

# 'Dangerous waters' of doing social activism in advertising

## Gillette case study



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## **Abstract**

This paper seeks to examine understandings of social activism in advertising, taking Gillette's commercial (2019) '*The best men can be*' as a point of departure. The project aims to find out whether companies should be involved in social activism by doing advertising from the audience's perspective. The project introduces relevant theoretical approaches, such as Stuart Hall's encoding/decoding theory and Kim Schröder's receptions analysis, which together with our collected data gained through qualitative interviews, serves as the backbone of the project. The project examines the audience's positions towards the Gillette commercial, which we consider as promising case in our endeavour to establish the extent of audiences' approval of social activism integrated in companies' advertisements. These findings will help us determine the audience's viewpoints on whether companies should be involved in social activism by producing advertisements. Based on the results of the analysis, we find that the audiences approve of the positive messages social activist advertisements deliver; however, they are more sceptical towards the message due to the source it is deriving from: the tension between the genre of advertisements produced by profit-seeking corporations and the nature of social activism aiming to bring about social change can affect how audiences decode the intended message.

## **Abstrakt**

Dette projekt undersøger deltageres forståelse af social aktivisme i reklamer med udgangspunkt i Gillettes reklame (2019) "*The best a man can be*". Mere præcist er hensigten er finde svar på, hvorvidt deltagerne mener, at virksomheder bør inkludere social aktivisme i deres reklamer. Undersøgelsen anvender relevante teoretiske tilgange som Stuart Halls indkodning/afkodnings teori og Kim Schrøders receptionsanalyse, som sammen med den indsamlede data fra kvalitative interviews fungerer som grundlaget for projektet. Projektet undersøger deltageres holdning til Gillettes reklame, som anses for at være en lovende case i vores bestræbelserne på at vurdere, hvorvidt deltagerne billiger virksomheders anvendelse af social aktivisme i reklamer. Resultaterne fra interviewene vil hjælpe med at afklare, hvorvidt virksomheder bør inkludere social aktivisme i deres reklamer. Baseret på resultaterne fra analysen sætter deltagerne pris på budskabet i disse reklamer, men er mere skeptiske over for kilden, som budskabet stammer fra: spændingen mellem genren af reklamer produceret af profitsøgende virksomheder og social aktivisme, hvis mål er at skabe social forandring, har en effekt på, hvordan deltagerne afkoder det tilsigtede budskab.

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# I. Introduction

Today, due to countless communicative platforms, users of modern media come in contact with a large number of images, videos, the majority of which are created by companies to sell products. It is becoming more and more challenging for organizations to catch people's attention and get their message through to the audience. Brands are not only concerned with promoting specific products, but they also recognize the importance of creating or maintaining a positive image of the company. We can see an increasing amount of examples of organizations highlighting ethical, environmental, or other social problems in their communication in order to stand out in a highly competitive market. However, such strategies also stem from the fact that consumers are more and more conscious about the social and political values brands represent, thus their purchases are also influenced by the link between organizations and social causes. So one way organizations create this link is focusing on relevant social issues in their advertisements. That suggests that companies want to raise awareness about different issues in our society and want to achieve change that can lead to a better world. Communicating messages to the audience that aim to generate social change can also be seen as actions of brand activism.

In this project, we aim to research audiences' perceptions on whether organizations should be involved in advertisements that incorporate social activism by introducing them to one particular media product: the Gillette campaign "*The best a man can be.*" Viewed by millions on social media, this video advertisement has triggered a heated debate on, among others, the corporate appropriation of social activist ideals in marketing campaigns. Is it a case of the industry acting opportunistically in a market-driven economy in the interests of maximizing profit? Or, could corporations, engaging in social activism, be seen as potential vehicles for social change? These are the questions we want to reflect on in our research.

## **Gillette advertisement**

The Gillette advertisement, 'We believe: The best men can be' published in 2019 sparked huge controversy and debate on the internet and social media. Gillette explains on their website that the title originates from their tagline '*The best a man can get,*' which was first introduced by the company 30 years ago (Gillette, n.d). With this campaign Gillette aims to

inspire men to be better versions of themselves and to become role models for young boys. Gillette reflects this idea in their communication, including in ads, on their website, and through social media. The company is aware that large brands like them can have an impact on society, and through the ad *'The best men can be,'* they are determined *"to actively challenge the stereotypes and expectations of what it means to be a man"* (Gillette, n.d). The message they are trying to get across to the audience through their communication is that in a new era of masculinity, there is a need to be improvement and change, and they invite people to join them in their fight for a 'new man'. Gillette acknowledges that they *"have a responsibility to make sure we are promoting positive, attainable, inclusive, and healthy versions of what it means to be a man"* (Gillette, n.d).

Based on the background information Gillette provides on the ad and its title, it is clear that company's intention was to bring attention to the stereotypical characteristics of masculinity and by this, make men more conscious of their behaviour and encourage them to improve, and to build new standards for what it means to be a man. Even though their intention with the campaign is to introduce a positive social change, it has not been appreciated by plenty of viewers.

Gillette's social media got swamped with controversial responses. On Youtube, currently, the ad has 1,4 million dislikes next to 791 thousand likes. Negative reactions of users dominate the comment field, with statements such as *"Gillette, your sexist stereotyping is itself a form of bullying and harassment!"* or *"Congratulations Gillette on insulting and alienating most of your customer-base"* (*"We Believe: The Best Men Can Be | Gillette (Short Film)"*, 2019).

On Twitter, users created #boycottgillette. Using the tag, a large number of people from all over the world expressed their indignation. Users tweeted about switching to another razor brand, committed to never using Gillette products again. For example, one stated (Twitter, 2019):

"My entire shaving life, I've used Gillette. No more. Meet my new razor and razor company - Schick. . #BoycottGillette"

Another user tweeted (Twitter, 2019):

”@Gillette Don't tell me how to be a man #BoysWillBeBoys #BoycottGillette”.

Some chose to purchase products from other brands after seeing the ad (Twitter, 2019):

“No more @Gillette in my shaving kit. Gillette you are not the best a man can get. Time to get new shaving products of other brands.”

The internet was also quick at coming up with memes that ridicule the attempt of Gillette to teach men how to behave (Twitter, 2019):



The meme above refers to a new phase in advertising, where brands aim to encourage social change, while the example below puts toxic masculinity into another perspective (Twitter, 2019).



Some internet users also wondered whether this new approach to advertising would help the company to advance the sales of their main product (Twitter, 2019).



The reactions, both positive and negative, as well as Gillette’s aspiration to help create “better man” cannot be taken out of context. The ad was inspired by the prominent MeToo movement - the movement that gained momentum through social media encouraging women to share their experiences and expose the magnitude of the problem of sexual harassment. The hashtag #metoo was used 12 million times in the first 24 hours on Twitter, capturing the attention of the media and resonating with many women around the world (Mendes et al., 2018, p. 236). The MeToo movement represents one of the most influential and high-profile examples of digital feminist activism and demonstrates the “*public’s willingness to engage with resistance and challenges to sexism, patriarchy and other forms of oppression via feminist uptake of digital communication*” (Mendes et al., 218, p. 237, author’s emphasis).

The Gillette commercial refers directly to this movement a few seconds into the video and then shows that the harmful forms of masculinity are widely accepted in relationships, in workplaces, and society. It is evident, in our opinion, that Gillette, as a parallel to MeToo-movement, is also trying to discuss the topic of ‘toxic masculinity’ and sexual harassment and prompt men to reflect on their behaviour and attitudes. While the company, like some others before, is taking a stand in regards to critical social issues and challenge gender stereotypes, the precondition of this campaign is the MeToo movement. It is our

understanding that this commercial was produced in the aftermath of the MeToo, therefore making this movement an essential *context* from which people draw their opinions and interpretations of the ad itself. We will elaborate on the aspect of the context in the theoretical part of our project and discuss the relevance of the MeToo movement in relation to our research in the analysis.

## **Motivation**

Our motivation for the project derives from the interest we have had in the Gillette advertisement. It was not merely the content of the ad that drew our attention, but also the context it was produced in. We found its reference to the MeToo movement and its dedication to influence men's behavior intriguing. It sparked our interest to look at further commercials by different companies and made us aware that Gillette is by far not the only one trying to achieve social change through advertisements. We were also interested in the reasons behind the fact the the ad generated a significant boycott. We found the audience's responses gripping, as seen from some of the memes and tweets from above, mainly because we did not have such adverse reactions to the advertisement ourselves. Looking more into the mixed responses of the Gillette and other similar ads prompted us to focus our attention on the diverse opinions of the viewers. Thus, we decided to look into how audiences respond to the encoded messages on social issues, given that the senders are large corporate companies whose primary goal is to make a profit. We regard the contradiction between companies' commitment to make people aware of problems in society and their ultimate aim of making more and more money fascinating.

