Effective or offensive advertising?

An exploratory study on negative Word-of-Mouth and consumers’ perception
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Bachelor Thesis

Title: Effective or offensive advertising? An exploratory research on negative Word-of-Mouth and consumers’ perception

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Abstract

Background: Thanks to digitalization, the current generation Y is constantly exposed to advertising and information, blurring boundaries that can lead to a “buzz”, process more and more common online due to the possibility to publicly respond.

Purpose: The aim is to understand the processes leading to a possible influence of consumer perception via negative online word-of-mouth and advertisements deemed controversial.

Method: As an exploratory study, this paper conducted qualitative interviews with a group of students in which they will react to two cases of viral, controversial advertisement.

Conclusion: The results show that there is indeed a relation between being exposed to negative online word-of-mouth: controversy and interpretation of the content influence the customer’s opinion.
1 Introduction

In this section, we provide the reader key information regarding the topic. Starting first the ongoing viral phenomenon to background information on viral marketing, we aim to give the reader sufficient knowledge to understand the stakes of this study. Then we will elaborate on the problem tackles in this paper and the relevance of our contribution in today’s literature.

The Web 2.0 has enabled the access to content that are spread, analyzed and even twisted by billions of users all around the world at all times. Individuals exchange information faster than ever thanks to Internet particularly on social media. These technologies lead consumers to start conversations amongst themselves. Buzzfeed for instance has mastered the art of getting people talking. Buzzfeed’s publisher Dao Nguyen notes in a TED Conference in October 2017, a silly birthday prank launched livestreaming on Facebook gathered 90,000 of viewers in less than thirty minutes. After reading the 82,000 comments users posted on the video, Nguyen and her team hypothesized that “[users] were excited due to the fact that they were participating in the shared anticipation of something that was about to happen. They were part of a community, just for an instant, and it made them happy” (Nguyen, 2017).

1.1 Background

Though the media industry has always relied on people reacting and spreading information, the concept of viral marketing exists for almost two decades (Camarero & San José, 2011). Indeed, viral marketing offers firms the unique opportunity to organically advertise their brands based on peer-to-peer interactions (Pescher et al, 2014). Not only is it free advertising, it also involves a voluntary action from consumers that holds more benefits than a paid testimonial and leads to a narrower targeting thanks to common interests shared within a same network system (Dobele, Toleman & Beverland, 2005). However the possibility to gather thousands of people around a single post is relatively recent. With 97% of the U.S. population owning a smartphone, and an average of 25 hours per weeks spent on digital media, including 22% of that time on social media, the society above 18 years old is highly connected to the world-wide-web, increasing in time (Nielsen Insights, 2017). The digitally native generation, also called Millennial generation, has proven to distinguished itself from previous generations in regard to its use of this new form of media (Gurau, 2012; Taken-Smith, 2012). Moore (2012) investigates in her article the reasons behind the use of online resources in a comparative study between digital natives and older generations. She argues that millennials use media as entertainment first when older generations - baby boomers born before 1960 - use it as a mean. Hence the digital age has
proven to create opportunities for companies with low resources, while yielding new challenges (Woerndl, Papagiannidis, Bournakis, & Li, 2008). Viral marketing and its numerous possibilities have been widely explored in the literature. From its creation to its implications, researchers and practitioners have tried to understand how to harness the opportunities that such new medium implies. Viral marketing is often described as a virus coming from the company. The information spreads online from the interaction people from a same network have with each other (BenYahia, Touiti & Touzani, 2013). As BenYahia et al. (2013) argue, the buzz is when a viral campaign goes beyond the intended public reaction. In other words, creating the buzz implies having consumers taking over content and organically spread it. Therefore, campaigns containing emotional triggers that consumer can relate to, are a base to a buzz in the making. Provocation has proven to be a powerful tool to catch the consumers’ attention (Vézima & Paul, 1997, BenYahia, Touiti & Touzani, 2013). While employed with issues deemed controversial like tobacco or road safety, this practice grew to other industry as well. The Italian retailer Benetton is the embodiment of controversial campaigning. The brand quickly increased the use of shocking images in their visual advertisements to play with the viewer’s sensitivity as a way for the brand to increase awareness on social issues in the late 80’s. The brand used controversial topic such as religion, war, racism, death or disease their campaign punctuated by the slogan “United Colors of Benetton” (Vézima & Paul, 1997). Shockvertising was born, well-known brand such as Diesel or Esprit followed the same footsteps after Benetton by using societal issues in their advertisement (Machová, Huszárik & Tóth, 2015). Although the use of taboo in advertisement is a fast and effective way to raise brand awareness, playing with the individual consumer’s sensitivity may result in low acceptance and even strong disapprobation (Vézima & Paul, 1997).

1.2 Problem Discussion

Then, why is it important to study the effect of controversial advertising on consumers perception today? Twenty years later, the undeniable influence that new means of communication have redefined the rules of advertising. Traditional word-of-mouth that only relied on face-to-face interaction has gone digital, enabling consumers to share their experience instantly with their network (Bailey, 2004). Consumers become broadcaster based on their inherent need to interact with others (Alexandrov, Lilly & Babakus, 2013). Thus Millennials have integrated these new tools into their daily life as a way to actively communicate with the world rather than receiving information. For instance, they will have a skeptic towards targeted ads and tend to have a negative reaction when perceiving targeted campaigns. Overall younger generations are more inclined to engage virtual networking - through blogs, texts or email - hence create
relationships through screens with both their peers as well as brands and retailers (Moore, 2012). Studies have widely explored the motivators behind word-of-mouth (Alexandrov, Lilly & Babakus, 2013; BenYahia, Touiti & Touzani, 2013; Camarero, San José, 2011). As Alexandrov, Lilly & Babakus (2013) demonstrate, while positive word-of-mouth is issued from a need to enhance self-identity when negative word-of-mouth is a defensive mechanism that aims to reaffirm one’s identity. Contrary to positive word-of-mouth, negative aim to help the collectivity. Indeed, negative comments result from the need to help others on a societal level (Alexandrov, Lilly & Babakus, 2013). Brand image is constructed around three major components: direct experience, word-of-mouth and advertising (Reputation Management, 2009). The spontaneous aspect of word-of-mouth is the only factor that the company cannot control, extended by the use of social media today. Indeed, consumer’s ways to understand thus interpret and communicate the brands’ message increase as their interactions with other customer grow (Dobelea, Tolemanb & Beverland, 2005). H&M’s polemic in January 2018 is the latest testifier of this phenomenon. Consumers shared on Twitter a post showing a black children model wearing a sweater written “Coolest monkey in the jungle”. The public’s reaction to the ad was unfavorable towards the brand, condemn H&M and calling for a boycott (Forbes, 2018).

1.3 Purpose

The subject of viral marketing has been widely approached, over the last two decades following the rise of social media (Ekhlasi, Niknejhad Moghadam & Adibi, 2018; Chen & Xie, 2008; Alexandrov, et al., 2013). While certain authors are focusing on why this strategy has become profitable, if not necessary for brands; other researchers have focused explicitly on social media campaigns (Carl, 2006; Dobelea, Tolemanb & Beverland, 2005; Woerndl, Papagiannidis, Bourlakis, & Li, 2008). From there, two kinds of studies have been conducted: the first kind converge to the effects of word-of-mouth, often when negative (Dost, Sievert, & Oetting, 2011; De Lanauze & Siadou-Martin, 2014; Balaji et al., 2016); the second kind being the effects it can has on consumers (Camarero C., San José R. (2011). Only a few studies seek to interpret those effects or their origins (Y.C. Ho & Dempsey, 2010).

This study aims to shed light on consumers’ perspective towards a controversial campaign gone viral on social media and its influence on brand image. Throughout this research, themes such as the relationship between brands and consumers, the effectiveness of online word-of-mouth and the implication of negative word-of-mouth on consumers’ perception will be explored to answer the following research question.

1.4 Research Question
Firstly this thesis will focus on the response and reaction potential consumers have towards specific marketing campaigns that are perceived as controversial on social media. Its research question will guide the reader towards the understanding and their implications of a few concepts such as brand image, controversial campaign and word-of-mouth. Overall our goal is to understand the repercussion in customer’s mind when being confronted with the widespread of negative opinions. Thus, this thesis will answer the following question:

RQ: How does the spread of a controversial campaign influences the consumer’s perception of the brand?

1.5 Definitions

**Web 2.0** Doyle (2010) describes the Web 2.0 as being “community based: social networking, collaboration, harnessing of collective intelligence, personal interactions with friends and sharing of information, expertise, and personal experience.”
2 Literature Review

In this section we will set the background and main concepts that will surround our subject such as Millennials considering the fact that our study is focusing on this part of the population, Word of Mouth and every aspect of it including Negative Word of Mouth and Consumer’s perception that will be linked with advertisement.

2.1 Consumer’s perception through advertisement

To understand best the implications underlying the influence consumers have on one another online, it is important to consider the effect brands have had on the way digital natives apprehend today’s environment.

2.1.1 Brands as self-expression

The terminology of “brand” held various meaning over the year. The American Marketing Association (2018) defines it as the “name, term, sign, symbol, or design, or a combination of them intended to identify the goods and services of one seller or group of sellers and to differentiate them from the those of the competition”. In other words, companies use a set of sensorial tangibles to enable individuals to identify them among others. Brands serve the purpose for consumers to recognize the reliable input of value (Keller, 2014). Indeed, since the industrial revolution and the implementation of mass-production, consumer use brands as an indicator of quality (Kendall, 2015). As Kendall (2015) states, the ability to categorize product at a national or international level based on the physical characteristics such as name, packaging and other attributes was an increasing gain of time. The interesting shift happened when consumers started to build their own identity around brands themselves. Indeed, the 1950’s with the era of mass media and the imagery consumption lead individual to assimilate their status according to the meaning that held a given brand in society (Kendall, 2015). In others words, the relationship between consumer and brands evolved into a dynamic interaction where one exists relative to the other. Indeed Aaker (1999) argues that consumers rely on specific brands as an act of self-expression. Thus Doyle (2011) defines a brand image as the “perception of the brand in the consumers’ mind”. In other words, an individual projects, from its direct or indirect experiences, what he/she assumes the brand is according to this individual’s own mental frame, which allows the same message to hold various meanings (Neudecker, et al., 2014). Indeed, Hirschman and Holbrook (1982) investigated the emotional aspect of the formation of the brand image through the concept of hedonic brand. They distinguished the traditional vision that relied
mainly on the utility dimension of a brand’s offered product and/or service to move to an approach that takes root in the feelings and sensations of the consumers. Their work paved the way towards many studies that explored the implications of a hedonic brand image in regards to the consumer behavior and adjustment to new technologies (Chakraborty and Bhat, 2017; Bruhn et al., 2012; Huber, et al., 2017).

2.1.2 Culture of advertisement

According to Ahmad and Al-Marri (2007), advertisement as a visual representation of a brand leads on consumers to perceive if a brand is a right fit in regard to a consumer’s self-representation. Consumption of imagery has indeed taken a significant place in how consumers apprehend their environment. Indeed in the context of mass media, the traditional mediums and digital ones are constantly sending consumers visual cues, closer to home than ever (Bruhn, et al. 2012). Strategies are developed by the marketer to create the best campaign in regards to its target audience (Ahmad & Al-Marri, 2007). Emotional and informative advertising are usually two distinct segments, leading to their own product category. Indeed Moore and Lee (2012) demonstrate that hedonic product description, symbolism, feelings, leads to developing a projection of past experience in the consumer’s mind. While advertisement can be used to transmit positive emotion, some brands make the choice to play with less pleasant yet bold alternatives (Cochrane & Quester, 2005).

