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To dare or not to dare – taking a stand in marketing campaigns

How companies' decisions to take a public standpoint in social issues affect
consumers' perceptions and behaviour

Master Degree Project in Marketing and Consumption
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Abstract

Based on an interest to contribute to further understanding of the area of CSR marketing the purpose of this article is to explore the perceptions and effects of marketing where companies take a public standpoint in social issues. Through analysis of millennials' perceptions and the outcomes of this type of marketing the study aims to increase the knowledge of how business as well as society are influenced. In order to gain knowledge in the area and be able to answer the research question, a qualitative study was conducted. The study included netnographic observations of companies' advertisements and communication on social platforms. In addition, ten interviews were carried out with receivers of the marketing type explored, representing the millennial generation, in order to get their perspective of the phenomena. The findings led to the insight that multiple various perceptions and effects exist. Mixed emotions toward this type of marketing were evident, both between different consumers and on an individual level. The influence of the three Cs, the type of company, the consumer and the specific cause, as well as the interplay between them, was closely linked with the mixed emotions. The study further presents how both social and business impact can be seen as a result of this type of marketing, where companies are suggested to be important social actors through contributing with additional awareness and new forms of social issues communication. Simultaneously, influence on consumers' attitude and behaviour can result in both positive and negative effects on business outcomes. Further, a long-term perspective and a bigger picture of the CSR initiative is identified as important both on the business and societal level. In summary, it can be seen as a complex phenomena, indicating a high risk when taking a public stand in social issues through marketing, with potential of both success and setbacks. The findings of the study contribute to insight of the consumer perspective within the studied area. Hence, the discoveries in this article are valuable for companies since they provide important knowledge in how to perform this marketing strategy in the most beneficial way.

Keywords: Corporate social responsibility, CSR marketing, Social Marketing, Brand Activism, Gender equality, Millennials, Goodwash, Resistance

Introduction

What is it that gives people goose bumps or even makes them cry when seeing a commercial? Or how come people around the world destroy their razors or burn up their shoes? Well, it can be advertisements with very powerful social messages that include sensitive topics or strong opinions, which steer up a lot of emotions. Advertisements like these are seen to get millions of views and endless responses. Gillette's commercial "Toxic masculinity" has 34 million views, around 800 thousand likes and twice as many dislikes (Gillette, 2019). These viral campaigns can be seen as a divider, raising strong reactions of either positive or negative emotions, separating people in two sides.

The well-known campaign from Nike "Just Do It", featuring the former NFL-player Colin Kaepernick who in 2016 went down kneeling during the national anthem as an act of protest against racial injustices and police brutality (CNBC, 2018), is a prime example of such campaign. The campaign stirred up a lot of heated emotions and divided people in two parts, it even got the attention of the US president Donald Trump who joined the discussion lively. When Nike launched this campaign, back in September 2018, their stock price reached an all-time high, but then it dropped dramatically (CNBC, 2018). However, the business did not seem to suffer that bad as the sales rapidly increased by approximately 30% (Guardian sport, 2019).

This indicates how the business could be affected when choosing to do a campaign like this. The Nike campaign can not only be connected to business impact. From the day it was launched, awareness has been raised to the social cause. Today, June 2020, it can be seen as more relevant than ever before, due to the widespread protest that is currently taking place, against social injustices and police brutality by emphasizing that Black Lives Matter, around the world. Nike's campaign lives on due to its strong connection to the social debate, where people today, one and a half years later, still comment on old social media posts with statements like "Now it makes sense!"

Evidently, this type of campaign has been demonstrated to get the audience's attention, which is highly important in today's business society, due to all the advertising that the consumers are showered with today. This extreme amount of advertising that consumers are faced with shapes the way current marketing takes form. However, another factor influencing how current advertising is formed is the increased expectations and pressure that stakeholders put on companies through their support of companies who take on their role as responsible social actors (Du, Bhattacharya & Sen, 2010). In present time, 2020, consumers' values seem to have shifted and overall consumers care more today about the consequences of their consumption and how business can affect the world we are living in, both for the good and bad.

A generation that is in the forefront regarding this mindset is the millennials, born from 1980 to 2000, which are seen as a very valuable and important customer base due to the fact that they will have high spending power and will stand for most of the consumption in the years to come (Shetty, Venkataramaiah & Anand, 2019). Therefore it is highly important to understand these consumers in order to keep up to date with their expectations and way of acting on the market, and with that information knowing how to relate and connect with them. One trait of character for millennials is that they are

more aware and influenced by contemporary social issues and possess better knowledge in the matter since they are, and have for a longer time been, exposed to the digital medium and Internet (Parment, 2012). They are often more engaged in social causes in comparison to older generations and take more responsibility, wanting to make an effort in making the world a better place (Shetty et al., 2019). As a result they put more pressure and higher requirements on companies to work toward the same goal and increasingly expect companies to take their social responsibility (Minár, 2016). Being socially responsible means to act beyond their commercial interests, not just focusing on profit, but additionally have a deeper purpose (ibid).

As a result of these new expectations from consumers a visible trend of Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) marketing with a clear connection between advertisement and CSR has emerged. It has become a marketing strategy for companies to engage and take a stand in current social issues and include CSR in their communication and positioning, as it is a way for them to bond with their target audience based on shared needs and interests. There are several signs of its presence lately, one of them being the frequent appearance of CSR content in the competitors' advertisements in the most prestigious advertising competition Cannes Lions last year (Westerberg Skoog, 2019). Another example is that during the 2017 Super Bowl, where the aired commercials in some ways are seen as important and exciting as the game itself, purpose-driven marketing where companies take a stand in social issues, was a major focus in the advertisements shown (Marjamäki, 2018), which highlights its existence and popularity these days. Further, Nike's "Dream Crazy" commercial, which is an extension of the brand's "Just do it" campaign won an award for outstanding commercial at the Creative Arts Emmys in 2019 (Guardian sport, 2019), which demonstrates that these types of commercials are appreciated and viewed as something special.

Previous research shows that there are both beneficial outcomes and risks with engaging in this type of marketing. Since the outcome can widely vary it is interesting to get a deeper understanding of what factors that influence the result and in what way in order to reach a more effective marketing strategy. Existing literature repeatedly brings up the fact that there is a two-side perspective with CSR communication efforts, presenting two underlying motives, namely that they can be motivated by business profits or by the desire to reach social change (Du et al., 2010). Due to this two folded drive it has been noticed that scepticism regarding companies' CSR communication initiatives may arise among stakeholders, which could potentially harm the outcomes of such practice (ibid).

Thereby we have identified an area of interest to further investigate where there seems to be an urgent need for deeper understanding in how to perform such marketing in the most beneficial way. Therefore, the purpose of the study is to understand how this type of marketing is received by consumers and what consequences that come with it. The study aims to add knowledge into how marketing, where companies take a public stand in social issues, may influence both business and society. More specifically, the following research questions have guided our study:

- *How do consumers from the millennial generation perceive companies' decision to take a stand in social issues through their marketing?*
- *What are the effects of it?*

Delimitation

To incorporate CSR in marketing practices can be seen as a broad area covering a variety of different topics. CSR includes several types of concerns such as environmental, economic and social (Svenskhandel, 2020). This study will focus on companies taking a stand in social issues through their marketing, which throughout this paper includes both their advertisements and communication on social media platforms. Further on, social issues can vary from human rights, equality or welfare

among other things (Svenskhandel, 2020). This study will focus on one specific social issue, namely equality with the focal point on gender equality and stereotypes. The theories and results are however applicable on other related social issues as well. This delimitation is primarily a methodical choice since the main interest is to investigate the marketing aspects of CSR commercials and not the issue of equality per se. The delimitation aims to facilitate the process and make it more intelligible, both regarding specific campaigns chosen as well as in the interview process. With a more concrete theme the collection of material became more focused, which both facilitated for the respondents as it became easier for them to comprehend the subject, but also improved the quality of the whole study as it became more tangible. Although it should be mentioned that other relevant examples are included in the study as well. Another point worth mentioning for the understanding of this article is how the political view of the subject primarily implies political correctness in relation to the social issues discussed, meaning to follow political values in the public debate and be conscious about how you express your message, which distinguishes it from general politics which is not discussed in this study.

Theoretical framework

CSR communication

Due to the time we live in and the issue of negative environmental development, people as well as businesses have pressure on them to act more sustainably. Sustainability refers to *“live well, while at the same time preserving the natural systems that make it possible for all people, including future generations, to enjoy a similarly high quality of life.”* (Martin & Schouten, 2012 p.13). Sustainability includes both environmental, social and economic aspects. In organizations the term Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) is used, for the addressment of social and environmental issues through practices and statements. This is a way for firms to incorporate both people, planet and profit concerns in their business plan (ibid). In

present time businesses put more emphasis on involvement in CSR than ever before, leading to social activities being common in corporations' everyday business (Du et al., 2010). Both environmental, community support and social actions are part of many companies today. A big amount of research explores this area within business, showing the growing importance of CSR on the market (Tata & Prasad, 2015).

For companies it is not only about engaging in such practices but furthermore, it is of importance to communicate it to the different stakeholders, making the external as well as the internal environment aware of what relationship the organization has to CSR. Research stress that creating awareness among stakeholders, especially consumers, is vital for the benefits that can be reached through CSR initiatives (Du et al., 2010). Consequently, both business return and success are dependent on the ability to enlighten the surrounding environment about the company's CSR commitment, through different communication strategies (Tata & Prasad, 2015). The lack of consumer knowledge about social issues as well as companies' engagement with the issues is often problematic. A study showed that 75% of people in Germany felt insufficiently informed about these types of practices by firms (Pomeroy & Johnson, 2009). Consequently, CSR communication is of interest both for companies as well as for their stakeholders.

In contrast to other marketing activities that are product oriented, CSR communication mainly expresses certain aspects of an organization's identity, uncovering much about a company's characteristics and values (Du et al., 2010). In accordance to Tata and Prasad (2015) *“many organizations consider CSR to be an important aspect of their organizational identity, and want to ensure that their CSR identity is appropriately portrayed to their audiences”* (p.766). Therefore, CSR communication can not only be seen as a tool, but further it is a critical aspect in the creation and promotion of an

organization's desirable image (Pomeroy & Johnson, 2009).

When it comes to CSR communication it can be performed in different ways. Either it can concentrate on a specific social cause itself or inform about the company's engagement in that chosen issue (Du et al., 2010). This study concentrates on the first part, where advertisements include certain social issues and not primarily on the companies' role per se. Having said that, CSR communication can promote a brand more indirectly through the marketing of a social cause, thereby creating associations with the brand (Pomeroy & Johnson, 2009).

In CSR communication the scepticism that often occurs in the audience must be considered. For instance, scepticism can appear when the motives with advertising social issues instead of products or company attributes are unclear (Pomeroy & Johnson, 2009). On the other hand and in accordance with previous discussion, the importance of communicating CSR is mainly for the potential benefits of it, suggesting that a stronger CSR image could lead to competitive advantages, differentiation and consumer loyalty (ibid). According to Morsing and Schultz (2006) communicating CSR to stakeholders is thereby critical, due to the power they hold. They can positively respond through loyalty and new consumption habits, in contrast they have the possibility to negatively react by demonstrating, down talking or even boycotting companies depending on their perception of companies' CSR identity and initiatives. It is widely debated to what degree an organization should promote their CSR in marketing activities, additionally how it should be done, whether it is most suitable to share information through reports and websites or through more prominent marketing strategies (ibid).