## **Problem formulation**

This project uses the Gillette commercial as a case to spark the conversation about social responsibility advertisements, and how audiences react to brands integrating social activism in their advertisements. This specific advertisement showcases signs of social activism to a high degree and differs significantly from other, traditional consumer advertisements where the product is highlighted. Therefore, it is a relevant example of the project's topic and a favorable starting point for the data collection. Our intention is not only to conclude on the



Gillette case solely but also to expand the project to a broader perspective and draw conclusions on organizations integrating social activism in a more general sense based on our findings. By carrying out reception analysis of the Gillette advertisement as a starting point, the project aims to find out the audience's understandings of organizations incorporating social activism into the advertising campaigns. Based on the ideas presented above, in the present research project, we aim at answering the following problem formulation and research questions:

**Should companies at all be involved in social activism by doing advertising from the audience's perspective?**

1. How does the audience understand, interpret, and react to the Gillette advertisement?
2. To what extent does the audience disapprove or accept organizations integrating social activism in their advertisements?

**Approach to the problem formulation and structure of the project**

As the project deals with audiences' perceptions of advertisements that integrate social activism, with the Gillette ad in focus, it is essential for our project to understand the process of audience reception. The main theoretical approach incorporated by the project is Stuart Hall's (1980) encoding and decoding theory. The positions Hall established on how audiences perceive a message will help us gain knowledge of their interpretations of social activism in advertisements. We see Stuart Hall's idea of audience members being active participants in decoding and establishing the meaning of a message as an essential theoretical point of departure.

Since the project is interested in the audience's responses, we are going to introduce Kim Schroeder's theory on reception analysis, which will help us investigate audiences' views on corporations engaging with social activism in advertisements more in-depth. We find this theory highly relevant for our study since it acknowledges the possibility for audiences to take up more than just one position introduced originally by Hall. This approach

will be relevant when examining the audience's sense-making processes of the Gillette ad and their specific standpoint on social activism in advertisements.

Furthermore, we are going to introduce important terms in relation to corporations' strategies on engaging with particular social issues in their communication. The project will showcase an example of a campaign that includes such strategies to provide a reader a better insight into the underlying causes that could have led Gillette and other companies to engage with social activism in their advertisement.

In the analysis of the project, we will pursue to examine how audiences understand and react to the Gillette ad and their position on organizations integrating social activism in their advertisement, based on the theories mentioned above and the qualitative data collected through interviews. Finally, in the discussion of the project, we are going to reflect upon the essential points of the analysis and answer the project's problem formulation.

## II. Theory

Our project aims to examine how audiences interpret and react to the message of the Gillette commercial and social activist messages in advertisements, and in order to carry out a thorough analysis on this topic, first, we need to lie down some theoretical concepts that help us understand the ideas behind the project's problem formulation.

### **Encoding/Decoding model of communication**

The first theory that we introduce in our project is Stuart Hall's encoding/decoding model of communication from 1980. It can be described as a theoretical approach of how media messages are produced, and how they are disseminated and interpreted by their intended audience. According to this model, the messages of media products are decoded in different ways depending on many various factors; such as an individual's cultural background, economic standing, and personal experiences (Hall, 1980). What is relevant about this theory in terms of our project is the way that audience members can play an active role in the decoding of a communicative product, and this is something we are keen to investigate with our diverse group of interviewees.

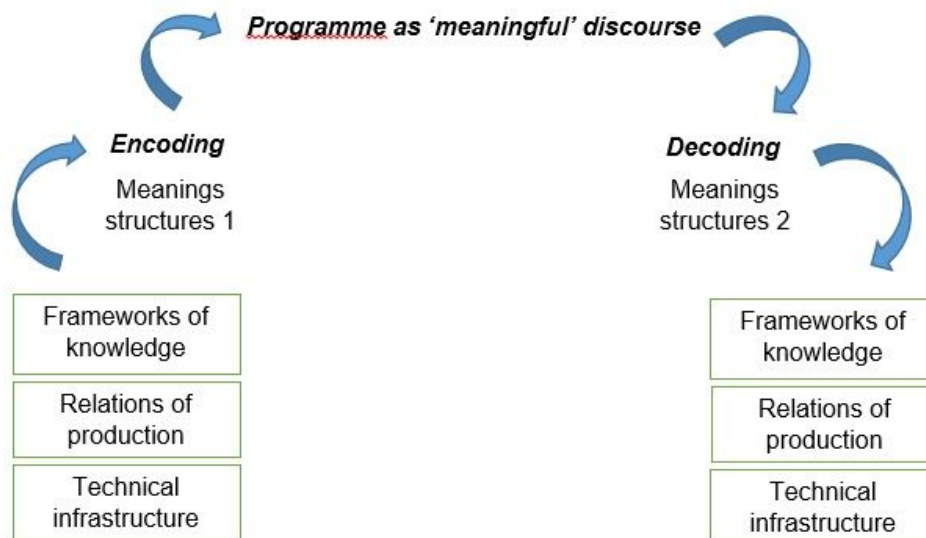
In his essay from 1980, Hall proposed four stages within this theory, which he identifies as follows: production, circulation, use, and reproduction. He describes them as “*a complex structure of dominance*” (Hall, 1980, p. 128) and we will now describe these very generally, and refer to how they are relevant for our project. Firstly, organizations or institutions produce a programme or a product. In the case of our research, the main products we are investigating are advertisements, with the Gillette advert from January 2019 being our main starting point; and other adverts also being discussed later on in our interviews. The message is therefore constructed in the production stage, and then circulated or transmitted afterward. Hall refers to the ‘message form’ as: “*the necessary ‘form of appearance’ of the event in its passage from source to receiver*” (Hall, 1980, p. 129). The message is then decoded or interpreted by the audience in the third stage, and the final stage of reproduction refers to how the message has been interpreted by the audience. What is important to

remember in this process is that each moment is both interrelated and independent, or as Hall states:

Production and reception of the television message are not, therefore identical, but they are related: they are differentiated moments within the totality formed by the social relations of the communicative process as a whole (Hall, 1980, p. 130).

Again in terms of our project, we are interested in assessing to what extent our interviewees approve or disapprove of social activism in advertising. So we feel that Hall's encoding/decoding theory will help us to analyze how audiences decode the encoding message of the Gillette advert.

The encoding/decoding model is frequently represented as a thing of symmetry, decoding being seen as the mirror image of encoding. Again this is something we are interested in investigating in our work: the level of symmetry between the messages and signs encoded into the advertisements we have shown our interviewees; and how they decode them, as well as to what extent they agree or disagree with said message. Below is Stuart Hall's articulation of the encoding/decoding model (Hall, 1980, p. 130):



Hall identifies three hypothetical positions from which decodings of a televisual discourse may be constructed, referring to three different ways in which a person can interpret or make sense of a communication product. The first position that he discusses is the **dominant-hegemonic code** which according to Hall:

When the viewer takes the connoted meaning from, say, a televisual newscast or current affairs programme full and straight, and decodes the message in terms of the reference code in which it has been encoded, we might say the reader is operating inside the dominant code. This is the ideal-typical case of 'perfectly transparent communication' (Hall, 1980, p. 136).

Hall describes the dominant-hegemonic code as a position where the viewer understand or reads the text in exact way as the encoder (televisual newscast) wanted to. So here, the recipient of the message agrees with how the message is presented, as well as the message itself. For example, if an interview participant both accepts messages being presented by organizations such as Gillette and agree entirely with the intended meaning of the advertisements; he/she can be said to be operating within the dominant code.

The second position Hall identifies is the **oppositional code**, where the audience decodes the message in a way that is contrary to the encoded reading. This reading often involves not accepting the message encoded by an organization. If our interview participants reject entirely the ideals of social activism being incorporated into the advertisements we have shown them, this would be an example of an oppositional reading. Hall refers to audiences positions as oppositional when they "*understand both the literal and the connotative inflection given by a discourse but to decode the message in a globally contrary way*" (Hall, 1980, p. 137-138). Therefore, a recipient understands the literal and intended meaning, but still decodes the message in terms of a oppositional position.

The last position Hall mentions is the **negotiated code/position**. He defines decoding within the negotiated position as a "mixture of adaptive and oppositional elements" (Hall, 1980, p. 137) This negotiated position is as Hall puts it: "*shot through contradictions, though these are only on certain occasions brought to full visibility*" (Hall, 1980, p. 137). Here, the audience negotiates their interpretation in a nuanced manner to create unique meanings that are neither identical with the encoded message nor in direct opposition to it.

For the sake of our project, we are interested in how our interview participants decode and interpret the Gillette advertisement and what level of symmetry there is between their interpretation of the advert and the intended message of the advert. We will then touch upon other advertisements to analyze the issue of social change through advertising more generally and to see to what extent they accept or reject the necessity of it in advertisements.

Stuart Hall’s encoding and decoding model is one way of looking at the processes of audience reception. Sonia Livingstone (2007), in her study ‘*The challenge of engaging youth online: Contrasting producers’ and teenagers’ interpretations of websites*’, looks at audience reception of online content. The paper draws on Hall’s encoding/decoding model, which was initially developed for mass production, but in her study, Livingstone (2007) explores if the theory provided by Hall (1980) can be extended to new media (Livingstone, 2007, p. 4). She argues that just as mass media texts, websites, or advertisements can also be interpreted in different ways, similarly to Hall’s three reading positions (Livingstone, 2007). She provides a framework that goes beyond the encoding/decoding model, and that looks at the relations between producer, text, and audience. We find some of the concepts of this analytical strategy relevant and useful when working with our qualitative data. It will help us examine how audiences understand and respond to the way they are addressed by the sender, Gillette, and how that can have a broader effect on audiences’ standpoints to social activism in advertisements.