Hence the use of taboo in advertising is a theme widely used in advertising (Manceau & Tissiers-Desbordes, 2006, Sabri and Obermiller, 2012). Manceau and Tissiers-Desbordes (2006) showed the generational shift in the use of taboo. The younger generation being widely exposed to sex and violence, the concept of taboo becomes part of their daily life. (Manceau & Tissiers-Desbordes, 2006). Though taboos are being normalized by younger generations and are a powerful tool, brands need to use it mindfully to retain consumers’ attention. Sabri and Obermiller (2012) explored the attitude consumer have toward based on the ads’ level of taboo and the products’ industry type. Their findings shows the use of taboo (sex, violence) is more accepted when the product is already controversial. An ad displaying a violent scene is more accepted in the event of the product already being negatively perceived by the customer. (Sabri and Obermiller, 2012). However, the fact that a specific ad is shared by the inner circle of an individual implies more reaction from his/her personal network. The closeness of information implies more reaction, therefore a wider spread of opinion thus information (Sabri, 2017). As Sabri (2017) notes, a negatively perceived campaign does not necessarily affect the attitude consumers have toward a specific brand. Findings highlight the difference between places of exposure. Indeed a printed ad and a post on social media do not have the same impact on the consumer’s mind. Sabri (2017) argues that if the controversial ad shared on social media already
comes with an opinion attached to it. Hence, consumers might not be shocked by it if the senders, being a “friend”, is not. In spite of the context of buzz or campaign that went viral, the online medium does not affect the opinion shift. However, findings show that the overall perception of the brand suffers from the use of taboo (Sabri, 2017).

Contrary to taboo, controversy has an inherent sense of subjective meaning. Chen and Berger (2013) describe controversial topics as the “ones on which people have different, often polarizing, opinions”. Authors investigated the spread of controversy and argued the fact that using controversy in marketing is a good way to create the buzz. By leveraging the organic nature of word-of-mouth to increase brand awareness. Indeed they exposed the effects of controversy as interesting due to the entertainment dimension and discomfort relatively to the social norm (Chen & Berger, 2013). Their findings show while talking to a friend about a controversial topic the interest factor - essential to any kind of interaction - is not that important relative to the discomfort. At the contrary the discomfort factor tied to social norms tend to prevent stranger to talk about controversial issues, thus stalling a buzz in the making.

2.1.3 Millennials, digital natives of advertisement

Digital natives are the part of the population which is more exposed to online word-of-mouth. As Moore (2012) states, the use of interactive media by Millennial is higher than any generation before. Hence, Millennial have incorporated new means of communications as an inherent part of the interaction with the outside world, through social media, blogs or email (Moore, 2012). Nevertheless, the literature still have not defined a clear period to describe the Millennials and cannot agree on precise year boundaries (more or less 3 years on each end), this generation, also previously called Generation Y, is predominantly portrayed as the one following Generation X and born within the span between 1980 and 2000 (Doyle, 2016). Multiples characteristics and traits have been associated with the Generation Y, attributes that many of the constituents dismiss. The main peculiarity used to describe Millennials is their reliance on technology, or pronounced proficiency in digital tools and social media, as they have been growing up simultaneously as their development, hence the use of “digital natives” to refer to them (Doyle, 2016; Gurău, 2012; Taken Smith, 2012).

The Millennials are often assimilated as being an attractive market segment, forming the largest generational group since the baby boomers (Taken Smith, 2012) and generally spending more than the previous generations (Gurău, 2012). However, not unlike any population, each individual part of the generation is unique and might not perfectly fit the overall description associated (to) with the group. As the instigators of the Millennials generation, Howe and Strauss (1991) declared: Every generation includes all kinds of people.
“Yet, [...] you and your peers share the same ‘age location’ in history, and your generation's collective mindset cannot help but influence you—whether you agree with it or spend a lifetime battling against it.”

Like any youth population (as some of them are still early in their 20s) and exposed to the same pop-culture, identity is a critical point of integration among their peers, as seen in the rise of influencers on social media. Per contra, they wish to consider themselves as standouts and unique, reflecting their personal beliefs. Distinguishing themselves from previous generations, with the “hero” trait (Howe & Strauss, 1991) this generation is known for being extremely sensitive to universal issues such as the war, global warming, human rights and other topics related to self-perception in the like of gender, race, sexuality, body positivity; therefore making them aware of these subjects and less prompt to controversy (Gobé, 2011). This is due to the constant exposure to an increasing amount of content, which thanks to the current digitalization, goes across borders and widen the possibilities of knowledge of internet users. Having access to more opinions and information have blurred the old societal borders of taboo and values, creating what can be translated as a new culture: the web culture, peculiar to Millennials. Consequently, Manceau and Tissiers-Desbordes (2006) referred to a younger generation as being less affected by the use of taboo due to their constant exposure to graphic and violent content online, which diminishes their relative importance.

However, Gurau (2012) assess that there are too many variations, at least in the field of consumer behavior, to consider the whole generation as an ensemble, leading to the necessity of refined market research and analysis in order to create an effective marketing approach. Having grown up in an era of saturated media and advertisement, they have developed a marketing consciousness acuter than the older generations and new strategies must be established (Taken-Smith, 2012). The concept of market mavens can be applied to Millennials, that is they are more inclined to reject the company’s information and share a personal experience with their peers, with 56% of the generation expressing their opinions on goods and services online (ibid). This shows the importance of word-of-mouth in the consumer behavior of millennials and the resonance it has opposing the brand’s actions. For this reason, they show a low level of brand loyalty, the branding itself not matter as much as before, as the individuals are rather looking for self-expression of their values (Gurau, 2012). They are looking for an emotional connection, or to relate to the brand message and will easily switch brands if not fitting to their beliefs (Gupta, et al. 2010).

2.2 The rise of vox populi: word-of-mouth through Internet.
The expansion of internet represented by social media platform and free speech, the communication between customers and potential customers took a new dimension with no consideration of time and place. Indeed, nowadays at any time and anywhere one can express whatever he/she wants thanks to the Web 2.0. Thus, word-of-mouth phenomenon found itself a new expanding and out of time platform which results in a much higher reach.

“Online word of mouth provides peer-to-peer communication with a new dimension, as it enables access to WOM sources irrespective of time and place.” (Oetting, 2009)

2.2.1 Word-of-mouth dimensions and goals

With the long tail phenomenon described by Anderson (2006) as “selling less of more”, hence focusing on the importance of online word-of-mouth for the success of a company and products. The internet brought to people tremendous possibilities and choices in the way they consume. The long tail represent the shifting of our interest from the mainstream products towards the increasing number of niches (see Appendix 3). All products can get attention and find consumers with media such as Amazon or eBay because there are no more restrictions due to an obligation of results. Previously, if a company wanted to sell a book or a disc, they needed to have enough local demand to be able to attract retailers. The limitation of space on the shelf acted like a natural selection and only the best seller’s products were available. All those boundaries and limitations blow up with the World Wide Web. And today with the Web 2.0 not only every product can be sold but everything can be a hit and become viral (Anderson, 2006). Two dimensions were enhanced, first the range of offers we can access and then the demand it can get. Moreover, this demand dimension is widely influenced by word-of-mouth. As Oetting (2009) states “word of mouth is actually becoming the most essential element for economic success.” (Oetting, 2009). Similarly, De Lanauze and Siadou-Martin (2014), discuss “the effects of the virulence and credibility of online consumer speeches on the consumer brand relationship” produce by the word-of-mouth in today’s area, the social media and internet revolution and the power to the consumers.

2.2.2 Word-of-mouth motivations and reach

From a study De Lanauze and Siadou-Martin (2014) made, they came up with four big motivations to use the word-of-mouth for each positive and negative ones. The positive ones are altruism, the implication for the product, self-valorization, and help to the company. The negative ones are altruism, anxiety reduction, vengeance & attention and rate seeker. There are three fundamental dimensions to the word-of-mouth: volume, which represents the number of posted messages; dispersion, which represents the diversity of the community who post the messages and valence, which represents the positive or negative dimension of the messages (De
A Mintel study conducted in 2015 shows that 70% of Americans are seeking out opinions online before making any purchase, using social media networks, user review sites or independent review sites. The buying process became more and more collective. And the study shows that 81% of the 18-34 years old interviewed seek out opinions of others before doing any purchases (Mintel, 2015). Consumer-created information is more relevant than seller-created information for consumer especially if the consumer is not an expert and seek basic and not technical information, he/she will look at consumer-created information due to the fact that it will more likely lead them to something that will match their preferences (Chen, Y. & Xie, J. 2008). The fact that word-of-mouth became highly digital oriented increases the unpredictable and uncontrollable factor since one information can spread at a huge speed with the social media tools. A simple message from anyone, as long as it can be seen by others, on a product, a service, a company is important (WEISS, 2014). Indeed as Oetting (2009) notes “consumers are developing new and sometimes surprisingly powerful ways of expressing their opinions through online media to growing audiences”. This can be related to the long tail phenomenon, every reaction, though, opinions can get substantial attention and a huge impact. Adding to that a bandwagon effect and an idea can travel the world and impact the behavior of millions of people.

2.2.3 Power of consumers on word-of-mouth

This expansion of various social networks enables customers to hold more power over companies, ask more as their voices become a marketing tool for the company. In return, customers expect more from the brands because of that feeling of power (Habibi et al., 2014). Thus, marketers have to be more careful and pay a very close attention in their works and marketing campaigns, one little mistakes and lots of people will jump on the occasion to bash a brand with negative word-of-mouth, we will discuss about this phenomenon more in-depth a bit further. That is why word-of-mouth marketing, the “intentional influencing of consumer-to-consumer communication by professional marketing techniques”, has become more and more critical for companies to monitor the word-of-mouth phenomenon. It is shown that a consumer aware of that company's influence with word-of-mouth marketing and the fact that it is explicit make the community supportive and accepting towards the product and service, if the community norms are in favour of profit-driven purpose, contrary to a hidden and less transparent word-of-mouth marketing campaign (Kozinets et al, 2009). Consumers need to be seen as “co-producers” of communication programs. The marketers need to understand the behavior of consumers in order to effectively use that word-of-mouth, good or bad, to their advantage. It is called the Network Coproduction Model developed by Kozinets et al. (Kozinets et al, 2009). As stated in the previously, creating the buzz implies having consumers taking over
content and organically spread it (Carl, 2006). Therefore, campaigns containing emotional triggers that consumer can relate to, are a base to a buzz in the making. Provocation has proven to be a powerful tool to catch the consumers’ attention (Vézima & Paul, 1997; BenYahia et al, 2013). So, a challenge with advertising and the willing of trigger word-of-mouth is the message understood. Indeed, there can be a clash between what the company is wanting to say and mean and what the consumer is actually understanding and react to. This can lead to the spread of an unwanted brand image among the targeted customers and badly affect the brand if the interpretation of the message is controversial or taboo. The negative word-of-mouth is then activated. (Oetting, 2009)

2.3 The spread of negative word-of-mouth and its responses

Why people transmit negative word-of-mouth? It is mainly driven by social intention of helping other consumers or future consumers in their choices and share information about their experiences in order to warn and affirm themselves (Alexandrov et al, 2013). It is useful for marketer to also understand who is spreading the negative word-of-mouth, what define the transmitters. A study about the correlation between self-confidence (self-competence and self-liking) and diffusion of negative word-of-mouth shows that the more self-competence the transmitter feels the less likely he will transmit negative word-of-mouth and the more self liking the transmitter feels the more likely he is to transmit negative word-of-mouth (Habibi et al, 2014). Previous research were conducted, linking negative word-of-mouth and the liberty of access of the millennials to content online. The possibilities to address their anger is wide for customers nowadays, however the research spotlights particular websites dedicated solely to the purpose of corporate ranting. These websites range from targeted platforms such as ‘http://www.untied.com’ to agency or governmental supported websites aimed at analyzing customer satisfaction (Bailey, 2004). After interrogating about 150 undergraduate students about their knowledge and attitude regarding complaining websites, Bailey (2004) draws the conclusion that while this younger generation is the most present online, only half had ever heard of corporate complaint sites, and only a third ever visited them. When aware of the possibility to share, and read complaints about a company, most of them agreed they were likely to do so, therefore exposing themselves to personal and negative word-of-mouth rather than use informative websites from the companies. While the respondents were not much of the complainer type, a social influence was noticed as they started another word-of-mouth circle to inform others of the existence of these websites. Therefore, the existence of these complaint websites might not change the purchasing habits of the whole market, but will accelerate and increase the negative word-of-mouth about this company, which can easily reach high
complainers, most likely to restrain from buying a product in the event of a complaint being made. The fact that those information are based on personal experience is more reliable for the readers than corporate information, made for marketing purpose, and thus affects more the website readers (Bailey, 2004).

