking campaigns from the brands they love. The research group members are between 18 and 60 years old and are engaged in a consumer-brand relationship. We use the theories of consumer-brand relationship, brand love, social identity, and brand community to analyze this phenomenon through the lenses of marketing. This study contributes to the field of consumer behavior research, enhancing the existing body of literature by delving into consumers' motivations for relationship maintenance, and the reasons for accepting wrongdoings. It contributes by advancing research on the intricacies between controversial advertising, consumer-brand relationships, brand love, and customer behavior. We aim to offer results that will enrich the understanding of the role of brand emotional connections in the context of the shocking promotion.

The study poses the following research question:

RQ: How do emotional connections with a brand influence consumer responses to controversial advertising campaigns?

In support of the main research question, we develop the following sub-questions:

SQ1: *Will brand lovers exposed to controversial ads continue to engage with the brand? Why?*

SQ2: *How will consumers continue to engage with the brand?*

2. Theoretical Background

This section showcases the main theoretical concepts relevant to the present study. It encompasses the concept of controversial advertising, consumer-brand relationships, brand love, and other aspects that provide a wider context to the main theme. To provide a good understanding and background to the nature of consumer-company bonds and their implications, this section also delineates the relationship's most important elements. This section offers arguments from the most important scholars, presents psychological perspectives on the relationship, and delves into the concept of brand love. Lastly, a research gap, a summary of the theoretical standpoints, and a conceptual framework are presented.

2.1 Controversial Advertisement

Research on controversial advertisements has been done for many decades. Scholars have written about this strategy using terms such as shocking (Dahl et al., 2003), taboo (Sabri & Obermiller, 2012), offensive (Chan et al., 2007; Daechun & Kim, n.d.; Waller, n.d.), or provocative (Vezina & Paul, 1997) advertisement but referring to the same empirical phenomenon. Companies use this strategy to attract attention and have generated exquisite results (e.g., Calvin Klein, and Benetton). A definition of controversial advertisement is a piece of media shared with the large public that “deliberately and purposely shocks consumers” (Dahl et al., 2003). This is done by breaking a set of well-defined social norms or breaching established moral codes regarded as acceptable by society. Based on culture, religion, level of development of the educational system, and other factors, societies define conventions and practices that suit their values and beliefs. Differences in both advertising rules and perceptions have been identified by researchers in different countries. For example, advertisers in Malaysia are prohibited from promoting addictive and gender-related products, as well as any statements that could upset religious, racial, or political groups (Cyril De Run & Ting, 2014).

The use of controversy in advertisements is not a new practice and it still holds great popularity. It pushes both consumers and organizations to rethink what is socially acceptable by venturing into taboo topics, or new ways of showcasing products and services. Scholars agree that social norms violation can be done by showcasing products that are perceived as taboo or offensive (e.g., hygiene products for women, alcohol), or because of the execution of the ad (e.g. obscenity, violence, racist images, nudity) (Arnaud & Waguespack, 2018; Dens et al., 2008; Waller, 1999). They organized offensive products into four categories: gender or sex-related products, addictive products, health and care products, and social or political groups (Noland, 2021). Chan et al. (2007) argue that there is a third way advertisements can create controversy and that is the type of medium. The placement of some ads in the public display would be inappropriate or unsuitable and this is referred to as the medium. However, this ties back to Dahl et. al (2003) and the concept of socially accepted subjects or objects. People and communities define what is acceptable and what is not within their environment. Factors such as culture, family, religion, or lifestyle play a role in the definition of these norms. Chan et al. (2007) support this assumption by finding differences in the perceived level of offence in

advertisements in Chinese and German cultures. They found that Chinese consumers were less accepting of controversial ads compared to German consumers. However, the consumers from both countries expressed strong negative reactions towards images with a sexual orientation.

Controversial advertisements have been widely adopted by brands because of their undoubtedly quality of standing out from the masses, which is generally characterized by lying within accepted social norms (Dahl et al., 2003; Vezina & Paul, 1997). While controversial or taboo advertisements usually promote a controversial product (e.g. female hygiene products, condoms, sexual disease prevention), this strategy has extended its reach into non-taboo products such as soft drinks, leather goods, and internet supplies and the reach has become global (Sabri & Obermiller, 2012). This tactic is widely used in the fashion and luxury goods industry. Brands such as Benetton, Calvin Klein, and Versace have been using this strategy for decades. Benetton's 90's advertisements featured pictures of an AIDS patient on the verge of death, a black woman breastfeeding a white baby, a priest dressed in black, kissing a nun dressed in white, three human hearts belonging to people of different races laid on a table, etc. (Vogue, 2024). All these campaigns sparked controversy at the time but attracted plenty of attention to the brand and the causes it was supporting. This strategy was also used by the clothing brand Calvin Klein who featured deliberately shocking pictures depicting models in poses and instances of sexual nature (Dahl et al., 2003). Originating back in the 80s and 90s, the brand continued to serve the narrative of pushing the boundaries of what is acceptable in fashion and advertisement. Pictures include young women and men wearing jeans and little other clothing promoting a jean line, and posing in sexual related manner for the underwear line. Calvin Klein used models and celebrities to enter popular culture and gained quite a reputation. Some of its advertisements picturing half-naked models continue to be banned, showing that its past campaigns had the results they wished for: gained attention and popularity (WWD, 2024). However, the brand persists in using this strategy to this day. Both of the mentioned brands have been using controversy in campaigns to appeal to young customers and to generate awareness toward societal issues such as racism and sexual disease transmission (Vogue, n.d).

The provocation literature explores consumer's reactions and attitudes to controversial advertisements and towards the brand using different constructs: emotions and social norms (Arnaud & Waguespack, 2018), perceptions (Sabri & Obermiller, 2012), mood and the setting (or the medium's characteristics) (Noland, 2021). Plenty of attention is given to consumer behavior toward these brands after the exposure to controversial ads. The studies mostly use fictitious brands and scenarios to depict controversy and test consumer's attitudes, memory, and behavior. Shock appeal and disgust appeal appear sparingly in some studies as part of the controversial advertisement literature (Dens, N., et al, 2008; Dahl, D., Frankenberg, K., & Manchanda, R., 2003). The studies mainly test the effectiveness of remembering the brand and behaviors (e.g., purchase).

While Dahl et al. (2003) found shock advertising to have positive effects on remembering the brand, increased attention, and influenced consumer behavior positively, other authors have come to different conclusions. Dens et al. (2008) discovered that controversial advertisements

that evoke disgust appeal have led consumers to have a negative attitude towards the ad, and the brand memory was not improved, but the contrary. The authors suggest that while this approach performs well in grabbing the attention of viewers, they are more interested in the ad's execution rather than the brand name. Some authors have even found that the use of such advertisements resulted in a more negative impression of the brand (Vézina & Paul, 1997; Maison & Pawlowska, 2017). While it appears that the results of these studies are contradictory, the type of the product, the ad's execution, and the purpose of the ad are what bring light to the situation. Dahl et al. (2003) and Vezina and Paul (1997) found that the use of controversial or shocking content in ads has a great effect on attracting attention, influences behavior positively, and boosts memory when used for educational purposes such as sexual disease prevention. The results are consistent with other studies that have the same context (Cyril De Run & Ting, 2014). However, when the nature of the product advertised changed from informational to purchase, the results were completely the opposite (Dens et al., 2008; Sabri & Obermiller, 2012). This might be due to the consumer's perception of the intentions behind the commercial. Informative commercials that are clear about their purpose such as informing people regarding an event or phenomenon that benefits them directly could be perceived as honest. Ads that challenge social norms are uncomfortable on purpose, and consumers might find the intention behind them as manipulative, as attempting to exploit their emotions and beliefs for the brand's gain.

Moreover, Noland (2021) found that mood and emotions affect the way consumers respond to ads, and it is consistent with Edell and Burke's (1987) findings suggesting that emotions predict both the ad's effectiveness and feelings and attitudes toward the brand. Edell and Burke (1987) also suggest that the emotions generated by an ad vary depending on its purpose (transactional versus informational).

Therefore, it is concluded that advertisements, either provocative or not, create emotions in consumers' hearts. While offensive advertisements get negative reactions from consumers, there is little understanding of what happens to consumers exposed to these ads who develop feelings for the brand and engage in a consumer-brand relationship.

Controversial ads might hurt a company's image in consumers' eyes as depicted by the previously stated scholars. However, the purpose of this study is to analyze how this empirical phenomenon affects brands when their customers are involved in a relationship with the previously mentioned producer. To pursue this, there needs to be an understanding of the relationship's elements and its implications. Hence, the theoretical background further delves into consumer-brand relationships, presenting the key literature and scholars' arguments.

2.2 Consumer-Brand Relationships

The section presents the intricacies of the marketing theory known as consumer-brand relationship theory. We venture into analyzing its purpose and the diverse relational elements, as well as present the arguments and disagreements of the most recognized authors on this interesting topic.

According to Fournier (1998), consumer-brand relationships are relationships in which a brand becomes animated and humanized to fit the role of a partner. This implies the brand is an active actor in the relationship and contributes towards its meaning and direction. Fournier (1998) defines the types of meaning a brand can bring to a relationship as psychological, sociocultural, and relational. It can be understood that relationships do bring value to both consumers and the brand, but just as relationships between people, consumer-brand relationships are subject to wrongdoings by either one of the partners. The scholar develops the Brand Relationship Quality model that seeks to analyze the nature, quality, and strength of the bonds consumers create with companies through consumption. She identified six facets that quantify the quality of such bonds. The first side identified, bearing a central importance is love and passion, followed by self-connection, interdependence, commitment, and intimacy (Fournier, 1998). This model provides a comprehensive understanding of the main constructs of consumer-company relationships.

There are multiple types of consumer-brand relationships developed between the two partners, and Fournier (1998) created a typology of fifteen forms of bonds, ranging from arranged marriage to enslavement. What is curious is the similarity with human relationships. These typologies present valuable insights into the nature of the bond, its social status, feelings, length, and intensity, as well as the level of reciprocation. The bonds also have different deterioration and development trajectories. However, other authors have classified relationships using different, less complex methods.

Garbarino and Johnson (1999) distinguish between low-relational customers and high-relational customers, meaning the level of attachment and engagement a consumer has with a brand. They also highlight in their study that satisfaction, trust, and commitment in customer relationships represent the keys to a fruitful relationship. What is interesting is that for high relational customers, trust and commitment are more important than satisfaction in their relationship, and maintaining and building trust and commitment is crucial for the future actions of customers. Transactional marketing programs do not work for this type of consumer, but this is appropriate if they desire the relationship. The authors also identified that family, social groups and norms, and identification with the organization may influence consumers' attachment to organizations (Garbarino & Johnson, 1999).

Rodriguez (2023) argues that brand relationships can be analyzed in terms of development and maintenance using the self-expansion theory. Self-expansion is one of the two elements that maintain consumer-brand relationships according to the scholar. Since it entails increasing or adding positive content to the bond, its companion, self-pruning, is responsible for removing negative material (Rodriguez, 2023). The author also found that brands can encourage and clarify consumer's sense of identity by providing meaningful experiences. These in terms enhance the brand relationship. Research shows that ties exist between self-expansion and emotional connections with brands. It goes to an extent in which the lack of self-expansion in a relational environment hinders the development of emotional bonds (Rodriguez, 2023).

If we were to consider Fournier's BRQ model, the element of self-connection could have the same meaning as self-expansion. This means seeking to enhance the self or the bond through association and interaction with brands, objects, and consumption encounters.

Aaker et al. (2004) focus on the types of brands that engage in consumer-brand relationships and categorize them into sincere brands and exciting brands. This categorization is made based on a brand's personality and values. What is interesting in their findings is that relationships with sincere brands deepen over time, similar to close relationships, but suffer amidst the brand's wrongdoings. Consumers judge the quality of their relationship partner and wrongdoings impact the way they perceive the brand, their sense of relationship closeness, and the level of personal connectivity or self-integration. In turn, the perceptions created upon such an event affect the satisfaction and commitment levels as well (Aaker et al., 2004).

According to the earlier argument presented by Fournier (1998), brands convey three types of significance to customers when involved in consumer-brand relationships. Those are psychological, sociocultural, and relational. Hence, to explore further the meanings the profit-driven entity brings to a consumer's life and consumption experience, the psychological aspects of the bond will be discussed.