	<b>Relating producer, text and reader</b>	<b>Relating text, reader and knowledge</b>
<b>Communicative purpose</b>	Subject matter	Action consequence
<b>Communicative form</b>	Formal composition	Media literacy
<b>Communicative effect</b>	Mode of address	Power and resistance

(Source: Livingstone, 2007, p. 13)

The three aspects found on the left column of the table relate to the producer, the text, and the reader. These can be drawn in parallel with the process of encoding. This part of the framework concerns the implied reader, which means that it is about the assumptions of the

creators of a text on who the reader might be. 'Subject matter' answers the question 'What is being communicated?', so it seeks to find out the purpose of the communication. The website Livingstone employed in her study is government based, targeting teens and aiming to generate online participation (Livingstone, 2007, p. 4). 'Formal composition' looks at how something is being communicated by dissecting the form of communication. Following Livingstone's study (2007), websites can vary in their forms; for example, they can be open or they can be available to members only (Livingstone, 2007, p. 5). Furthermore, the 'mode of address' can be associated with the question 'Who communicates to whom?', and it looks at the effect of communication. The website Livingstone worked with was government based, but the content was written by young people targeted to young people.

The right side of the table looks at the relation of reader, text, and context. The aspects of the producer and user are still embodied, but there is less focus on the producer. Instead of the implied reader, this column of the table "*examines how the realized text depends on the contingent ways in which real readers are embedded in diverse contexts of everyday life*" (Livingstone, 2007, p. 11) by focusing on three themes. 'Action' concerns the consequences of reading a text, or in Livingstone's research (2007), it aims to find out what will follow from the actions of youth's participation in the website. Furthermore, it is essential to look at the pre-existing knowledge readers draw on when interpreting a text (Livingstone, 2007, p. 7), which is referred to as 'media literacy' in the framework. Here, Livingstone (2007) seeks to find out what else young people know about participating in a website (Livingstone, 2007), which is closely related to Hall's theory of decoding that also acknowledges the existing beliefs and knowledge of the audience. The last aspect is 'power and resistance', which aims to shed light on whose interest a certain discourse or activity is. It looks at the power relations between producer and reader, whether users or audiences go along or resist with the intended meaning of the message (Livingstone, 2007).

She concludes that the more open and collaborative texts producers create, the more effective and powerful their message will be. Whereas, if they make assumptions about the implied reader and force them to the preferred reading, they can end up with audiences generating alternative or critical readings, resulting in an ineffective communication (Livingstone, 2007, p. 11). In the project's analysis, we are going to draw on the terms found in the above-introduced framework together with our collected data to come closer to answer the project's problem formulation.

## Reception analysis

The project seeks to find out the audience's response or reception to a media content, which leads us to the theory of reception analysis. Reception research tries to understand the sense-making processes around media. In this particular case, we want to investigate how the viewers of the ad make sense of its message and how they create a link to the corporate social activism; therefore, we find reception research an essential theoretical perspective for our project.

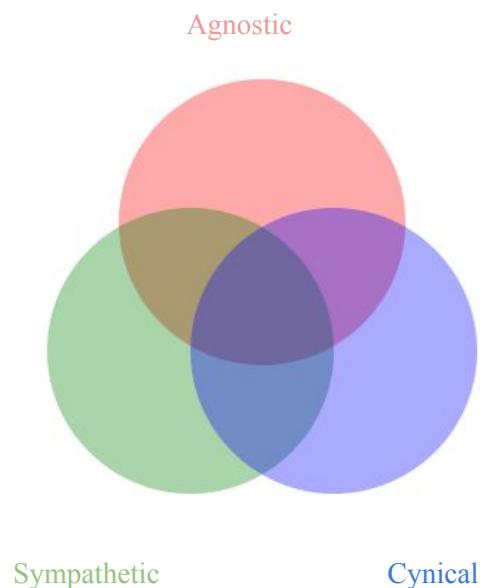
Reception research originates from Hall's encoding/decoding theory, which suggests that there are three positions, three typical decoding positions from which an audience can decode a media text, which we have explained above. However, the audience's sense-making procedure can be more complex than just taking up one of the above-mentioned positions. Sonia Livingstone, who examined audience reception on television dramas argues that "*it has been established that audiences are plural in their decodings, that their cultural context matters and that they do not always agree with textual analysis*" (Livingstone, 1998, p. 195). We find the understanding of audiences positions as plural useful in our research and will touch upon it in our analysis.

According to Kim Christian Schröder, whose main field of study is reception analysis and who has published numerous articles on the topic, "*texts must be seen as in principle polysemic, that is, as carrying many potential meanings, or sense-making affordances*" (Schröder, 2015, p. 1). Empirical fieldwork is necessary to carry out reception analysis. It helps the researcher to understand these different potential meanings that the audience acquires. Through fieldwork, one can also find out how the audience's mind has been triggered by the given communication product or text, which is vital to comprehend the sense-making processes of the viewers.

In his study called *British Corporate responsibility advertisements and their readers in the 1990s*, Kim Schröder (1997) looks at how an audience makes sense of corporate responsibility ads and whether they notice at all that they are different from ordinary ads. He was interested in finding out if the audience reads the corporate responsibility ads in the way the organization was meant to communicate them or if they make sense of them in other ways (Schröder, 1997, p. 281). Building heavily on Hall, Schröder suggests that the ways in which



the respondents react to corporate advertising could be organized in three categories: the sympathetic response, the agnostic response, and the cynical response, corresponding to Hall's preferred, negotiated and oppositional readings respectively (Schröder, 1997, p. 282).



(Source: Schröder's three types of response to corporate advertisements, 1997).

While distinguishing between these three types of response, Schröder does stress that due to the complexity of meaning-making process they should only be considered as “ideal types”, not necessary corresponding with the views of any individual informant (Schröder, 1997, p. 286). This model also allows for the ambivalent views, since more often than not the informants can not be placed in one particular category indubitably, which aligns with Livingstone's (1998) view that audiences are plural in their decodings. Indeed, in his study, Schröder found that several informants responses could not be placed in only one category, but their views suggests they represent more than one perspective, one being more dominant than another (Schröder, 1997, p. 287). Therefore, the intersection of the circles on the figure are equally important as the main domains.

Taking into consideration all of the above, Schröder's model gives us a systematic analytical tool for the empirical analysis of qualitative data that can be used in our own research. We found this study especially relevant for our research as it combines the understanding of positions as plural and use this understanding to analyse the positions of the

different members of the audience in relation to advertisements which include social activism. His study also inspired us to consider the possibility that our audience in our fieldwork will not have a clear standpoint towards social activism and advertisements, and the importance to examine and draw on data that derive from those responses that cover more than just one obvious viewpoint.

Reception research also looks at the audience's social context (eg. their age, gender, culture, ethnicity, education), since it influences their meaning-making. We need to consider as an important aspect of the project that *"people's positioning as members of a particular class, gender or generation is itself mediated through their audiencehood"* (Livingstone, 1998, p. 197). In relation to our project, we are going to reflect upon the social context of the audience we work with in order to understand how that affects their sense-making.

Reception analysis and Hall's theory on encoding and decoding provide an important theoretical background for the project, and together with theories on social activism, can help us better understand the different responses of the Gillette ad and audiences' position towards organizations integrating social activism in their advertisements.

## **CSR advertising and brand activism**

Capitalist enterprises have a long history of incorporating social activism in their marketing campaigns. Starting in the early nineties, observations have been made on how *"business organizations are now expected to meet social and political objectives, as well as those of profit and employment"* (White in Schröder, 1997, p. 276).

According to Schröder, there is an unspoken widespread agreement that companies should be able to enter the dialogue with the public and show their "sensitivity" towards public concerns, including environmental concerns, various social issues, in other words to be involved in corporate social responsibility (CSR) (Schröder, 1997, p. 276). This "accountability" manifests itself through what Schröder calls "corporate responsibility advertising", that unlike consumer advertising, *"proclaim[s] a social ethos [as well as] inform[s] about a company's commitment to environmental concerns, community relations, or the future of mankind, without any overt attempt to promote a specific product"* (Schröder, 1997, p. 277).

In our project we also adopt this notion of corporate responsibility advertising in relation to the Gillette ad, since it does not refer to any specific Gillette product, but rather draws the audience's attention to such social issues as sexual harassment, bullying, and "toxic masculinity". Television and social media audiences are exposed daily to numerous brand communication messages aimed to "*persuade individuals to alter their individual behavior in order to improve their own health and welfare*" (Wymer, 2010, p. 99). In the past few years, we could observe a rising number of brands that adopt the voice of activists, integrate timely issues into their campaigns, and align themselves with the aims of progressive movements. As Taylor, et al., ironically put it:

Whole Foods Market trades on images of ethical consumption, Nike sells women's empowerment via lycra shorts, and the Dove Real Beauty Campaign sell products by critiquing dominant media-constructions of beauty and promoting body acceptance (Taylor, et al. 2016, p. 124).