There are by now several ways visible on how to communicate CSR, and research on the topic highlights different concepts within the area. Depending on how the communication more exactly takes form and what the main

purpose is, various terms are used for similar strategies. For instance, cause marketing, social marketing and brand activism are all explored as marketing paths in the area of communicating social causes. According to Pelozo and Shang (2011) cause marketing and brand activism are both ways to respond to the demand from millennials, that they have on companies to act in favour of the society. In fact, they are suggested to be among the most effective ways to do so (ibid). These different ways of doing CSR communication are often closely related. This is stated in an article by Kotler and Lee (2005) concerning social marketing initiatives, which by many actors can be named cause marketing or simply corporate social responsibility.

Social marketing

One way companies perform CSR communication, among many other voluntary actions, is the use of Corporate Social Marketing (CSM) (Yuhei & Kent, 2014). The term social marketing aims to raise awareness and influence the attitude and behaviour when it comes to social ideas and issues (ibid). Through the inclusion of social elements in organisations' communication the goal is to influence the discussion of specific issues and subjects to reach more awareness, acceptance and positive outcomes for a specific cause. Furthermore, the objective of social marketing and the connection with a social cause in advertisement is to be perceived as socially responsible externally, and thereby affect the image of the company in the eyes of consumers (Alcañiz, Cáceres & Pérez, 2010). Previous research shows that communication of CSR initiatives has a positive impact on consumers' attitude toward brands as well as their purchase intentions (Jiyun & Hustvedt, 2014). This further deepens the belief that positive results can be obtained through the combination of advertisement and social engagement. Elements that have been discussed to affect the possible impact of social marketing is the company behind the communication, the setting in which it exists as well as how the message takes form (Yuhei & Kent, 2014). It is therefore suggested that the message in its solitude is not the only

concern, the perception of the company and the way of communicating it are all potential factors that influence the final outcome and how it is received. Effective social marketing has both positive societal and business outcomes, which explain the trend of social marketing today. Kotler and Lee (2005) propose that *"CSM campaigns are best when they're based on a healthy dovetailing of interests between what society needs and a company's goals and objectives"* (p.102). These earlier findings indicate that the effectiveness of social marketing advertising relies on both the relevance it has for the society as well as the fit with business characteristics.

Brand activism

Another way to engage in CSR communication is through brand activism. Brand activism is a new phenomenon, which has grown recently and become very popular (Shetty et al., 2019). It is more powerful than traditional CSR and is driven by a fundamental concern for the major and most urgent problems that society faces today (Kotler & Sarkar, 2018). It is defined as the act of a company or a brand that supports and promotes social, economic, environmental, cultural and social issues and unites them with the company's core values and vision (Shetty et al., 2019). Brands take on an activist role and openly express their opinions and standpoints in different questions (Kotler & Sarkar, 2018). This strategy includes the common use of contemporary social issues in corporations' communication, so-called social activism. Social activism covering areas such as equality, including gender, race, age etc., and societal issues like health care and education. Business efforts are used in such a way in hope of doing good and reaching improvements in society (ibid). Brand activism can take various forms, including the acts of making open statements in the public domain and making a cause-related statement through marketing or advertising (Shetty et al., 2019).

Brand activism has several favourable outcomes. One being the publicity that comes

with taking an activist role and the possibility of a massive buzz creating around the brand (Shetty et al., 2019). When making open statements and taking a stand in social questions, in particular sensitive or controversial topics you get your audience's attention. Further, consumers who share the same values and beliefs will associate with the company and feel connected to it, which results in customer loyalty and in turn a favourable impact on their profits (Shetty et al., 2019). Consumers today want brands that care and stand for something that they can relate to. Brands that promote social responsibility are therefore liked and promoted by consumers who have common beliefs (Carroll, 2008). It is highly important in today's business environment to connect with consumers on such a level. Since consumers today, mainly the millennials, are more aware and influenced by social issues and in turn more involved and willing to take their responsibility in order to make the world a better place, they value companies that enable this (Shetty et al., 2019). Brands can therefore not be neutral since consumers wish to identify with brands that are socially responsible and possess high ethical standards (ibid).

However, there are risks with brand activism as well, it may not always be positive. If not done correctly consumers may react negatively to it and dissociate from the company (Shetty et al., 2019). The activism efforts must sync completely and match the company's ethics, core vision and values. It must make sense and seem sincere. If not, customers can perceive the company's actions as a marketing stunt or an attempt to allure consumers on fake grounds, which causes them to distance themselves from the company. Another potential risk is if a company's potential customers have shifting opinions in certain questions they have taken a stand on. Consequently this may lead to the loss of loyal customers or eliminating the possibility of gaining new consumers (ibid).

Authenticity

A concept that has been widely discussed in

marketing and is closely linked with CSR is authenticity. Broadly authenticity refers to being real, genuine, credible and trustworthy (Hartmann & Ostberg, 2013). Factors such as clear values, strong history, openness and honesty leads to authenticity (Beverland, 2005). It is defined as being true to oneself in the way that one's actions and behaviour reflect what is important for that specific someone and matches one's core values and beliefs (Mazutis & Slawinski, 2014). Authenticity is based on our actions and how they are shaped by our motives and reasons (Jackson, 2005). It is more about action, and not just reflection. Consistency between expressed values and realized practices must occur to reach authenticity (Cording, Harrison, Hoskisson & Jonsen, 2014). In order to be authentic a person or organization must walk the talk, it is not enough to just say something, you have to show it too. However, authenticity is not just a one-way phenomenon. The level of authenticity is determined by evaluations, judgments or assessments of how real or genuine something is (Joo, Miller & Fink, 2019), which means that one must strive to be true to oneself and authentic within a social context where others have to validate one's claims (Peterson, 2005).

Credibility of CSR communication

When it comes to communication of CSR and the research covering the area one relevant factor explored is the credibility in these types of advertisement activities. The source behind such communication is emphasised as important, where the use of social marketing by companies has been discussed less credible compared to similar actions made by for example governments or non-profit organisations. This is due to the fact that the reason behind the communication strategy can be questioned (Bloom et al., 1997). When socially responsible marketing is motivated by self-interest and business profit negative effects can occur, consequently reducing the potential influence of the advertisement (Samu & Wymer, 2014). The fear among consumers of being approached by commercials with underlying intentions are

proposed as a source to criticisms and reduced impact of social marketing (Alcañiz et al., 2010). Consequently, it is of importance that companies express honest intentions and that their CSM actions are not merely a result of self-interests or the willingness to succeed in the way other companies have through their CSM actions (Yuhei & Kent, 2014).

One commonly debated element that affects the perceived credibility of a CSR advertisement is the fit between the brand and the cause, which is brought up in the campaign. It is commonly noticed that researchers put emphasis on the degree of fit between the chosen cause and the company's business and values in order for the communication to be credible (Samu & Wymer, 2014). According to (Alcañiz et al., 2010, p.171) *"perceived fit refers to the degree of similarity and compatibility that consumers perceive between a social cause and the brand."* As mentioned, a critical aspect of corporate social marketing is credibility in order for the consumer to be affected positively, therefore the message should be carefully chosen in line with the brands previous actions and its image. Even further, research suggests that the CSM advertisement needs to focus on an issue that can be related to the products or services that companies offer in order to be truly beneficial (Kotler & Lee, 2005). Du et al. (2010) mention that it has been found that different stakeholders assume that firms focus exclusively on supporting those social issues that are logical and well associated with their core business. Accordingly, a potential risk with CSM is that the relevance is missing between the social cause in comparison with the brand, hence negative associations can appear in contrast to the intended positive impact of the advertisement (Samu & Wymer, 2014). Further, Du et al. (2010) explain it by how the absence of a natural link between the two will reveal the business motives which in turn risk to increase negative reactions towards the CSR initiative.

Similarly, the knowledge and background of a company is an important element in the

perceived credibility, for them to be able to express an accurate message and take a standpoint in a certain area of interest. An underlying comprehension for the issue and knowledge in the area is crucial for a credible association between the company and the cause they support through their marketing (Alcañiz et al., 2010). It is therefore suggested that a genuine engagement in the social issue is not enough, additionally sufficient knowledge is necessary in order to deliver a credible message and a beneficial CSM campaign.

Furthermore, the CSM initiative can not be seen as a one-time action in order to create a successful campaign, on the contrary, to gain credibility other activities aligning with the social cause must coexist. Research has discussed that the general social responsibility of a company including previous social activities will strengthen the impact of a purpose driven advertisement (Du et al., 2010). Studies emphasize the commonly existing gap between the corporate social marketing activities seen today and the actual social responsibility companies take. Hence many corporations seem to fail to live up to the image they create by applying CSM in their communication strategy.

When investigating the area of social marketing another influencing factor is the individual's own importance and belief in a social cause. The success of social marketing activities is influenced by the relevance of the cause for the consumers and how they value it (Yuhei & Kent, 2014). For the advertisement to succeed the level of agreement and involvement in the specific cause is a key issue (Kotler & Lee, 2005). Therefore, when exploring the impact of CSR advertisement the relevance for the receiver has been underlined as important in order to understand the effectiveness of the communication, both regarding the awareness as well as the perception of the message (Du et al., 2010). Consumers' personal interests and values influence what they pay attention to, considering all the impressions and information facing them today.

Goodwashing

One critical aspect regarding communication of CSR is the responsibility organizations have to make sincere and genuine statements that align with the reality (Schouten, 2012). The concept of greenwash is commonly seen today, where firms are blamed to give false or exaggerated information about their sustainability work, making use of the power of marketing to be perceived more responsible or sustainable than they really are. It is mostly heard about greenwashing and commonly discussed when it comes to CSR, however the word originally evolves from the term “whitewash” that implies the hiding of imperfections or insufficiencies, combined with the word “green” that refers to environmental aspects (ibid). Consequently, the core signification of this theory is how organizations hide negative aspects and exaggerate positive developments, even if it is mostly mentioned as greenwash today. This could both be seen as an active choice or passive acceptance by the company, that if it is revealed for the audience can hurt the image of the brand (Schouten, 2012). Greenwash is the conventional term of the issue, however despite the fact that consumers can be sceptical when it comes to social initiatives by companies it is not discussed in the same way. One suggestion is the word “goodwash” that is seen lately, as a broader definition that includes the false or insufficient information about firms social responsibility or good deeds for the surrounding over all.

Resistance

Resistance, in the form of consumer resistance, has gained increased attention in academic literature lately and most research shows a common belief that consumers of today have greater knowledge regarding their consumption and are more capable of resisting corporate marketing actions (Galvagno, 2011). The term resistance has been defined in multiple different ways by various authors. On one hand, it can be described more broadly as disliking, while on the other hand it can be explained as a more counter oriented act. Thus, it can be expressed

as either an attitude or a behaviour (Penaloza & Price, 1993). In this study focus is put on the second definition, the behavioural one, where an individual is committed to actively take resistance.