Reimann et al. (2012) explore the psychological dynamics of emotional arousal and the incorporation of brands into the self within consumer-brand relationships over time. This is done through a series of experiments employing self-reported data, skin conductance responses, and functional magnetic resonance imaging. Emotional arousal refers to the intensity of people's emotions (Caruelle et al., 2024). The study shows that emotional arousal tends to decrease as consumers develop stronger relationships with brands over time while incorporating the brand into the self-increases. Close consumer-brand relationships are characterized by rapid self-expansion and inclusion into the self, yet newly formed brand relationships elicit greater emotional arousal compared to established relationships (Reimann et al., 2012). The findings of this study help us understand better the complexity of consumer-brand relationships and their elements. It also shows how consumers engage with brands over time and highlights the important role emotional arousal and self-expansion have in the relationship.

Furthermore, brand experiences are another important element that stabilizes the consumer-company relationship. Brands have the power to, by creating unique experiences with consumers, build unique connections, and thus relationships. Brands can "help them discover who they are" while creating experiences for consumers, and enriching them with emotions (Rodriguez, 2023). Positive consumer-brand relationships enhance favorable brand evaluations (Fournier, 1998), and relationship satisfaction (Garbarino & Johnson, 1999), and resolve identity conflicts (Ahuvia, 2005). Richa and Garg (2020) elucidated the central role brand experiences play in consumer-brand relationships, emphasizing the materialization and cultivation of brand love. Furthermore, their research also signals brand experience as a moderator between the intricate concepts of brand image, trust, and brand love. Their study also delineates a differentiation between emotions and attitudes. Emotions emerge upon long

exposure to brand experiences, while attitudes transcend direct brand interactions, and do not require direct contact with a brand or a long relationship (Joshi & Garg, 2021).

To fully understand consumer-brand relationships in the context of controversial advertising, it is essential to explore the social identity theory in the continuation of brand experiences. Brand experiences play a role in shaping consumers' perceptions of affective attachment to organizations. These are intertwined with consumers' sense of self. The benefits partners in consumer-brand relationships receive during its length were previously identified within the literature. In this section, we explore the concept of enhancing consumers' identity in brand relationships and what it comprises through scholarly findings.

According to Ahuvia (2005), consumers view brands as part of their identity (an expression of their identity). The scholar argues that the people and objects a person loves have a powerful influence on their sense of self. It could be argued that an individual's identity is subject to an identity project which is the life-long journey of shaping and reshaping one's identity (Rokka & Ulver, 2023). Consumers are inclined to perform such rituals because of their desire for excitement, and newness, as well as fitting in within a social class or group. Henry and Kravets (2023) argue that individuals who behave similarly to people within their social circle enrich their idea of self. Brought forward with the movement of postmodernism, the new approach to identity entails on one side detaching oneself from traditional and old-fashioned ways, and on the other incorporating elements of social life, aesthetics, and consumption communities (Rokka & Ulver, 2023). In modern days, brands can flourish by exploiting people's desire for a reflexive and fluctuating idea of self.

Ahuvia (2005) explains that due to the vast number of objects, and places people come across in their lives, only a small number fall under the category of love objects. He also notes that self-extension and love are far from being identical, and therefore, love objects represent only a fragment of a consumer's identity (Ahuvia, 2005). Scholars agree that brands can help solve consumer's anxieties and identity-related issues (e.g., past self versus the ideal self, etc.), and loved objects come as a solution to identity conflicts (Ahuvia, 2005; Belk, 1988). The consumer's identity is a never-ending journey (Rokka & Ulver, 2023) that requires constant adjustment following ever-changing social norms, hence a static identity does not exist within consumers.

To understand the idea of the self, Stets and Burke (2000) analyzed the integration of identity theory with social identity theory. Identity theory, as suggested by the authors, points out the role as a base for identity, social identity theory has the group as a foundation. Consumers can use the process of bricolage in their identity projects to enhance the self. Bricolage suggests that consumers use available resources to enhance the self in a consumption setting with what is available at hand, while identity projects refer to the life-long journey of changing and adapting a consumer's identity (Rokka & Ulver, 2023). It enables consumers to repurpose, combine, and reinterpret elements of consumer culture such as brands and communities to express their individuality.

Consumers who develop a strong sense of identity concerning a brand are likely to react differently to controversial advertisements based on their integrated identity. Identity theory suggests that individuals derive a sense of self from their roles and communities, including brand affiliations. This is consistent with the findings of Ahuvia (2005) and Belk (1988). Thus, consumers who identify strongly with a brand might choose to, even defend the brand when it performs wrongdoings.

Social identity theory emphasizes the importance of group membership and the sense of belonging to a community (Stets & Burke, 2000). Consumers who are part of a brand community may interpret controversial advertisements through the lens of their group identity. If the advertisement reinforces the shared values and norms of the brand community, it may strengthen their sense of belonging and commitment to the brand. However, if the advertisement is not aligned with its identity, the consumer's attitude towards the brand could suffer.

Lastly, the literature explores one of the central aspects of consumer-brand relationships, brand love. This relational feeling plays an important role in understanding the customers' motivations to engage with brands after wrongdoings.

2.3 Brand Love

Consumers react to advertisements based on the emotions they feel when they see them (Edell & Burke, 1987). Even though mood can affect the attitude toward the ad either positively or negatively (Noland, 2021), other factors affect the way consumers respond as well. For example, what is deemed acceptable or controversial for that matter is defined by social norms and "normality". Scholars compared these socially acceptable norms in different cultural settings (Cyril De Run & Ting, 2014) and considered demographic factors such as nationality, gender, age, and level of education (Dahl et al., 2003) and found that these factors affect consumer attitudes differently. For example, Chan et al. (2007) discovered that Chinese consumers were more offended than German consumers when they were exposed to ads that had an uncomfortable nature with sexual and gender role themes.

Since its introduction in 1988, the concept of brand love has gained popularity among brand managers (Albert & Merunka, 2013). Brand love is a marketing construct that explains the phenomenon of people developing intense emotional connections to certain "love objects" such as a pet, playing an instrument, a painting, etc. (Carroll & Ahuvia, 2006). Referring back to Fournier's (1998) BRQ model, brand love is one of the main elements that define the quality, strength, and stability of consumer-company bonds. Scholars agree that love is a feeling often associated with consumption. Consumption is subsequently used by consumers to include societal elements, such as brands into their identity (Ahuvia, 2005). This notion correlates to the concept of the extended self, introduced by Russell Belk. This concept refers to the different objects that become part of the identity of an individual. Possessions are used in the process of self-identity creation, bearing a much more complex significance than their utilitarian or hedonic nature (Belk, 1988). People can develop emotions towards certain brands that are

deemed relevant by consumers, which could potentially enhance themselves and their image by being a fan of that brand.

Moreover, brand love is a brand loyalty concept that signifies the emotional attachment a satisfied customer has toward a company. It is important to note that this construct differentiates itself from brand affect and customer satisfaction. Scholars have found foundational parallels between interpersonal affection and affection within a consumer context (Carroll & Ahuvia, 2006) which strengthens the consumer-company relationship construct. Joshi and Garg (2021) suggest that brand love plays an important role in such relationships and affects loyalty directly and indirectly through engagement. Brand engagement is presented as a crucial predictor of loyalty. This is done by using advertisements and interpersonal communication. The authors suggest that trust and company image are strong drivers of brand love, which in turn leads to loyalty (Joshi & Garg, 2021).

Furthermore, brand love is a result of customer satisfaction achieved post-purchase (Wallace et al., 2014). Hence, consumption is an ever-present element that binds these relational elements together. However, this feeling goes beyond the purchase interaction with desired companies and ventures into other societal entities. For example, consumers who actively engage with brands and have a strong sense of community are proven to develop a higher level of brand love and express positive word-of-mouth (Wallace et al., 2014). Organizations profit from these marketplace feelings and the bonds consumers create with them.

Du et. al (2007) identifies the term brand acceptance as part of brand advocacy and highlights the willingness to try new products from the brand and accept wrongdoing as the main features. This is an interesting aspect in the context of controversial advertisements. Brands with high brand love and advocacy could be forgiven by consumers if their advertisement campaigns turn out to be outrageous or too controversial.

Similar to interpersonal relations, in which partners benefit from each other while developing a stronger bond, consumer-company relationships benefit both parties. One benefit valuable for customers is enhancing their social identity. Wallace et al. (2014) research consumer engagement with expressive brands and categorize them into socially self-expressive brands and inner self-expressive brands. The scholars emphasize that inner self-expressive brands are brands that consumers integrate as part of their identity and are likely to reject misconduct from them. However, the consumer's behavior towards the brand on social media will be one of defending it and refusing to believe the negative narrative in an effort not to hurt their social image. These findings are of great importance to the understanding of the intricacies of CBR (consumer-brand relationship). We can comprehend that some brands benefit immensely from the high self-integration or self-connection buyers cultivate. For socially self-expressive brands, the results are completely the opposite. Because consumers are not emotionally attached to the brands, even though they experience brand love, they are less open to offering word-of-mouth but will accept misconduct (Wallace et al., 2014).

Moreover, brand love has antecedents and scholars agree that brand trust is one of them (Albert & Merunka, 2013; Joshi & Garg, 2021), yet some argue that brand identification plays as big

of a role as brand trust and image. Identification with the brand and other customers helps in the development of this feeling (Albert & Merunka, 2013). However, identification with a brand and brand love differ because the desire for unity is not sufficient for developing a love feeling (Ahuvia, 1993).

Albert and Merunka (2013) propose different predecessors and highlight the importance of brand love as an element of consumer-brand relationships. They suggest emphasizing the brand values and personality and developing brand communities to help develop closer relationships. These in turn make consumers more willing to accept price premiums and offer positive word-of-mouth (Albert & Merunka, 2013).

In addition, we understand how consumers experience brand love through a model proposed by Batra et al. (2012) that contains antecedents, core elements, and outcomes. The scholars distinguish between the love emotion and the love relationship helping the understanding of this complex phenomenon. They suggest that consumers experience brand love through multiple encounters. The authors find that quality beliefs are its antecedents and establish seven core elements: “perceived functional quality, self-brand integration, passion-driven behaviors, positive emotional connections, long-term relationships, positive overall attitude valence, attitude certainty and confidence (strength), and anticipated separation distress.” (Batra et al., 2012). The outcomes of this phenomenon are brand loyalty, word of mouth, and most importantly, resistance to negative information.

Lastly, the literature reviews the concept of brand community. This is chosen for analysis due to its potential role in influencing individual’s responses to provocative promotions from the community point of view. It offers an interesting perspective into how a community’s members can influence one another and the implications it has when controversy is present.

2.4 Brand Community

The community side of brand relationships offers value to consumers for multiple reasons. A brand community can be defined as a group of consumers that gather and create social relations, and establish rituals or traditions revolving around the brand, either physically or online (Isisag et al., 2023). These consumers are troubled about the actions and events that relate to their beloved brand. The feelings these loyal customers have towards the brand can be considered marketplace sentiments. Marketplace sentiments are “collectively shared emotions” that have three elements: an emotion, a brand or a person who represents the target of the emotion, and a group of people that feel that emotion towards the brand or person (Isisag et al., 2023).

Brand community members can use the brands as a means of adding meaning to otherwise transactional and profit-seeking organizations in the quest for societal goals such as the desire for connection (Cova et al., 2023).

There is undoubtedly value created within brand communities. Because its members engage in activities that promote the brand such as organizing and participating in events, both brands and consumers benefit from this relationship. This is known as value co-creation, a

phenomenon that encompasses the value generation from both parties involved. Brands create value for consumers by adding benefits and meanings and consumers pay the price (Cova et al., 2023). However, some scholars argue that brands cannot control value creation, and have come up with the concept of linking value co-creation as a means to explain that brands represent a marketplace resource that helps create and maintain the relationships between consumers (Cova et al., 2023). In the context of controversial advertisements and consumer-brand relationships, value co-creation within a brand community can have nuanced dimensions. The introduction of controversial advertisements can disrupt the community's activities and general direction of thought. These ads have the potential to evoke different reactions within the community, ranging from feelings of excitement and engagement to feelings of anger, betrayal, or alienation.

However, there are opponents to the idea of consumers gaining benefits from engaging with brands, especially through the process of value co-creation. According to Zwick, Bonsu, and Darmony (2008), consumer value co-creation is a practice that exploits the labor and creative force of consumers, while organizations offer virtually no reward for the work performed. The scholars suggest that the perpetuation of this practice drives the consumption apparatus and leaves the consumers alienated in their quest for identity alteration.

2.5 Summary of Theoretical Standpoints and Conceptual Framework

The theoretical background identified relevant concepts and connected theories with the research question proposed, aligned with the overall study's aim. This research contributes to the field of advertising and consumer research through the perspective it takes on brand feelings to controversial promotions.