**Brand activism** is another highly popular term, which can be used to describe corporate social responsibility strategies integrated in the company's practices. There are a lot of recent examples of brand activism in modern advertising, that "*aims to sell a product by associating it with a resonant image, lifestyle or ethos*" (Stadler in Pardun, 2013, p. 270). In *Corporate Social Responsibility: Doing the Most Good for Your Company and Your Cause* (2005), Lee and Kotler distinguish between CSR activities as marketing-driven, corporate-driven or society-driven. Brand activism falls under the last category and is radically different from two others, because it is concerned with the biggest and most urgent problems facing society. In our project, we argue that the Gillette ad works as an example of this brand activism, because it could be seen as response to the rising importance of certain social issues (ex. sexual harassment) for the general public. The rise of the new media allows organisations to take part on the discussions, they have not been involved in earlier - on gender equality, racial issues, body-positivism, ethical consumption, etc. We want to examine how audiences interpret this kind of activism, coming from big international companies, such as Gillette. Some scholars have already examined the process of integrating social movement ideas into advertising campaigns, as well as audience's understandings of these campaigns (Taylor, et al., 2016). Although it has been argued that "limited transformative outcome" had been

produced as a result of such campaigns; it is however, useful for our project to examine campaigns and advertisements similar to the one by Gillette to exemplify corporate appropriation of social activist ideals (Johnston & Taylor, 2008, p. 941).

One of the first exceptionally successful social campaigns, Dove's *Real Beauty*, generated massive public attention and increased sales (Johnston and Taylor, 2008). Even though the purpose of the campaign was said to be the challenge of contemporary beauty codes and promote body-positivism by showing different female body-types. Although Dove's campaign does provide the critique of Western beauty norms, according to Johnston and Taylor (2008), it also "*reproduces and legitimizes the hegemony of beauty ideology in women's personal lives in the service of expanding sales and corporate growth*" at the same time (Johnston and Taylor, 2008). According to Johnston and Taylor (2008), Dove's profit imperative is the reason for reproduction of hegemonic beauty ideologies and it explains company's place within a larger hegemonic ideology of consumerism. Johnston and Taylor (2008) identify this phenomenon as *feminist consumerism*, a corporate strategy, employing feminist themes of empowerment to market products to women. Meanwhile, according to other scholars, one cannot deny that Dove pioneered the age of female empowerment, giving rise to other significant campaigns, such as #LikeaGirl by Always and #NotSorry by Pantene (Russell in Gulbrandsen and Just, 2016, p. 129). However, this did not prevent the criticism of the relationship between advertising and social movements on the basis of advertising's "hidden" capitalist agenda.

In another study of Dove Campaign, '*A Corporation in Feminist Clothing? Young Women Discuss the Dove 'Real Beauty' Campaign*' by Taylor, et al., (2016) feminist consumerism is also a central theme. Their paper aimed to find out how the audience, in their case, young feminists, understand the campaign. Their analysis investigates how adherents of feminism react to corporations using feminist ideals to sell their products. Based on qualitative research, they wanted to find out if corporations can play a positive role in reaching the goals of social movements, such as feminism, or if the audience views campaigns like Dove's Real Beauty relying on 'feminist consumerism' as harmful and manipulative with the only aim of making profit (Taylor et al. 2016, p. 124). The research topic of this case can be drawn parallel to our project. We are also interested to find out to what extent audiences approve or disapprove of corporations integrating elements of social change in their communication, therefore we find it important to look at the methodology and

results of the Johnson et al.'s study. The researchers conducted focus group interviews to collect qualitative data, where the interviewees reflected on the Dove campaign and shared their thoughts and feelings about it (Taylor et al. 2016, p. 129). A salient part of their method of data collection was that they gathered focus group members with a similar political view, women who identified themselves as feminists. The researchers made them focus on the particular problem of corporations, specifically Dove integrating feminism to sell their products by making the interviewees come to a sociological understanding (Taylor et al. 2016, p. 129). Through the discussions, the researchers aimed to find out if the Dove campaign of Real Beauty is feminist and if corporations should engage in the cause of feminism. According to the study, the participants came to a common ground that the campaign is not feminist because the company focuses on women's self-esteem through physical appearance rather than consciousness and social behaviour (Taylor et al. 2016, p. 140). Furthermore, they concluded that since feminism is an anti-capitalist movement, corporations should not express themselves politically through consumption and 'do the job of feminists' (Taylor et al. 2016, p. 140).

The combination of the theoretical approaches explained in this chapter will form an important base for the project's analysis, and together with the qualitative data will help us answer the project's problem formulation.

### **III. Methods and methodology**

Due to the nature of the problem area and the research conducted by this project, it was chosen to adopt an interpretivist qualitative approach, rooted in a social constructionist framework. In this chapter we will clarify some of our methodological considerations and describe the practical aspects of our research method. The research design entails ontological framework of this project, the epistemological dimension (interpretivism), as well as our considerations concerning qualitative method, participants, transcribing and some methodological suggestions on other research angles one could have taken on the topic.

#### **Ontological framework**

The ontological framework of our project is rooted in social constructivism. According to Leeds-Hurwitz (2009), social constructionism centers on the notion that our reality is not objective and that we as subjects, therefore, cannot access objective knowledge. Instead, meaning regarding the social world is constructed through the interactions, words and actions of people, who attach substance and definitions to social phenomena through subjective understandings and interpretations (Leeds-Hurwitz, 2009, p. 2-3).

However, it is important to acknowledge that within the social constructionist perspective, it is recognized that reality is not necessarily solely subjective, but also exists as an objective entity (Spinelli, 2005). Nevertheless, our access to the objective reality, while considered by some as implausible, is bound by our limited sense-making and interpretive repertoires. Therefore, what becomes essential within this particular social scientific perspective, is to acknowledge that knowledge is a product of interpretations, which the researcher in turn can interpret, as:

There is no, direct, one-to-one relationship between ourselves (subjects) and the world (object). The world is interpreted through the classification schemas of the mind (Gray, 2014, p. 23).

In the context of this project, a social constructionist framework was adopted as the most beneficial, as the project aims to interpret in-depth, qualitative understandings of the participants in relation to social activism within the communication of advertising campaigns.

## **Interpretivism**

An interpretivist approach has been chosen due to the work with qualitative interviews; our participants and their sense-making of social activism through advertisement.

Interpretivism refers to an approach to knowledge and functions as an umbrella categorization of different analytical perspectives to various disciplines - including Communication Studies; interpretivist researchers approach social reality with the aim of understanding how individuals and groups create meaning in everyday practices, communication and lived experiences (Vannini, 2009, p. 2). Interpretivism was originally conceived as a counterpoint to positivism, as the latter was found to be unable to explain the intricacies that are born out of human interaction and sense making (Bryman, 2012, p. 28). Furthermore, humans are capable of meaning making, reflection and intention which affect the unpredictable action made frequently by humans (Vannini, 2009, p. 4).

Hence, the aim is not to *explain*, but to *understand*, as the German sociologist Max Weber advocates with '*Verstehen*', which literally means "understanding" (Bryman, 2012, p. 28 – 29). This reflects the distinction between the positivist and interpretivist approach, where 'explaining' is connected to the former, which tries to grasp or explain the causal relation and predictive and rigorous reasoning of the human action or thought. This stands in contrast to the interpretivist approach, which aims to understand the human condition by the way humans assign meaning to an action or thought, due to humans unpredictability and diversity and how they assign meanings to various things and events. This is one of the reasons why we deliberately chose our participants to be diverse in their cultural background. We hoped to explore different aspects of various thoughts on the Gillette ad and on social activism in advertisement.

## **Qualitative Method**

Based on these methodological considerations, the project employs a qualitative approach in contrast to quantitative. Qualitative research method has a rejection of methodological

positivism in the social science that limits scientific findings to quantifiable facts (Kvale and Brinkmann, 2009, p. 12). In qualitative research, the focus is not on abstract and quantified data, but on concrete detailed understandings i.e. *“the cultural, everyday, and situated aspects of human thinking, learning, knowing, acting, and ways of understanding ourselves as persons [as] opposed to “technified” approaches to the study of human lives”* (Kvale and Brinkmann, 2009, p.12).

As part of qualitative methods, this project adopts individual interviews, which attempt to understand the interviewees’ lived world and their own perspectives (Kvale and Brinkmann, 2009, p. 27). Interviews are framed so that there is an opportunity to interpret their lived world in accordance to the described phenomena (Kvale and Brinkmann, 2009, p. 27) – which in our case is social activism in advertisements. Once we considered the possible data and knowledge that would be produced in individual interviews compared to focus groups, we came to the conclusion that individual interviews would provide more relevant data that would lead us to answer the project’s problem formulation. Focus groups concentrate on producing empirical data, which emphasise the meaning-making in groups and the dynamics of the interaction between interviewees (Halkier, 2016, p. 10). It is about the social processes that lead to certain interpretations. Focus groups are beneficial when seeking negotiations and arguments, for example what a group agrees or disagrees on (Halkier, 2016, p. 10). However, this project aims to capture the individuals’ lived world views, which is more challenging for the researcher to come across in focus groups due to the larger number of participants. Furthermore, a person’s atypical or individual understanding of a particular phenomenon has more space to bloom in individual interviews compared to focus groups (Halkier, 2016, p. 14). Conducting one-to-one interviews eliminates the social barrier, while in focus groups interview participants can interrupt each other, thus individuals are prevented to share their opinions in-depth. Additionally, they might feel uneasy about sharing their personal views because they might be worried about being judged, which means their genuine opinions will not reach the surface. Meanwhile, during individual interviews, participants can speak freely without being pressured by the others or feeling constrained. After considering these aspects, we chose to collect our data through individual interviews. During the individual interviews, the participants felt comfortable and free to speak their opinions and we were able to gain raw and nuanced thoughts and standpoints on social activism in advertisements.