2.3.1 Negative word-of-mouth as an incubator for brand awareness

Indeed, the purpose of viral marketing is to get the message seen by a majority of people (Camarero & San José, 2011). Customers’ becoming carriers of advertisement through word-of-mouth. The act of receiving and forwarding content. Out of all the positive attitudes towards receiving a viral message, they found that curiosity is the main factor of opening content. The “feel good” aspect of the content comes second. Other studies have shown the relevance of curiosity in the act of forwarding content (Ho & Dempsey, 2010). Also, Pescher et al. (2014) demonstrate the need for a campaign to be entertaining for the customer to find interest beyond reading. Thus the lack of reaction when opening the email is the worst that could happen for the firm. Not triggering interest from the customer means that the content is not seen therefore useless. (Camarero & San José, 2011). Hence a study conducted by Kaplan and Haenlein on the impact of valance on word-of-mouth diffusion characteristics shows that negative word-of-mouth has a much higher diffusion compared to the positive word-of-mouth. People getting information from hearsay are more likely to transmit negative thought and rumors that positives one and thus increase the spread of negative word-of-mouth (Kaplan & Haenlein 2011). Indeed, comments on social media are countless and negatives ones have five times more impact than positives ones. (Habibi et al. 2014). These findings show a dissonance to the study conducted by Dost et al. showing that the transmission of negative word-of-mouth is more often refused, more subject by transmission refusal (Dost et al., 2011).

2.3.2 Against Negative Opinions

We know that the connection of one customer with a brand can attenuate the negative effect of the negative word-of-mouth since the customer already knows and like the brand, thus tends to be more inclined to defend the brand and trust only what he knows for sure. But a research made by Wilson et al. (2017) extends this fact and try to see if this negative word-of-mouth can be positive to the brand with favor effects. The consumer who faced negative word-of-mouth and has a very strong self-brand connection will feel that that negativity is aimed to him because he will consider the brand as himself, feeling an obligation of defense and ultimately strengthen his connection with the brand. Consumers defend the brand and think and develop his/her thought about the brand even more than before and emerge of that debate even more connected to the brand, and possibly affect the person at the origin of the negative word-of-mouth. These
studies aim to emphasise the fact that the more a consumer is related to a brand the less the negative word-of-mouth will affect his vision and better, it will strengthen his relationship with the brand (Wilson et al., 2017). Within the amount of information processed every day by consumer online, not all carry the same weight. De Lanauze and Siadou-Martin (2014) discuss the credibility that negative word-of-mouth has relative to the message shared by consumers. Indeed negative word-of-mouth comes from an already negative mindset that is based on anger, vengeance or hurts feelings (Balaji et al., 2016). In their study, De Lanauze and Siadou-Martin (2014) investigated the relationship between the substance and form of the messages compared to its perceived credibility. Their result showed that the more virulent and emotionally affected the reaction was, the fewer consumers found it credible. A contrario, the more credible the message is the more negative it will become for the brand if the virulence is low. (De Lanauze & Siadou-Martin, 2014). Indeed, a negative reaction towards a brand can be seen as the individual’s defense mechanism (Wilson et al., 2017). Therefore, when considering negative reviews consumers tend to assume that the complaints and/or bad experiences result from the individual’s personal values (Balaji et al., 2016). Consumers sharing negative word-of-mouth almost instantly face social dissonance (Balaji et al., 2016). When posting a negative experience, the transmitter is confronted with the reactions of his/her peer, either in favour or against (Dost et al., 2012). This phenomenon leads consumers who have a negative experience of a brand to avoid all kind of negative word-of-mouth to prevent social nonconformity (Dost et al., 2012).
3 Conceptual Framework

The following chapter will introduce the reader to relevant concepts that are central to the further development of this study. Insight on the concept of self-congruity will be provided, diving into key concepts such as hedonic and functional brand image.

3.1 Self Perception

The purpose of this study is to investigate the factors of influence of perception when consumers are being exposed to a campaign deemed controversial online. Hence, as Gupta, et al. (2010) notes, members of the Millennial generation answer differently to marketing strategies than previous generations due to their exposure to mass-information online. Their need to relate to the brand’s message rather than the utilitarian aspect of a product implies a shift from a traditional to a meaningful consumption (Gurău, 2012). The self-congruity is a theory deriving from the psychology field that states the relationship between product user-image and the consumer’s self-concept. Sirgy (1985) was one of the key authors to apply it to the business literature, followed by many studies aimed to understand consumers’ behavior (Lee, et al., 2015; Cowart, et al., 2008; Jamal & Al-Marri, 2007; Huber, et al., 2018). This theory relies first on the understanding of the self-concept as “the totality of the individual’s thoughts and feelings having reference to himself as an object” (Sirgy, 1985). Grubb and Grathwohl (1967) also define it as a drive for self-enhancement through interaction with others. Thus the behavior of individuals is guided by the resemblance perceived in a given context according to one’s own self-image.

Moreover, the notion of self-concept as defined by Dolich (1969) relies on two main pillars; first the actual self-image, being the perception individual has of him/herself and the ideal self-image which is based on one’s aspirations to ideally become. Higgins' (1987) outlined the ought-image self as a third determinant which relates to individual’s notion of what should be according to one’s own moral standards. Indeed the ought-self acknowledges the inner beliefs based on cultural difference, which is of importance in this study of taboo and controversy.

Aaker (1999) argues that an individual’s notion of self evolves over time and situation, thus consumers rely on brands to distinguish themselves relative to other. Indeed, a study conducted in the fashion industry by Mocanu (2013) demonstrates the importance of the acceptance through the consumption of a specific brand, especially amongst young adults. The results outlined the notion of “right” and “wrong” consumption based on brand image; which leads individuals to a sense of security, peace of mind and social acceptance.
Considering the need for an individual to define one’s self-image relatively to others, a phenomenon can be distinguished, the bandwagon effect. This effect can be defined as a “herd mentality” which implies that people to whom social acceptance is important, adopt some widespread pattern of behavior purely because ‘everyone else is doing it’, as in the Facebook phenomenon in which each person who accepts a challenge nominates others to do the same. The chain effect boosts the popularity of trends.” (Chandler & Munday, 2016). The effect can be illustrated in one sentence: “if others think that this is a good story, then I should think so too” (Sundar, 2008). The internet is a mine of personal opinion and thought, and users can easily be overwhelmed by them. In the research of self-identity and image, the users have a propensity to adopt the popular choices and follow the “earlier decision makers” (Sim & Fu, 2011). Those opinions are usually carried by the number of likes or good impressions they have. Users trust and pay attention to “websites surface characteristic and features” (numbers of views, likes, comments, retweet, etc.) rather than focusing on the content itself and the idea behind it. Indeed, there is a tendency on the internet and social media for the audience to evaluate the quality of a content, or an opinion by the number of reactions and impressions about it (Kim & Sundar, 2014).

3.2 Responses to advertisement stimulus

Subsequently, brands hold distinctive meaning in the consumer’s mind and thus yield different benefits. The utilitarian aspect related to a brand is the inherent function of the product whereas the hedonic aspect refers to the emotions and feeling implied when consuming the product and/or service (Spangenberg, & Grohmann, 2003). Jamal & Al-Marri (2013) note the attention marketers should give to a brand’s communication relative to the concept of self-congruity and consumer satisfaction. Their findings demonstrate the power of advertisement to build an image to which its target user can relate to as product users and create high self-image congruence, thus high level of satisfaction. As for the consumer with low self-image congruence, they argue that functional advertising which is information-centric, would result in a high level of satisfaction (Jamal & Al-Marri, 2013). Thus in order to comprehend the underlying factors of perception, it is important to understand two processes, cognitive and affective, which result in the acceptance or dismissal of the stimulus.

3.2.1 Cognitive processes

The cognitive dimension of one’s own mind relies on both knowledge and belief, which result from past experience and memory (Cacioppo & Petty, 1982; Ruiz & Sicilia, 2014; Miller et al., 2009). Ruiz and Sicilia (2014) argue that consumers attitude to the advertisement stimulus relies on the content of itself. Relatively to the product category, consumers will seek appropriate
information (Ruiz & Sicilia, 2014). Indeed, Wright (1973) argues that an individual relies primarily on his or her “evaluative mental responses to message content, rather than the content itself”. In the context of mass-media, consumers are facing an overwhelming amount of information, which leads them to develop information-processing strategies. The tendency individuals have to intellectualize advertisement messages is called the need for cognition (NFC) (Cacciopo and Petty, 1982). Consumers with high NFC tend to see advertising rationally and to evaluate it on a logical basis. Geuens and De Pelsmacker (1998) demonstrate that consumers with high NFC enjoy best an advertisement that gathers enough relevant information about a product. Creative elements, being the visual aspect in a given advertisement, is indeed shown to decrease interest with high NFC consumers. Indeed high NFC individuals are driven by the thinking process and underlying meaning for a given message (Miller et al., 2009). Per contra, Miller et al., (2009) note that individuals with low level of NFC show a lack of attraction towards informative advertisement and are more appealed by entertainment content.

According to Wright’s (1975) model, when confronted to the advertisement stimulus, the acceptance of a given message is mediated by three main cognitive responses: counterargument, source derogation and support argument.

First, a counter argument relies on the comparison of the information relative to the one’s own knowledge and belief. Then the source derogation variable investigates the source of the message and questions its possible bias that it could invoke for the trustworthiness of the information. Finally, the supporting argument variable is similar to counter-argument but instead of only comparing the information, the consumer will add on arguments from his/her own experience or the message itself for more accuracy. What’s more, consumers are usually aware that a support argument comes from external influences whereas counter-arguments are only analyzed within the consumer’s own system of belief. However, Wright’s (1975) findings show that the source of derogation and support argument, highly rely on the situational factor of the advertisement displayed.