To understand how emotional connections to brands affect responses to organizational missteps, there are multiple factors and concepts to consider. In the introduction chapter, we emphasized the lack of understanding of the factors that perpetuate customer-company bonds in conditions in which the brand is generally considered controversial or offensive. Understanding how the relationship is affected, along with feelings, and attitudes toward the company could be improved. The literature review showcases in-depth research on the shock marketing tactic in advertising, and its uses, highlighting the destructive effects it has on brands (Dens et al., 2008; Vezina & Paul, 1997; Maison & Pawlowska, 2017; Cyril De Run & Ting, 2014). Controversy in advertisement has its purpose. Although this strategy is generally perceived negatively because of its shocking or disturbing nature, this tactic can push the boundaries of advertisement practices (Dahl et al., 2003). It can raise awareness towards taboo products or topics, and press for introspection in the corporate and social worlds, provoking a reassessment of the established social norms and ethical boundaries. Leaving aside its positive aspects, offensive promotions represent a challenging strategy to accomplish with successful results, as we depicted previously.

By adding knowledge from the field of consumer research, our research proposes a different approach to analyse the use of controversy in advertising. Fourniers' (1998) consumer-brand

relationship theory adds structure to the bond we seek to study, laying the ground to unfold the brand love theory. Consumer-brand relationships represent a complex marketing construct, comprising nuanced elements such as brand identity, love, trust, affection, loyalty, identification, and extension. Fournier's (1998) consumer-brand relationship theory holds an important position in the understanding of relationship marketing. Scholar's Brand Relationship Quality (BRQ) model offers insights into the most important components of a consumer-company bond. Our literature review offers multiple categorizations of these types of connections.

As previously mentioned, brand love theory plays a central role because it emphasizes that deep emotional connections between customers and companies lead to brand loyalty (Joshi & Garg, 2021) and brand advocacy and support (Wallace et al., 2014). To further explore the benefit aspect of the relationship, we use the theory of social identity and brand community. The literature explores the benefits partners in consumer-company bonds can gain. For the former, the prospect of enhancing social identity by affiliation to a brand is at play. We venture into the concept of adaptation of self to maintain pace with societal trends and community standards (Rokka & Ulver, 2023), and the use of brands as tools for anxiety release (Ahuvia, 2005; Belk, 1988). Through the use of social identity theory, we identify the consumers' desire to use the group or community as a base for self-enhancement (Stets & Burke, 2000). We found the duality of identity project options interesting. Therefore, this led us to the concept of brand community. Brand communities are created from love and admiration for a company (Isisag et al., 2023). Hence, consumers interact with other group members and create value for the company. This could lead to a shift in the exclusive consumer-company relationship. The connection is not exclusive to two partners but is owned and shared with others.

Moreover, this study strives to answer the research question posed: "How do emotional connections with a brand influence consumer responses to controversial advertising campaigns?". We aim to result in findings that will enrich the comprehension of the contention in consumer-company bonds and its effects. This has led us to a conceptual framework below. It suggests that brand love is one of the central aspects of consumer-brand relationships. The framework highlights an individual perspective, the individual consumer using different concepts to understand the phenomenon. There is an assumption that controversial brands maintain their customer base regardless of the shock marketing strategy. As presented in the literature review, consumers can accept misconduct from brands, but we assume that there must be a reason why consumers continue engagement even after being "hurt" by their beloved brand. We bring forward these perspectives to endeavor an empirical study that we describe and argue for in the methodology section.

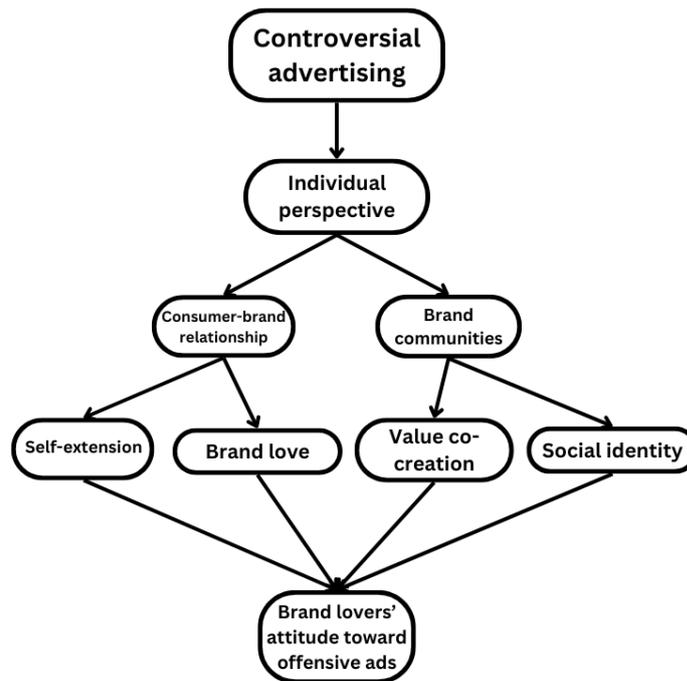


Figure 2. Conceptual framework

2.5.1 Research Gap

The research we propose delivers insights into both the field of consumer research and advertisement. It investigates the interplay between emotional connections to brands and consumer responses to controversial advertisements. While research covers the benefits of emotional connections, meaning brand relationships that involve consumer feelings toward brands, and the effects on consumers' behavior and attitudes toward controversial ads; there is a gap in understanding how brand love moderates consumer reactions to such practices. Our study aims to explore the extent to which robust emotional bonds with organizations can either buffer or intensify the impact of provocative advertisements. Additionally, we seek to discover the factors that drive ongoing consumer engagement with a brand (the why). In this context, we also investigate the nature of consumer participation in the brand relationship over time (the how). Addressing this gap contributes to the understanding of consumer behavior in the context of provocative marketing strategies.

3. Methodology

3.1 Research Design

The type of research design selected for our study is narrative methods. This approach focuses on collecting and analyzing personal experiences and narratives shared by participants. Because of its flexible approach, which enables the use of this research design, the opportunity arises to collect and understand rich and deep experiences from respondents (Bold, 2014; Easterby-Smith et al., 2021). Using narrative methods will enable us to capture subjective experiences, which, in the case of emotional connections to brands and reactions to their controversial advertising campaigns, will provide diverse and individual data. Due to their characteristics, narrative methods will not only allow us to uncover consumers' complex interactions and reactions to the presented campaigns but also to contextualize their behavior by understanding the personal background behind their decisions and behaviors. The involvement and empowerment of participants, that characterize narrative methods, build a space for sharing experiences, which positively impacts the richness and depth of the collected data on the studied phenomenon (Easterby-Smith et al., 2021). Using the potential of this research design, we will have the possibility to delve deeper into the issues discussed in our research paper, collect broad and accurate data, and analyze it taking into account peripheral but equally important socio-cultural (and other) contexts.

3.2 Ontological and Epistemological Approach

The chosen ontological approach in the study is relativism. This philosophy recognizes the subjectivity of the nature of reality and the dependence of knowledge on context and social constructs. Complexity and randomness are emphasized, by pointing out that reality is not determined. Numerous truths are contingent upon circumstances and cultural norms. Relativism indicates the diversity of perspectives and the legitimacy of numerous disparate viewpoints in comprehending and perceiving reality (Easterby-Smith et al., 2021). The use of relativism as an ontological approach allows for the exploration of the dynamic and socially complex nature of emotional connections between consumers and brands, as well as consumers' reactions to controversial advertising campaigns. This is achieved by recognizing the diversity of their perspectives that influence different reactions and interpretations of marketing communications.

The epistemological approach in the study is social constructionism. Its assumptions about the indiscernibility of knowledge and its construction by individuals due to social interactions, language, and cultural contexts are fundamental to this approach. This philosophical approach to knowledge analysis emphasizes the importance of contextual understanding due to differences in individuals' social, historical, and cultural contexts (Easterby-Smith et al., 2021). In a study focusing on emotional connections to brands and consumer reactions to controversial advertising messages, it is of great importance to consider socio-cultural contexts that affect the potential for knowledge discovery in this area. This approach will facilitate a

comprehensive understanding of the intricate dynamics between consumers and brands, as well as the influence of emotional connections on perceptions of marketing communications.

3.3 Methodological Approach

The methodology selected for the research project is a qualitative approach. This methodology will permit a comprehensive and detailed examination of the subjective experiences and perceptions of participants regarding controversial advertising (Easterby-Smith et al., 2021). The qualitative approach will facilitate the explanation of the phenomenon of the relationship between emotional connections to the brand and reactions to controversial messages in advertising campaigns. This will provide an opportunity to find an answer to the research question posed.

3.4 Data Collection

3.4.1 Data Required

The study that will be conducted for this research will use a qualitative methodological approach. Data will be collected through face-to-face interviews. The purpose of conducting the interviews is to obtain data that will enable us to understand the impact of emotional connections to a brand on consumers' reactions to controversial marketing campaigns of their favorite brands. Among the information that will be needed to answer the research question, there are four groups of data that researchers will gather from carefully selected respondents. The interview sections, in order, will allow obtaining data on basic information about the respondents, the intensity and depth of their relationship with the brand Oatly selected for the study, their reactions to the brand's three selected advertising campaigns, and the respondents' general attitudes toward the use of controversial content in advertisements.

3.4.2 Method of Data Collection

For the study of consumers' emotional connections to brands and their impact on the reception of controversial ads, a direct interview research method will be used. This qualitative approach makes it possible to obtain accurate and necessary data, thanks to the professional interaction taking place between the interviewer and the respondent (Kvale, 2011). A semi-structured interview approach will enable the interviewer to conduct a conversation to gain needed data, while at the same time allowing the respondent to reflect more on the topic under discussion. This approach can positively affect the quality of the information obtained. At the same time, interviews, due to their specificity, provide the opportunity to obtain data from the respondent in a pure form, i.e. unaltered by the influence of other research participants, as can happen with other research methods (Easterby-Smith et al., 2021).

a. Sampling Strategy

According to the concept of brand love (Albert & Mernuka, 2013; Carroll & Ahuvia, 2006), individuals who have a relationship with Oatly will be needed to conduct the research. We are committed to finding the strongest possible consumer-brand relationship, where Oatly reaches even a level of anthropomorphization (Fournier, 1998), and the connections between potential respondents will be characteristic of a high-relational customer (Gabarino & Johnson, 1999). The respondents will be consumers who have experiences with the brand, including those through which they can express their selves, and derive satisfaction from the existence of this relationship (Rodriguez, 2023; Gabarino & Johnson, 1999; Richa & Garg, 2020; Ahuvia 2005).

To ensure that the data we will collect is as diverse as possible, we aim to involve people with different characteristics in our study. Our respondents will be between 18 and 60 years old. This will allow us to get opinions from different age and generation groups. Among the respondents, there will be people of different genders, which will also ensure a diversity of perspectives on the topic of the study. Respondents will have different educational and professional statuses. Due to the nature of qualitative research, which is characterized by very low generalizability, we want to create a diversified research sample. This will allow us to analyze the phenomenon in a representative group, in the colloquial sense (Easterby-Smith et al., 2021; Enzo, 2013).

With such a detailed sample, we will be able to analyze the phenomenon of emotional connections in the context of controversial ads to the fullest. To find respondents who meet these specific requirements, we will use a purposive sampling method. It is characterized by the ability to target potential respondents with very specific characteristics. This sampling approach will enable us to contact people who have the experiences and characteristics needed to respond to the interviews (Easterby-Smith et al., 2021).

To obtain rich and comprehensive data in the context of controversy in advertising, we plan to interview 4 to 10 respondents meeting the above criteria. The targeted number of interviews conducted is 8 respondents. This sample size is still perceived as small, but given the capabilities and needs of data collection, the number we have set will allow us to collect enough information that is of high quality. By limiting the number of respondents, we will have the opportunity to focus fully on the people who choose to participate in the interviews. This will enable us to give them our full attention and collect more data from a single respondent, up to a saturation level, than we would with a larger research sample size.

b. Interview Techniques

The technique that will be used in the interview, consistent with the objectives of the semi-structured interview, is laddering. This technique prompts the respondent to give more detailed and thoughtful answers. Using an "up" approach will provide insight into the reasons for

various behaviors, emotional reactions, choices, and decisions, and "down" examples to support the answers given (Easterby-Smith et al., 2021; Bourne & Jenkins, 2005). Asking for a much more detailed description of the answers given will allow for a deep exploration of the topic of emotional connections and controversial ads, providing the opportunity for a more interesting and accurate analysis of the resulting data in the study.

Interviews will be conducted in a neutral environment for respondents to avoid unnecessary distractions and to create a comfortable place to share their feelings and emotions on the research topic (Dovetail Editorial Team, 2023). The interview will be conducted by two researchers, one in the role of interviewer and the other as notetaker and observer. To facilitate analysis of the interview, the interviews will be recorded, and the records will be used only for the purpose of the study. Access to the recordings will be provided only to the researchers, to maintain anonymity and confidentiality. Respondents will be informed of this situation before the study begins.

c. Questions Technique

This section has the purpose of describing the interview questions' structure and flow, along with providing argumentation for the choices made.