Furthermore, we chose to apply a semi-structured approach with a thoughtful interview guide in mind with focus on certain themes, such as the Gillette ad and other brands' role when it comes to trying to achieve social change through advertisements. The guideline was a great tool to help us stay on track during the interviews to make sure we cover all the different points that are relevant for the research, but at the same time, there was also room for additional questions that followed up on the interviewees' thoughts (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009, p. 27). We let the interview go off script if the participant guided the conversation elsewhere, but mostly we aimed to keep the direction and structure we had previously established.

During our interviews we showed our participants the Gillette commercial (2019), which was subsequently discussed by all of our participants. In the case of one interview, with participant number 4, several commercials were displayed in addition to Gillette. This was due to the limited knowledge the participant possessed on the topic of the research.

## **Participants**

The project aimed for a participant selection that represents a diverse range of individuals. The intention was to gain distinctive answers and nuanced opinions on the research topic. We apply the strategy of *maximum variation* (Halkier, 2016, p. 30), which is employed when the sample size is small, as in the case of this project due to our limited resources. Therefore, we chose participants with different backgrounds, ages and genders: three females and three males, all between the age of 25-69, representing different cultural backgrounds. The data deriving from a variety of segments will allow us to draw conclusions based on a wide range of opinions and provide a holistic perspective on social activism in advertising. We do not seek to generalize the collected data, but aim for knowledge that reflects the nuanced nature of opinions towards advertisements that include social activism.

## **Transcribing**

The data collected through individual interviews have been saved on audio records, which were then carefully transcribed. Transcribing is a part of the interpretation process, which can give rise to different issues that can help the project's analysis (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009, p.

177), and some of these issues we wanted to tackle before transcribing. In order to prevent misunderstandings, we used the following technique to provide an insight into the interviewees' utterances:

(.) = small pause

(...) = longer pause

/ = half sentence

mmm... = affirmative

Capitalized word = words with the particular emphasis

Laughing = (laughter) or (laughs)

Even though our focus was still on the content of the transcriptions as opposed to non-verbal communication, these symbols or abbreviations were employed in order to make the interviews more nuanced.

# IV. Analysis

## 1. Audiences' positions on the Gillette advertisement

On the basis of the theories we have introduced and the qualitative data we have collected, we aim to investigate how audiences react and interpret the Gillette advertisement, which also refers to the project's first research question. We are going to look into the social context of the audience, the relationship between their cultural background and their interpretation process, and their different positions regarding the Gillette advertisement.

### Social context

As described earlier, audience's decoding and sense-making processes of messages are influenced by their personal experiences, cultural and social backgrounds, and their pre-existing knowledge.

As the MeToo movement is an important theme of the Gillette ad in communicating their message, in this section of the analysis, we are going to examine if audience members are able to make connections between the MeToo movement and the encoded message and if so, how. Audience's knowledge on the MeToo movement can also be referred to as media literacy based on Sonia Livingstone's framework (Livingstone, 2007, p. 13), when examining the relation between text, reader and context.

It is essential for audiences to have some awareness about the MeToo movement. According to Ben, who thinks that the ad would not have existed without the movement: *"I think this is the ESSENCE of the ad. If there were NO MeToo-movement, the ad would not have an EFFECT and, probably, would not have been conceived in the first place"* (A1, l. 263-264). Thus, based on his interpretation, the ad would not be understood without the MeToo movement. This means, that the context the ad was produced in and the knowledge the audience has on this social movement is essential to make sense of the message of the ad. Other interviewees also quickly recognised that the ad is drawing on the MeToo movement, which means that they possess some knowledge, and furthermore helps them gain understanding of the ad. Moreover, Andrew puts the message of the Gillette ad in parallel

with the message of the MeToo movement, which according to him is pursuing men to be better version of themselves (A1, l. 215-217).

Our research showed that during decoding process most of the participants make sense of the message based on their personal lived experiences, which confirms Hall's argument that an individual's personal experience influences their sense-making procedure (Hall, 1980). For instance, Wendy immediately drew on her own experience as soon as she detected the ad's references to the MeToo movement. She shared how much she is concerned with the topic and that she has been involved in meetings in the film industry about how to handle the 'MeeToo' situation, as she works as a film director (A2, p. 1-2). Although one of the interviewees, Gina, did not have an extensive knowledge on the MeeToo movement, as she herself implied, she was still able to reflect on it based on her own social context. As part of the decoding process, she drew on her own experience from her job "*I can see it from my work*" she says, as a part of making sense of the MeToo movement in the ad (A4, l. 86-87). It made her think about the ratio of men and women at her workplace, where the number of men is much higher than the women (A4, l. 95-96). Moreover, based on her personal understanding, the message of the ad suggests that the world is changing and there has been a shift from a male dominant world towards more equality. Her decoding is influenced by her concern for the differences in wages between men and women in Italy (A4, l. 167-168). In these highlighted episodes of interviews, the participants were able to use their personal lived experiences to unpack the decoded message. Based on their diverse responses, we can conclude that their pre-existing knowledge deriving from their professional field, personal interest, and their general understanding of gender equality played an important role in meaning-making process.

When examining the media literacy of the audience, their knowledge on the subject of older Gillette ads also contribute to the way they decode the message. Based on our collected data, all audience members realised that this particular Gillette advertisement is different from the company's previously produced ones. For example, Andrew emphasized that in the older Gillette ads, it is always a stereotypical man that is the main character (A3, l. 226-228). Based on other responses (A1, A2, A4, A5, A6), one can conclude that audience members recognized the shift from product centred Gillette ads, where "*the guy is shaving*" (A4, l. 241), and it is only about "*the equipment they use to shave their face*" (A2, l. 156-157). Meanwhile, according to Ben, 'The best a man can be' is a public service ad and aims to

reach social change: *“Well, /the thing here is/ /complexity is/ a company does not only sell products per se, they sell their name, okay? And it’s important that the name is associated with good social cause”* (A1, l. 298-299). Based on his knowledge of media, he can see that Gillette produced a social responsibility ad, where the company is trying to deliver a message that concerns the society. What’s more, he is able to compare it with other ads that integrate social activism, such as the Nike ad with Colin Kaepernick (A1, l. 10-11). The social issues in the Gillette ad are also detected by Gina, who despite not having an extensive knowledge on the subject - *“not super-updated on ads”* (A4, l. 230) - was still able to compare it with other ads, previously seen in the cinema (A4, p. 5).

Based on the replies from these participants, it is evident that they were able to distinguish between consumer ads and CSR ads, such as the Gillette advert. Even those respondents who never saw or heard about the Gillette ad before or had very limited knowledge about the genre of advertisements were able to recognise that the Gillette ad is trying to deliver a message to influence audience’s social behaviour. Based on their own social context, our participants were also able to see how the Gillette ad is different from other, consumer ads where the product plays the central role.

## **Cultural background**

Now that we have examined our interviewees' understandings of the Gillette advertisement in terms of their social contexts, here we will examine how audiences’ interpretations relate to their cultural backgrounds, using Livingstone’s argument, that audiences’ cultural context has a great significance in their decoding process (Livingstone, 1991, p.195).

One of the main patterns we noticed and that many of our interviewees highlighted, was the difference in gender roles between the United states, where the advertisement was conceived, and Denmark where our interviewees all live. Ben, for instance, touched on this when we questioned him if the Gillette ad was in line with how he perceived Gillette's image to be; to which he responded:

But the association I have with Gillette from many years that I lived in the US and from print advertising is the REAL man with the square jaw, the image of the 'Marlboro man' and this is what they show. Muscles and... (A1, l. 335-337).

So here we can see that he has a very clear view of Gillette's advertisement to be very stereotypical, based on his own personal experience of having lived in the United States for a number of years. He stated that in his opinion, the advert is aimed predominantly towards a male American audience, and that he did not believe the advertisement would have triggered the same reactions in a country like Denmark, where the understandings of masculinity and gender equality are so different from the United States:

I don't think this ad would work in Denmark [...] /Because of the way I perceive a Danish male/ The male is a lot more understanding and conscious about the relationship with female (.) and there is not much need to express the masculinity as it is in the US (A1, l. 411-418).

Ben again refers to his cultural knowledge of having lived in the US in his interpretation process of the implied audience of the Gillette advert. He speculated that perhaps Gillette were actually trying to target females in America when he stated:

I don't know, how/ the behaviour/ purchasing behaviour in the average American family is, but FEMALES make BIG decisions, I mean female members of the household. So, maybe, that would influence women to be Gillette products because they are thinking in their favour (A1, l. 528-531).