3.2.2 Affective Processing

As mentioned previously, brands hold a meaningful and symbolic significance for the consumer. Hirschman and Holbrook (1982) introduced the notion of hedonic consumption compared to the traditional approach. Their study outlines the importance of emotions and feelings which leads to consumer’s own interpretation of reality. Emotions and feelings are a delicate topic due to the variety of individual processes. Yet Larsen and Diener (1987) defined that individuals process emotions on a different level and intensity. Their findings show that similarly to the NFC scale, when exposed to a same emotionally charged advertisement, consumers show either high or low levels of emotional intensity. Types of emotional responses
have been classified by Roseman (2011) in five distinct families of emotion. Due to the nature of this study, only the focus on the negative emotions which are deemed more relevant when analyzing negative WoM. First, the author defines the distancing family as an “increase distance from stimuli” based on fear, sadness, distress, dislike, and regret. Then the rejection family appraisal invokes an avoidance of the stimulus shown by disgust, contempt, and shame. Finally, the attack family appraisal relies on the dismissal of the stimulus resulting in frustration, anger, and guilt (Roseman, 2011). These negative emotional responses derive from the exposure of a given message which threatens an individual own sense of self or within a given social group (Roseman, 2011). Indeed, individuals tend to assimilate themselves relatively with other individuals’ characteristic similarities. Thus the social identity links individual by a group-based identity which is positively seen and distinguishes it from out-groups members (Tajfel and Turner, 1986). The self-categorization theory implies that individuals from certain social categories, for instance relative to gender or race, are likely to find themselves as in-group, at the opposite of the out-group considered as the societal majority (Branscombe & Ellemers, 1998). According to social studies, perceived threats can be either realistic or symbolic (Doosje et al. 2002; Branscombe & Ellemers, 1998). Stephan and Stephan (2000) define three circumstances that result in coping response in regards to in-group identity. First, if the out-group is perceived as threatening the lifestyle of the in-group. Second when the out-group’s negative views and expectations are noticed by the in-group. Finally, when members of the in-group are pessimistic toward any kind of interaction with is out-group.
4 Methodology

In the following chapter the methodology chosen to approach the research question will be developed, we will explain our method of data collection, data analysis and the type of interview we chose. Then we will go further into the data collection approach, how did we conduct the interview, why we chose a certain type of marketing campaign. Finally we will expand on the ethic and validity aspect of our research.

4.1 Chosen research method

This study is aimed at understanding the underlying mental processes defining a consumer’s reaction to an advertisement and the possible variations after exposure to negative word-of-mouth regarding this specific advertisement. This is in order to deepen certain aspects of the research question, rather than to find a solution. For this reason, we can define this research as an exploratory research. This research design allows adaptability, which is necessary when gathering data with individuals. However, due to the generic use of qualitative information, there is no possibility to describe the study as a correct sample representing the wider population (Dudovskiy, 2018). With most exploratory researches, it is not uncommon for the author to change his/her direction or method over time when gathering information (Saunders & al, 2012).

4.1.1 Data collection approach

To understand the choice of approach we decided to turn ourselves to, we first need to explain the various methods available. Three options are available: deductive, inductive and abductive. As the goal of our study is to understand consumers’ reactions towards advertisement, we use qualitative research to use the human factor as our main tool. Humans interactions can be adaptive and responsive, develop in the case of unusual answers and discuss to verify accuracy on both sides (Merriam, 2002). In many cases, it is easier to use inductive reasoning when doing qualitative research because of the discrepancy in human behavior, to which theories are not always applicable.

Induction or the inductive approach is usually defined as drafting a theory, a principle based on observations (Edson, Buckle Henning & Sankaran, 2017). Most qualitative researches are turning to inductive approach due to the fact that the researchers are closer to the data, and analysis is open to interpretation, it will allow to go more in-depth into the subject studied. On the other hand, a deductive approach drafts data from previous researches in order to verify
them or develop them. They often use quantitative methods to analyze data with the help of surveys or experiments, such as in mathematics or health care studies (Edson & al, 2017). Finally, an abductive approach is a mix of both whereby comparing results and possible causes, with the theory in the middle. In this case, we gather data from the respondents’ perspectives, and analyze it in order to try to build concepts and hypotheses so according to the literature, seeking to an inductive approach is more fitting to our research (Merriam, 2002). However, we first started to analyze the results and then looked for theories to interpret them, which is close to a deductive approach, but since we went further than these theories thanks to our data, we remain closer to an inductive approach.

4.1.2 Data analysis approach

When trying to understand a phenomenon using qualitative data, a few possibilities are available, the most common being: grounded theory, phenomenology, case study or basic interpretive qualitative study. While we are using specific ads, we cannot describe them as case studies, because the principle of a case study is where the data is drawn from, and in this case, our priority is the respondents and not the ads themselves. For this paper, the basic interpretive study was used for the following reason: we are trying to identify and understand how the interviewees make sense of a situation, and how that meaning is an instrument. The pattern of a basic interpretive study goes as follow: discussing a phenomenon, the insights of the involved parties, then interviews to gather data which was analyzed to create patterns, sometimes using literature as references (Merriam, 2002). After collecting the data, we followed five steps to analyze the information gathered throughout the interviews. The process was conducted accordingly (Yin, 2016):

- Compilation: this is arranging the data collected (interviews and concepts) in a certain logical order, such as forming a database.
- Disassembly: this procedure can be assimilated to “coding”, assigning recurrent labels or themes to the content and was done to gather the main mood of interviews.
- Reassembly: this step consists of reorganization the compiled data by categories, according to the codes previously defined, which was done through sorting the respondents in a table.
- Interpretation: this phase is done to create a narrative that becomes the base of the analysis as data is deepened and deciphered. This is where we linked the codes to the concepts.
- Conclusion: the final stage is to draw conclusions from the study, related to the four anterior phases.
On the second step, after transcribing the interviews and reading them thoroughly, we decided on six codes that were recurrent and relevant in the responses, then expanded the concepts to fit for the analysis: relatedness, taboo, disapproval, understanding, neutral, methodic. Using a color code, we highlighted fragments of the answers in order to emphasize the significant segments according to the previously defined themes. This allowed us to categorize the respondents’ interpretations and analyze the interrelations between the various own reactions of one respondent, those relations being cross-narrated in the empirical findings.

4.1.3 Semi-structured interviews

In order to assess the veracity of these theories and whether they apply to this study, we will use qualitative interviews, conducted individually to collect in-depth information on the subject. According to the results expected, three main different types of interviews can be used: structured, semi-structured, unstructured. A structured interview will follow the same specific questions, in the same order, leaving few to no room for flexibility. Oppositely, unstructured interviews have no guidelines and results in a more spontaneous exchange. For this research, the choice leaned towards semi-structured interviews with the help of a questioning guide: mostly the same questions were asked to the interlocutors, some of them being added or omitted according to the answers, in order to orientate the discussion (Ryan, Coughlan & Cronin, 2009). Interviews were done through self-selecting sampling, by communicating a request for cases on social media, then collecting the answers the public will voluntarily give (Saunders et al., 2016). Many factors can lead to disparities in the answers, apart from the characteristics that we discussed in the conceptual framework. The respondents may not interpret the questions the same way, give honest answers or the differences may come because of a variation in the relationship between the interviewers and the interviewees (Gomm, 2004).

4.2 Data collection

Now that we have explained the methodology approach from the literature, we will further detail the fieldwork technique used for gathering information during the research.

4.2.1 The interviews

Interviews were conducted face-to-face by the three researchers; the first taking the role of moderator to make sure the interview stayed on topic, the second to push the conversation further allowing interviewees to elaborate on their answers and the third in charge of taking notes to highlight the verbal and nonverbal cues from the interviewee. This format enabled free speech from the interviewee and an in-depth conversation between both parties. Prior the interview, interviewees were asked to sign a consent form (Appendix 1) that allowed
researchers to record and use the information in the context of this study. The length of the interviewees varied from 10 to 23 minutes, all recorded on the same recording device. They were all conducted in English to ensure maximum homogeneity. The interviews were articulated in three sections: introduction, display of the first campaign and online reaction, display of online reactions to the second campaign and then exhibit of the second campaign. The introduction section allowed the researchers to set interviewees into the topic’s mindset. Its purpose was to get the interviewees to talk about themselves and own experiences around the subject.

Prior the display of the first case, researchers presented the brand to the interviewee in order to assess awareness and current perception. Interviewees were then shown the first campaign and were asked to comment the campaign. Then researchers presented a sample of online reactions to the interviewee. Researchers assessed from the interviewee response his/her’s perception of both the brand and online reactions. The second case was conducted in the reverse order. After introducing the brand, researchers presented first online reaction without the interviewees being aware of the campaign itself. Interviewees were asked to comment these reactions hence give their assumptions on the actual campaign. The second campaign was displayed afterward, letting interviewees compare their expectations built on online reactions to the actual campaign.

To sum up, the interview gave researchers knowledge on the following subjects, in this order:

- Personal information (gender, nationality, social media use…)
- Relationship with social media and advertisements
- Knowledge of the brands (brand awareness, self-perception, consumption behavior…)
- Exposition to advertisements and reactions online, first the ad than the reactions for the first case, than oppositely the reactions before the ad (pictures)
- Opinion from the customer after seeing the ads and the reactions (change of mind, personal feelings…)

A more detailed interview guide (Appendix 2) was used during the research, in spite of the fact that it is not always in the same manner, depending on the respondent's answers (i.e. pushing further some questions or lighten others).

4.2.2 Sampling

In order to maintain the anonymity of the interviewees, we will designate them by a letter. Only their age, gender, nationality and program of studies are publicly displayed.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Denomination</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Nationality</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Studies</th>
<th>Duration</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
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<td>French</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>International Management</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>M2</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>Bosnian</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>International Management</td>
<td>9:47:00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>M3</td>
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<td>Italian</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>International Management</td>
<td>14:15:00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>M4</td>
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<td>French</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>International Management</td>
<td>17:37:00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
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<td>French</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>International Management</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
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<td>French</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Engineering</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>M7</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>British</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>International Marketing</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>M8</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>Swedish</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Embedded System</td>
<td>15:47:00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>F1</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>Belgian</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Intercultural relations &amp; Office management</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>F2</td>
<td>22</td>
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<td>Female</td>
<td>Social Care</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>F3</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>Egyptian</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>International Marketing</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>F4</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>Dutch</td>
<td>Female</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>F5</td>
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<td>Female</td>
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<tr>
<td>F6</td>
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<td>Norwegian/Iraqi</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Marketing Management</td>
<td>16:45:00</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Figure 1: Information about the sample*

4.2.3 Cases selected

The two contents chosen are different in their form and subject. The first advertisement is publicity from the brand Protein World (Figure 2), a UK based company selling protein nutritional complements to promote a healthy, fit lifestyle. The ad was displayed in the London tube in 2015 as a visual poster splattered across the wall. The six reactions to this campaign we picked were chosen by notoriety or influence (that is, the ones that had the most reactions or relevance to the subject) (Figure 4). The second is more of a marketing campaign, a statement than an advertisement itself. It is part of a Budlight campaign (Figure 3) in 2015 based on the hashtag #UpForWhatever that displayed several different catchphrases on their bottles, such as Coca-Cola did with names or locations. In this case, the four reactions were chosen for their strong interpretation and negativity towards the campaign (Figure 5).
Figure 2: Advertisement campaign from Protein World, 2015.

Figure 3: Marketing Campaign on the bottles, Budlight, 2015.
Figure 4: Reactions chosen towards the first advertisement

Figure 5: Reactions chosen towards the second campaign
The decision for the Protein World campaign originates from the important vague of reactions at the time of the controversy, not only on social networks but in the traditional media as well. Here, the ad is shown first in light of the fact that the reactions were intimately related to the advertisement itself, only based on the image itself and its explicitness. All negative reactions were triggered by the exact message the company tried to convey. As women in advertisements are becoming a widely discussed and controversial subject, going back in time and analyzing the movement is interesting as 50% of the worldwide population is concerned by this “issue”.

As for the Budlight’s campaign, the decision was taken in light of the fact that oppositely from the first campaign, the reactions are taking wide and “violent” interpretations, which are not directly linked to the brand message but rather due to a critical context, triggering all kinds of taboo and room for personal interpretation. Here, the subject of alcohol, consent, and responsibility are highlighted by the detractors but the brand did announce their intent was not in the same optic.

The reason we chose to display Twitter responses over other social media’s reactions is due to high connectivity and liberty of speech that the platform offers. Is it not uncommon nowadays for brands to have a social network account, however they generally do not perform specific and adapted marketing strategies, rather applying the same on all platforms. The issue with this approach is that not all social networks are the same, Twitter being probably the riskiest of all. The blue bird company thrives on an original dialogic culture, established on high communication and information sharing, not only instantaneous but also advanced by a high reachability to a wide audience. Most users are known for their libertarian and anti-ideology attitude, their attraction for controversy and the exploitation of content for parody purpose. Therefore, a company will arise in conversations, whether directly involved or not, creating a lack of control over the information and content spread about the brand (Weller, 2014).