The interview starts with demographic questions about consumers' age, and gender, and then goes into whether they are vegans, and consume or have tried plant-based products and their opinion of them. They aim to provide insights into who the respondent is and their stand regarding plant-based products, and Oatly's goods.

The first set of questions seeks to identify the consumer-brand relationship's intensity or depth. The questions are made in a way in which the respondent is not brought into the theory of consumer-brand relationship. The inquiries are rather trying to establish indirectly the feelings the consumer has towards the brand and other elements of the bond.

The interview contains a section of general and background questions that set the stage for the remaining ones. These questions have the purpose of bringing back to memory and familiarizing the respondents with the ads in question to invoke the feelings and memories they experienced when they were first exposed to them. Questions related to details from the event in the general world and around them are posed to bring forward elements that caused the respondent to create his or her opinion on the ad.

The next set of questions is about the shocking nature of the ad. The respondents are challenged to express their opinions on what makes the ad controversial if anything. Opinions about the company are also questioned, analyzing both the pre-ad and post-ad attitudes. In this section, we pose the question of whether or not they continued engaging with the brand after the event, and we question the reason behind it. The consumers with continued engagement are then

questioned on the ways they continue their relationships with the brand, with a focus on feelings, attitudes, and behavior.

3.5 Data Analysis

As the research design of this study is narrative methods, therefore, a thematic analysis method will be used to analyze the data gathered in the interviews. This approach is appropriate for analyzing data of a narrative nature. It makes it possible to understand and identify narratives, considering individual events, other contexts, and backgrounds. By using this approach, it will be possible to analyze and interpret in depth the detailed and extensive data obtained through the characteristics of this research design (Easterby-Smith et al., 2021; Bold, 2014). The analysis of the data collected through interviews will consist of several stages, which are described below.

3.5.1 Method for Data Analyses

The first, and most important, step of our analysis will be to transcribe and organize the interviews. Research conducted through the narrative method uses and relies on interpreting the data obtained (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). To enable the most accurate analysis and interpretation, we will use the conducted interviews to make transcriptions, which will make analyzing the data easier and more convenient. The transcription process, to be as accurate as possible, will include elements of non-verbal speech. Capturing signals such as voice hesitations, pauses in speech, or emotional responses will provide additional opportunities to analyze and understand the captured data. As a result, the data will be more in-depth and authentic (Dehnam & Onwuegbuzie, 2013). Even though organizing and matching the collected data is a labor- and time-intensive process, it is the basis for a good analysis. Organizing will not only enable us to get a first look into the data but also to find and identify the first recurring themes, similarities, but also differences. This will positively influence the course of our analysis, showing its first outline (Bold, 2014). In the first stage of analyzing the data, we will follow Riessman (1993), who argues that the processes of transcription and analysis cannot be separated. According to the researcher, transcription supports the processes of thinking analytically about the collected data and allows for better organization, as well as influencing further, better analysis. Therefore, this stage of our study is very important. We want to spend as much time on it as necessary to create an opportunity to understand, observe, and evaluate the phenomenon of emotional connections and reactions to controversial advertising messages as accurately as possible in the next stages of our work.

The next step will be to analyze the sorted and reduced data. In this phase, we will use elements of thematic analysis. This type of analysis method makes it possible to identify, analyze, and report on patterns in qualitative data in the form of themes (Bold, 2014). By organizing the data into themes, it is possible to interpret the data into larger groups. We will begin the analysis

process by identifying the codes embedded throughout all of our interviews. These will then be sorted into larger groups, which will be defined by themes. This process will enable us to sort the data even more accurately according to the different themes. According to Saldan (2013), codes are short descriptions, in the form of words or brief sentences, by which it is possible to describe the main aspect that the fragment of data relates to. Thanks to this method of reduction, it will be possible to identify the key fragments of the data we will obtain from our respondents and their subsequent analysis. Using this approach will make it possible to identify codes that are repetitive, and different and those that are most relevant in terms of emotional connections to the brand and responses to controversy in ads.

To create codes that will help us identify the reactions of our respondents, we will use an open coding method. This means that the codes created will result from observations of the collected data (Arthur, 2023). The codes identified during the reading of the transcript will be marked and then grouped according to the themes they will address. Themes, meanwhile, are a characteristic of data analysis in all qualitative analysis methods from phenomenology to grounded theory, including narrative analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Due to their nature as subtle and abstract patterns, they make it possible to explain a phenomenon. There are various ways to recognize them in the processes of data collection and analysis, either before, during, or after collecting data. The identification of themes can occur based on a review of the literature, or the feelings and thoughts that will be provided by respondents during interviews, but also during the process of analyzing qualitative data (Ryan & Bernard, 2003; Saldaña, 2016; Mishra & Dey, 2022).

In our analysis, we want to identify themes after transcribing and organizing the data using codes. This procedure will allow us to focus on the collected empirical evidence and the patterns, similarities, and differences that exist in it. The main themes identified during the analysis that appear in the responses of our respondents will be described by developing a narrative that is aligned with our research design. In this way, we want to achieve consistency between our analysis and the stories we will collect from the study participants. The use of a narrative approach in the analysis will also enable us to coherently compile data from previously evaluated literature, covering topics ranging from controversy in advertising to consumer-brand relationships and concepts related to this relation. This will provide an understanding of the topics this research study explores. The use of themes will also provide a good basis for creating a clear and logical chapter structure in which the empirical data will be analyzed. Contexts and relationships have to be included in the thematic analysis. The interview questions were structured to gain as much information as possible to expand the context of the analysis of the data obtained from the respondents. The analytical approach we chose allows us to consider different contexts and relationships between people (Bold, 2014), in our case the relationship between the consumer and the brand, but also between the interviewed consumer and other consumers or family members. Placing our respondents'

narratives in social, cultural, and historical contexts (in terms of their life histories) will enable us to understand how these factors may influence the reception of the controversial ads discussed in the study and consumers' experiences with the Oatly brand.

3.6 Quality of Research

3.6.1 Validity

Validity is a concept that in research refers to the reliability of conclusions that can be made based on a piece of research (Bryman & Bell, 2015). In qualitative research, validity is determined by four criteria: credibility, transferability, reliability, and confirmability (Dahlgren et al., 2007).

The first criterion, trustworthiness, is otherwise known as the ability to represent the reality associated with the study (Dehlgren et al., 2007). Due to the subject matter undertaken and the selection of the research group, the background of the respondents does not have a major impact on the results of the study. A much more important factor that was taken into account to a limited extent in the study is personal background, which can influence the reception of the particular content presented in the ads. The selection of a study sample that included respondents of different ages made it possible to gather data from people not only with different views but who were also at different stages of life. This approach made it possible to strengthen the credibility of the study, due to the assurance of diversity in the information-gathering process (Dahlgren et al., 2007).

The second criterion for determining validity is transferability. This aspect refers to the ability to use the results of a particular study for application in similar contexts (Dahlgren et al., 2007). The study acquired data of a highly subjective nature, which is related to the research design used, which is narrative methods (Easterby-Smith et al., 2021). For this reason, the transferability of the results of the study on the importance of emotional connections in the reception of controversial advertising messages will vary depending on many factors, including the respondent and his or her background, the brand, the advertisement being analyzed, and current private and public events on the political scene, the environmental scene, and many other factors. The study's portability criterion can therefore be described as low, due to its subjective nature.

Another key validity factor is reliability. It refers to the consistency of results and accuracy of the research process. It means that other researchers can easily apply and repeat the research using the data collection and analysis methodology created in the study (Dahlgren et al., 2007). To make the reliability of our study as high as possible, all subsequent procedures related to the research design were described in detail, and each stage of the study was documented. Even so, due to the research approach used, the data obtained during the

interviews is subjective. This means that the use of the same methods, even on the same participants, can provide different data, and therefore affect the repeatability of the analysis performed.

The last criterion of validity is confirmability. It means that the results of the study should be free of bias (Dahlgreen et al., 2007). To ensure impartiality and avoid bias, the data that was collected during the interviews and used to formulate the study's conclusions is neutral. The researchers have no reason or benefit to influence the results of the analyses in a biased manner. The analyses were conducted according to a pre-planned scheme to ensure consistency and transparency in the research process. This ensured that reliable and credible results were obtained.

3.6.2 Reliability

Reliability is the stability and consistency of responses that have been analyzed in qualitative research. The interpretation of the data can be enriched by using any notes from the time of the execution of the survey in written or created by recording devices form. In other words, reliability can be determined if different researchers obtained the same results using the same methods in a survey (Easterby-Smith et al., 2021). In the case of the above study, the level of reliability can be described as medium or low. This is due to the research approach used, which is qualitative methods as well as relativistic ontology and social constructionist epistemology. The choice of this research approach presupposes differences in perception of reality, which depend on cultural, linguistic, and social context. The data collected in the course of the study designed through narrative methods is subjective. By the characteristics of the philosophies used, the research design, and the data, the information collected for the study will vary depending on the experience of the respondents, and therefore other researchers may get different results from a study conducted using the same method.

3.6.3 Bias

When conducting qualitative research using various methods, including interviews, there is a risk of bias. This phenomenon involves the falsification of the research results through inappropriate behavior of the researcher towards the respondent. It can occur by suggesting an expected response or by putting the respondent under pressure (Dobrodziej, n.d.). Bias can also occur due to the influence of the presence and manner in which the researcher asks questions, which can affect the respondent's answers (Easterby-Smith et al., 2021).

The study will address consumers' emotional connections to brands and their impact on consumer responses to controversial advertising messages. As researchers, we are aware of the risk of bias during the interview process. We will make every effort to ensure that this

phenomenon does not occur by, for example, preparing for data collection, and ensuring a neutral environment in which the study will take place.

3.6.4 Limitations

As researchers, we are aware of the limitations of our study. Due to the sample size, which includes consumers between the ages of 18 and 60, the generalizability of the results to other age groups may be limited, due to differences in social contexts. There may also be a social desirability bias (Krumpal, 2013), reflected in giving answers that respondents perceive as socially expected, rather than sharing their own opinions. The research also has a temporary context. Over time, consumers' reactions to and perceptions of selected advertisements may change. The study includes past advertising campaigns, so respondents' conclusions may differ from their attitudes when the ads were published, and there is a chance they will be different in the future time. The researchers have no control over external factors. News events, trends, or changes in consumer preferences can affect respondents, and it is not possible to prevent the influence of these factors.

The study used a single, qualitative, methodology. This approach is appropriate for the purposes of the research but may limit the depth of understanding of the problem compared to the use of mixed research methods. Due to the characteristics of the chosen methodology, the data obtained will have a subjective character (Easterby-Smith et al., 2021). The analysis of this data may vary depending on the cultural context and other factors that influence the researchers, which may lead to some bias in the analysis. The study focused on ads from one company - Oatly, which may have limited the scope of insights gained. Consideration of other ads and brands that use controversial approaches in their advertising campaigns may offer additional insights into the problem of emotional connections and consumer reactions.

3.7 Ethical Considerations

As researchers, we want our study to be ethical and consistent with key principles of research ethics (Easterby-Smith et al., 2021; Bell & Bryman, 2007). We want to maintain the principles of research participant protection in our study. Accordingly, we are taking measures to ensure the safety, dignity, awareness, and privacy of our respondents. Before the study begins, we will collect verbal consent to participate from each participant. In the information provided at the beginning of the interview, in addition to obtaining consent, respondents will be informed of the objectives of the study and the recording being made, how the recording and transcription will be stored, and how the data will be processed. Participants will also be informed of the possibility of discontinuing the interview at any time, without providing a specific reason. Due to the need to record interviews to make transcriptions, this method of obtaining consent will be clear and indicated at the beginning of each recording made. To preserve the anonymity of our respondents, the recordings made during the interviews will be kept for only 30 days after

they are created, and only the researchers will have access to them. In addition, to ensure the anonymization of respondents' answers, we will give them randomly assigned names. This will enable the analysis to be navigated smoothly while maintaining the privacy of potentially sensitive statements by the study participants.

At the same time, we wish to preserve the principles of integrity of the research community (Easterby-Smith et al., 2021; Bell & Bryman, 2007). Our study of the relationship between emotional connections and reactions to controversial advertising is designed to ensure fairness and transparency. We declare that the study is conducted credibly, and its nature and purpose are clearly defined. The researchers have no intention or benefit from falsifying the results of the analyses conducted during the study. We assure that all data and results presented are valid and reliable.