Another of our interviewees who is able draw conclusions based on her cultural background and experience living both in Denmark and the United States, is Nancy. For instance, discussing the boycott of Gillette, she was quick to ask if it was American men specifically who had reacted this way. (A6, l. 400). She then proceeded to explain that in her experience of having lived in the States for most of her life: “...*men in America are pretty damn sleazy!*” (A6, l. 414), and that in America “...*it's a more extreme that they are brought up to be, to be more manly (...)*” (A6, l. 422-423). And this was in contrast to her views of Danish men, who she described as more passive and even as “babies” (A6, l. 448). She also referred to the different conceptions of gender roles between men and women in Europe, as did Ben. Ben for instance referred to the relationship between men and women in Denmark as more

“sophisticated” and nuanced than in the U.S., whereas Nancy was more radical when she stated:

The woman is the dominant one. And the man is almost like “okay..”, like that is very strange for me to see. Cause over there “hey I’m gonna do this, you stay home. I’m gonna work and everything” and over here it’s like I see a lot of opposite (A1, l. 438-439).

It is evident to us that some of our participants’ meaning-making process and their understandings of the advert were influenced by their cultural background and their lived experiences. These experiences, personal reservations and points of view played an important role in their interpretations of, for instance, gender roles in society, as demonstrated above.

### **Implied audience**

In order for a message to be decoded successfully and aligned with the encoded meaning of the sender, it is essential for the communicator to consider the implied audience, sometimes also referred as the target audience of the sender. Based on our collected data, according to some participants, the ad is targeted towards men due to the fact that the ad is “*very manly, because first of all, it’s Gillette, which is man products, and there are mainly men in there [the ad]*” (A6, l. 343-345). Other audience members immediate thoughts after watching the ad are similar to Nancy’s. They also think that Gillette is a men’s product, so they must target men (A1, A4, A6). For instance, Ben’s initial idea on the target audience is that the “*message is addressed to males, NOT to females and specifically AMERICAN males*” (A1, l. 411). However, after further reflection on the topic, they also contemplate on the possibility of women being the implied audience, for instance Gina: “*women, maybe it’s women, they want to get this message across to*” (A6, l. 250-251). Ben also reassesses the topic when he reflects on women in families being decision-makers and being in charge of the household-related decisions (A1, l. 528-530), thus he implies that Gillette could have targeted women as well. As seen above, their initial and latter understandings on the implied audience of the ad are often contradictory, which suggests that their decoding process is complex, confirming Hall’s and Schröder’s theory (Hall, 1980; Schröder, 2016) on sense-making procedures being active and complicated.

## **Positions**

In the following part of our analysis, we are going to examine the reading positions the audiences take towards the Gillette advertisement based on the different types of audience responses established by Hall, and later developed by Schröder, as discussed earlier in the project. Taking into consideration Schröder's argument that audiences opinions can be too complex to fit into one of the established positions by Hall (dominant, negotiated, oppositional) (Hall, 1980; Schröder, 1997), in this analysis we are going to attempt to place each interviewee in one of the positions or in the intersections of the positions, using Schröder's model.

## **Sympathetic**

The sympathetic position refers to the state when the reader decodes the message in the same way as the encoder intended it to be and agrees with that message. Based on our collected data, one of the audience members, Nancy, approves of the commercial due to the fact that it makes people think about important social issues. Furthermore, she agrees with the message of Gillette as she concurs with the idea that there is a need for change when it comes to the way people treat women (A6, p. 5). Another interview participant, Wendy had also positive impressions of the ad, and thinks that the company is "*doing the right thing*" (A2, l. 174). According to her, the ad conveys an important message that young boys are looking at other men and learning from them how to behave (A2, l. 108-109). She appreciates that Gillette is trying to prevent sexual harassment and trying to achieve social change by showing both negative and positive examples of how men should behave regardless of colour or age (A2). Based on the collected data, both Nancy's and Wendy's understanding of the ad attunes with Gillette's intended message, thus one can conclude that their position is dominant/agnostic.

## **Intersection of sympathetic and agnostic**

Similarly to Wendy, Gina also finds the message of the ad important because it inspires boys and men to the right behaviour and because the topic of sexual harassment is important to talk about (A4). Moreover, she especially agrees the way the office scene in the ad is presented and recognises from her own experience (A4, p. 4). This means that she decodes this particular scene the same way as it was encoded by the sender, Gillette, which is that women



are underestimated and viewed as too sensitive (A4, l. 195-197). Her decoding entails that ad is trying to show that those men who act violently or those who harass women should act in a better way, should be better people (A4, l. 144), which aligns with Gillette's motives and intentions of the campaign (Gillette, n. d) and thus the encoded message. However, even though Gina agrees with this idea, she is sceptical at the same time due to the source of the message: "*I don't think it really tells anything about the company! I think they want to try and look good!*" (A4, l. 320-321). Thus, she does not see Gillette's intentions as credible and honest enough, due to the fact that companies' goal with advertisements is to brand themselves. Here, we argue that this idea derives from the tension between the genre of advertisements and social activism. They are contradicting each other because of their different purposes. Advertisements' ultimate goal is to sell products and increase profit, meanwhile social activism aims to create social change that benefits society. In Gina's view, Gillette attempts to create a better image of themselves by integrating social issues in their advertisement, but one can not know what their actual corporate values are (A4, l. 282-283). However, she still regards the ad as successful in delivering its message, but since she also expressed slight scepticism about the sender, one can place her in the intersection of the agnostic and sympathetic sets in Schroeder's framework. Parallel to Gina, another audience member, Ben also reflected upon the fact that Gillette's aim is to make profit and to be associated with good social cause (A1, l. 298-299), therefore the message's validity is negatively affected due to the nature of the sender. However, he also thinks the ad is a positive role model for men as it shows examples of how men should behave (A1, l. 142-144) and he regards the ad's purpose to to elicit change in men's behaviour as an important issue (A1, p. 5).

### **Agnostic**

Some audience members create meaning that does not completely agree with the intended message, but is not in direct opposition either. One of the examples from our field work is Andrew who agrees with the message of the Gillette ad that men can be better versions of themselves (A3, l. 190-192), but at the same time thinks that the way the implied reader is addressed is too direct because the ad "*HAMMERS the message*" (A3, l. 122). Another participant, John acknowledges the effort of Gillette trying to bring upon social change by aligning themselves with the MeToo movement, and show that they are foreleaders (A5, p. 4)

in this issue. However, he can not ignore the fact that the company's main goal is to generate profit, thus he is cynical about the decoded message, that Gillette want *"to be part of changing social norms and perceptions of manliness"* (A5, l. 235-236). In his opinion, Gillette is trying to be positively associated with an important social issue just to create a better image of the company, however he still agrees with the advertisement's encoded message about pursuing men to be better versions of themselves (A5). Based on the responses of Andrew and John, their nuanced standpoints towards the message suggest that their position is negotiated.

### **Cynical**

The collected qualitative data does not propose that there are audience members who are in disagreement with the encoded message, but their views on the possible reasons of the backlash can help us gain an understanding of the oppositional position. Here, they mostly raise issues that can be related to the 'mode of the address', which according to Livingstone, concerns the communicative effect of the message. Gina, who is aware that this Gillette commercial is different from the company's older one, thinks the negative responses of the ad might have derived from the way the ad addresses men: *"telling GUYS not to act badly against WOMEN...Highlighting this thing, problem, these issues, that maybe men don't wanna hear"* (A4, l. 362-364). Meanwhile, Andrew suggests that the ad was received negatively because *"it tried to tap into this whole MeToo movement and used that movement to (.) sell products"* (A3, l. 89-90). He expresses his dislike towards the ad because it pretends to be part of the MeToo movement, while their goal is to sell shaving products (A3, l. 104-110). Furthermore, Ben also considers the negative way the audience might perceive the ad, as the way it portrays men can be seen as patronizing, and together with the existence of social media, that could have resulted in the boycott (A1, p. 9). We find it an interesting aspect of the project that the examined audiences have not obtained the oppositional position, yet they could still reflect upon why the advertisement could have received such a negative response.

After examining the role of social context in audience's interpretations and analysing their positions towards the Gillette ad, we can conclude that they are plural in their decodings, and their standpoints are complex. As seen in the figure above, in some cases our participants could not be placed in the "ideal" positions, but in the intersection of those reconfirming Hall's and Schröder's idea (Hall, 1980; Schröder, 2016) on sense-making process being ambiguous and complicated.

## **2. Audiences' interpretations of social activism in advertising**

Having discussed different positions of the audiences towards the Gillette ad and different interpretations of the advertisement, in this part of our analysis we want to reflect on audiences' stance towards social activism in advertising, that corresponds to our second research question. Although some academic work on this topic has been done (Taylor et al., 2016), we consider our project to be a valuable contribution to this problem area. We want to discuss how different members of the audience interpret and understand the incorporation of social activism into advertisements and possible reasons for occupying such positions.