Consumer resistance may occur towards a brand, an organization, norms, marketers’ practices and marketing images (Cherrier, 2009). Connected to CSR, consumers often show resistant tendencies against socially irresponsible businesses and unethical products, which relates to the will to act and be a smart consumer and contribute to ethical consumption (ibid). Related to this the Edelman Earned Brand Global Report (2018) showed that consumers today are more ethical and value driven and therefore most of them do not hesitate to boycott a brand or switch to another one if the brand stands for a certain cause or issue that upset them (Shetty et al., 2019). Further, Fournier (1998) mentions that consumers who view the actions of a firm as oppressive can implement various resistant behaviours in order to counter such actions. If individuals perceive that brands negatively characterize a specific group, they can choose to resist those brands and their products (Kates, 2000). Related to this, one key factor when discussing resistance is self-identity. Individuals who view the actions of a firm as oppressive towards a specific group of people, e.g. women, homosexuals or an ethnic group, may act resistant due to not wanting to be associated with such values (ibid). Thus behavioural resistance may derive for different reasons and take various forms, including behaviours such as brand avoidance, where consumers actively avoid a specific brand and its products, and brand rejection, where consumers refuse to engage with a brand and instead boycott it (Fournier, 1998).

Methodology

Research approach

A qualitative research method has been used in this study to explore the area in marketing where companies include social issues in their communication. A qualitative approach is

suitable when the aim is to gain a deeper level of understanding in the studied phenomena (Bryman & Bell, 2011). It enables us as researchers to explore people's perceptions and experiences of things, in this case the consumers who are facing these mentioned marketing activities. Further an inductive research approach has been used, which means that there is no objective truth, instead the collected data is interpreted in order to reach a logical explanation and theoretical results (Eriksson & Kovalainen 2008). The aim is not to draw any quantitative or generalizable results (Malterud, 2014), instead the main focus is to understand a more limited range of people more thoroughly.

Pilot study

As we wished to get prior insight in the studied subject before moving forward we decided to read news articles, websites and material posted on different social platforms to see what campaigns focusing on social responsibility that were out there and how people tended to react to those. By doing so we found five suitable campaigns for our study that we decided to look deeper into. These five campaigns were “Like a girl” by Always, “Make what’s next” by Microsoft, “Body by Victoria” by Victoria’s Secret, “Zerotypes” by Zalando and “Toxic masculinity” by Gillette. These campaigns were chosen due to the content touching upon the specific social issue we decided to focus our study on, namely equality and first and foremost gender equality and stereotypes. Further, these campaigns were highly attentive and people seemed to have much to say about them as there was much written about them by both journalists and consumers online. We therefore thought of it as interesting to study these campaigns closer as they clearly stirred up a lot of emotions, which is what we wish to take part of in this study.

The search for campaigns and people’s reactions to them gave us a pre-understanding useful in the preparation of test interviews. We carried out two test interviews. One man and one woman were interviewed in a face-to-

face setting where the location and atmosphere felt relaxed. We aimed at creating a setting similar to the one that we were planning on having when conducting the main interviews. The pilot interviews lasted for approximately 30 minutes. The result from the test interviews guided us further in developing the main interviews as they gave input regarding which questions that worked well and how to rephrase others in order to reach the desirable material, namely rich and detailed answers. An additional campaign was brought up in one of the test interviews, namely “Spela som tjejer” (in English: “Play like girls”) by KPA Pension, which we decided to include in our study based on the same arguments previously mentioned regarding the other campaigns. In total there were six campaigns identified through the pilot study that we focused our study on moving forward. Two of the advertisements to these campaigns, “Toxic masculinity” by Gillette and “Spela som tjejer” by KPA Pension, we decided to include in the interviews as they contained several interesting aspects that we wanted to investigate.

Netnography

A review has been done of the six identified campaigns on the social media platforms Instagram and YouTube, where the responses from the ones interacting with the campaigns have been in focus in order to gain additional understanding for receivers’ reactions on these types of marketing activities. Through the observation of these videos and posts together with the interactions from the public we have obtained valuable insight in how such communication can be perceived by people online. Furthermore, the episode “Victoria’s Secrets misslyckade comeback och födelsedagsbonanza!” from the podcast “Det skaver” has been included in the netnography to get further insight into the studied subject. Together the netnographic observations constitute a part of the empirical material, complementary to the interviews, in order to analyse the studied phenomena. Netnography made it possible to study the emotional and cognitive reactions towards this

type of marketing and not just the phenomena and behaviour on its own. In accordance with Kozinets (2010) netnography provides the opportunity to examine social interactions, personal expressions and cultural practices in an accessible environment in order to comprehend and clarify the reality.

Interviews

The main empirical material was collected through interviews with consumers who are receivers of marketing containing social issues and companies' standpoints in these questions, which is suitable since the aim of the study is to capture consumers' perspectives on the studied topic (Eriksson & Kovalainen, 2008). In total, we conducted ten interviews. The interviews enabled us as researchers to explore the attitudes and behaviours of consumers in order to gain understanding for the reactions and effects of this type of marketing (Crang & Cook, 2007). As previously mentioned delimitations, we decided to focus the study on one specific social issue, namely equality with the prime focus on gender equality and stereotypes. The two advertisements shown during the interviews and the questions asked were mainly addressing this specific social issue. However, other social issues were also touched upon during the interviews.

The interviews were semi structured, meaning that questions were prepared in advance but the interviews were still flexible (Eriksson & Kovalainen, 2008). Depending on how the interviews were progressing questions were added, changed or removed during the process (Bryman & Bell, 2011). In that way the researchers have a clear structure to follow based on formulated themes but can still adjust the interviews in order to conduct as much valuable information as possible (ibid). In order to get the personal experiences of the respondents and well-developed answers the questions were asked openly (Crang & Cook, 2007). In eight interviews we met the interviewee face-to-face. However, due to certain circumstances (Covid-19), two of the interviews were carried out through video calls where both parts could see and hear each

other, making it as similar to a real meeting as possible. The length of the interviews varied between 40-60 minutes. All interviews were recorded, with permission from the participants, in order to facilitate the process and keep focus during the interviews without the pressure of having to take notes (Eriksson & Kovalainen, 2008).

Prior to the interviews the respondents received the information that the interviews would touch upon the subject of marketing containing social issues and how companies take a standpoint in such questions in their communication. The interviewees did not get any further information or prior lead to what the interviews would be about. The decision to not inform them further was based on the hope of catching their first impressions and getting more spontaneous and honest answers during the interviews. As all the interviews were held in Swedish the quotations used in this article were translated. We decided to hold the interviews in Swedish as it is the native language of all the participants and therefore were thought of it as more natural and easier for the respondents to talk freely about the discussed topics. In turn, richer empirical data that benefitted the outcomes of the findings was reached. Due to this, the meaning of the statements may have been slightly affected by the translation into English since the researchers' perceptions and way of translating may have an impact.

The criteria and selection

In this study ten respondents informants were interviewed with the aim to reach valuable insight in the mind of the receivers of CSR communication, and their comprehension and reflection on the area of interest. In the process of selecting participants the main criteria was that the respondents were within the right target group, namely millennials. Millennials are usually familiar with the studied subject and belong to the next generation that will have high spending power within the coming years (Shetty et al., 2019), making them an important target group to understand and the reason why we have decided to focus on them in this study. The

informants are in the age between 23-35. Six women and four men were interviewed as we found it interesting to get the perspective from both genders. In order to find participants a story on Instagram was posted with a short description of our study and a question whether anyone felt that they had input in the matter of being exposed to marketing containing social issues messages and were willing to participate. We chose Instagram to reach possible participants since it is the platform where most of our acquaintances, which are in the targeted category actively use.

A table of relevant information about the participants can be found in the appendix, which includes name, age, occupation and further interests and engagements. Worth noticing is that some informants are more prominent in the paper as they are quoted more frequently. However, their salient appearance is due to their ability to express themselves in a comprehensive and eloquent way. Hence, their quotes represent the other informants' opinions and reactions as well and therefore all the participants are valued as represented in the study.

Transcription and analysis

Directly after each interview, they were transcribed while the material was still fresh in memory and it was possible to remember how things were expressed and how the respondents behaved, such as their body language and reactions. By transcribing the interviews better understanding of the material can be reached when the researchers get well acquainted with the data (Eriksson & Kovalainen, 2008). The transcribed interviews and the data from the netnographic study were then analysed using coding, where various patterns and themes were identified. By coding the material, looking at similarities in the data, connections can be drawn between the different sources (Eriksson & Kovalainen, 2008). The coding process resulted in finding eight distinct themes, which are presented in the analysis section. These themes were illustrated by descriptions and quotations from the empirical material in order to present the

findings in the study. Moreover, in the discussion four additional themes have been identified and discussed further. These themes are based on the findings in the analysis.

Previous research

This study is built on previous research that cover areas such as social marketing and brand activism in order to understand the merge between advertising and corporate social responsibility. A literature review has therefore been done in the beginning of the process to get familiar with the subject and find out what is previously known about the researched phenomena. As the knowledge in the studied area that the authors of the article possess is highly important for the credibility and quality of the study (Eriksson & Kovalainen, 2008), previous research in the area was conducted. Hence, secondary sources in the form of scientific articles have been used to explore and understand the subject of interest and thereby be able to relate the collecting material to previous findings. The aim of the study on one hand is to be able to strengthen theories through new materials and knowledge and additionally develop the area of research.

Ethical aspects

All participants in the study were informed about the purpose of the study and received full information about the study before the interviews took place, in accordance with Patel and Davidsson's (2011) advice. Further the informants have been made aware that they are participating by their own will and have the right to withdraw their participation at any time, which Eriksson and Kovalainen (2008) mention as important. Another vital ethical aspect they recommend, that has been taken in account is to ensure anonymity for the study's informants. This has been done by renaming the participants. Furthermore the participants were informed before the interviews started that they were going to be recorded and gave their permission to do so, which is in accordance to what Eriksson and Kovalainen (2008) recommend.

Trustworthiness

In accordance with what Eriksson and Kovalainen (2008) suggest, which build their reasoning on Lincoln and Guba (1985) criterias to assess qualitative studies, we have familiarized ourselves with the topic, mainly through media, reports and our own pilot study. Further, we thoroughly investigated theories and research in the area to ensure the credibility of the study. The most important parts of our study are the interviews and the netnographic material. These parts were collected and used in order to reach the claims made in the study, which is another way of ensuring credibility that is mentioned by Eriksson and Kovalainen (2008). Confirmability is another important aspect for a trustworthy study, which in this article is ensured through the collected data, which is presented as quotes and descriptions of what the interviews and netnographic observations unfolded. Further, the interpretations in the analysis are based on the material presented. Taken together, this makes it easier for readers to follow the line arguments and reach similar interpretations of the material. This goes in line with what Eriksson and Kovalainen (2008) present as strengthening the quality of a study through conformability, that others who study the same material can clearly understand the interpretations done. By presenting a clear and detailed methodology that provides information and understanding of the study, the process of the research becomes logical, traceable and documented, which Eriksson and Kovalainen (2008) mention as a way to reach dependability in a study. Further, the inclusion of sufficient quotes and descriptions of interactions from the interviews in the article, the collected data is represented in a relevant way. This makes it possible to reach transparency and traceability, which is an additional way to ensure the quality of the study. Additionally, transferability refers to how the study relates to other research so that the results are applicable in other contexts (Eriksson & Kovalainen, 2008). Here, we have catered for transferability by referring to previous research throughout the text, from

the introduction via the theory section to analysis.