4. Analysis

4.1 Why Oatly? Brand Overview and Its Controversies

In this part of the paper, we will concentrate on analyzing the empirical data we collected through the interviews we conducted. We will present the results of the study and discuss them in the context of the topic of our thesis, using the theoretical data analyzed in earlier chapters. However, before we get to the analytical part of our study, we want to introduce and explain the selected brand for the research. The case study of Oatly, presented below, is included in our paper to introduce the characteristics of the brand and to familiarize our readers with the ads that we selected and demonstrated to our respondents during the interviews. The Oatly brand pursues a sharp and unconventional marketing strategy, using controversy in its communications. Bringing the case of this company will allow us to better explain our choice in the context of the study of emotional connections with a brand and their impact on the perception of controversial marketing campaigns.

4.1.1 The Original Oatly

The Original Oatly is a Swedish company active in the food industry. It produces substitutes for traditional dairy products made from oats (Wikipedia, 2024a). The company has its origins in Lund, where in the early 1990s a researcher from the local university, Rickard Öste, discovered a method to make an oat drink while researching lactose intolerance and sustainable food systems (Wikipedia, 2024). The Original Oatly was founded in 1993 or 1994 by brothers Rickard and Björn Öste. The company's headquarters are located in Malmö (Wikipedia, 2024a), and Jean-Christophe Flatin (Oatly Group AB, 2023) has served as CEO since June 1, 2023. Oatly is currently owned by several organizations, such as Blackstone Group, Verlinvest, Nativus Company Limited, and others (Wikipedia, 2024a).

Oatly is currently operating in more than 20 countries around the world, with Sweden, Germany, and the UK being the most important markets for the plant-based manufacturer (Wikipedia, 2024a; Oatfinder, n.d.). Factories are located in Sweden, the United States, the Netherlands, Singapore, and China. The company is growing and continues to expand into new markets and manufacture new products. The current product range includes not only regular milk substitutes but also other dairy products such as ice cream, cream, yogurt, and sandwich spreads (Oatly, n.d.).



Figure 3. Selected Oatly products (Own figure based on: Oatly, n.d.)

4.1.2 Controversies of Oatly and Its Ads

During the company's relatively short existence, it has unfortunately not been without controversy. In 2018, the company faced criticism from consumers on its social media. Oatly was criticized by the vegan section of its consumers for selling leftover products as food to pig farms. Oatly explained its decision as a sustainable use of resources instead of throwing them away. But consumers pointed out to them that the farms buying back the feed are raising animals for slaughter. The company responded to the accusations against them and emphasized in the response their goal of being the most sustainable and transparent company in the food industry. They emphasized their actions with the desire to fight against nutrient waste and to contribute to the growth of biogas production, which has a positive impact on being CO₂-neutral. Considering consumer voices, Oatly gave notice that they would reconsider this issue, which was positively perceived by the brand's consumers (Chiorando, 2018).

In 2020, Oatly decided to sell part of its stake, worth a total of \$200 million. One new shareholder benefitting from this offer is the American Blackstone Group Inc. The decision was met with criticism from environmental organizations and activists. The Blackstone Group has been linked to a controversial investment in South America, which has been directly blamed for contributing to the destruction of the Amazon Forest. The investor has refuted the allegations, but one member of the group was later linked as an outspoken supporter of Donald Trump and financed his re-election campaign. Oatly, responding to the allegations against them, emphasized that the choice of this investment will enable them to spread their mission of sustainability and expand their plant-based product offerings. The Swedish company pointed out that the purchase of their shares by Blackstone was a decision made by the U.S. company to make their investments greener than before. Oatly highlighted that less sustainable

companies cannot be excluded from investing in a greener organization, as they will not then have the chance to improve their sustainability status. The agreement signed between the companies underscored the growing popularity of plant-based products, including oat milk, which achieved a 300% increase in sales in the US market in one year (Helmore, 2020).

Oatly stands out in the market with its unconventional marketing approach. The company is not typically product-oriented, but rather focused on creating a lifestyle brand. In addition to building the brand on the offered benefits of oat products, that is, as an alternative to regular milk, Oatly has taken a rather unusual approach. The communication implemented involves being “damn fearless” (AdFormative, 2022). The company's strategy focuses on simplicity and authenticity, using basic marketing practices. Among other things, Oatly demonstrates its authenticity by carefully showing its journey from planting oats to the manufacturing process of its products, including real personas in all of the processes. Showing the creation process from behind the scenes has resulted in increased trust, a sense of intimacy, emotional connection, and authenticity on the consumers' side. The focus on simplicity in communication proved to be the key to success. The minimalist design of their products, website, and advertisements, allows them to easily communicate the value of buying their products without distracting from their actual benefits (Johnny's Digital, 2023).

Oatly is present on many social media, with its profiles on LinkedIn, Facebook, TikTok, and Instagram. All of these social media channels are used to very great effect, by publishing engaging yet casual content. The communication carried out there is quite unusual for company profiles. Oatly uses social media following the concept of interpersonal communication, and in their publications, comments, and discussions one can feel the freedom and dialogic nature. Including its observers in its communications on social channels has enabled it to build an engaged, interactive, and loyal customer base (Johnny's Digital, 2023; AdFormative, 2022).

In its marketing campaigns, Oatly stands out to consumers not only for its authenticity and transparency but also for humor and provocation. In its history, Oatly has had several hit and well-executed campaigns, but they have not been free of being controversial. After several banned advertisements in various countries, the company decided to set up an “Fck Oatly” website, where they report all of their marketing screw-ups (Fck Oatly, n.d.). Despite the daily use of the unusual approach in advertisements, some campaigns, according to viewers, have gone a little bit too much. For this reason, we decided to use them in our study to see if even the most controversial messages were able to affect the emotional connections between consumers liking Oatly and the brand itself.

Among the ads selected was the 2019 campaign “Ditch Milk” (Swedish: “Spola mjölken”). This included a series of posters with slogans, videos, and social media activity. The campaign aimed to draw attention to the dominance of regular milk in the food industry. “Ditch milk,” however, was met with a wave of criticism, mainly due to its controversial reference to a

campaign to promote sobriety in 1970s Sweden, which was signed with the slogan “Spola kröken” (English: “Ditch the booze”). Oatly ensured, however, that the campaign was intended to draw attention to the problems associated with the dairy industry and to promote a balanced approach to milk consumption. Farmers, not only dairy ones but also those involved in oat farming, were also seen among critics of the ad. They blamed the company for teasing each other and risking divisions between the different agricultural sectors (Biling, 2021; Oatly, n.d. a). To all the accusations and the question of whether the campaign had gone too far, Oatly responded: “We are in the middle of a climate crisis where 25% of the greenhouse gases are created by the food industry. Half of that comes from meat and dairy production. Yes, we do get criticized for bringing this to the table, but for two weeks ago, who was talking about sustainable milk?” (Oatly, n.d. a). The campaign helped raise awareness of the Oatly brand and prompted discussion on alternatives to cow's milk and sustainable agriculture.



Figure 4. Ditch the milk campaign mural (Source: Oatly, n.d. a)



Figure 5. Ditch the milk campaign on Oatly's YouTube (Source: Oatly 2019, 0:38)

Another campaign that provoked online discussions is the 2021 “Help Dad” series of ads. The goal of this campaign was to draw attention to the fact that the age group which pays the least attention to eating and drinking sustainably is our dad’s generation. The fathers showed the least interest in vegan products among all other age groups. Oatly has set a goal to educate men between the ages of 44 and 75 on this subject, and to generate discussion around plant-based products and climate change (Oatly, n.d. b).

The “Help Dad” campaign consisted of several TV commercials and a specially created article in cooperation with The Guardian on intergenerational differences (Oatly, n.d. b). The videos used for the ads show children behaving in the exact same way toward their fathers as parents behave toward their teenagers.

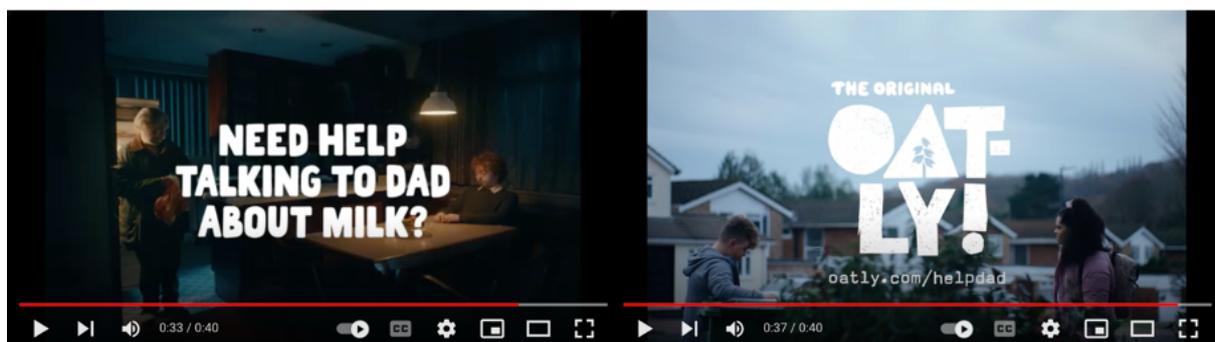


Figure 6. „Help Dad” campaign on Youtube (Source: Oatly 2021, 0:33; Oatly 2021a, 0:37)

It didn't take long for this campaign to become controversial. The company itself has boasted of a record “40 seconds (or less)” between the ad's publication and the brand's accusation of age discrimination, insensitivity to the problems of alcoholism, and promotion of anti-farmer attitudes (Fck Oatly, n.d. b). The children pictured in the ad in the role of authority, who castigated their fathers for consuming regular milk, were very quickly associated with a reference to alcohol problems and situations in which children catch their parents buying alcoholic beverages. Oatly was criticized on social media by people affected by alcoholism in their youth, pointing out that they did not find the joke presented quite funny. The Advertising Standards Authority (ASA) in the United Kingdom additionally accused the company of misleading consumers, due to the information given regarding the differences in CO2 emissions for the production of oatmeal drinks and regular milk. Oatly responded to these accusations by explaining that they provided too little detail in their comparison of greenhouse gas emissions. While they admitted that they could have been more specific in their statement, they highlighted that all of their data is based on scientific research, and they are not ashamed to speak out about it (Gilbert, 2024).

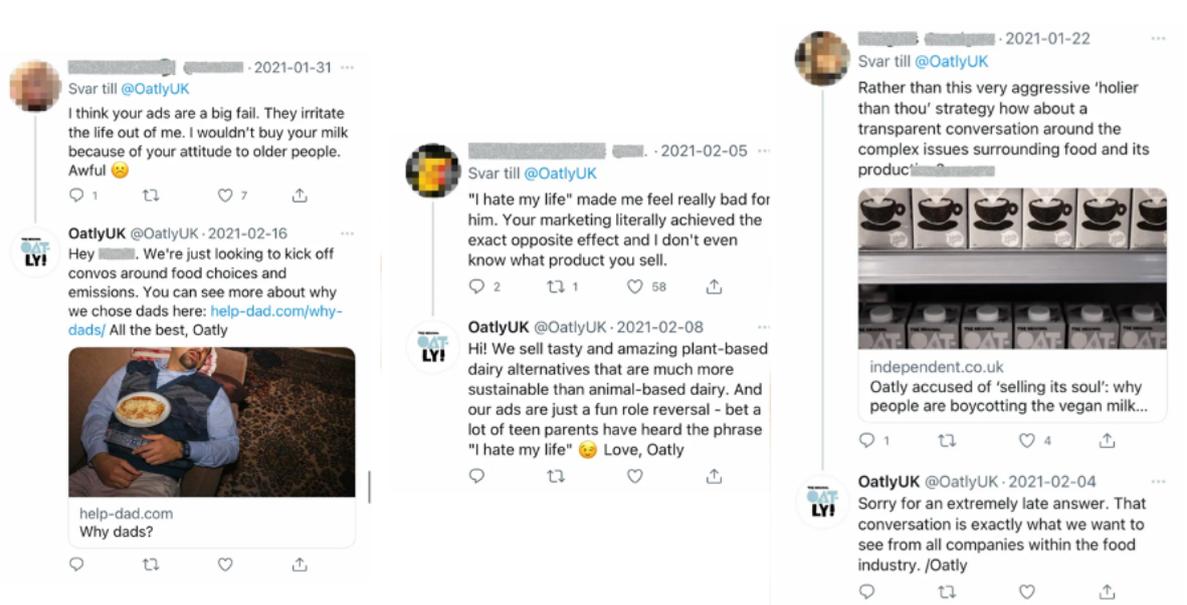


Figure 7. Examples of comments on the „Help Dad” campaign (Source: Fck Oatly, n.d. b)

The most recent campaign chosen for our interview is the “Milk Made for Humans” series of ads published in 2015 in Sweden and later again in 2021 in other countries on the celebration of the Super Bowl. The original version of the 2015 ad included posters and newspaper prints scattered in various locations. After the campaign was first published, Oatly was sued by the dairy industry because the ad implied that cow's milk was unhealthy.