### **Promises and pitfalls of doing social activism in advertising**

Do people generally see social activism in advertising as a positive thing, or do they consider this appropriation of ideals to be cynical, manipulative, or even harmful? Through our qualitative research, we wanted to gain insight into different ways in which the respondents react to the inclusion of social activism in corporate advertising. Our findings show, the first reactions of five out of the six participants to commercials' social message were positive, although their reasons, sometimes overlapping, were generally different (A. 1, A.2, A. 4, A. 5, A.6). Some participants, like Ben and Gina, pointed out that social activist commercials capture social problems in society, making them more visible for the general public (A.1, A.4). For instance, Gina was convinced that a commercial like this "*highlights certain things*

*that are happening during our times, the new changes, and the new issues we have*” and acknowledged the importance of doing that (A. 4, l. 301-304). We consider this to be a reference to commercials’ potential to attract attention to certain social issues. In line with this argument, our findings show that some participants regarded brand activism as means to generate debate around important social issues. John saw these sort of adverts as “*reinforcing very important conversation*” about the acceptable norms in society, for instance in terms of the relationship between men and women and gender equality (A. 5, l. 362-367). He also considered this kind of adverts complimenting the existent social movements, but not instigating them - “*So I think, it [advertising] compliments it [social change], I think it's part of the process. It's not like they are initiating.*” Another participant, Nancy, emphasised the spreadability of such messages, incorporated in advertising: “*it's going BEYOND... to get MEN'S attention...*” (A. 6, l. 241-242) and “[..] *this is a good way to get a message across to the public in a quick way*” (A. 6, l. 246). It is evident to us that some participants see the reason for this kind of advertising to support the existing social cause and fuel existing public debate by disseminating the message quickly.

Some of the participants referred to this kind of advertising as inspirational, and an indicator of fundamental changes in society. One of such participants, Gina, discussing both commercial by Gillette and another one by Danish company Ørestad, saw the primary purpose of such kind of ads to “*inspire people and show that: something is happening and there is a change*” (A. 4, l. 454-458), while Wendy referred to brand activism as a new and groundbreaking phenomenon (A.2, l. 79-81). She later described it as a “*huge step and very brave thing to do*” (A2, l. 443-445). It is our understanding that the reference to brand activism as a “brave” step that companies are taking could be explained by the risks involved - the topic that was also discussed by some interviewees. Even though some of the participants considered corporate social advertising to be a common practice, they also acknowledged that companies are taking a considerable risk when trying to align themselves with social movements. While discussing Nike’s attempt to address social issues in their recent advertisement, featuring controversial athlete Colin Kaepernick, Ben described social activist element of this ad as “*courageous*” and even “*audacious*” (A.1, l. 537-539). He also reflected on how Gillette took a risky step producing “The best a man can be” while the

MeToo movement was still a current and controversial topic, a heated and unresolved debate that had already existed before Gillette has done the commercial. According to Ben, such advertising was “*RISKY. Controversy has a PRICE,*” meaning that using such a polarising social movement as MeToo was a risky step from Gillette’s part. And the price for this involvement, in Ben’s opinion, was a massive boycott the company faced afterward (A. 1, l. 550, 685-701). Another participant Andrew expressed the same opinion in another metaphor calling the involvement in social activism “*dangerous waters*” for companies and explained that this kind of strategy is likely to face resistance from the general public due to controversy of the social movement itself:

I guess, the “danger” - quotation marks - /about being this/ commercial that is very activist is that (.) you CAN’T hmm (...) everyone won’t be happy, like you are saying. So maybe (.) if some people find this advert (.) great and “Oh, yes!” they support the MeToo-movement, you will have a lot of people (.) HATING the MeToo-movement, so (...) it’s also dangerous waters. (A. 3, l. 625-629)

John also pointed out that there might be certain risks associated with the cooptation of social activism by private companies in terms of changing the way they have been doing advertising in the past. “*It’s a bit a gamble for the company in a way,*” he stated while discussing Nike, who has taken the stand on racism in their recent advertisement, “*because they are departing from their traditional advertising method, which clearly works for them.*” (A.5, l. 154-156). In John’s opinion, it could be unsafe to employ new type of advertising, because it could lead to detachment from some members of the audience, used to traditional type of advertising. During our qualitative research, we were able to uncover that there are certain risks involved in doing social activism in terms of both alienating audiences, but also in terms of departure from “traditional” consumer advertising, that audiences are familiar with and are more likely to accept.

## Potential positive roles of social activism in advertisements

Even though some participants identified some risks of social activism in advertisements, they also acknowledge the potential positive roles they could play in society. Another reason for our participants' sympathetic response was the perception of this type of commercials as role models – the point that has been discussed by numerous participants during our interviews (A.1, A.2, A.4, A.6). Our first participant, Ben, has interpreted the primary purpose of the Gillette commercial as showing "the right way to act" and discussing the destructive patterns of male behavior while trying to convince the audience that "*<...> you can do something about it. You SHOULD do something about it. And showing example of HOW.*" (A.1, l. 220-221). Nancy was also convinced that doing activism in advertising is inspiring in terms of how to behave, because it is something that "*needs to be taught,*" and a commercial could be a valid medium for this purpose (A.6. l. 193-194). As mentioned before, both Wendy and Gina stated that children need positive role models, and it is, therefore, important to discuss social issues, for the sake of future generations, regardless of which source this discussion is coming from (A.1, l. 108; A4, l. 96-97). We can therefore argue that some people are inclined to accept social activist message in advertising because it can play a positive role in the dissemination of social movement ideals.

Some of our participants emphasized the role of such commercial in fighting stereotypes (racial as well as gender) and promoting diversity. For instance, while comparing the old Gillette ads with the new ones, Gina explained that older ones were "*<...> very stereotypical of men! I think that's just how society was thinking in that time.*" (A.4, l. 261-262) She considered the stereotypes and expectations of modern men being challenged in this new type of advertising, the point of view that was shared – to some extent – by three other participants. For instance, both Wendy and Ben praised the fact that modern commercials (and Gillette in particular), show "*vulnerabilities*" and "*insecurities*" of men, that have not been shown in advertising to this extent before (A. 2, l. 89-91, A.1, l. 178-179 respectfully). We argue that these participants highlighted the change in gender representations in advertising and the departure from the stereotypical portrayal of men and women, the point, that has also been developed further by another participant, Andrew. While

stating that the stereotypical portrayal of men in old advertisements are “*kind of commercials from the nineties*” referring to the old Gillette ads are “*outdated*” (A 3, l. 232-244), he speculated that these changes could be explained in terms of fundamental transitions in modern societies towards increased equality between men and women. “*In the future,*” he claimed, “*we will have another society (...) society built in a different way, where differences between men and women (...) will disappear. And I think it is going that way.*” (A.3, l. 248-250). He later pointed out that unlike the old commercials, a lot of modern advertisements, as well as other media products and films, show a tendency to include people of different races and, therefore, promote diversity:

<...>you see people of different colour, you don't see that in the old commercials - like a clean-shaven, white man. Yes, in terms of, like (.) the media also, you see it in film as well. Even the big movies /just like Disney has/ in Star Wars they have people of different colour. I think it's natural. (A.3, l. 277-285)

For Andrew it is “natural” that companies are creating this kind of advertising, meaning that it is no longer socially acceptable for television advertising to use stereotyped gender roles. Speaking about modern print advertisements, Ben also noticed that a lot of companies are attempting to associate their brand with diversity. He discussed print advertisements in *The Economist* periodical, where:

<...> you will get those ads/ You see the picture of a woman, of a black person, white person, someone from Asia, /they address the issue/ this is DIVERSITY. They don't say “We are DIVERSE company,” but you see it in the picture. (A.1, l. 648-650)

We can therefore argue that some of our participants supported the inclusion of the social activist message in advertising due to its potential to minimize gender role stereotyping and promote diversity.

## **Authenticity and “Hidden agenda”**

Perceived positively by some, the attempt to create a new progressive image in commercials, like Gillette, was, however, something that made our participants reflect on the sincerity and “hidden agenda” of those commercials. Some participants began negotiating their positions towards social activism in advertising once the discussion touched on companies’ motives to do this kind of advertising, moving away from a positive understanding towards a more sceptical one. They acknowledged that one of the main motives for companies to be involved in such activism was to make their brand associated with the rightful cause. For example, Ben stated that these commercials are “*creating a brand name that is socially CONSCIOUS and addresses social problems*” (A1. 1. 372-373). Discussing how Gillette produced their “The best a man can be” campaign in the aftermath of the MeToo movement, he also noted, “<...> *they [Gillette] produced the ad in the middle of the earthquake [referring to the MeToo movement] <...> and it was still shaking...*” (A.1, l. 685-690). We can see that he interpreted this campaign as a company acting opportunistically in the light of ongoing social movement-related debate. Another participant, John, also pointed out how companies are profiling themselves by showing that “*they are on the ball, that they are watching current affairs*” (A. 5, l. 156-157). The inclusion of social activism as an opportunity to take advantage of a social movement was also discussed by our participant, Wendy. She highlighted the fact that companies join various social movements due to a recent “*trend*” of inclusion of racial, gender and climate issues into advertising campaigns with the purpose of selling their products “*by doing the right thing*” (A.2, l. 433-435). Some of our participants discussed involvement of private companies in any kind of activism as an obligation to carry out such practices in order to attract new audiences. Companies are tapping into social movements to create an appeal for new audiences to show that “*they are feeling the pulse of how young people feel*” (A.5, l. 156-157). The participant sees the social activism as a way of attracting new customers - “*millennials*” - young people who would be inclined to buy their product, because it is associated with the cause, that they are already sympathetic towards (A.5, l. 170-175). We can, therefore, argue, that some participants tend to interpret companies tapping into a social activist movement as a way to generate conversation about their brand



and, ultimately, to attract new audiences by tackling the ongoing debates about pressing issues in society.