Empirical data and analysis

In the following section eight distinct themes have been identified, which are built on patterns discovered in the findings from the empirical material. They are all discussed with support of the empirical material collected in connection to the theory presented above. The different themes complement each other in explaining the consumer's perceptions and effects that are seen existing.

Importance of communicating social issues

The empirical material evidently showed the importance of communicating social responsibility and taking a stand in social related issues. It was shown that marketing where companies take a stand in social issues facilitated for consumers in their consumption choices. By expressing the companies' views on certain social issues, consumers felt like they could more easily decide what products and brands to consume. The respondents pointed out that it led them to choose one thing over another when there were several options, namely the one from the company that had communicated their standpoint. This was based on them knowing what the company in question stands for and that it therefore felt better to consume their products. This relates to how a clear CSR image, where one's values are clearly explained, can lead to differentiation and loyalty among consumers (Pomeroy & Johnson, 2009).

“Knowing where they stand I get much more excited to buy their products and it is easier for me as a consumer to feel like I'm making a good choice” –Lily

“They are sending out a message that makes me feel like if I'm choosing between things, I rather choose the ones that clearly have expressed where they stand and who I share the same values with” –Leonor

Further, it was expressed that by knowing the

company's standpoints the consumers felt like they did a good thing by choosing to buy their products instead of others in the aim to reach social benefit. This relates to how today's consumers want to feel like they are contributing to society and thereby value the companies that enable them to take their social responsibility as Shetty et al. (2019) mention.

“It gives me a feeling like I’m doing some kind of good by consuming their products, and that feels really good”
–Leonor

Based on these findings, the importance of communicating a standpoint in social issues can be argued to be beneficial for numerous parts, both companies and consumers. It facilitates for consumers to reach their desired outcome, in terms of making well informed consumption decisions and feeling valuable due to being able to contribute to society. While companies favour from this as they attract these consumers and benefit from that by selling more products.

Moreover, it is not only perceived positively but furthermore it is somehow an expectation from stakeholders that companies should be socially responsible in their business which emphasize the importance to communicate it externally. The conversations with the informants highlighted the fact that if companies do not show themselves as conscious and correct in their marketing they were seen as outdated, which had negative effects on the consumers. Amelia brought this up regarding the perception of Victoria's Secrets' image:

“I would say that Victoria's Secret now feels a bit outdated somehow, since they have not followed the development in how society acts and thinks [...] I would say they are stuck in the old..”

Consequently it can be seen as a huge risk to not take action and follow societal progress. Additionally, to ignore the importance of including it in the marketing strategy, due to

the fact that this kind of marketing initiative can function as the link between a company's CSR values and practices, and the perception of the company among stakeholders.

The advertisement format

An identified influencing factor on the outcome of companies' marketing attempts that include social issues is the format. First, brought up by the majority of the informants in the study was that the format in itself was favourable in regard of reaching a positive outcome from a societal perspective. It was stated that there was a clear distinction between this type of raising awareness to a social cause and the more traditional ways like politics, education or other formal sources such as governments or non-profit organizations. It was mentioned that this format where advertisements include social issues enables these serious questions with important messages to be taken up in a more fun and exciting way, in comparison to traditional approaches, which made the message more comprehensive and easy to take in. On the question regarding what kind of impact these advertisements have on her, Elvira said:

“I really believe that it makes a difference to some degree, because you, you get affected somehow. Now it's brought up in a funny way too, I mean it's not a fun question really but it is presented in a way that makes me understand a little bit better. Maybe it gets more deeply rooted when you understand it in another way. It's easier for people to understand when it is explained in a playful way compared to when one actually says that yes it is like this, girls earn less than guys, maybe that's hard to take in”

As indicated above, this type of marketing brings up social issues in a more mundane way which was shown to be beneficial in order to capture the attention and reach understanding for the social issues raised in the advertisements. However, this beneficial result was shown to not always be the case with this format, it shifted when the advertisements became too serious. Felicia

said that Gillette's commercial was very deep and alluded on very big things, which made it feel very heavy and not that easily consumed. Similar reactions towards Gillette's advertisement were expressed by two other interviewed consumers:

“A lot of feelings are brought up when they do a commercial that is this dramatic and deep, way more deep than what it actually needs to be when it's just about a small razor. I mean wow, it's so serious! It's gone a little too far I think, it's not even fun to watch anymore so I kind of just shut off!” –Elvira

“In this one it's a man speaking with a you know... a very authoritarian male voice and it feels way more serious than the one from KPA. I mean in that one, there are all those cute kids talking and you just want to see what happens” –Leonor

These reactions can be assumed to depend on the fact that when the advertisements get too serious the messages promoted resemble the social messages that are communicated in more traditional ways and are therefore not received as well since traditional sources were explained to be harder to understand and assimilate. A thought can thereby be that when trying to engage the public through this type of marketing the advertisement should not be too serious or dramatically made if wanting to reach maximum impact.

Further on that note it was identified from the interviews that consumers' perceptions of advertisements with social responsibility focus are affected by how the advertisements take form, including aspects such as vibe, setting and casting. Yuhei and Kent (2014) suggest that elements such as how the message is formed and in which setting it exists weighs in on the final outcome and how it is received by consumers, which is relatable here. This was evident when comparing the reactions on the two advertisements shown during the interviews. There was a distinct difference between the perceptions of these advertisements, especially in regard to how genuine they appeared in the consumers'

mind. The commercial from KPA Pension was received way more genuine than the one from Gillette. The main reason explained by the interviewed consumers to why KPA Pensions's advertisement felt more genuine was its more low-key appearance, where Dave described the commercial as not being *“too much in the face”*. Several informants based their assumption on the fact that it was filmed in a more ordinary setting with children in it speaking in everyday language. Tom said that it felt like you were in the classroom and that you were a part of it, which made it feel very real. In comparison Gillette's commercial was explained as being very *“American”*, indicating that it was very dramatic. Phrases as *“too much drama”*, *“very extreme”* and *“over the top”* were used to describe it. Further it was brought up that Gillette's commercial starred very many different actors and was filmed in numerous locations, which was explained to contribute to a feeling of exaggeration and that a lot of money was put into making it. The words *“too much show-off”* were used to describe it and this was further explained to contribute to the feeling of not being genuine. One respondent that captured this demonstrated difference well said:

“This one is you know, a little bit cuter and feels like it's a bit cheaper made, kind of like someone has been in the school cafeteria and filmed there, which I think is an advantage. While the other one is more... well I mean to make that commercial must have cost such an extreme amount of money because they have filmed on so many different locations and have so many actors. So that also makes you think like put the money on something more important. You become a little sceptical, like yeah you've done a nice commercial but maybe you should invest the money on something smarter” –Leonor

This statement demonstrates the general perception that was identified among the informants about how advertisements that are made in a flashy way contribute to companies' intentions being questioned. Several respondents pointed out that it led to

the feeling that it was solely done to reach publicity. Also, scepticism was raised about the authenticity of the intentions of the company when putting that much money into a commercial instead of using that money to actually do something that would directly be beneficial for the specific social issue raised. Pomeroy and Johnson (2009) said that scepticism may occur when the motives with advertising social issues instead of the company's products or attributes are unclear, which can be applicable here.

All and all, these insights can indicate that a relaxed, more low-key commercial, which is not too serious or flashy, seems to be beneficial both in regard to successfully getting the message through and in reaching the perception of genuineness

Part of a bigger picture

A recurrent theme throughout the study is the connection between the marketing initiative and the general social responsibility of the company behind it. As brought up in the theory section the general social responsibility and the history of CSR work from the brand will impact how such advertisement will be received by the public (Du et al., 2010). This was revealed as an important factor that was reflected upon both among people on the Internet as well as by the participants in the interviews. One comment on Gillette's commercial on YouTube stated the following:

“Forced child labour and charging women more for shaving products. Is this the best a company can get? Is it?”

This statement highlights how a reaction towards the advertisement from Gillette is that it brings awareness to the company's CSR actions, or lack of it, and further raises negative associations towards the company's general CSR initiatives that do not go in line with what the advertisement state. Similar reactions were seen repeatedly in the case of Gillette but also towards several other campaigns observed. One example is how an individual has commented on one of Zalando's Instagram posts where they

encourage diversity in their slogan, trying to erase the use of stereotypes and eliminate the clear distinction between men clothes and women clothes, or specific clothes for different gender, ages or sexual orientation. The comment pointed out how they used the hashtag #zerotypes as their message but still have clothes divided between men and women and have their own account for @zalando_man which they link to on their profile.

Similarly, it was common that the informants in the interviews were sceptical regarding whether the companies who deliver an opinion about equality in their marketing campaigns actually live up to their standpoints in their own businesses. For example, consumers were questioning if the board consisted of 50% women, if the employees were fairly treated and if the companies' products or services express the same thing as their advertisements do.

“My picture of Gillette is that all of their razors for men are still in dark blue, black and metallic, or maybe a “fast” orange colour. And all the female razors are made in pink and white. This makes me think that it is the exact opposite to your commercial. Why not instead start to sell a unisex razor? [...] and I think they have to readjust on a bigger scale, because it will never be trustworthy with a commercial with razors for women that are pink” –Leonor

The suggestion that the brand activism must align with the brands values and ethics (Shetty et al., 2019) and furthermore the message communicated should be chosen in accordance to the companies' products and services (Kotler & Lee, 2005), is thereby found to be important for people's perceptions and responses to these marketing activities. That the company in their own business lives up to what has been stated through their marketing therefore seems crucial in order for the advertisement to be relevant and impactful. This discussion made it clear that a precondition for social marketing campaigns to be perceived positively is that the social

responsibility permeates the whole organisation, where consumers can distinguish consistency and not opposition between the advertisement and a company's business.

Further on this theme, the history of an organization's image and behaviour when it comes to CSR and social practices became relevant in the investigation of brand activism and social marketing campaigns. To be exposed with a strong social opinion from a specific brand can be critical since consumers most often recognize them from before, whereby they already have a perception of what they do and stand for. As expressed by several informants, if companies do not have a good CSR record or existing social values and then launch a campaign like the ones discussed, with a clear social issues focus, it does not feel right or natural in their eyes. One example that came up through the empirical material was how Ed Razek, former chief marketing officer of L Brands, which Victoria's Secret is a part of, in November 2018 expressed that plus-size and transgender people do not belong in their show as the show is a fantasy which do not include plus-size or transgender people. A year later Victoria's Secret tried to rebrand themselves as inclusive, trying to push for equality in their new campaign. This attempt highlights the inconsistency that can occur between a company's historic image and its present activities. Further, this inconsistency was shown to result in informants perceiving the campaign as unnatural and unauthentic, as well as not genuine, which in turn led to irritation and scepticism towards the brand and their intentions. This scepticism can be explained by what has been said in the theory about authenticity. Mazutis and Slawinski (2014) stated that being true to oneself through a behaviour and consistent actions that reflect one's values and beliefs is to be authentic, and further to relate one's practices with the values expressed, to not only say something but actually do it is a way of showing authenticity. As Victoria's Secret's actions not being in line with these guidelines, authenticity can be assumed not to have been

experienced as a result of this. In turn this would explain why scepticism among informants emerged, since scepticism was indicated in the interviews to arise as a consequence of lack of authenticity.