Figure 8. „It's like milk but made for humans” (Source: Baker, 2020)

The new ad, in video form, featured former Oatly CEO Toni Petterson singing the song “It's like milk but made for humans,” and the now iconic slogan “Wow no cow!”. The ad was met with positive but also negative responses. People were so dissatisfied with the ad that they began wearing T-shirts that stated, “I totally hated that Oatly commercial” (Croagh, 2022). Responding to the wave of criticism, Oatly designed its own T-shirt with the same print, and as an apology for the public distaste and embarrassment the ad caused at the Super Bowl, it offered it to its critics. An edition of 500 T-shirts sold out in less than five minutes (Chang, 2021).



Figure 9. Oatly's „I totally hated that Oatly commercial” t-shirt announcement (Source: Chang, 2021)

The ad with the slogan “It's like milk but made for humans” was also shown in Ireland, where the slogan was banned by the Advertising Standards Authority for Ireland (ASAI). Oatly was accused of spreading false information, as cow's milk is not suitable for human consumption. ASAI argued its decision because traditional milk has always been an important part of building a proper human diet. The phrase used in the advertisement could suggest that people have been misled for years to increase profits by dairy companies. Oatly has responded to the charges against them. The “It's like milk but made for humans” slogan has been removed from the country. In his statement on the restriction imposed on them, the general manager for the UK and Ireland said that ASAI agreed with them on the possibility of plant-based drinks offers, which are the same as regular dairy ones. He stated that despite the whole situation, they believe that consumers have the right to choose between the dairy industry, which is harmful to the planet, and a healthy and organic plant-based alternative. The situation was followed by the creation of the Fck Oatly website, and those who read its content had the opportunity to drink free oatmeal coffee in Dublin (Fck Oatly, n.d. a).

4.2 Empirical Findings

In this part of our study, we will analyze the collected empirical data. Following the planned approach to data analysis, after conducting the interviews, we made a thorough transcription, in which we included all verbal and non-verbal responses from our respondents. Then we carefully reviewed the transcribed data. This enabled us to diagnose the recurring similarities and glaring differences in the attitudes and responses of the interviewees. During the initial analysis of the data, we grouped the similarities and differences, assigning codes to them so that we could more easily place them in our later analysis. We grouped the keywords we found, corresponding to the themes we distinguished based on the distribution of motives running through the respondents' answers. In this way, we were able to diagnose three main themes *Identifying Consumer-Brand Relationship Strength*, *Reactions to Controversial Advertisements from Oatly*, and *Post-Transgression Attitudes and Behaviors*. Considering the previous sorting method, each topic was described in detail, including codes, and was complemented by quotes from our respondents' statements and theories that we previously analyzed in the literature review part of the thesis. This allowed us to create a narrative structure for our analysis, presenting the most detailed yet relevant sections of the interviews, that provide an understanding of the issue of emotional connections to the Oatly brand and the reaction to its controversial advertising campaigns.

Along with the measures taken to ensure the anonymity of our respondents, according to the plan described in ethical considerations, our respondents were assigned random pseudonyms. We used the following names for anonymization purposes: Elvis Presley, Dolly Parton, Janis Joplin, Joe Cocker, Mick Jagger, Elton John, Phil Collins, and John Lennon.

4.2.1 Identifying Consumer-Brand Relationships Strength

The respondents were asked several questions about their opinion of Oatly, the feelings they associate with the company (if any), brand experiences, both positive and negative, and advocacy intentions to identify the relationship strength with the company. In terms of opinion regarding the brand, the respondents had their differences. While for some, Oatly is the perfect brand and they perceive all of the brand's elements as interesting, others like the brand but consider that its marketing tactics are excessive. The results are consistent with the brand relationship theory which indicates that consumers engaged in bonds with companies have a good opinion towards them, and could experience the feeling of love (Fournier, 1998).

“Oatly is more than just a brand to me; it's practically a lifestyle. I absolutely love everything about it. From their delicious oat milk and other products to their witty advertising campaigns, Oatly has captured my heart. They're not just about selling a product; they're about promoting a sustainable, compassionate way of living. Plus, their sense of humor and willingness to push boundaries in their marketing makes them stand out in the crowded market of plant-based products. I'm truly their biggest fan.” – Elton John

Moreover, the participants, all fans and customers of Oatly, presented distinct reasons and benefits from the interaction with the brand. Their reasons are the need for milk alternatives due to lactose intolerance, the desire to support sustainable brands, being vegan or vegetarian, reducing personal CO₂ production (because plant-based products would produce less CO₂ compared to normal milk as per the respondent), the desire for a well-rounded diet, or simply for the pleasant taste. However, what unites them in terms of product features is the taste. The respondents claim that Oatly has the highest quality among competitors. Batra et al. (2012) identified that when consumers love brands, they invariably mention high quality as a reason for doing so. For our study, this means that the respondents have been identified correctly as being Oatly brand lovers.

“But the taste and the texture I feel it's the best. So regardless of all the competitors, I'm still going back to it every single time.” – Elvis Presley

Central to our research is the concept of brand love. In our study, this feeling has been identified in consumers' responses in two ways. Firstly, the respondents simply stated that they love Oatly and proceeded to give reasons for doing so. While some expressed this feeling without hesitation, others were not as direct. However, we can attribute this to the similarity of feelings developed between consumer context and interpersonal affection (Carroll & Ahuvia, 2006).

“I love the company because of these (referring to the humor Oatly uses in its ads).” – Elvis Presley

“... and I love their brand, the product, just honestly, like I don't see a lot of difference between other plant-based milks.” – Janis Joplin

“I love their approach to the promotion, the marketing, to the communication with the customer.” – Joe Cocker

“I love Oatly as a brand overall.” –Mick Jagger

“I absolutely love everything about it. From their delicious oat milk and other products to their witty advertising campaigns, Oatly has captured my heart.” –Elton John

“I don’t think it was the first plant-based brand that I’ve discovered, but I think it was the one that made me fall in love with both oat milk and the brand.” – John Lennon

Secondly, we identified brand love by examining self-brand integration (Aaker et al., 2004), positive word-of-mouth (or advocacy) (Wallace et al., 2014), and resistance to negative information (Aaker et al., 2004; Du et. al, 2007). These are key elements of brand love that extend beyond brand loyalty, showcasing a more profound, passionate, and committed relationship. In terms of self-brand identification, we inquired if consumers express that the brand reflects their personal values or if the brand is mentioned as part of their identity. Most of the participants identify with Oatly’s mission and values, especially the vegan respondents. The desire to be more sustainable, reduce CO2 emissions, and generally live a healthier and balanced lifestyle were interviewees’ most common claims.

“One moment that stands out to me is when I learned more about Oatly’s commitment to sustainability and environmental responsibility. As someone who has been vegan for over a decade, environmental sustainability is a cause that’s very close to my heart. When I discovered that Oatly not only produces delicious plant-based products but also prioritizes sustainability in every aspect of its business, it resonated with me on a personal level.” – Elton John

“When this is their mission, it really resonates with me. Transparency really resonates with me, as I really value that. When comes to sustainability, well I do support a lot of sustainable brands.” – John Lennon

Furthermore, as discussed in the literature review, brands can enhance consumer-company bonds by creating brand experiences. Richa and Garg (2020) suggest that brand experiences moderate brand image, brand love, and attitudes. Experiences from companies can include but are not limited to events such as product demonstrations, live experiences, interactive activities, brand communities, digital experiences using virtual reality and augmented reality, etc. For Oatly, we noticed that the respondents had different experiences with the brand. We draw parallels between the memorable experiences and the feelings the respondents had towards the company. The respondents who took part in encounters presented a stronger positive attitude and advocacy toward the brand. We discerned that those respondents held stronger feelings and identified themselves with the brand. Interviewee Elton John is a great example. His first encounter with Oatly is memorable to him to this day.

“One memorable experience I had with Oatly was when I stumbled upon their pop-up café during a trip. I think I can say that I’m a foodie, so every time I’m traveling, I try all the interesting restaurants and cafes in the town. And there was a café which was all about oat and Oatly. It was like a hidden treasure trove of all oats haha. They had everything from specialty lattes to oat-based pastries, and the atmosphere was just so welcoming and fun. I

spent hours there, chatting with other oat and Oatly enthusiasts and trying out all their different offerings. During my one-week stay I went to the café four times!”

The respondent showcases his loyalty towards Oatly by being a brand advocate.

“I've advocated for Oatly as a brand numerous times. Whenever the topic of plant-based milk alternatives comes up in conversation, I'll recommend Oatly almost every time and share why I believe it's the best option out there. Whether I'm talking to friends, family members, or sometimes even strangers online, I always defend Oatly against any scepticism or misconceptions that might arise.”

Respondent John Lennon had also a memorable experience with the brand.

“I actually remember the day when I tried Oatly for the first time. I remember exactly where it was ... Once I found a very small coffee place, I think they had only five tables. The café is called “Fika”, which I was really intrigued by... And there was this barista, I asked him about the alternative milk options, and he said, “Well, we have oat milk”. I was kind of sceptical, cause my previous experience with this one was not so good, but he explained that this is Oatly, and I should really try it, cause it's really good. So, after I took the first sip I was amazed. The coffee was really good, and the experience with this creamy and smooth beverage. I was like “Oh! I'm coming back for a second coffee soon”. “

The respondent also advocates Oatly.

“Only in the form of recommending it to other people. So, in a positive way. I even picked up a carton once and dropped it off at one of my neighbors. She makes some cashew milk by herself, and I showed her Oatly because I thought she's gonna like it, which basically happened.”

However, the respondents who have not had a direct memorable experience with the brand have different reasons for advocacy. In their answers, those customers emphasize the product's superior taste as a reason to recommend the company, not its values, mission, and brand identity.

“I will defend it and say that it's really good and I tried it and tested it many times. So, it's again, its quality wins over everything. And I would I am definitely a huge advocate of the brand, but because of its quality, not because of the influence a might have had based on its social campaigns or social media posts, is just my opinion based on my experience with the brand on the using the brand.” – Elvis Presley

In conclusion, we believe that we accomplished the objective established for this segment of the empirical findings. The respondents interviewed have been correctly identified as being part of a consumer-brand relationship, and most importantly, present love feelings towards Oatly. The self-brand integration with the oat milk company is visible in multiple ways. Personal identification implies consumers have similarities in values with the brand, emotional attachment implies developing strong emotions, brand loyalty suggests choosing Oatly over any other competitor, and positive word-of-mouth or advocacy suggests consumers frequently

recommend the company to friends and family. Through our examples, we believe we reinforced consumers' strong emotional connection, loyalty, and advocacy to Oatly. Using self-expansion, meaning constantly adding positive content to the relationship (Rodriguez, 2023), Oatly can reap the relationship's benefits in the long term.

4.2.2 Reactions to Controversial Advertisements from Oatly

During the interviews, respondents were shown the three advertising campaigns that we discussed earlier - *Ditch Milk*, *Help Dad* and *It's Like Milk but Made for Humans*. Oatly used shocking or provocative marketing tricks (Dahl et al., 2003; Vezina & Paul, 1997) to draw attention to the problems associated with excessive milk consumption and related greenhouse gas emissions. In the case of Oatly, the procedure of controversy in advertising is used intentionally. The company has repeatedly indicated that they want to start a discussion on those topics that are important to them. Strong advertising messages achieve their stated goal of intentionally shocking their audience (Dahl et al., 2003). Oatly builds its transparent image in this way, which the company repeatedly emphasizes, for example in The Official Oatly Code of Conduct Document. There we can find a declaration on building trust with the brand "*We communicate openly about our values and strive to be a transparent company because we want our consumers to make informed and conscious choices and to have confidence in us and our products*" (Investors Oatly, n.d.). According to Aaker et al. (2004), brands that are perceived as honest and transparent influence consumers' perceptions of them positively, and the relationship grows stronger and closer over time. Misbehavior, which in this case the controversy becomes, can be perceived differently, and can affect the level of consumer satisfaction and commitment after experiencing inappropriate behavior.

The reactions of our interviewees to the presented campaigns varied, but some cohesion could be observed in them. The ads did not cause negative emotions in them, despite the included controversies, they remained a neutral or positive attitude - showing through smiles or even laughing while watching the videos. After familiarizing them with the advertising messages, we received different, but mostly very positive reactions about the presented ads.