4.3 Ethics and validity

Ensuring quality and validity of the study is important, not only to ensure reliability in the results but also a correct and ethical conduct of research. There is hardly a way to define a “good” study but certain stances can be adopted to guaranty rigorous and trust-worthy conclusions. In order to address those concerns, we will develop about the validity (internal and external), reliability and transparency (Merriam, 2002).

4.4 Validity

Internal validity can be defined as the congruence between the research and reality: is the study true to reality, true to objectives? Reality is usually an idea of interpretation, relative to
individuals; and in qualitative studies, it is usually the authors’ interpretation of the respondents’ own interpretation of the subject. One of the main tools to ensure internal validity is the use of triangulation: the correlation between multiple investigators, theories, sources and methods to confirm the outcome. In our case, the triangulation is made with the help of multiple researchers, sources, and theories (Merriam, 2002). The peer review strategy is also used all along the process of writing the paper, by the implication and correction of other students in seminars.

External validity, also called “generalizability”, is whether the study’s results are applicable to other situations or greater samples. Due to the small and random sampling associated with qualitative studies, the question of generalization is hardly worth considering, especially as the point is to get in-depth insight and not a general truth. One solution to still add external validity to a research is thanks to case-to-case transfer, in which the reader asks thyself if the situation would be applicable to thy own situation. To enhance this situation, a rich description and a great variety of the sample is primordial (Merriam, 2002).

4.5 Reliability

The term reliability refers to the replicability of the study and is closely linked to validity. This is a difficult point to assess because of the instability of human behavior nor the relevance of one insight over another. It once again comes to interpretation, the results might not be completely similar but as long as the data and the results are consistent, there is replicability. Once again triangulation or peer-review are tools applicable to assess reliability, but an audit trail can be helpful for replication: by describing in details and over time the decisions on data collection, analysis and results (Merriam, 2002).

4.6 Transparency

When conducting qualitative researches, ethical dilemmas are likely to arise on the use and collection of data and are underlying in the relationship between the researcher and the respondent. Our primary source of information being the participants, a strong trusting relationship is necessary, for ethical and comfort purposes. All our interviewees were given a consent form before the interview, along with a quick preview of the subject in the recruiting call on social media. Therefore, respondents came willingly and voluntarily to participate in the research. The consent form (Appendix 1) informed the participant about the use and record of their data, the anonymity of their responses and the destruction of the vocal records on a given date, to which only the researchers would have access. A sense of privacy and liberty is then given to the participant, which is important to allow free speech during semi-structured
interviews, especially about personal opinions. To preserve this anonymity, the contributors are only designated by a vague denomination, that is M. or F. for male and female.
5 Empirical Data

In this section, results from the interviews will be objectively displayed, following the continuity in which the discussion was engaged. Narratively conveyed, the data will be divided in three sections: introductory phase, first then second case.

5.1 Introductory

First of all, participants were asked introductory questions regarding their use of social media and social networks. To get a deeper understanding of participants’ mindsets and approach on both online comments and brands, their positioning and exposure to this particular kind of information were assessed.

5.1.1 Platform

The wide majority of the participants appeared to be quite familiar with the popular social media (e.g. Facebook, Instagram, Twitter and Snapchat) and yet showed a specific preference for one platform over the other. Participant F6 for instance showed an inclination towards Twitter whereas participant M7 considered it to be ‘messy’ and ‘hard to get around’. Yet participants who are on various platform mentioned the time factor of using such platform. It was mentioned by F6 that the mobile medium was the primer vehicle to go on social media. Some participants noted the extent to which they consume information and imagery on social media, usually on a daily basis from “half an hour to 45 minutes per day.” stated F6, to being “always on social media” like F3. The notion of need has been brought up by participant M5 when mentioning daily routine being punctuated by the use of social media “when I wake up, it’s kind of a need for me to use it”.

5.1.2 Usage

When asked to develop on their use of social media, participants mentioned the communication aspect of social media. Indeed, the social aspect has been developed by the majority of participants, using these platforms to share within a closed network of friends and family like M4. This participant also mentioned the tagging functionality available on Facebook that allows users to refer specific content to another person as an important mean of communication. However, this notion usually related to Facebook was nuanced by participant M7 that noted the shift of published content on specific platforms as: “Facebook recently got a bit boring and people don’t post as much”. Several respondents noted that each platform serves a different purpose, as F6 put it “Snapchat just for friends, Instagram for pictures and stuff. Facebook is
The entertainment aspect of social media was brought up by some participants which mainly aimed at Twitter. Among the participants using this platform, M6 mentioned the humorous dimension when deciding to relay tweets. Participant F6 also brought up the utilitarian aspect that groups on these platforms, namely Facebook, that allow for recommendation for personal hobbies purpose.

Moreover, most of participants argued the consumption of information through social media. Although the type of information sought by the respondent, all agreed upon the relative relevance of the content. For instance, participant F6 observed the use of Twitter as a relay of information from people’s direct experience: “I see people back home that I know talk about it and what really happened when they were there”. Indeed, Twitter was the most cited platform as a mean to gather information and news. Participants noted the use of hashtags, allowing them to check trustworthiness of a given information. For instance, participant M8 said: “when Avicii died, I had gone on Twitter to see if it’s true”. Participant F3 also observed that Twitter and hashtags allow users to learn about the ongoing trends. Similarly, participant M6 stressed the promptness of information to progress on Twitter.

5.2 Protein World

Following the introductory question regarding their amount of exposure to information on social media, participants were introduced to the brand’s attributes, Protein World’s campaign and the online reactions towards it. Each of these sections was presented sequentially to the participants to assess the determinants of the possible changes of perspective regarding image through advertising and negative eWoM.

5.2.1 Brand awareness

None of the participants had prior knowledge of the brand Protein World. Only a couple of them mentioned being active consumers of similar product compared to other participants that did not consumer nor felt as being part of the targeted audience of the brand. Thus, the reactions developed in the following section were not biased by prior any perception towards the brand.

5.2.2 Reaction to the campaign

Thus, the participants were introduced briefly to the brand and its product line. They were then showed a picture taken of the billboard of the brand’s advertisement (see Figure 2 above) and were asked to give their impression towards it.

When presented the campaign, participants reacted on various dimensions. First, some viewed the women depicted in the ad as the “the thing that most visible” F1. Similarly, participant F2 noted that this is a norm to use the female body in advertisement while adding the notion of
“stereotype” when mentioning the beach body slogan. Others were confused on what to think of the advertisement. Participant M8 said, “The first thing I am seeing is the girl. I don’t know what it makes me feel” before acknowledging the possible harm that such message could do to some viewers. Along the lines of what participant F2 said, M8 pointed out the habit of the industry to use the “same skinny model type girl”. Indeed, participant F4 observed the fact that displaying such body type induces a leaning towards a physical ideal. Some respondents questioned the inherent quality of the ad and if it really served the product. For instance, participant M3 said when asked about the ad: “I think it doesn’t fit... ‘Are you beach body ready?’ This is Protein right? I think it’s too much”. Others like M6 also got confused with the purpose of the advertisement, looking at it as “would think it’s a bathing suit advertisement”. Overall, the campaign itself was relative to the participants’ own personal subjective tastes, going from, for M4, “I don’t really like the type of advertisement to be honest” to positively view the choice of campaign for M5, from “nice” stated by M1 to reaching real discomfort felt by F5.

5.2.3 Perceived image

When asked what their perception of the brand was, opinions were quite divided. On one hand, participant F2 stated that the brand’s message was based solely on their intention to sell without regards to its target audience and on the other, participant F5 observed that they are actually selling to people that are pursuing this lifestyle. Hence, most of the participants focused on the fact that the company was using the female body to show a particular lifestyle or an objective only goal. For instance couple of participant asked themselves if they were “beach body ready” like M2. Others as F4 pointed the unrealistic picture depicted by the advertising and that such body needs more than just product to be achieved thought M6. Similarly, some participants questioned the health aspect, for instance participant F3 that pointed out the additional pressure and need to work out intensely for insecure people to achieve this ideal. As M8 puts it: “I think they are saying something like ‘the more skinny, the more beautiful you are’ “

5.2.4 Reaction to online reaction

Participants were then showed a sample of online reaction (Figure 4) that where conveying a negative perspective of the ad. Thematic such as sexism, body shaming and mental health were the most recurrent. Participants were subsequently asked to react to it.

When being confronted with the online responses, participants had contrasted reaction that gave a broad spectrum of opinions. However, most of them agreed on the fact that they were expecting it. Some participant, F4 for example mentioned that they agreed with the reaction as they had already anticipated it. Participant M4 also said “knew this was going to be... I mean
that people were going to talk about it and feel offended by it”. Indeed, some of the respondents like F3 have pointed out the sensitivity of the topic, connecting it to ongoing political and cultural debates such as “feminism”, “objectification of women and conveying unhealthy image of what a woman’s body should look like” said M7. Moreover, the notion of women in advertising was contrasted by the participant M8. He commented on the fact that if it would have been a man’s body displayed on the ad, reactions would not have been the same. He acknowledged that “They are basically doing the same thing just less reaction to it”. Participant M4 also acknowledged the situational aspect of the advertisement display which might have increased the impact on people: “this in a metro station, so big and so graphically... shocking”.

While the viewing of the reactions strengthens some participant’s already existing opinions like F2, the message conveyed by users nuanced other participants’ opinion. While they agreed at first with the reactions, they emphasized the excessiveness of some of these responses. For instance, participant F4 qualified it as “Somewhere a bit aggressive” and added “I wouldn’t be screaming it on social media”. Participant F3 observes that “I feel like if they were angry they could have contacted the company because this is a bit too unfair” after sympathizing with the possible harm that it could have done to people who relate to this issue. Indeed, some respondent did understand the reaction, yet acknowledged the brand’s position. For instance, M1 argued “I can’t totally agree with them because I am against ruining someone’s work”. Similarly, M6 noted that this slogan could be understood differently, thus hypothesized that the brand “didn’t mean to be... offensive, for the people they are trying to reach”. Though some emphases with the negative comments as it brought the new perspective they had not seen at first like M7, it was not the case for all. The notion of over reaction was brought by F5 who was strongly against the behavior of online users. Though she mentioned in the previous section the discomfort when seeing the campaign, she stated “I wasn’t feeling this way because that’s a wrong beauty standard, not at all. I did not even think about it, because each body is different, I don’t have anything against really fit bodies”. Respondents also expressed that they think, the attitude users have online are relatively pertinence of, as participant M2 noted “people get offended easily nowadays”.

5.2.5 Influence consumer perception

Participants were then asked the consequences these reactions might have had on the consumers’ perception of the brand, as well as their own. The product quality being a distinct from the advertisement’s quality, M2 observed that “When you buy those things, you don’t compare advertisement, it’s all about quality”. The product category and its implications have also been pointed out by F4 who said that loyal customers might not get affected when new ones could. Indeed, F2 who strongly agreed with the reactions stated: “I would not want to
spend my money on a sexist company.”. The influence of others opinion has been noticed by some participant. Indeed F3 acknowledged that “when I see people angry, it makes me more angry” and goes on by saying “knew it was going to be offensive already but I didn’t really get mad until I saw the comments”. M7 also pointed out the bandwagon effect that leads people to consolidate their opinion accordingly. Moreover he observed his own evolution of mindset, going from the lack of interest in the product towards a total agreement with the comment. However amongst participants that were not from the brand’s target market, many did not experience a change in their own perception due to the lack of interest in the product. As M6 “I didn’t know the brand but when I see a brand with some protein product like that I know that it is not the truth so it doesn’t affect my opinion because it was already the same”, similarly F1 added “it’s not a brand that I know so doesn’t really matter.”.