In addition to what was mentioned above regarding what has been found about social marketing campaigns in relation to a company's CSR, a factor for the marketing activities to be remembered is that it is a part of a more long-term strategy. Brought up in the discussions with receivers was that in spite of a strong and positive message the advertisement and the opinion raised should be repeated in order for it to be attached in the mind of the public, consequently to be able to make a difference. This was expressed through participants' statements regarding that the advertisement "*can not be a one-time thing*", "*it needs time to sink in*" and that "*it should be a long-term initiative from the companies*". Otherwise it risks being perceived exclusively as a marketing trick, highlighting the lack of responsibility from the brand. As well as being insignificant for the consumers if they do not see it as a part of a bigger picture. What is found above regarding a need for consistent involvement in social issues is related to the theory about CSR credibility, which put forward the importance of repeated activities and a general CSR engagement over time (Du et al., 2010). Together this supports the idea of considering the long-term perspective of social marketing focusing on social issues.

Natural connection between company and cause

Another interesting finding regarding marketing where brands are taking a stand in social issues is the difficulty of distinguishing the connection between what the advertisements convey and the brand and its products. Most of the informants reflected that they were shocked that it was a particular company that stood behind the commercial, they almost missed out on who actually communicated the message in the advertisement. Both on YouTube and social media as well as in the interviews it was

expressed that the connection felt far-fetched between the advertisement and the brand. This fact complicates for people to understand what the campaign is actually for or by whom it is sent. The concern seen among our participants regarding what link companies have to the cause they choose to communicate about in their campaigns goes in line with what theories suggest how stakeholders most often assume brands to support social issues that are naturally associated and a close relation to their main business (Du et al. 2010). On Always' YouTube commercial one comment said:

“Anyone realize this is a tampon commercial”

Additionally, it was mentioned that the loose fit between the company and the cause made it feel like the company was losing themselves in the attempt to do something good and relevant for the public.

“I believe they try to take social responsibility and highlight problems in our society, which in general is good, but it is important to have a good connection. It feels like many companies have lost themselves and their own products in this, and mainly focuses on something that makes them look good. But I think they have to make it related to the brand in order for it to be a successful commercial”
–Amelia

What can be said about this communication style based on the findings of this study is that although a commercial and the attempt to do good for the society is appreciated, the fit between the company and the chosen cause is a central issue that not only is noticed by the consumers but furthermore can bring about negative effects.

The conversations with the interviewees revealed that the advertisement should be related to what the company does in order for it to feel more genuine. Amelia mentioned in her interview that when the cause chosen to promote is close to the company's foundation the commercial is perceived genuine, since

the company then is more involved and knowledgeable and therefore can contribute in the discussion. This goes in line with what Alcañiz et al. (2010) state as an important element for credibility of CSR communication, that the company has enough understanding and knowledge in the area for their statement to be accurate and credible. Likewise, the knowledge of the company can be seen questioned by one informant in the following quote:

“I think it was their example that felt very off. It felt like it maybe..., well.. there were strange examples because they made you feel like they didn't really had a grip of the question” –Dave

Consequently a bad fit between the two can lead to the opinion of not being their matter, and that the choice of cause to support is not logical, leading to an expressed doubtfulness towards the motive behind the advertisement. According to Du et al. (2010) a lack of natural connection between a company and its cause risks revealing and strengthening the business motives as a primary source to the initiative, and thereby decreases the positive outcomes of the action taken. This relates to the findings above and signals the importance of the company-cause fit in order to be perceived credible and genuine as a brand, ultimately for the commercial to have an impact while avoiding negative and sceptical reactions toward the initiative. This is further shown in the following statement:

“It should be genuine, and I hope that in most cases it has something to do with the company or what they are trying to do. That they also start a campaign or something like that. I understand KPA, a better future, like that's their slogan, but still it is a bit far-fetched. I would want it to be something more close-to-home, in that way it feels more genuine. It should feel “right” in some way” –Charles

Underlying intentions

The findings revealed that it was a common belief that there were underlying intentions behind communicating social issues and

taking a public stand in such questions. The perception that companies used such approach to reach publicity was clearly evident. The desire to be associated with a good cause or wanting to appear as correct and up-to-date as pressure is put from society to act socially responsible was also mentioned as reasons for companies to engage in social issues. This relates to what Lafferty (2007) states regarding how the objective with CSM and the connection with a social cause in advertisement is to be externally perceived as socially responsible and as a consequence influence the image that the consumers have of the company. Further, companies' hidden agenda to make money was repeatedly mentioned by consumers as one of the main reasons as to why companies engage in social issues.

“Most of all I think it’s because they want it to become a buzz around it or that they want to be perceived in a specific way. I mean there is always, well almost always an own interest in it. They always want to be associated with something good or get attention somehow” – Dave

“I might be a little cynical here but I mean, I think that all they really want to do is to gather extra points by showing that they have kept up with the development in society and are kind of politically correct [...] I get a small feeling that they are lying, I mean come on! They only want to make money from it!” – Leonor

These statements underline that the receivers are aware of the business motives that are discussed among several researchers in the theory section. As shown above, the fact that underlying intentions seem to be commonly known to exist made consumers question companies' motives and in turn scepticism was shown regarding companies' true agenda and whether they actually cared for the questions they highlighted in their communication. This goes in line with what Pomeroy and Johnson (2009) said about how scepticism can arise when there are unclear motives to why companies advertise social

issues. Further it was expressed by some of the respondents that the advertisements felt insincere due to the underlying intentions that seem to exist. Jointly this affected the consumers' attitude toward the companies negatively.

“Rather a little negative now, also because you are extra critical when you assume that they are trying to gain profit on something important” –Amelia

“For me it’s just so transparent that they are doing it now because of all the criticism that has come. It’s not genuine at all and it just feels so fake, like they only do it because they have to [...] I don’t think that’s okay” – Podcast “Det skaver”

This resonates with Shetty et al. (2019) mentioning regarding how a company's actions that are viewed as insincere, and consequently perceived as a marketing stunt or an attempt to allure consumers on fake grounds, may cause distancing. Further, the statement that consumers unlike being approached by commercials with underlying intentions can lead to criticism and decreased impact of social marketing (Alcañiz et al., 2010) is also applicable here. In extension, some respondents mentioned that it was very clear that companies sometimes used a social cause solely for their own gaining and in an unethical way. Examples like brands playing on consumers' emotions, such as guilt and fear, or using a very serious and important question for their own winning was brought up. If acting in such a way, obviously only caring about self-interests, the respondents expressed that they may feel disgust or reject those companies.

“I hate when companies try to use feelings and things that are good in people for purposes that are dishonest” [...] It feels wrong, that you only use it for your own winning, something that is so serious and important. I wouldn't support that” –Dave

However, the interviewed consumers did

seem to understand and agree on the fact that companies must have a profit perspective in mind as that is the idea with having a business and a presumption for them to survive. The respondents mentioned that as long as the agenda to engage in social issues in one's marketing was also based on an honest will to do good, and not solely due to business perspectives, it was seen as acceptable that there were other interests as well. Further, the interviewed consumers described it as positive when companies did something good simultaneously as they market themselves, indicating that they had a double perspective in mind, as long as the marketing efforts did not hurt anyone.

“I think it's okay, since it doesn't harm anyone else and of course they have to think about themselves as companies to survive in a world like this. But it is important that they are doing it in a fair way, without hurting anyone or cause any other negative thing”
–Amelia

“I'm thinking that no matter what their purpose is, as long as they are doing it in the right way and still want to do good as well, it doesn't matter if they want to make money and do so in the end. I still think it's nice that they are doing it in this way and that the message is really beautiful” –Anastasia

Kotler and Lee (2005) stated that CSM campaigns are best when they are built on a healthy complementarity between societal needs and companies' business objectives, which can be connected to the findings above. Based on these findings emphasis can be put on the importance of having two perspectives in mind, suggesting that it does not have to be solely one of the two agendas, but preferably both of them in symbiosis with each other.

Goodwash

Another interesting theme with regards to the findings in this study, is how taking a standpoint in social issues as a business actor also can be a risky endeavour since it not only brings about positive effects. Based on the discussion with receivers of such

advertisements it can be suggested that this type of marketing can be perceived as an easy way for companies to demonstrate awareness of social issues and social responsibility, however it is questionable if they actually succeed to live up to what is stated.

The findings regarding how well the receivers of social marketing think that the whole picture of a company, with all its practices and values, matches the commercial, indicates that the message in the commercial usually does not represent the businesses' CSR efforts in a relevant way. The interviewed individuals for this study were sceptical to whether the standpoint communicated actually was a true reflection of what the organization does as a market actor. Further, the empirical section about underlying intentions indicates how the business motives to mainly gain attention or be perceived more socially responsible were visible for the participants, which questioned the honest intentions of raising a social issue in one's advertisement. This could be connected to the concept goodwash, which in reference to theory is built on companies who exaggerate or state dishonest information about their CSR work, to hide insufficient ambitions and unsuccessful practices, or just want to be seen as better in some aspects than they truly are (Schouten, 2012). Further, the fact that it can indicate how companies search for business profits by improving the perception of the brands CSR image among consumers (ibid) goes in line with the underlying intentions mentioned above. The feeling among consumers of scepticism or doubtfulness regarding how genuine and true the statements in the advertisements are, relates it to the feeling of goodwash.

“Well, they see a social problem and try to take advantage of that, like if we do something that people appreciate they will recognize us. It becomes a little bit of greenwash somehow.. that they try, like here we take social responsibility, look how good we are [...] It is rather more about the own winning than now we're gonna change the world!” –Amelia

In the theory section regarding brand activism

it is mentioned that if a marketing initiative does not seem honest or if it fails to relate to a brand's core practices and beliefs it could be taken for a marketing trick or an attempt to mislead consumers (Shetty et al., 2019). This could be connected to what is said in the discussion about Victoria's Secret in the podcast "Det skaver":

"And others say that it is nice that they talk about self-confidence, but no it isn't. Because that is pinkwashing, or greenwashing or I don't know what it is called. It is not okay if you can't live up to those valuable statements. Somehow you need to look yourself in the mirror and search one's heart. If I hit this big drum of inclusiveness, can I deliver that? Or, is it only a word and a hashtag?"

Authenticity is based on how one's practices are genuine and that they are consistent with the core values, which put emphasis on living as you learn in order to be authentic (Cording et al. 2014). Thereby, the discussion above, about how the marketing initiatives are perceived as fake and as an undertaking that is not really achieved by the company, indicates a lack of authenticity, which further are shown connected to the feeling of goodwash.