„I thought they were funny because they have a very humorous approach, and I found the message at the end also very funny” - Mick Jagger

“I liked the videos ... I care about the ads, so they were cool. Then it's aesthetically appealing, and I don't know if it makes you feel kind of nice. In a way ... I mean, some of them were quite funny. You know, I think the main point here is even though you might not agree with, you know, the main message, it kind of makes you laugh. So, you don't take it that seriously and I think might be good because it kind of takes away the pressure that some people might feel like it's you know, create on them. And the last one was pretty cool like showing the CEO singing in the field. That was pretty cool and funny, actually.” – Dolly Parton

“On the other hand, I feel like they are really, like, it's a really radical type of communicating, and they want to get the message across. And I like it. I might not agree with them. I'm not saying that I agree with all those ads, but it resonates well with me. I think it's that bold type of communication that I like. I feel like it was creative, and I was resonated.” – Janis Joplin

After knowing the respondents' general opinions about the ads in question, we began to uncover the controversies surrounding Oatly's brand campaigns. These “inappropriate behaviors” (Aaker et al., 2004), in the relationship our respondents have with the brand, may have affected their engagement and satisfaction with using the products or interacting with Oatly (Aaker et al., 2004). Part of our respondents knew some of the ads beforehand and were aware of their controversial aspect, but nevertheless emphasized that they liked the ads presented, while at the same time understanding their controversial dimensions.

“... my thoughts on the campaign remain largely unchanged. I can understand why the campaign might have brought controversy, especially in a country where dairy farming is a significant industry, but my personal opinion of the campaign remains positive.” - Elton John

„... I think they have this oddly specific humor but at the same time, they are funny. Also, I can see that some people might get offended by them. One thing that I thought about when I saw the ad, was seeing a little connection to alcoholism which might be a controversial problem. So, I love the ad, but I can see that might be not funny for everyone.” – Joe Cocker

Other respondents were not previously familiar with the ads presented. Their reactions to the materials were therefore the first they had experienced themselves. Our respondents rarely mentioned negative experiences with Oatly when examining their consumer-brand relationship. Issues related to the high price or low availability in their country of residence were mentioned among them. However, they highlighted that this was not a strongly negative experience, only one that limited their ability to consume the products. However, they indicated that if they had the opportunity, they would buy Oatly products more often. This means that our respondents have a very positive relationship with the brand, pointing to many positive moments associated with dealing with the vegan manufacturer. According to Fournier (1998), good relationships between consumers and brands have a favorable effect on brand evaluation, and the level of satisfaction with the existing relationship (Gabarino & Johnson, 1999). Analyzing the responses of the respondents, who first encountered advertising messages, it can be observed that when presented with the controversy, they admitted that they recognized it. However, they felt the ads were still well done and consistent with the brand's usual marketing style, and they also found them entertaining and humorous.

“That's interesting. I didn't see the connotation with alcoholism before you told me. Now I see it, but I think they used it in a funny way. But I never had anyone in my life who was struggling with things like this, so maybe that's why I see it as a funny thing” - Phil Collins

“I must say that I didn’t think about the reference to alcoholism. But now I see it, when the daughter comes in, actually there are few of those. Oh yeah, I get it now. Now it’s making sense that the dad is hiding the milk bottle or is asking for the [milk] bottle and is refused. Haha, that’s kind of funny.” - John Lennon

Following the framework outlined by Du et al. (2007), consumers who have a relationship with a brand become its defenders or advocates. By achieving this level of relationship, consumers defend the brand from criticism and are unwilling to allow any information about the not-necessarily good actions of their favorite brand. This means that they are more willing to forgive inappropriate actions or advertisements because they are infatuated with the brand. Almost all of our respondents, after being exposed to the controversies noted by the public in Oatly's ads, adopted, sometimes even unconsciously, a position of protecting and defending the brand (Elvis Presley, Janis Joplin, Joe Cocker, Mick Jagger, Elton John, Phil Collins, John Lennon). Some of them, in the earlier part of the interview, mentioned that they were unlikely to have the opportunity to advocate for the brand. nonetheless, they more or less consciously took on the role of defending Oatly during our interview. Among the reactions to the controversy presented, three main arguments ran through our interviews.

The first is related to the controversy surrounding the shares held by Blackstone and the Chinese investor. When presented with this information, some respondents were surprised, while others were aware of the Swedish company's share split. However, some of the respondents seemed almost offended by the information given to them, which could be felt in the change in their tone of voice and slightly nervous behavior during this part of the interview. It was possible to perceive a lack of confidence in the accuracy of the information and a desire to know the sources and their reliability.

“Well, I can say what I think about it, but I just wanna be sure about the information that you just quoted. I just wanna be sure it comes from reliable sources. Because again, this can also be an anti-Oatly organization ... Okay, so that information is legitimate. So, I think, I don’t want to go bullet by bullet, but let’s assume that most of the information you just gave me is true.” – John Lennon

Several respondents, especially to information related to Oatly's unusual shareholders and investors, used almost the same argument while defending the brand. It relates to the fact that currently there is hardly any company that is completely transparent and does not have some hidden controversy on the side. Thus, the desire to defend Oatly was noticeable in two ways. The first is by explaining to the researchers that such suspicion can now be held against any organization. And the second, by explaining to themselves, even in the form of defending the brand to oneself, that Oatly's actions, even though they may be perceived as not entirely pure are still good and justified.

“Hmm, haha... Obviously, that makes that kind of you don’t wanna trust them as much, but at the same time name one brand that isn’t owned by some shady business owners or makers.” – Mick Jagger

“Because at the end of the day there, I don't think there's any brand in this world that has not had any issues with controversy in any way on any aspect of their life. It could be their marketing, it could be their production, their distribution, or any aspect of their business.” – Elvis Presley

“... But I think the controversy with the investors and stakeholders is a little shady. But I don’t think it’s only Oatly’s thing. I think a lot of companies have some skeletons in the closet. I wouldn’t say that I defended Oatly from someone, but more like from myself. This stakeholder thing was too hard for me, and then, thanks to my friends, I realized that any company in this world is 100% honest. So, I had a moment when I didn’t like them, ... but it's not like I decided to boycott them or something.” - Phil Collins

Another type of response to the controversies presented about Oatly was to point out, that nowadays people are oversensitive, and that the company does not bring up topics that should cause so much outrage. Even though, in a later part of the interview, when asked what was exaggerated in the controversial advertising messages, they pointed to social problems, including alcoholism, which, when discussing the Oatly ads, was not as hurtful to them as when considering the ads in general.

“I feel like I said like everything is a lot more sensitive, and people are more sensitive nowadays because of the social media and everything that we have access to, and we think we are entitled to everything. And sometimes this gets in the way of just being and just taking a joke and being reasonable.” and “Again, people are way too sensitive about subjects that really are not that.” – Elvis Presley

“This is the moment when the ad is getting too controversial for you. But I still think that nowadays people are a little too sensitive. ... I feel like 20 or 30 years ago, people weren’t so offended, so sensitive.” – Joe Cocker

“It’s sad that people don’t understand jokes nowadays. I don’t think that Oatly wants anyone to fight. People are too sensitive nowadays, so I hope it was only a fake accusation.” – Elton John

“I think the ASA was a little bit too sensitive in this case.” – Phil Collins

The third, and final, most frequently observed argument defending the brand was the explanation that, according to respondents, the controversy in Oatly's advertising is actually their unconventional and characteristic approach to marketing communications.

“Their packaging literally reflects their ads, or their ads reflects their packaging. Because as you said, they're very like dark humor sarcastically witty in a way. Because all the messages that I'm reading and all the bits of fun facts that they tried to put there are exactly the same. So yeah, they are just unapologetic about their branding, and that's what it is you like it or not? That's what they are.” – Elvis Presley

“So, I guess that's like, then here, maybe I would see the connection, that they just decided to go wild with their ads.” – Dolly Parton

“I get why they can be perceived as controversial. For me, they are just well-made and stand out, from the ads we have on the market. So, I would say they might be controversial. But for me, they aren't.” – Joe Cocker

“I think Oatly, ..., their packaging and slogans on the cartons. I think they're trying to grab the attention by presenting out-of-the-box ideas. That's what I'm thinking about those campaigns and the ads I just saw. I think they are fun and quirky, and they use ideas that are just not ordinary. I don't think I've seen any other brand or at least milk ones or even plant-based [milk] use an approach like this.” – John Lennon

The complexity and multidimensionality of responses to selected controversial Oatly advertising campaigns can be seen among the responses gathered through the interviews. Among the data collected were reactions that ranged from approval toward the brand and its strategy to a kind of defense of the brand against the researchers. Some respondents, despite their awareness of the controversy, showed their brand loyalty by defending brands they have stronger relationships with (Du et al., 2007). The atypical approach to marketing that a company takes in the market is appreciated by its consumers, even if they don't fully agree with the messages shown in the campaigns. However, it is worth noting that the use of controversy can be a strategy to build commitment (Dahl et al., 2003; Vézina & Paul, 1997; Cyril De Run & Ting, 2014). This means that Oatly's provocative actions can strengthen relationships with consumers and cause discussions and reflections on the value of the brand, and its importance in building their self-identity (Ahuvia, 2005; Rokka & Ulver, 2023). The captured answers of respondents demonstrate the importance of authenticity and transparency in marketing communications, which is very important in the context of building long-term relationships with consumers (Aaker et al., 2004). In summary, despite the varied reactions to Oatly's campaigns due to differences in background, education, social factors, or even current humor (Arnaud & Waguespack, 2018; Sabri & Obermiller, 2012; Noland, 2021), it can be noted that consumers, who have a relationship with the brand, respond more subtly and gently. They explain to both them and others the reason for their response, which is determined by having an emotional connection to the brand.

4.2.3 Post-Transgression Attitudes and Behaviors

To identify the impact controversy had on the consumer-company bond, we analyze the respondents' answers regarding buying, engagement on social media, their attitudes, and advocacy intents. In terms of buying behavior, the consumers had different responses and reasons for their statements. Seven out of eight respondents stated that they will continue to buy Oatly's products. The remaining one has been affected by controversy and plans on choosing a different brand, while one of the seven also considered buying from different brands, but acknowledges that Oatly remains the favorite. Consumer responses to engagement on social media platforms remained mostly unchanged, with only one of the respondents expressing her desire to follow the company on LinkedIn after the interview. In terms of attitude towards the brand, the controversy has not made a significant difference. While the responses to the provocative advertising were perceived in various ways, it did not deter the brand lovers from continuing to support Oatly. It is worth mentioning that product quality is a significant reason for continuing to engage with the brand, with several respondents mentioning it. When asked whether their attitude and feelings towards Oatly changed upon learning about its controversial promotions, the interviewees responded as follows:

"No, not really." - Mick Jagger

"Not at all! I'm still as big fan as I was when we started haha." -Elton John

"No, everything is the same for me, maybe I'll actually follow them on my LinkedIn to just know what is going on at the moment. I still like their products and I'll be buying them as long as I don't find anything tastier, which I believe is impossible haha." - Phil Collins

"Yeah, I little bit. I won't stop buying it, but I'll look into it." - John Lennon

"I wouldn't say they changed. I was also surprised about the other campaigns that you showed me and I'm just happy that they are doing the same strategy which is showing that their marketing is done very well." - Joe Cocker

"So, I mean, it maybe opens my eyes a little bit so I don't think I was blind and I'm like, I'm not supporting them blindly and madly as I said... . I didn't know about all those controversial ads so maybe they also adjust their marketing nowadays because you know, nothing from like, those banners that I saw was this controversial. It was feisty. But it wasn't like this controversial." - Dolly Parton

The controversy level perceived by most respondents was mild. While they could understand the impact these advertisements can have on certain people (e.g., children of alcohol addicts), the promotions were not considered offensive to such an extent that would stop them from buying Oatly's products, engaging with the company on social media channels, or advocating the brand.

The respondents did not perceive Oatly's advertising strategy as deliberately controversial, but rather unintentional with a touch of humor and boldness. However, based on our analyses of

the actions taken by Oatly in the face of backlash from controversy, we understood that the company does not use a so-called crisis management system. This means that when they receive adverse reactions, Oatly does not issue a public apology but rather documents the misconduct on their FckOatly.com website (check Oatly's background above for more details). Hence, the controversial stance in its promotions is rather intentional and purposeful. Several interviewees appreciated the oat milk producer's courage to tackle taboo or sensitive topics and bring levity to a serious societal issue such as alcohol addiction. The remaining few emphasized the fact that Oatly should remain ethical and not ridicule people suffering from addiction. Overall, the message conveyed by the brand lovers is of defending and supporting Oatly, the result being consistent with Du et. al's (2007).