5.3 Budlight

Following the Protein World’s campaign, we introduced the second case by an introduction of the Budlight brand. They were warned of the upcoming process: first a display of the reactions, then later the campaign itself. Between those, a follow-up of their current feelings was done.

5.3.1 Brand awareness

Compared to the first campaign, many more (F4, F5, M2, M4, M7, M8) knew the brand Budlight, or at least the major owning company Budweiser, before the interview, either from product placements in movies or for seeing the products in stores. All of those having ever heard of the brand had, however, no opinion on it and were not consumers, except for M2 that expressed a dislike for the products. Thus, the opinion of our subjects is based on what they will see during the interview without any previous assumptions towards the brand itself.

5.3.2 Expectations by seeing only the reactions

After presenting the brand in a few sentences, the respondents were shown a slide with a compilation of the reactions (see Figure 4 above). The first question inquired if they had any first reaction when reading the comments. Confronted with the online reactions chosen, and with no idea of the subject except what they could themselves pull out from those tweets, some of the respondents expressed curiosity, and wanted to see what the company did, F3, F1 and F2: “I am really curious to see what the advertisement is because this sounds really harsh. I mean rape, I really want to see what is going on.” stated F2.

Some expressed a sort of confusion, being unsure and not being able to see a relation, such as F4 who cannot see a relation with beer or have no idea at all like F2, F5 and M8.
Others tried to guess more in detail what the advertisement could be about, either linking it to a sort of freedom given by the product like M1 or comparing it with other advertising like F4, who used the AXE campaign to describe the potential attraction from women you could get from using this product. M7 also associated the message to “pick[ing] up chicks” while M5 noticed the reticence from consumers to buy the product. Several tried to imagine the content of the advertisement like M6. Some of the respondents used the word “joke” to describe what they think is probably on the campaign, like for example F3 or as M8 said, “Ok so something about they made a rape joke or like some video”.

Before having accessed the campaign itself, some respondents were able to identify the potential risk for the company, as F6 put it: “This literally would damage a company’s image SO HARD, it’s not even funny”, or M4 and M7 that believes no brand should ever get near this kind of message, even if it wishes to shock the public.

5.3.3 Reactions to the message after seeing the campaign
The second phase of this case consisted of presenting an image of the slogan displayed on the bottles, as part of the company’s marketing campaign, preceded by a quick explanation that this message particularly led to controversy. The first questions were about what they thought of the message itself, how it made them feel and what message could they understand from the brand.

Two main perspectives are prevalent, in spite of the fact that every respondent had different manners of expressing their opinions.

The first tendency of reaction was quite negative towards the brand and its message. The respondents M2 consider this was “a mistake” or “clumsy” like M8, while oppositely F6 said she doesn’t think it is one as she explained as “That was SO not hard to miss, [...] I think this was also kind of on purpose because they probably wanted to raise a commotion on themselves, [...] this might be actually what they wanted to do”. On the same topic of whether the brand was actually trying to say what the consumers understood in the reaction, the respondent M7 answered that “stuff like that [...] could easily be misunderstood”, which correlates with the answers of F2, F3 and M3, who think this is a matter of interpretation.

Some of the respondent addressed the subject of alcoholism, directly linked with the product to express their feelings towards the slogan like M5 who points out that alcoholism is a real problem of the our society while M6 consider that “the slogan is dangerous” due to the recklessness in some people’s drinking behavior, sometimes leading to dangerous actions or even “sexually that could pay away for diseases” according to M8. This sexual behavior, previously linked to rape in the reactions as well as in some interpretations from the respondents, is highly prosecuted by a few respondents, who felt strongly about the subject. Along this line, F6 related it to the consequences it can have, saying “it’s a very sensitive
subject [...] A lot of people commit suicide because of this.” whereas M7 said “that having that capability to say no is really important because somebody trying to take advantage on you when it’s consensual can be … It’s not good.”

On the other hand, the rest did not see the harm in the slogan displayed on the Budlight bottle. F2 first said she was expecting something worse, further developing as “this is I think for fun and for beers. I would not interpret it like that.” In the same manner, F4 had quite positive impressions of the campaign and said she would not read rape in this slogan, an opinion shared by M4 using adjectives like “quite good” or “not offensive”. Two respondents concluded that this was probably not the intention of the brand to talk about rape, for example F3 and M3, which M7 thought was originally meant as “a playful way” or “a confidence boost”.

5.3.4 Reactions to the reactions after seeing the campaign

The last subject consulted with the interviewees was their feelings towards the reactions they saw, now that they had seen the campaign and could compare it to their own beliefs.

Most of the respondents felt compassionate with the online reactions, considering them “justified” as stated by M2 and M5. Some of them claimed that they “understand” the reactions, and even would have the same, like M2 as it is a very “touchy” and “sensitive” topic, since “there is a lot of places where they’re having problems with sexual harassing or comments or assaults” stated F6. While the respondent F4 says, she can see where the detractors could get the idea from, she also considers those as “very far-fetched”. From this point of view, there are similarities with the answers from other respondents, M3 and M4, who describe the reactions seen as an “overreaction” which according to M4 is due to a will to integrate a “movement”. This idea that the public all have the same reaction is shared by F5 that describes the public as “fragile and so easily offended”. Interviewee M8 also consider this an exaggeration but express some hesitation about his feelings towards the tweets.

Some of them confessed being influenced by the reactions, either fully recognizing it like F3 who said, “I don’t think they necessary meant rape, but since I have read the comments before it is in my head […] I think I am influence about what they said before.” In accordance with this response, F1 claimed that because she didn’t know the brand, seeing the negative comments online would push her towards another brand. The respondent M8 also replied that he wouldn’t want anyone to see him with this beer if everyone knew the reputation associated to with, so he wouldn’t choose Budlight. The other way around, F5 confessed not caring, as it “did not influence [her] whatsoever”.

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6 Analysis

The aim of this section is to link the results to theories seen in the Theoretical Framework. We divided each individual by themes in order to have a clearer view of their evolutions of thought throughout the interview and analyze three phenomena: controversy, interpretation and influence.

6.1 Coding via concepts

As mentioned in the previous chapter, the data analysis approach of this study was first conducted following recurrent themes found in the empirical results. While in the empirical data part was broad to cover as much of the data possible, this section focuses essentially on relevant processes and on certain respondents, chosen for their evolution throughout the interviews. Subsequently, concepts from the literature were used to identify the underlying phenomenon implied in consumers’ perception of advertisement message and reaction to negative eWoM. Those concepts were the base to find the themes in the respondents’ answers: we looked for emotional and cognitive responses that could be assigned to one of the dimensions, then subdivided it through six main themes on the scale. Those six themes were still too broad and had different meanings for the respondents; leading to another subdivision. For example, the theme of “Taboo” applies to two different kinds: an intense personal taboo, or a more socially recognized one. The coding used is developed as displayed in the following table.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Affective</th>
<th>Relatedness</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The respondent had a direct experience or feels directly connected to the content.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The respondent had an indirect experience or feels indirectly connected to the content.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Taboo</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The matter is sensitive in modern society</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The matter is sensitive according to inner beliefs</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Disapproval</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The respondent rejects the reactions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The respondent rejects the brand's message</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The respondent shows relativism, reasonably understands.

The respondent shows compassion, emotionally understands.

The respondent opinion is equally balanced.

The respondent shows no interest or no opinion.

The respondent analyzes the content from a lambda consumer's perspective

The respondent analyzes the content from a brand's / marketer's perspective

**Figure 6: Coding used during the analysis, outlined from the interviews**

The coding used to analyze empirical was compared to the conceptual framework based on the literature. The scale used in the coding analysis to understand participants’ reaction was based from strongly affective responses to high cognitive responses. The following table summarized the concepts deemed relevant to analyze first the participants’ perception of advertisement message and reaction to negative eWoM.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Cognition processes</th>
<th>Emotional processes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>High NFC</strong>: relevant information about a product, sees advertising</td>
<td><strong>Low NFC</strong>: lack of attraction towards informative advertisement and are more</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Social identity theory</strong> defined as “a group-based identity which is positively seen and distinguishes”</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
rationally and to evaluates it on a logical basis

appealed by entertainment content

it from out-group members”

**Coping strategies:** assert strong in-group identity, competitive behavior to improve in-group status and exhibit defensive reaction

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>COGNITIVE RESPONSE</th>
<th>EMOTIONAL RESPONSE</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

**Counter argument:** comparison of the information relatively to the one’s own knowledge and belief

**Source Derogation:** investigates the source of the message and questions the possible bias

**Distanciation:** increase distance from stimuli based on fear, sadness, distress, dislike and regret

**Rejection:** avoidance of the stimulus shown by disgust, contempt and shame

**Attack:** dismissal of the stimulus resulting in frustration, anger and guilt

**Support Argument:** comes from external influences more aware of influence

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**Figure 7: Summary of concept used for coding**

6.1.1 Protein World

Using the coding explained in the latter section, the respondents were placed in each category according to certain sentences expressed. They were analyzed before and after seeing the reactions, according to the continuity of the interviews, to be able to oppose them and assess the possible changes induced by seeing the reactions.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Reaction to the campaign</th>
<th>Reaction to the reactions</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Relatedness</strong></td>
<td><strong>Relatedness</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Direct</em> experience F5</td>
<td><em>Direct</em> experience F2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Indirect</em> experience M5</td>
<td><em>Indirect</em> experience M7, F6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Taboo</strong> Societal Issues F5</td>
<td><strong>Taboo</strong> Societal Issues F5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Theme</td>
<td>Inner belief</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-------------</td>
<td>--------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Disapproval</td>
<td>M7, M8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>M3, M7, M6, M4, M6</td>
<td>F2, F4, F6, F2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>F2, F4, M6, F3, M7, M3</td>
<td>F3, F4, M4, M6</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Figure 8: Respondents classified in each theme for the first campaign

As mentioned in the previous section, participants tend to exhibit negative reactions towards the contents shown, from both the advertisement and the reactions. When presented with the online reactions, participants showed a clear tendency towards understanding the reactions shown, a phenomena that will be investigated in the following section. In spite of the diversity of opinion shown in the interview, the majority of participants thus fall under the “Understanding” area towards the reactions, either by relativism or by compassion.

6.1.2 Budlight

Due to the difference in the proceeding for the second campaign, the data was here analyzed according to expectations and primary opinion coming from only the reactions, opposed to the feelings on both the ad and the reactions. This allows a comparison between the content, based on prior instinct.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Expectations before seeing the campaign</th>
<th>Reaction after seeing the campaign</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Relatedness</td>
<td>Direct experience</td>
<td>F6 Direct experience</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Indirect experience</td>
<td>F3 Indirect experience</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Taboo</td>
<td>Societal Issues</td>
<td>M2 M5 M8 M2 Societal Issues</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Inner belief</td>
<td>M6 M7 Inner belief</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Disapproval</td>
<td>Rejects the reactions</td>
<td>F5 F4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Rejects the brand's message</td>
<td>M4 M6 M2 M5 M6 F3 F6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Understanding</td>
<td>Relativism</td>
<td>F4 M2 M6 F5 Relativism</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Compass</td>
<td>M2 Compass</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Neutral</td>
<td>Perfect balance</td>
<td>F3 Perfect balance</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>No interest</td>
<td>F5 No interest</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Methodic</td>
<td>Consumer's perspective</td>
<td>F1 F2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Brand's perspective</td>
<td>M4 M8 F1 M4 M8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>M1 M6 M7 M4 M8</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Figure 9. Respondents classified in each theme for the second campaign.*

In the context in which the second campaign was treated, it was more complicated to define two different periods of thinking, as with seeing only the reactions at first, most respondents had trouble identifying any feelings or ideas without having more information. It is still, however, more relevant to assess reactions prior to the campaign, thus expectations arising from the reactions only, then compare it to the thoughts ensuing from being able to contrast it to the campaign.