"Sometimes it can feel a little bit like greenwashing when it previously has been revealed in the news about them that they may not be that good. Things about their supply chains in other countries, that they may not have succeeded with their sustainability work and still they go out in social media saying how good they are. Then it feels like it is a bit greenwashing, so that is the risk sometimes, when you know a lot about a company. That it may not be as good as they express"
–Elvira

Hereby it could be argued that our empirical study indicates that marketing initiatives sometimes are seen as goodwash, where companies want to show CSR commitment or attributes that are not relevant. This assumption is not only based on some interviewees' expression of the word greenwash or goodwash, but rather an

interpretation about how consumers more generally express negative perceptions about companies' ways of engaging in social issues, which in many cases imply the behaviour of goodwash.

Resistance

The empirical material showed that a potential effect from raising social issues and taking a stand in one's marketing is resistance. Consumers may distance themselves from a company who practices this behaviour, due to various reasons. The empirical data showed that it may lead to consumers not wanting to engage with a company they haven't been connected to earlier or consumers deciding to end their business relations with a company they are currently involved with. A first step towards distancing oneself from a company, e.g. disliking or scepticism, can derive from perceptions of respondents mentioned in the other presented themes. A lack of a bigger picture, no natural connection between company and cause, an assumption that there are existing underlying intentions or the perception of goodwashing, can all cause this first step of distancing from a company. Ultimately it was evident that it could even lead to resistance if the companies' attempts to take a stand in a social related issue in one's marketing is not done accurately or perceived as wrong by consumers. If not carried through correctly, activism efforts not syncing completely or matching the companies' ethics, core vision and values, there is a risk that consumers react negatively and dissociate from the company (Shetty et al., 2019).

Further discovered reasons than the ones above that may cause resistance, is if consumers believe that the company in question is putting their focus in the wrong place. The empirical data showed that consumers sometimes find it inappropriate to bring these questions to light in a format like advertising and do not wish to take part of such a message there. It was stated that companies should focus on their main goal, namely making money and not pursue any political agenda or attempt to do good.

“When posts from companies including political elements show up in my feed I get mad and feel a bit attacked because it feels like it’s appearing in my social channel and it doesn’t belong there. Then I just block those accounts or posts” –Leonor

“Thanks Microsoft for showing your biased political crap. We’re switching to Dell” (From Microsoft YouTube channel)

“Thanks to this film I will never transfer to KPA Pension (currently a customer at Länsförsäkringar). You are selling insurance, all you achieve with signalling your political ideology and CLEAR agenda is to alienate people. Nobody looks to you for guidance, you are a company whose goal is profit”. (From KPA Pension’s YouTube channel)

Further, it was pointed out that companies often forget themselves when having a focus on social issues. It was evident that companies tend to miss to communicate what kind of company they are or what they have to offer and instead solely put emphasis elsewhere. One follower commented this on KPA Pension’s Instagram post:

“It seems like your advertisement wants to present a political message more than what the fuck kind of company you are and what you will be able to do for me? You give no description at all.. Idiots and idiot company you hired for this advertisement, I will actively not choose you”

Another discovered reason for dissociating from a company was when perceiving a company’s message as oppressive or when not sharing a company’s opinion in a social related question they are taking a stand in. When not connecting on such level the interviewed consumers explained that they do not want anything to do with the company in question. In accordance, both Fournier (1998) and Kates (2000) mention that consumers who view a company’s actions as oppressive and negatively characterizing a specific group of people may implement resistant

behaviours. Further, connecting to this is that shifting opinions between company and consumer can lead to the loss of current consumers or new potential ones (Shetty et al., 2019).

“If they spread racial elements or other opinions I don’t share I boycott them” –Lukas

“If a company’s advertisement is degrading in any way, like for example advertisements I’ve seen which have been racist or discriminating against women I get a negative attitude against the company and don’t want to be associated with them” –Anastasia

The second quote above further relates to how self-identity is closely linked to resistance. As mentioned by Kates (2000) individuals may take resistance from a company who acts oppressively against a specific group of people due to not wanting to be associated with the values they express and do not want the company’s beliefs to reflect badly on themselves.

Moreover, the collected material showed that the level of resistant tendencies varied depending on how involved the consumers were in the particular question and the level of importance it had for them. This goes in line with what Yuhei and Kent (2014) mention about how the outcome of social marketing is affected by the relevance of the cause for the consumer and how they value it.

“For a short while I didn’t want to shop from that company but now I’m sure that I’ve done it again. When it’s not that important to you, you forget after a while I guess. Now I don’t have any problems with them anymore” –Felicia

This statement indicates that the consumer more easily returns to the company he or she once left if the specific cause is not that important to the individual. Further, the empirical data showed that the company itself and the relationship the individual has with it determines the level of resistance. It was evident that some brands were harder to resist

than others. To illustrate this Anastasia explained how her view of H&M was affected negatively after they starred a dark-skinned boy in a hoodie with the print “Coolest monkey in the jungle” in one of their advertisements. She further described that she otherwise likes H&M and their products and therefore it was more difficult for her to take resistance.

“Well... to be honest, for a period of time I actually didn't want to buy from them, but then I started again... I mean it's H&M, it's not that easy” –Anastasia

Another statement indicating that the company has an impact on the resistant behaviour was made by Lily:

“I mean I still buy clothes from Zara, even if I also understand that it is not someone who sits down and sew that by hand”

Evidently, the company behind the commercial and the personal relation between the company and consumer seem to have a vital role in influencing the resistance behaviour. The findings demonstrate that some companies are harder to avoid or live without and may be considered differently, in comparison with those who are not, in regard of resistance.

Companies as social actors

What is further important from the findings is the potential of the advertisements to influence people not just as consumers but also their mindset and behaviour from a societal perspective. It was commonly discussed how firms' opinions and attention to current issues could influence receivers of the message positively. From the interviews it was mentioned that the messages in the advertisements had social effects through the suggestions that they are “*an eye-opener*”, “*a reminder*” and “*they increase consciousness about injustices or personal behaviours*”. This indicates how one effect of the marketing activities studied is that it raises awareness to specific social issues among people, thereby having the chance to affect the society and not

just from a business perspective.

“The behaviour in general changes since I start to think about it when I see this video, one become aware of how you behave when looking at how they highlight a problem. So of course it can change. But I don't know if my behaviour as a consumer changes anything by this, but of course if it is a commercial done in the right way maybe it will affect me” – Amelia

“I don't know when it comes to my consumer behaviour. I think it is more about getting a reminder. Maybe you start to think more about how you should behave or what you say. If you see some kids fighting or something, maybe you try to help and show them what is right and so on...” –Charles

This highlights that some participants put emphasis on the marketing initiatives as an eye-opener or reminder of societal issues, but that they were more doubtful if it would actually change their consumer behaviour. Jiyun and Hustvedt (2014) state that CSR communication is shown to have a positive influence on consumers' attitude and purchase intentions. The empirical material indicates that this could partly be the case, but regarding the type of communication investigated in this study that has not always shown to be the case. As shown in the statements above it does not have a clear positive effect on the consumer behaviour, consequently the positive impact on purchase intentions can be questioned depending on the situation.

Furthermore, it is interesting whether marketing with a focus on social issues can actually lead to a change in behaviour or if it becomes more of a confirmation for those who already agree and are aware of the issues. The interviews showed how people appreciate the social message of the advertisements and feel an importance in bringing up issues like inequality between genders. This was expressed by respondents stating that they like the message and that they think that it is highly important, showing that they agree

with companies' opinions. On the other hand, it has also been noticed in previous parts that companies' way of involving can irritate or make people sceptical, this would be especially true if not agreeing with the message in advertisements. It was therefore brought up as unsure whether a social marketing campaign like the ones discussed could actually change opinions or create consciousness of social issues among people that are not yet involved in the question.

“I really wonder if it can affect opinions even for people who are very fixed in their point of view and do not share the opinions from the beginning. I hope so, but I also believe that it could be more of a.. that you get a feeling of confirmation for those who already agree with the ones that are behind the commercial”
–Leonor

It was further mentioned that it can take time and that the message needs to be repeated for it to have an impact on society and on the issues brought up. For example, Lily expressed that the commercial can have a real impact on people in the long-term, but that it is difficult to see that it will have it directly from that one message. In line with this Amelia highlighted the fact that even if a message is strong the information comes fast, therefore in order for that person to be affected it would need to be repeated several times during a longer period of time in order for it to sink in. This indicates the complexity of influencing people even with a sensitive topic, suggesting that one commercial will firstly gain attention but that the message needs to be communicated over time for people to feel that it makes a difference in their mindset. This is closely connected to the discussion that the initiative can not be a one-time attempt in order for it to not just be appreciated in the moment but further have a social impact.

When looking at this marketing approach it could be seen that if the commercial is done in a good way, it can be seen as a win-win situation where both the company as well as the society can benefit from it. In accordance

to what Kotler and Lee (2005) suggest about how social marketing has the advantage of combining positive outcomes for both business and the society and therefore is an interesting strategy, the empirical findings about consumers' reactions indicate that double interests are reached. Since taking a standpoint in social issues through advertisement can be seen as a new and different way in which people receive important societal messages, it could contribute to the impact on the public, as an additional advantage to the business interests.

“I think people get an eye-opener and I also believe that they get remembered for something good as well. You associate the company with something more than just their products” –Lukas

Discussion

The role of the company, consumer and cause

Through the study we found important factors that influence the outcome of the type of marketing initiatives focusing on social issues. One key factor identified in the study is the company, but the consumer and cause were also shown as important. With company we refer to the sender of the communication, meaning the one that stands behind the raised social standpoint. The consumer is the receiver of the advertisement and the cause means the social issue in itself, including what area it touches upon. Together we recognize them as the three Cs.

The type of sender can be assumed to play a key role, influencing consumers' perceptions and behaviours. Related to this the company behind the communication has been discussed as a possible factor to affect the impact of social marketing (Yuhei & Kent, 2014). As shown in the analysis, when knowing much about a company, such as their history and CSR image, consumers' reactions get affected due to having that information in mind. This was for example the case of Victoria's Secret, which was brought up in the analysis, where consumers compared their previous

positioning and values, which are commonly known to be questionable in regard to diversity, with their new initiative pushing for inclusiveness. It turned out that their background affected the outcome of their new campaign negatively since not adding up or being received as a genuine effort. This dilemma of having previous knowledge about a company was further brought up:

“This is such a good advertisement, but not from Gillette. They are a multinational company, I’m guessing that they are only doing it because they can. I mean they are so heavily scrutinized, you know like everything about them so it doesn’t feel genuine. It’s a little bit like the case with Nestle who did a miss, or well they did several, but there was one a few years ago. I don’t even know what they did really, I only know that they are eeh... a little bit shady, and I mean they have to pay for that several years after it actually happened. If they were to do a commercial like this I wouldn’t believe them” –Leonor

“They are such a big company, you know too much already. Fast fashion brands, everyone knows that they are not that good, supply chains abroad and everything” –Elvira

These statements indicate that previous knowledge about a brand can be seen as a hindrance for companies in their marketing efforts, trying to communicate an important message and take social responsibility. Consumers already seem to have preconceptions towards companies they know much about, which complicates the process for such companies.