Aaker et al. (2004) categorise brands in consumer-company bonds as sincere and exciting brands. Exciting brands are characterized by being unique and captivating (Aaker, 1997), while sincere brands are characterized by being consistent and trustworthy (Aaker et al., 2004). We classified Oatly as an exciting brand because of its distinctive marketing and branding initiatives, youthfulness, and playfulness, making it one-of-a-kind within the plant-based products industry. This makes Oatly's customers expect the unexpected from the brand and be receptive to actions that showcase the brand's identity. Our study's results are somehow consistent with Aaker's et al. (2004) results who identified that relationships with exciting brands become reinvigorated after wrongdoings. After viewing Oatly's controversial advertisements, interviewee number D3 stated her excitement towards the brand for its quirkiness and boldness. She also highlighted her growing appreciation towards Oatly despite its controversial stance.

"I like them more! And it might sound bad, but I like pissing off people by opening the taboo topics. So just telling people that we need to talk about this, or this is something that if it's not discussed, it's gonna not stop itself. So, I like the controversy...Sometimes they don't know, as I said in the beginning, they don't know where to tone down, because sometimes you need to tone down. But I like the stories that you told me, it makes me like the brand slightly more." - Janis Joplin

Moreover, our results are consistent with Du's et. al (2007) findings, showing that consumers who are brand advocates are more likely to accept wrongdoings from the brand. Even though the T4 consumer believed Oatly's advertising campaigns were controversial and acknowledged the effect they could have on people affected by alcohol addiction, his opinion and attitudes towards the company have not changed. When asked if his opinion and attitudes toward Oatly transformed upon learning about the controversy, he emphasized they have not.

In the literature review, we presented brand communities and their relevance to our study. It was emphasized that these communities bring meaning to profit-seeking organizations and deliver value to customers (Cova et al., 2023). Value co-creation was displayed as a means of engagement or interaction between buyers and companies. We started from the assumption that consumers who are emotionally attached to brands might react differently to controversy in a social setting compared to a private one. Stets and Burke (2000) emphasized in their study that

group membership and belonging to a community are important elements of social identity. However, the results of our study have not identified any particular significance toward brand communities. While some of the respondents felt an affinity to the vegan community, most of the respondents did not sense a connection to Oatly's community per se. In turn, our results point towards a consumer tribe, a group of individuals who share the same interests, lifestyle, and values in a consumption situation but do not gravitate towards a single brand but multiple, rather than a brand community (Isisag et al., 2023).

Furthermore, the consumers interviewed have been selected based on the criterion of loving Oatly and purchasing regularly. The oat milk producer is available in numerous markets throughout Europe and North America, making us consider respondents from different countries to participate in the study. As presented in the methodology chapter, the age and gender of the respondents played an insignificant role. However, studies on responses to controversy identified that factors such as gender, age, level of education, and cultural norms can affect the perceived offensiveness towards objects or promotions (Cyril De Run & Ting, 2014; Dahl et al., 2003; Chan et al., 2007). The findings from our study are not consistent with the literature because none of the factors presented above changed significantly the perception of controversy. The respondents reside in five different countries and are aged between 18 and 46, both females and males. Yet, it is worth mentioning that the differentiating factor between the literature and the current study is the engagement in a consumer-brand relationship. It could be argued that the interviewees are more accepting and lenient towards provocation because of the commitment and feelings developed towards Oatly.

Lastly, Garbarino and Johnson (1999) identified that family, friends, and other social groups influence consumer's attachment and attitude toward brands. After learning about Oatly's controversial practices, the participants were asked to state whether or not their family's or friend's opinion would influence their buying intentions. Oat milk is a low-involvement product, meaning a product that requires minimal thought, while a high-involvement product requires decision-making effort, generally a lengthier process, and more importance is attributed to the purchase (Hoonsopon & Puriwat, 2016). Hence, the nature of the product could have had an impact on the interviewees' likelihood of being influenced by their family's and friends' opinions when it comes to purchasing oat milk. The respondents would attribute little thought to their peers' negative opinions towards Oatly.

"I would still buy their products because for me it's not controversial enough [to stop buying, or cancel them in a sense]" - Mick Jagger

"As I mentioned, I am the person in my circle of friends who most influence everyone's opinion the most. I think at this point this is my personality trait haha. However, I think their opinions are also important to me. I would certainly look into such matters, but I believe that everyone should consider things like this on their own and do what they think is the best." - Elton John

"I would respect and listen to their opinions, but I still value my own opinion the most, so I don't think it will change overnight. I respect them, but I also respect myself." - Phil Collins

“I think I will try to understand their views on this but I still value my own opinion the most so I will talk with them. And we'll consider everything by myself. But I think I will stay with the good product.” - Joe Cocker

To conclude, the last theme of our empirical analyses had the purpose of identifying the extent to which controversy affected the consumer-company relationship. The aversion previously identified by the respondents was a moderator or external factor that would interfere with the relationship partners. The changes would be reflected in the areas of purchase intent, engagement on social media platforms, brand advocacy, attitude, and feelings towards Oatly. While some of the results have been mixed, the main takeaway is that the interviewees continue to support the brand despite the controversial advertising campaigns. The most common theme is the appreciation for Oatly's boldness and humor, as well as emphasizing the importance of maintaining promotional topics ethically.

5. Discussion and Conclusion

This section aims to summarise the main empirical findings of the study, establishing how the research question and the sub-questions have been answered. It also highlights theoretical and managerial implications, as well as acknowledges the study's limitations.

5.1 Research Aims

The objective set for this study was to investigate the brand attachment influence on consumers' reactions to provocative advertising campaigns. It sought to capture consumer's changes in attitude (if any) toward their beloved brand when they learned about the controversy behind their campaigns. Most importantly, the study aimed to analyze how this external phenomenon affects consumer-brand relationships, as well as the rationale behind consumers' choice to continue to engage with the company and the way they do it. Hence the research question set for the study was:

RQ: How do emotional connections with a brand influence consumer responses to controversial advertising campaigns?

To support the main research question and provide structure to the overall thesis, two additional sub-questions were proposed.

SQ1: Will brand lovers exposed to controversial ads continue to engage with the brand? Why?

SQ2: How will consumers continue to engage with the brand?

5.2 Discussion of Findings

The main findings of our empirical analyses have helped us understand consumer-brand relationships better as well as their implications. Firstly, the results indicated that the interview participants were identified correctly as being Oatly brand lovers and involved in a relationship with the brand. By examining elements of consumer-company bonds such as self-brand integration (Aaker et al., 2004), advocacy (Wallace et al., 2014), and immunity to unfavorable information (Aaker et al., 2004; Du et. al, 2007) we determined a few interesting aspects. Self-brand integration was more evident in vegan or vegetarian consumers who were also interested in being sustainable, as opposed to consumers who used Oatly because of health reasons (e.g., because of lactose intolerance). It could be argued that consumers who identified with Oatly's values and mission were more susceptible to self-brand integration. This result bears managerial importance because it demonstrates that brands that wish their customers to experience this relational element should focus on developing meaningful missions and company values. Most of the consumers advocated for Oatly at least once since becoming customers but for distinct reasons. While some of the respondents recommend the oat milk producer for its overall image and marketing tactics, most of them emphasized superior taste as the reason for advocacy. The immunity or resistance to negative information about the brand

was one of the most evident findings in our study. When the respondents learned about the meanings behind Oatly's controversial campaigns (e.g., references to alcohol addiction, implying that milk is not intended for human consumption), the responses were mixed. The results ranged from not being affected by the controversy to questioning the sources of the data presented. The claim that many organizations have "skeletons in the closet" was common among respondents. This could be interpreted as a way of refusing to believe negative information about the brand, defending it by deflecting the knowledge about Oatly, and highlighting that such issues are common in the business world. The respondents also emphasized that "people nowadays are too sensitive" when asked if they perceived the presented promotional campaigns as provocative. We interpreted these results as a piece of robust evidence that brand lovers are more likely to accept wrongdoings from their beloved brand. Hence, we believe that we answered our main research question by identifying that emotional connections to brands buffer the negative reaction to purposeful controversy in advertising.

Furthermore, a secondary focus of the study was to identify whether or not brand lovers will continue to engage with the brand post-transgression. We defined engagement by two factors: purchase and social media engagement. In terms of buying intent, most of the interviewees stated they would continue to purchase Oatly's products regardless of the controversy. While few of the respondents expressed their desire to learn more about the controversy surrounding Oatly before they take any action to switch to a different brand, the overall results point to the fact that the buying intent remains largely unchanged. The data regarding the engagement with Oatly on social media platforms proved to be insignificant, with many of the consumers not following the oat milk producer on any platform. These findings answer our first sub-question regarding whether brand lovers will continue to engage with Oatly or not, as well as the second sub-question regarding how they will do so. This study aligns with existing literature that highlights the positive effect on consumer-company bonds when provocation is perceived by consumers as consistent with the brand's identity (Dahl et al., 2003; Vézina & Paul, 1997; Cyril De Run & Ting, 2014). The respondents strengthened their commitment to Oatly, many of them mentioning that the ads watched are aligned with their expectations from Oatly, which they generally perceive as interesting, humorous, and unique. This has important implications for managers because it showcases the significance of authenticity in the formation of long-term relationships with customers.

An interesting aspect of the study's results is represented by the reason why brand lovers sustain involvement with Oatly. We believe that there are several reasons for this choice. Oatly's advertising campaigns have been identified as controversial because they deliberately and purposively provoke consumers (Dahl et al., 2003) through the ad's execution (Arnaud & Waguespack, 2018; Dens et al., 2008; Waller, 1999). All promotional efforts employed in the study utilised stigmatization, insensitivity to serious societal issues along ethical concerns. Associating milk consumption with either alcohol addiction or an inhumane practice raises provocation within some consumers. However, the brand lovers simply did not perceive the ads as "too provocative". It could be presumed that the ads were targeted towards a specific demographic that might not regard them as offensive. In our study, we identified this as a

pertinent reason. Brand trust and image could also play a role in the respondents' reactions. However, to some consumers, these associations cross a fine line that, as our respondents suggested, companies should not when making promotional campaigns. We understand that the perception of controversy can be a subjective matter. Nonetheless, we could argue that the discernment of the consumers offended by these ads is as valuable as any other point of view.

5.3 Future Research

Our study's findings enrich the existing body of literature on consumer-brand relationships and controversial advertising. Previously, a gap in the literature was evident composed of the lack of connection between emotions toward a brand and the impact of a potentially destructive external factor. This study took a step toward enriching the understanding of the interplay of brand feelings, controversy, and consumer-company affinity. The qualitative nature of the research offers rich insights into interviewees' feelings, and thoughts, these aspects lacking from existing, mostly quantitative research on these subjects. By providing empirical findings on brand lovers' attitudes toward provocative promotions, this study helps organizations mitigate the risk they expose themselves to when using this advertising strategy. Scholars can continue to broaden the existing body of knowledge on consumer-brand relationships and brand love to discover further implications useful for brands working with developing such bonds.

This study is relevant to the field of advertising because it offers information about the controversial promotion of a real brand. Compared to many studies on provocative promotion that assess behavioral responses to fictitious companies and campaigns, this study evaluates consumers' reactions to controversy on a real company, Oatly. Future research could investigate how consumer-brand relationships develop and change over time, especially how these influences change based on the types of advertisements used by companies.

Another opportunity for future research would be to explore cultural differences in ad reactions. The interviewees reside in five different European and North American countries, which share some cultural commonalities. Further research analyzing the interplay between emotional connections and controversy in countries with a different cultural upbringing (e.g., from Asia, South America, etc.) could result in different findings. Studies identified that social norms and cultural background affect how provocation is comprehended, which in turn could lead to interesting findings that would enrich the existing body of literature (Chan et al. 2007; Cyril De Run & Ting, 2014).

5.4 Limitations

The present study has some limitations. The reduced sample size implies that the research's reliability is relatively low due to a high possibility of achieving slightly different results if the study were to be replicated. The eight in-depth interviews offer a good understanding of the general brand lovers' mentality towards controversy, but a larger number of interviews could have provided greater generalizability.

Moreover, we cataloged Oatly as an exciting brand and concluded that it has benefited (to some extent) from transgression. This result is consistent with the results of Aaker et al. (2004). However, as the relationship between the company and consumers deepens over time, consumers' perception might change and Oatly would be seen as a sincere brand. This change would entail that missteps would hurt the relationship. This study was time-restrained, and a longitudinal study could have offered more discoveries and a better understanding of the evolving nature of the relationship.

Another limitation is the possibility of a social desirability bias (Krumpal, 2013). Due to this bias, the respondents could have offered answers that were considered socially acceptable by themselves, especially around a topic that is considered sensitive. This, in turn, could have affected the results slightly. However, we believe we have created a comfortable and judgment-free environment in which the interviewees could freely share their opinions.

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