### 6.2 Phenomenon

As the coding found in the interviews have been explained, and linked to the corresponding concepts, this section will further analyze the implications of movements between each coding...
within the interviews, and how they create phenomenon linking the literature and the respondent's behavior.

6.2.1 Controversy

Being a focal point of this study, the controversial aspect of the advertisement obviously arose during the interviews. The vision of controversy adopted by the respondents is closely linked to the viral aspect of an advertisement. Three examples of how one’s own vision of controversy applies to this study are here detailed.

Counter argument

An interesting phenomenon that we saw is the opinion and thought of the participant F6. Indeed, as seen in the results that her first thought without seeing the slogan but just the reaction was very virulent and she didn’t question the answer whatsoever saying, “This literally would damage a company's image SO HARD, it’s not even funny”. Her following answers when confronted with the campaign show us that she is very sensitive to the subject of rape and have an already strong position on the question. She immediately assumed that the company did that on purpose, “I don’t think it’s a mistake”. She occulted all possibility that people could not see the meaning she is seeing.

Here we can assimilate the reaction of participant F6 to a rational feeling, which falls into the cognitive dimension of self-congruence, as she does understand and relate to the issues due to her personal beliefs and knowledge of the subject. The reactions support her inner arguments, so the rejection of the advertisement’s message from the reactions and her self-image leads to a correlation. However, despite the present relatedness, she somewhat takes a step back from the situation and the offense (“Yes [it is offending]”); and does not express immediate contempt or personal hurting and therefore falls in the cognitive area rather than affective. Indeed, she immediately follows by explaining what is offending, but the reasons behind that were objective and not from personal experience, she said “it’s a very sensitive topic to a lot of different people that are going through stuff that is insane, or changes them” and “it probably triggers them and worsens the entire situation of trying to fix the rape culture”. Here, the message conveyed by the brand, its controversy and its possible impact is the main counter-arguments, not the brand or the subject itself.

The language and demeanor adopted by the respondent during the dialogue indicate a strong temperament that leaves low to no space for influence.
Rejection emotions

For this campaign, one other highly interesting profile to analyze was participant M7. When confronted with the reactions in the first place, he opted for a marketing point of view, therefore falling in the methodic strategy, as he judged the marketing decision of the brand and its pertinence. He deemed that “for a brand to dabble in those brand messages is like a stupid decision”, arguing that “[he] do[sn]t think you should create shock value by touching those subject” since he believes that “it’s quite a strong issue”. This last comment allows to categorize the participant in the taboo category, in this case rather as a societal issue since he does not express any relatedness to the subject. After being displayed the campaign itself, through the picture of the bottle, M7 however felt more concerned about the soaring problem communicated in the reactions, in this case rape. Indeed, the participant shared a personal story in which he was himself victim of sexual harassment linked to alcohol abuse; a story in which he expresses his refusal towards an inebriated person who wouldn’t take no as an answer. Therefore, the slogan “The perfect beer for removing no from your vocabulary” resonated strongly for him, which he revealed as “I had one experience where me saying no didn’t really work that well and I know how that feeling can be so yes I think that having that capability to say no is really important because somebody trying to take advantage on you when it’s consensual can be ... It’s not good.” The raw and direct relatedness of this experience can resonate with the previous sayings of F6 about trauma, and how seeing related content can affect the person privately.

Resonating to her, the respondent M7 associated the issue with a personal story, which brings it into the affective dimension of the self-congruence. He clearly links the brand’s message to topics such as taboo, which indicates emotional involvement, as this is related to a personal experience. While first adopting a rational perspective, the relatedness rise when seeing the slogan leads to the support of the argument, and the participant starts developing more about the subject. Unlike F6, he does not only treat the subject but connects to it and rejects it without holding the reactions or the brand accountable for his discomfort, only the personal feelings are considered. These feelings were closer to the “rejection” emotion family than to the others, as being victim of a taboo situation can be shameful.

Source derogation

Brand and subject rejection have been illustrated, and the same phenomenon can be applied to reaction rejection. In the case of respondent M4, the rejection does not only concern the reactions, but rather their controversial aspect and their relevance. According to him, “with social media a lot of people are also exaggerating a lot just to be part of the movement” and
therefore do not feel concerned. He develops further with “Some people really get offended but some will just be saying “yeah I agree, this is horrific, they should have never have done this” and they don’t really care about it.” In this case, the participant was coded as “Disapproval of the reactions”, since he demonstrates the source derogation variable, that is he is considering the answers on Twitter as not significant because of their origin. To him, social media’s reactions are biased by a need to overreact and therefore there is no real controversy, only collective exaggeration.

6.2.2 Interpretation

When analyzing the reactions of participants after being exposed to the negative eWoM stimulus, we noted some kind of contrast regarding the perceived message content and the content itself, either on the campaign or on the reactions.

New perspective

Indeed, participants took the message content and highlighted the interpretative factor when reacting to the negative WoM. Many participants whose first reaction was coded as methodic due to the high level of NFC, acknowledged the fact that even though they did not argue with the users, they understood their claim. Participant M5 for instance stated in Protein World case the fact that “It can be called a misunderstanding” even though he stays in the methodic category with the company point of view by saying “the brand didn’t mean to be offensive”. This is also the case of other participants that mention terms such as F4 who state “I feel like I kind of understand”, F2 that observed regarding the Budlight case “I think it can be differently interpreted”. Participant M3 on the other hand takes from the support argument variable, information in message content from the reaction to compare it to the advertisement message by arguing “For me at least, I wouldn’t interpret it as embracing rape, because that doesn’t come to my mind. But maybe for women, I think the perspective would be different. Because it’s a bit different from both sides.”. All participants that mentioned this phenomenon of understanding the possible interpretation however are not manifesting any changes of perspective, rather making sense of the reactions themselves.

Substance

As for M2, the phenomenon pulled from his reactions is based on his perception, interpretation of the brand’s message itself, therefore in the substance of the advertisement. He has trouble interpreting the protein aspect of the brand, because he says “Overall I would think it’s a bathing suit advertisement if anything, without the text”. He cannot relate the content of the ad,
the woman, to the product and thinks about what it would really be according to the substance of the ad, adopting a “methodic customer’s point of view”. As he can relate to the general environment of the brand, proteins, the participant M2 expresses what he expects from the brand for him to share the same interpretation of weight loss, rather than bikini through the sentence: “When you buy those things, you don’t compare advertisement, it’s all about quality”. If confronted with this type of product, he has a clear opinion on his expectations of the content, not matched here, which implies a high NFC. A person with low NFC would not analyze the way it should be marketed nor if it fits with his needs, as they would focus on the entertaining aspect only.

Medium

In the case of M6, his understanding of the perceived message of the reactions can be explained as doing the opposite of source derogatory. The respondent states many times that he often use Twitter and find it “fun”, therefore he is used to the platform and the form of its content. He has trust in what he sees on the social media because he has a direct experience with it. Therefore, he will be more likely to accept the interpretation of the reactions, because in his idea, they are relevant. He is not especially compassionate, but simply understands the effects of negative eWoM with this special source. There is high self-congruence between his view of the medium and the pertinence of the reactions.

6.2.3 Influence

Different degrees of influence were exhibited by participants relative to each own individuality; some of them appearing in the results, whether positive or negative. Three of these levels are here portrayed, from zero to high influence.

Tribe

When investigating possible influences participants experienced facing the campaign and the reaction, F2 manifested the higher self-congruence in regards to the comments. Indeed she was first classified as “methodic consumer point-of-view” due to her rational way of perceiving the advertisement. She manifested some picks of dismissal towards the advertisement message by mentioning “this is a perfect body, this is not like “you go to the beach with your body, it’s a beach body””. Interestingly, we noted an increase of hesitation as she elaborated her opinion and added rational arguments “This product can not give you that body, for sure”. Once shown the reaction, she immediately gained in insurance. Her first reaction was structured in three steps: “I feel like this is the reaction I had as well. I’m glad that people see that as well. I wish
that men would see that as well”. The repetition of “as well” and her reaction show the evolution from the concept of self-image, social categorization in-group (e.g. online reaction), to social categorization out-group (e.g. brand message); thus linking it to the concept of self-identity. Indeed, we find the same notion in the self-categorization following the “them” and “use”, which lead to the coding of “direct relatedness”. Such progression of argument leads to “increase her rejection of advertisement message” by stating when asked if she thought it impacted the brand image: “Yes [...] I would not want to spend my money on a sexist company.”

Bandwagon effect

One of the most influencing phenomena is the Bandwagon effect, hereby shown by two respondents. We will focus on the participant M8 due to the specifics of his reaction. First of all when confronted to the slogan of Budlight after the reactions, the interviewee is really hesitant and he comes up first with “I mean a bit over-reacting maybe” so in a disagreement of the reactions. Then he takes the side of the reactions but nuance every answer by saying that he understood what the brand wanted to do “I don’t know, ‘removing the no’ I see what they are saying”. We really feel hesitation and he does not want to take any side because he might not want to get associated with a side, it is a very neutral point of view.

But then when asked if he would consume a beer with that slogan on it or if he was affected by that controversy, we identify the bandwagon effect, thus how community and opinion can act on your behavior but not necessarily your personal opinion.

He never stated his personal view, opinion, or thought in the answer to that question, the only variable that can make him consume or not the beer is the vision of others on his behavior. “You don’t want to be seen drinking this beer if everybody knows that they are having these weird comments on the beer” and “But if they had a campaign and no-one really cares... yeah [I would consume the beer]” are his only statements after asking if he would or not consume the beer. He clearly would act considering popular opinion and mass rather than considering his personal opinion, one that is unclear. If people think it is bad, then it is bad.

Impassivity

Neutrality concerning the advertisement chosen in our interview was present in a few of our interviews. This impassivity and emotional distance are perfectly represented by the participant F1. Firstly her intonation is very passive and she does not really engage with the interviewers, her answers a straightforward and short “no” “Not for me personally no.” or “I don’t know to be honest.” are a few examples of answer closing the possible discussion. The subject F1 was
reluctant to develop her impressions and personal thoughts. The ratio between our interventions to make her talk and her actual thought is close to one showing a reluctant attitude. She shows no relatedness, she says, about the reactions to the ad Protein World: “It wouldn’t affects the way I see myself and it’s not a brand that I know so doesn’t really matter”, there is a distance taken with the subject in the second part of the sentence meaning that neither the reactions nor the ad affect her judgment and she just does not have an opinion about it.

6.3 Analysis summary

We can see from the three concepts associated to the controversy phenomenon that they can fit in the cognitive dimension, like counter argument and source derogating, but in the affective dimension as well, like the rejection emotion expressed. This shows that controversy is extensively related to your internal beliefs and your rational amplitude, this is a question of understanding or rejecting the reactions that create the viral effect; or push it yourself because of sensitive personal opinion.

The interpretation phenomenon is however strictly related to the cognitive dimension, which is linked to an analytical behavior of whether the subject is normal or logical in one’s mind. The concept of support argument associated with perspective implies that one’s interpretation is due to the affinity between their own argument and the acceptance of other people’s arguments. The notion of NFC falls also in this dimension, as implied in the name, and implies the aspect of content that an individual seeks. High NFC implies a methodical analysis of content to assess if it fits their expectation, which if met will mirror the interpretation, whereas low NFC indicates an appeal for entertainment, usually a less relevant interpretation. A similar process applies with derogation, as the type of platform or placement used can stain the interpretation of the audience if not relevant to them.