As further indicated in the statements above it is often larger and more well-known companies that people appear to have preconceptions about and are sceptical towards, which can be assumed to depend on the idea that larger and more well-known companies are often more scrutinized and written about more in the news and on social media, which leads to consumers having more knowledge about them. If one were to start from this assumption, one can argue that

larger and more well-known companies have a bigger challenge trying to readjust and rebrand themselves as more CSR oriented. It can thereby be suggested that it is more challenging for these companies to reach desirable outcomes from the use of advertisement focusing on social issues. However, it should be noted that a large and more well-known company with a good previous record does not have to have the same prerequisite or be assumed to be affected in the same way as just recently mentioned. Although it was pointed out by respondents that solely the fact of being a big company can bring around scepticism, which can be assumed to depend on the idea that all big companies are put under the same roof.

In relation to what previously have been discussed, it can be assumed that smaller or less well-known players on the market more easily can enter this marketing approach successfully as they have a so-called “clean slate” and not their past as a hindrance. Based on this discussion it is evident that the type of sender, in terms of size and level of recognition, plays a vital role as different types of companies influence consumers’ perceptions and behaviours and in turn the outcome of social marketing in various ways.

Another area where the type of company was shown to affect the outcome was when it comes to resistance. The findings demonstrated that depending on what type of company it is, the resistant tendencies were shown to vary, indicating that some companies were harder to take resistance from than others. In the examples where this was shown in the analysis, which also represent the other participants’ discussions regarding the topic, larger or more well-known companies were mainly brought up as harder to resist. Anastasia demonstrates this as well:

“As in the case of H&M, as soon as it makes it more complicated for me in any way and I have to avoid things that I otherwise normally do I become less likely to boycott them”

As it is indicated throughout the study that the

difficulty to take resistance from these companies is due to the accessibility and convenience they offer, as well as the fact that they are present in the consumers' everyday life and have a high degree of exposure, it makes sense that it is larger brands that have been identified as harder to resist. As they are major players on the market and appear everywhere, both in regard to physical and online stores as well as in advertisement, they influence consumers to a high degree and are often key locations for consumption. They are in turn part of one's routine and provide convenience through easy access, being present at several locations, and by having a wide range of products, making it possible to consume more or less everything in one single store and not have to put effort into looking elsewhere.

However, the empirical data showed that the company must not always be a major player on the entire market in order for it to affect the resistant tendencies in this way. It could likewise be a major player for the specific consumer, such as a company which the individual buys a lot from or is difficult to substitute, and consequently more difficult to resist. Furthermore, a brand that takes on an important role in the consumer's life due to a personal connection, e.g. a strong relationship or emotional attachment, can also be seen as harder to live without. A local shop and a hairdresser were two examples of major players for the specific individual, that we could identify through the discussions with the interviewed consumers, as they were highly present and relevant for the consumers and enabled the possibility to tie personal relationships.

“Let's say Brännö Handel would say something bad... I couldn't live without them, how would that go? I go there every day. Then I would have to go to the mainland, like come on!” –Tom

The role of the consumer and its personal relation to a specific company can as shown in the statement above be discussed to have an influence on the reactions and resistant

behaviour towards a company that includes social issues in their marketing. Additionally, as demonstrated in the analysis, the individual's degree of involvement in a specific question, also impacts the individual's perception and resistant tendencies towards a company who takes a stand in a social issue through their marketing. As in the case of Anastasia, brought up in the analysis, which more easily went back on her resistant actions since not finding the certain question that important.

As stated above it can become easier or more difficult to avoid a company and take resistant action depending on the three Cs. What role the sender has on the market, e.g. how big or well-known it is, what relationship the individual has with the company as well as what level of importance the social cause has for the consumer all weigh in on the resistant tendency among consumers. Due to the factors mentioned above, the step to take resistance in the first place can be smaller or bigger, as well as it can be easier or more difficult to return to a company and start consuming once again.

All and all, the role of the three Cs has demonstrated its importance and impact on the outcome of this marketing strategy where companies take a public stand in social issues. It can be concluded that different types of companies, in terms of size and level of recognition, have various prerequisites and consequently various challenges. A concluding fact that can be argued for is that larger and more well-known companies have a bigger struggle rebranding and entering this type of marketing strategy successfully, as in comparison with smaller or unknown brands, as their past are often an obstacle. However, smaller or less well-known companies have the disadvantage of being easier for consumers to take resistance from as they are not major players on the market, which instead is their hindrance.

To be in the limelight

When it comes to the effects that this type of advertisements can have on receivers,

ultimately what it can imply for companies, one interesting point is that the activities resulted in the companies consequently putting themselves in the spotlight. Therefore, to put your opinions and what you support in the public domain can be considered risky as it can bring additional awareness to the organizations' related CSR values and practices, or the lack of them. As a consequence of communicating a personal standpoint in a social issue, increased pressure on the specific company is seen to exist among the respondents due to the effects of higher consumer expectations and demands on the company in general.

“Name things for what they really are. I sincerely hate the Victoria’s Secret brand but they have nice panties, I’m ashamed to say that, but it’s true. But if they would only say that their lingerie has amazing lace or whatever that’s fine. If you say nothing, then no one cares. But once you’ve done that people start to care, and then you have to live up to that” –Podcast “Det skaver”

It can be understood that an advertisement with a social standpoint will not only be viewed as an individual act but furthermore it will also bring awareness to a firm's past behaviour and image in relation to what is now expressed. From previous discussion it is shown that earlier recognition and knowledge of a company become relevant and must match the current campaign and its message for it to feel natural and be influential. The findings from the analysis suggest that strong opinions from companies can have the consequence of reminding the audience of the past, so the question is if the company is ready for that when launching a campaign. It is therefore important that you as a sender of a commercial, such as the ones studied in this paper, are aware of how your past will be perceived in comparison to what standpoint you now present, so that attention is not called to other negative associations that make people question the honesty of the marketing attempt. For example, previous so-called errors or lack of responsibility in the area can be more visible when a brand makes a

statement that brings attention to the company's CSR values. By that, it is worth noticing how the past matters in how the campaign and message is received. Furthermore, that you as a company can explain and justify previous choices or practices done. The risk of having consumers noticing the past as a hinder for the marketing initiatives focusing on a social cause is further discussed by one interviewee:

“It’s good that they try but they will never be able to change completely. Once they started in one way I don’t think that it’s possible. I don’t believe it’s gonna work, they will not return to their glory days. And I still think they will go for really skinny models like they used to, because that is how Victoria’s Secret is! In that case I would say that they would need to switch their name” –Charles

Additionally, based on the findings it can be discussed that it not only reminds consumers about a company's past but also is perceived as a sort of promise, creating higher expectations on companies to act in accordance to what they express with their marketing. When taking steps to engage in social issues, ultimately firms propose what they will do in the future, which makes it hard to go back or simply not continue that path. This is connected to the findings that the strategy must be long-term, and that it will not make such difference only creating one strong commercial expressing a certain message. If the company does not see it as a part of a long-term approach the campaign could be perceived as a marketing trick and not truly genuine, which indicates that the consumers' expectations for future involvement increases through a company's strong opinion or communicated passion for a certain issue.

The same debate can derive from the findings that the social responsibility should permeate the whole organization and that other parts should express the same as what is said in the commercial, in order for the ad to be received positively by the audience. Considering this, three different things can be expected when a company decides to take a stand in a social

issue. First, other related activities that support the campaign were brought up as strengthening for the final effect. Dave mentions this in his interview:

“I appreciate that they also have a campaign here on the site, that shows that they actually do something else”

Thereby, a wider approach on how to engage in social issues as a company is seen relevant for the receiver and brings about positive reactions. Secondly, products that live up to the values are also a questioned factor among consumers. Lastly the internal structure can also be seen relevant, in order for an initiative to be credible and positive, where examples like equality among employees tells a lot about if the company actually has a genuine support for equality and gender issues. In conclusion both the past, the present and the future of the company matters for the impact of a social marketing campaign, since you raise the level of what consumers can expect from you when you take a standpoint. In order for a commercial to be authentic and positively perceived it is necessary that it goes in line with the rest of the practices and values, not only that it feels right in the present but over time.

Mixed emotions towards advertisements

An interesting discovery in the study is that there are mixed emotions towards advertisements including social issues. One and the same advertisement can stir up multiple emotions and can be perceived in various ways, where some consumers are very positive while others are not. This was evident in the interviews and netnographic observations, where various perceptions, both positive and negative, have been identified in the analysis. Some consumers are very positive towards companies taking on this role, striving to improve society and reduce social injustice. Others consider it as unnatural and wrong for companies to do so as they argue that it is not their place and should therefore not take the liberty to do so. Additionally, a common belief is that companies are using this type of marketing for

their own gain, which also adds to the negative perception connected to the matter. When looking at the various responses towards Gillette’s commercial, reactions similar to both these statements were seen repeatedly:

“I think it’s really good that they bring awareness to these questions, it should be like this all the time. [...] It’s problems like these that you know about but that aren’t highlighted that much” –Charles

It feels a little bit like false marketing, when they use something like that to ride on a wave and get free sympathy. Then I simply stay away [...] It doesn’t feel like it’s their place or the best thing to do” –Dave

A finding that is even more interesting is how a specific individual may have mixed emotions towards this type of marketing or even to the same advertisement. Individuals have shown to experience both positive and negative emotions and perceptions at the same time. The existence of consumers ambiguity is based on respondents’ statements where they clearly express duality, but also established from the fact that it seemed challenging for participants to express and decide whether they thought this type of marketing was good or bad. They tended to hesitate and ponder over their answers and went back and forth in their opinions.

Of course I think it’s really good. It shows a certain commitment, that they want to take that responsibility, so of course that’s positive. It’s good that they want to work with it, that they have actively taken that choice, but still.... I don’t know, sometimes it just feels a little forced just to show that they are doing it just because... because it’s expected when they have that role even if they are maybe not there yet... But then of course I think it’s good that they do it, it’s a little bit like that... hmm, double you know, there may be some mixed feelings” –Elvira

Further, mixed feelings were highly prominent in connection to resistance, where it was seen that the behaviour was affected as a consequence of these contradictory emotions. It was found that participants who found a company's initiative to engage in social issues as wrong or believe that a company's standpoint in certain raised questions is wrong or degrading may or may not create resistant tendencies towards that company. It was evident that informants from time to time find themselves in a challenging situation as negative emotions towards a company or its values exist simultaneously as the respondent has other perceptions towards the company that are positive or has a personal relationship with the specific company, which weighs in. This was the case for Anastasia in regard of H&M, presented in the analysis, where her negative perceptions of H&M's values and her general liking of the company and their products were balanced against each other and influenced her resistant behaviour.

Another situation where mixed emotions were seen to have an impact on the resistant behaviour was when there was a negative public opinion towards a specific company or its values, which the individual either did not share, or did share with the public but valued other aspects higher. This was the case for one of the podcasters that in the podcast "Det skaver" mentions that she hates the Victoria's Secret brand and what it stands for, like many others, but still buys their panties because she likes them. However, she further expresses that she is embarrassed because of this, which connects to the findings in the analysis regarding how individuals do not want to be associated with standpoints that reflect badly on them.