Influence is noticeably resulting from an emotional dimension, in which emotional distance and, opposingly, self-categorization are coherent mechanisms. Whether the subject feels strongly attached or emotional towards the content, or emotionally distant due to a lack of interest or opinion, the personal feelings are compared to the expressed feelings of the population. When an individual goes from neutrality to concern, and vice versa, according to the movement of the population, then there is an influential process called bandwagon effect.
The purpose of this study was to understand consumers’ perception towards a controversial campaign gone viral on social media and its influence on brand image. Throughout the exploration of existing literature on the place brands hold in today’s environment, especially for Millennials, the importance of word-of-mouth was emphasized in the shift of consumers’ perception. Based on a qualitative analysis of semi-structured interviews and theoretical concepts illustrating self-image relatively to others, this study answers on how the spread of a controversial campaign influences the consumer’s perception of the brand.

First, influence is noticeably resulting from an emotional place, in which consumers demonstrate an emotional distance or opposingly, a strong relatedness based feeling of having a voice through the online reactions. When an individual goes from being neutral to concerned, or vice versa according to the public’s opinion, or suddenly has an excessive response similar to the reactions, then there is an influential process. The interpretation phenomenon is however strictly related to the analytical behavior of whether the subject is rational or logical in one’s mind. When seeing opinion of others, individuals show a tendency to incorporate it to their own thinking process relatively to the message perceived. The type of content that an individual seek in an advertisement implies either a methodical analysis of content, or an appeal for entertainment, usually leading to a more distant interpretation than planned from the company.

When investigating the widespread of negative online comment, is it important to consider the medium on which the messages are shared. Indeed, the relative credibility of comments highly depend on the perception consumers have prior considering it. Therefore, the controversial aspect can also be doubted. In the same line, controversy is a highly subjective notion to which consumers are not systematically relying to, depending on personal values. It comes from both a cognitive and an emotional response, resting on the relatedness level, showing that controversy is extensively linked to your internal beliefs and your rational amplitude.

Overall, the spread of a controversial campaign can influence the consumer perception, either positively or negatively, but on various dimensions depending on the consumer’s own response processes (cognitive or emotional).
8 Discussion

In this section, alternative findings not based on concepts and gained knowledge regarding the data will be detailed here in order to deepen the analysis executed previously. Managerial implications and limitations will complete the discussion.

8.1 External determinants of the phenomenon

It is interesting to notice that the three controversial phenomena all arose during the second part of the interview, hence the Budlight campaign. The fact that controversy related outcomes were more pronounced with this campaign can be explained by the difference of controversy in the subject themselves. Indeed, the subject of rape is more taboo and sensitive than body positivity and sexualization, essentially because it has become usual for consumers to face objectification of women in the media, decreasing the shock and refusal of this kind of marketing strategy, whereas opposingly, rape has been widely denounced around the time of the interviews, with the #MeToo movement. One would expect the female respondents to reject the first advertisement, for the way it pictures the female body as a result from relatedness, however, it is actually mostly males that disapproved the brand message, expressing sympathetic understanding, while females disagreed with the reactions and opted for a relativist understand. This is a demonstration of the involvement of Millennials as a whole, boys and girls, in the current societal issues but also emphasize the novelty of this generation.

But in the meantime, contrasting with that involvement on societal issues, we spotted that a lot of participants was really hesitant and not expansive on the subject presented. Even the ones who had a strong opinion on the marketing campaign presented took a little bit of effort to get involved in the interview. Most of them were really detached and nuance everything they were saying by showing that they were understanding both sides. This shows a detachment on these controversial themes that millennials are confronted every day in our society. There is an easy to forget virality and buzz because of the characteristics of it. We jump from controversy to controversy and don’t have time to digest and analyze them which put ourselves in a position where we just find it normal to see those controversies and fight and thus don’t take any side.

As stated in the results chapter, the use of social media by our subjects was limited to 3 aspects: Communication, entertainment, and information. The communication aspects in order to keep the contact with peers by tagging them or use social media to work with a project group for example. The entertainment aspect to have fun and laugh about thread happening on Twitter or funny content. The information aspect, especially on Twitter, in order to get the most recent
news about a subject from journalist sources or personal sources. But none of them actually mentioned that they would or that they are using social media to transmit and spread an idea or an opinion like the person we showed them. Which show also a detachment towards controversy. A quote that strike us and illustrate perfectly the phenomenon of being simple spectators is from M7 saying “I think this situation would be taken care of by other people, there is a lot of people around that will make sure that this goes down.” added to “I wouldn’t waste my time” even if he directly related to the matter.

8.2 Outcomes on influence

The self-congruence dimensions that lead to the three main families of phenomenon discovered, emotional and cognitive, are however not opposing each other. Although there is a ladder aspect of going from emotional responses to the cognitive responses, passing through alternatives steps (or concepts) relating more or less to one of the sides, there is no exclusivity as to which side “wins” in an individual’s personality. As we could expect from a qualitative interview, the human mind is complex and trying to reduce them only to one of these dimensions would be inefficient and wrong. Indeed, we noticed it was possible to express emotional and cognitive reactions about the same topic, from various angles. The overlay of two families of phenomenon actually enlightens us about the role each reaction has onto the other.

Figure 10: Visual representation of the phenomenon and their connections
In other words, while each “family” (interpretation, controversy, and influence) is only applicable to one dimension of the spectrum (cognitive or emotional), except controversy that can be in both, the study shows that there are however possible combinations between these families themselves and identifies how they can affect each other. Illustrated above in (the) figure 10 as A, B and C, the connections between each of the three movements show a dominant bond, explained as follow:

**A: Interpretation determines controversy**
The relation between Interpretation and controversy works in one way. The interpretation exerted towards the brands or the reactions’ “message” will, in the case of a controversial topic, lead to the analysis of the message and the interpretation presented or stated by the interviewee himself. The interviewee will thus think about the controversial aspect of the message that people bring to him or that he spotted by himself forcing an analysis it. After that, there are two possible responses linked to the controversy family, acceptation or derogation.

**B: Interpretation determines influence**
The interpretation the interviewee will have about the message portrayed by the brand will be confronted with the interpretation of the people who reacted on social media. If the interpretation or thought of the interviewee is closely linked to the reaction people have on social media, it can lead to an influence of the interviewee opinion in a sense that he will relate a lot to the reaction and feel that his idea is strengthened by the shared beliefs. But it can also be opposite and the interviewee can be influenced in the other way, rejecting the reactions and defending is the point just because he saw those bad reactions like the subject F5. Putting a new perspective influenced by the reactions.

**C: Controversy determines influence.**
The link between controversy and influence can first be illustrated by the bandwagon effect. When confronted with controversial content and mass negative Word of Mouth one can avoid the consumption of a product because of social integration like we saw with the subject M8. The influence is based only on others beliefs and vision about the controversy. The controversy factor also determines the level of influence if there is a strong relatedness with the reactions which enter an emotional level, then the interviewee will avoid the consumption of the product because of inner belief.

**8.3 Interconnection within phenomenon**
We can see that the Interpretation phenomenon has a greater impact than the two others, reverberating on both Controversy and Influence. With a less extensive consequence, controversial processes also have consequences on whether the target will feel influenced by the
content. Therefore, we can assume that Influence in the case of a viral marketing campaign exposed to NWoM is defined by the sum of the matter’s initial and cognitive perception, and the relationship towards the disputable topic, whether emotional or rational. In the case of a regular campaign, the process would be reduced as the dynamic between one’s understanding of the message and relatedness to the content. Thus, we can conclude that the most important factor to take into consideration when analyzing influence is to be able to convey the right message in a correct way to avoid any error of interpretation, which could then lead to the rise of a controversial reaction.

8.4 Limitations and further research

Although we achieved almost a gender equity (8 males vs 6 females), the characteristic we considered relevant to include in the sampling table is the program studied by the participants. Indeed, most of them are business students. Due to their studies, they have previous knowledge and perceptions of marketing and advertisement that could have overshadowed their reactions, even more considering that in the “Methodic - Brand’s perspective” we can mostly find these business respondents. Here, the influence does not come from the study itself (campaign nor reactions) but from the participant’s background. It could, therefore, be interesting to focus on the correlation between cognitive responses and the role of the studies into which aspects are pointed out in a study.

The approach developed along this study was based on qualitative data which relied on a semi-structured interview. Even though participants were selected with intend to gather diverse perspective on this topic, they were also made from convenience. Indeed, most of the respondent being an international undergraduate at Jonkoping University, their perception might not be fully representative in regard to age or culture.

Also, this study focused on a specific part of culture which relies on the perspective of women in advertisement. Culture being an inherent part of the concept of self-congruence, this study depicts the perception of individuals relative to this issue. Moreover, the controversial aspect of on which this study was based followed the determinants peculiar to the western culture. Factors of the perception of taboo and controversy might indeed have differed in other cultures. The case studies which ground the collection of empirical data were gathered by looking at negative reactions on social media, especially Twitter. Knowing that Twitter gathers a majority of active users from the US, it is acknowledged that the selection of case studies might have been influenced by the occidental standard and particularly from the United States.
References


Wilson, A.E., Giebelhausen, M.D. & Brady, M.K. J. (2017) Negative word of mouth can be a positive for consumers connected to the brand, *Journal of the Academy of Marketing Science, 45*, 534.


APPENDICES

Appendice 1 - Consent to Audio Form

CONSENT TO AUDIO - OR VIDEO RECORDING & TRANSCRIPTION
Bachelor Thesis

Lara Gender, Anne-Gabrielle Hoarau and Victor Ricard. Students in International Management from Jönköping International Business School

This study involves the audio or video recording of your interview with the researcher. Neither your name nor any other identifying information will be associated with the audio or audio recording or the transcript. Your age and nationality will be used, if your consent is given. Only the research team will be able to listen (view) to the recordings. The tapes will be transcribed by the researcher and erased once the transcriptions are checked for accuracy. Transcripts of your interview may be reproduced in whole or in part for use in presentations or written products that result from this study. Neither your name nor any other identifying information (such as your voice or picture) will be used in presentations or in written products resulting from the study.

By signing this form, I am allowing the researcher to audio or video tape me as part of this research. I also understand that this consent for recording is effective until the following date: 21th of July 2018. On or before that date, the tapes will be destroyed.

Age:
Nationality:
Participant's Signature:

Date:
Appendice 2 - Interview guide.

OWN EXPERIENCE

Q - INFORMAL
Could you do tell me more about yourself? Your age, where you come from and so.
What is your relationship with social media? Do you use them a lot? What for?
Do you see a lot of advertisement on social media? Do you care about it?

Q - BEST / WORST CAMPAIGN?
If you had to watch a marketing campaign again which one would you choose?
Why this campaign marked you? Was it in a good or bad way? Triggers
Where did you saw it? (How is presented to the consumer + influence)

CASE STUDY 1 - Protein World

Q - DO YOU KNOW THE BRAND, WHAT DO YOU THINK?
How long have you known the brand, what image do you have (sustainable? good or bad? no opinion?)

* SHOW THE AD *

Q - WHAT DO YOU THINK AND WHY
What message do you understand, what are the brand values according to you?

* SHOW REACTION *

Q - WHAT DO YOU THINK ABOUT THOSE?
Do you think it impacted Brand image / Loyalty?
Do you see yourself in those?

CASE STUDY 2 - Budlight

Q - DO YOU KNOW THE BRAND, WHAT DO YOU THINK?
How long have you known the brand, what image do you have (sustainable? good or bad? no opinion?)

* SHOW THE REACTIONS *

Q - WHAT DO YOU THINK ABOUT THOSE?
Do you think it impacted Brand image / Loyalty?
Do you see yourself in those?

* SHOW THE CAMPAIGN *

Q - WHAT DO YOU THINK AND WHY
What message do you understand, what are the brand values according to you?

Appendice 3 - The Long Tail Phenomenon