This indicates that there is an inner struggle between these mixed emotions and one's conscious that is highly complex. A dilemma for the consumer regarding whether or not to take resistance from the company, since being torn between one's own mixed emotions or between personal feelings and public opinions, was seen to exist. Together the

assumption can be drawn that it is a very complex phenomena, where it is difficult to predict the outcome of marketing that focuses on social issues as it brings on mixed emotions, which in multiple ways affect consumer's behaviour.

Business impact vs. social impact

Through the analysis it was evident that companies' actions of taking a stand in their marketing can have an effect on both consumer behaviour and on social behaviour. First, in regard to consumption behaviour, an interesting finding is how this is influenced depending on the connection between the company and its products and the raised social cause. The analysis showed that a loose connection will result in less impact on consumers. As previously discussed in the analysis regarding the company-cause fit, receivers tend to miss the connection to the specific company in the commercials. Further findings from the analysis showed that consumers doubt whether they would change their consumption behaviour. Together, these insights lead to the suggestion that if people do not connect the company or their specific products to the commercial, it may not positively change how they consume. Thereby, a potential risk from a business perspective is that a commercial with a social issue will mostly be viewed from a social perspective, where people pay attention to the social issue in focus and not the company that stands behind it. Thus, social aspects get the audience's attention and not the company or their products, which will consequently result in lost influence on consumer choices.

"If I just look at the commercial like this I would not think of Gillette [...] It feels weird that a company that does what they do are using a message like that" –Felicia

"I was mostly shocked that it is KPA pension, I didn't get how they are connected to anything in the commercial really [...] I have seen the commercial before, I remember it because I think it's funny, but I had no idea that it was for KPA Pension [...] They do not

promote themselves here at all! They're really not!" –Dave

Further, this statement above indicates that even when the commercial is appreciated the firm may not benefit from the positive associations, since not clearly promoting themselves or their relation to the social cause. Thereby the effectiveness of the positive impact on consumer behaviour can be questioned.

Secondly, a comparison can be made with products that are sustainable and more directly have a clear and positive impact on the environment or social aspects. It could for example be products that involve donation to special causes or products that have a responsible manufacturing process or do not hurt the environment, as these are clearly connected to being able to make a difference as a consumer. In contrast, the products in the commercials focusing on companies' opinions in social causes will not directly lead to improvements since the commercial somehow is disconnected from the product characteristics. Therefore, the first distinction of sustainable products can more easily be perceived as a good choice due to its more direct connection to social good. Whereas the choice of consuming a company's products based on the company's marketing of social issues is not always connected to socially responsible consumption. This distinction between the two can be considered as a disadvantage from the perspective since individuals do not see that they make a direct difference in the cause by choosing to consume the products from the company that use this type of marketing strategy. In turn, this can further explain why the consumer behaviour is not always directly influenced by this kind of marketing. However, as positive reactions towards this type of marketing initiatives were seen in the interviews, the perception of the company and the attitude towards it can be influenced positively. Consequently, this can subconsciously influence the consumers' choice between different products or brands in a long-term perspective. What is worth noticing in

connection to previous discussions is that the general image of an organization's CSR efforts can influence whether consumers feel that they are making a good choice. If consumers get aware of companies' CSR through a commercial with a focus on social issues, and further notice that they live up to what is said, it could lead to a change in consumer behaviour, since they then feel like they are choosing a "good" company. This indicates how the consumer behaviour can actually be affected by companies' social opinions in advertising.

In regard to social impact, the analysis indicated that companies can by including social issues in their marketing actions be seen as social actors. It was evident that they do not just have a possibility, but rather a good chance, to contribute to the debate and progress in important social issues by bringing awareness to the public and informing them of certain current issues. As previously presented, it was shown throughout the study that companies' attempts to bring these important social issues to light result in consumers opening their eyes, starting to reflect over these social concerns and their own behaviour. By including a standpoint in a social issue in one's advertisement a first step towards societal improvements can thereby be argued to be reached.

The reason why these marketing actions actually can reach such results is based on the presented findings that the format in itself is different from other sources that bring up social issues and this type of advertisements show social concerns in a way that is perceived as more appealing. As a consequence, the message was found to be more comprehensive and embraceable, which enables the message to really break through. As advertisements communicating social issues are easy to access and seen as an easier and more appealing way to receive and assimilate such important messages, it can be argued that it becomes possible to reach a broader audience. The ones that normally do not take part in information regarding social

issues, as they are not engaged in the matter, interested in searching for that kind of information or have the capability to understand the message when it is presented more traditionally, can be reached through this type of communication. In that way, a larger mass of people can become aware of these social issues and start to reflect about them, which in turn leads to a higher possibility to actually reach social improvement. However, an important aspect to include in this discussion is that social marketing actions that are made by companies are stated to be less credible compared to similar actions made by for example governments or non-profit organisations (Bloom et al., 1997). If taking this into account one could argue that the most beneficial way to reach social improvement is for these different types of sources to work together as they can be argued to complement each other. One source contributes by making the message more widely understood, embraceable and spread, while the other source increases the credibility of the message.

Furthermore, as it was established in the analysis that a social message takes time to sink in and have to be communicated continuously in order to have a social impact, it can be argued that a company's decision to take a stand in a social issue through one's marketing can not be a one-time thing. It must be done continuously, over a longer period of time if the company is going to become a social actor, reaching social development. As a company's social actions must reoccur in order to make a considerable change a suggestion is that actors on the market must come together and jointly work as a group in order to really make a difference for the better. One actor can not change the world by itself, instead it can be argued that it has to be done collectively by multiple actors, where each organization and individual take their role. This further connects to the conclusion made in the paragraph above, where suggesting that companies should work collectively with governments and non-profit organisations.

At last, the fact that companies are such a big part of people's lives today allows one to assume that they are able to succeed as social actors. They can be argued to have a lot of power and influence as we are living in a consumer society where our world somehow evolves around consumption and these companies. Companies are in a way the source to what we desire as they trigger our "need" when offering products and lifestyles to us. They influence how we view things as they are everywhere in our society and feed us with their products and messages at all times. Therefore, one must understand that in order to reach social improvement companies are an important success factor and can be seen as a one of the key actors to solving the societal dilemma. A suggestive thought is therefore that companies see the potential they have and make something valuable and important for society with that opportunity.

Conclusion and contributions

The purpose of this study is to provide a deeper understanding of how marketing, where companies take a public stand in social issues, is received by consumers and the consequences that follow. Thereby, the paper has identified and presented several themes highlighting how perceptions and effects come about and what they implicate for consumers. Through the insights from the analysis the conclusion that this type of marketing leads to multiple various reactions and responses can be drawn, indicating that the outcome of this type of marketing may widely vary. Linked to this, as demonstrated in the analysis, mixed emotions towards this kind of marketing have been identified. This is seen both between different consumers but also on an individual level, where a consumer has been shown to have contradictory feelings. Further, it has been found that the three Cs play a vital role in how this type of marketing is perceived and what the effects are. A concluding idea is that the size of the company and its level of recognition as well as the personal relation to the company and cause have impacts on the outcome. All these

factors will contribute to how the campaign will be received and in extension how consumers will behave.

Through the study it has been shown that both social impact and business impact can be seen when companies communicate their standpoints in social issues. Therefore, a conclusion can be made that companies could be important social actors as they bring awareness to social issues and provide social information in new ways, which can capture a wider audience. Simultaneously, the marketing initiatives have business consequences due to the fact that it has potential to influence consumers' attitudes and behaviours. One conclusion applicable to the business perspective as well as the social perspective is the importance that it is a long-term initiative. In order to be noticed and have an effect, the social message needs to be repeated over time. Similarly, to influence consumers in a positive direction, it needs to be perceived as genuine, which requires that it is a long-term commitment and not a single PR stunt. Furthermore, the social marketing activity should be a part of a bigger picture, both within the company, as a part of the general CSR effort, and in society, where different actors collaborate to raise social issues for the public good. In summary, companies taking a standpoint in social issues is an interesting marketing strategy because of the dual perspective and dual benefits.

All in all, the conclusion can be drawn that marketing where companies take a social stand is a very complex phenomena as all the mentioned possible perceptions and effects indicates that the reception and outcome can vary to a great extent and therefore the marketing actions are challenging and the effects are difficult to predict. Moreover, the decision to take a stand in social issues in one's marketing can thereby be concluded as risky for the company's business interests as it can result in great success, but also big setbacks. To conclude, this marketing strategy implies high risk as it can lead to both large wins and losses. The question is if companies are willing to take that risk and dare to engage

in this marketing approach. If so, our recommendation for actors who want to enter the field of marketing with a social focal point is to get familiarized with it beforehand and become aware of all these potential influences and outcomes in order to have the best possible prerequisites to succeed. This study adds to the pre-knowledge that is valuable for companies when performing this type of marketing strategy, due to its contribution to in-depth insight into the consumer perspective. Hence, give understanding of how the consumer reacts to and behave when getting approached by marketing where companies raise their opinions on social issues. Furthermore, this article contributes to the academic research field of CSR communication and marketing through additional theoretical understanding of social marketing and the effect on consumer behaviour. To the best of our knowledge, the research area of companies taking a standpoint in social issues in marketing activities has not yet been widely studied, which adds to an early understanding of the topic.

Limitations and directions for future research

As the study focuses on in-depth conversations with a group of ten respondents, it provides detailed information and understanding of the studied phenomena. However, it creates a limitation for the study since a more general representation of the public can not be reached. Hence, a suggestion for future research is to carry out a more extensive qualitative research, including more respondents from a broader spectrum of consumers. Thereby obtaining additional perspectives on the studied topic in order to draw more extensive conclusions. Also, a quantitative approach testing ads and campaigns in a larger web-survey, with questions based on the qualitative studies, would be interesting to improve generalizability.

Moreover, due to the fact that this study is mostly limited to the social issue of equality

the paper does not uncover possible differences in consumers' reactions towards various types of social causes. A direction for further research is therefore to study various types of social issues, since it could be interesting to compare and explore how the

reactions towards marketing may vary depending on the issue. This direction of research can further reveal if there are any differences in the level of success regarding the outcome of this marketing approach due to the cause itself.

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Appendix

Table 1. Overview of respondents

Name*	Age	Occupation	Interest/Engagement
Amelia	26	Associate buyer	-----
Anastasia	23	Law student Working part-time at the custody in Gothenburg	Member of a student organisation for asylum seekers
Charles	30	Co-owner of a lamp store	Former coach for a soccer and a floorball team
Dave	25	Freelancer	Filming documentaries and commercials. Chairman of a handball organization
Elvira	26	Student in Innovation and Management	Social media manager for the female network of the School of Business, Economics and Law at the University of Gothenburg. Former coach for juniors in dance and gymnastics.
Felicia	25	Student in Health and Sport science	Coach for junior team in rhythmic gymnastics
Leonor	33	Project manager and lab engineer	-----
Lily	27	Collector at a collection agency	Internship and work at The Swedish Childhood Cancer Fund
Lukas	28	Car dealer	-----
Tom	35	Operational efficiency manager	Former coach for juniors in Soccer and Handball

*All names are replaced with pseudonyms