Generally, all of our participants discussed the dynamics between social activism and the capitalist agenda of making a profit. Ben (A.1) considered companies' integration of both social responsibility and social activism a natural way of running a business. He saw no contradictions between the incentive to make money and promote social cause, stating that "*it's common sense, it's HUMAN, and I really think it makes business sense*" (A.1, l. 581-582). A number of other participants were convinced that the profit motive does not necessarily negate the possibility of social activist credibility. Nancy (A.6) stated that while the companies do want to advance their sales by aligning themselves with social movements, they also might have a "*good heart,*" meaning that they might be genuine in their aspirations to elicit social change (A.6. l. 531-538). Both John (A.5) and Wendy (A.2) stated that for them the potential for social change is far more important than companies' possible "hidden" motives. John argued in favour of social activism coming from companies, if they contribute into society and "*reinforce something in a positive way*" (A.5, l. 340-343). For Wendy, the importance of social change overshadowed the real motivations behind this type of activism:

<...>I think business is definitely business they're doing this to sell more and to keep their own position in the market by doing the right thing. So I like that. If they earn money from it, it's good for them. But I like that they're pushing things in the right way (A.2, l. 438-440).

Taking into consideration these statements, one could conclude that some participants were inclined to potentially disregard companies' motives if there is a potential for positive social change in society.

However, our further findings showed, that some were still rather suspicious towards the true reasons of consumer capitalism and considered this type of advertising to be, to some extent, a manipulation and another marketing tool. Gina (A.4) indicated a lack of trust to such kind of commercials "*So I think marketing in general nowadays is just being used to show kind of a DIFFERENT reality than what there is actually BEHIND a company*" (A.4, l. 392-396). Here, she is questioning the authenticity of this activism and is discussing a

possible mismatch between the ideals companies are trying to promote in advertising and their actual state of affairs regarding equality in the majority of consumer capitalist enterprises. Another participant, Andrew went even further and considered this activism to be sort of “*damage control*” - he speculated on how Gillette, trying to align themselves with the MeToo movement, was trying to escape possible allegation of sexual harassment (A.3, l. 458-462). Therefore both Gina and Andrew indicated the need to distinguish between the message and the source - they tried to unpack the relationship between the social activist message and the real state of affairs in companies, that are involved in the activism. Our findings show that some of the participants were sceptical towards the message due to their lack of trust towards the companies in question.

### **Tension between the message and genre**

Those participants who discussed the dynamics between capitalist incentive to make a profit and social brand activism, also questioned the validity of the genre chosen for doing such activism. Andrew, who occupied a negotiated position (in Hall’s terms) from the beginning of the interview, said, “*I just don’t think that it [social activist message] BELONGS in the COMMERCIAL.*” (A.3, l. 127-128). He highlighted the tension between the message and genre, finding it hard to reconcile the commercial produced by the private company with a social movement, such as MeToo. He later added:

I think /the movement/ the MeToo movement /was/ grew because women, especially famous people had the guts to stand up and speak for themselves, speak /for what/ for what men have done to them and they did so in the interview and on social media. They didn’t do it in a commercial, that would be weird! (laughter) I think it’s the cynical way of looking at it that gets people /kind of/ outraged. “How are you using THIS /this movement/ this social movement to sell products? (A.3, l. 425-432)

He also spoke about the implications of such appropriation of social activist ideals:

(...) they are using the movement to sell products, in a way, so it is kind of (...) “*diluting*” <...> the movement. When you are using it like that.” (A.3, l. 425-426).

In his opinion, the appropriation of social movement ideals by private companies is not only inappropriate and cynical, but also harmful for the movements in question. As researchers, we find this an interesting point of departure that we will elaborate more in the discussion section of our project.

### **Corporation's role in social change**

Considering the variety of opinions about the use of social activism in advertising, it is important to examine whether companies should at all produce such media products. Some of our participants also reflected on the degree of involvement of private companies in any kind of activism and their obligation to carry out such practices. According to Gina, corporations should engage with corporate social advertising, however only if the message delivered to the audience is inspiring because that is how change can be achieved (A. 4, p. 8-9). She also highlights that commercials are an important platform for portraying social issues since viewers' behaviour and way of thinking can be influenced by what they see in the media (A. 4, l. 634-642). Another audience member, Wendy also approves corporations' practices of brand activism as she finds advertisements and other mediums effective platforms to bring about social change even if the companies' motive is to make higher profit (A. 2, p. 10).

Other participants also came to discuss companies' potential for achieving positive social change in society and the way social change occurs in practice. As has been discussed previously, some participants were sceptical about companies' role and could not see them as vehicles for social change; others struggled with the coexistence of the capitalist agenda and social activist ideals. Further discussion led our participants to reflect on the nature and pre-conditions of social change. Andrew was convinced - social change is inevitable and *"will happen no matter what, it's happening constantly, it's an ongoing process"* and companies, even though *"motivated by commercial reasons"* would help *"reinforce that change"* (A.5, l. 292-294). Gina also saw that companies' role is to *"highlight"* social issues, but ultimately, in her opinion, it depends on all of us - *"depends on the person"* - to promote social change (A. 4, l. 301-305).

Meanwhile, other parts of the collected data suggest that companies should not necessarily be involved in social activism. John, despite the fact that he initially agreed with the overall social activist message, did not entirely see it as corporations' responsibility to create social change or include social activism:

<...> corporations exist to make money, and provides jobs too, don't get me wrong. I'm not an anti-capitalist, I think, you know, I believe it benefits society if companies are creating jobs and creating wealth. But let's face it, I just don't see their role, as being (...) as their duty, to push a social issue. (A. 5, l. 332-335)

According to him, it is not the corporations' role or concern to draw people's attention to social issues. He later pointed out that addressing social changes is outside of the realm of private companies and that companies' role is wealth creation and job creation (A.5, l. 441-442). Meanwhile, Andrew was convinced that "*companies CAN do a lot and they SHOULD do a lot to help create a better world in every way they can*" (A. 3, l. 405-406), however, he specified that for certain organizations, producing commercials that tap into existing social movements is not the right way to create positive changes in the society (A3, p. 11). Thus, together with John, he disapproves of corporate social advertising to a certain degree.

## **Alternatives**

It is additionally constructive to question the audience what alternatives exist, apart from motion picture advertisement. Wendy argues for the importance of people knowing about social activism and, therefore, spreading the word is beneficial. Her suggestions are: "*I think there should be banners, there should be poster, there should be (...)/ on the company's own site.*" (A. 2, l. 264-265). Unlike Wendy, Andrew does not think corporations should use advertisement as a way to promote a social cause; instead, he advocates for "*using some of their money to create a better world*" (A. 3, l. 385), for instance by donating to NGOs (A.3, l. 389-391). Another alternative to social activism in advertising is addressed by John. As previously stated, John did not consider the corporations to be obliged to include social

activism in their advertisement. Instead, he argues, it would be more practical to let governments be in control of such issues:

So I would take my key from the government to leads the way, with things like this. So I would rather see government initiatives because there is a lot they can do in this area. But they are doing things, aren't they? I don't know about Denmark, but in the UK, there are laws about, having more women on boards in big companies (A. 5, l. 467-470).

Therefore, according to John, social issues are primarily in the hands of governments, but he did not exclude the possibility of them joining forces to instigate change in: “[...] a close partnership, but I would like the government to lead.” (A. 5, l. 475-476).

The analysis of qualitative interviews showed that most of the participants initially showed a sympathetic response to the inclusion of social activism in advertising. Many discussed how the integration of social activism in advertising campaigns could facilitate the dissemination of social activist message and reinforce the existing social change in society. Some participants highlighted their understanding of such commercials as a potentially valid channel for addressing racial and gender stereotypes and promoting social inclusion.

However, the unconditional support for the campaign and the message it is conveying changed after subsequent dialogue, which led to a more critical stance on the coexistence of corporate and social activist objectives. Some of the participants showed a tendency to move towards a negotiated position after speaking about corporate motives and purposes for doing brand activism. Majority of participants pointed out to tension between “hidden” capitalist agenda and social activism, the topic, that have been discussed rigorously by all participants. Participants questioned authenticity and genuine reasons that companies might have; the interpretations of these reasons were different: some participants spoke of social activism as means to generate conversation about company and, ultimately, attract new audiences, while others saw it as a cynical attempt to associate a brand name with the rightful cause in order to generate profits. Some of our participants couldn't hide their skepticism towards the message due to their lack of trust towards the capitalist enterprises in general. In the meaning-making process, some distinguished between the social activist message and the source of the message, making it clear that while they agree with the general message of the social

movement, they do not necessarily approve of the medium or the source it is coming from. All of our participants questioned companies' potential for eliciting social change through such advertising and discussed possible alternatives. This discussion led our participants to reflect critically on the implications of social activism in advertising, both in terms of consequences for social movements and society as a whole.

## V. Discussion

Our findings of audiences' understandings towards the inclusion of social activism in advertising revealed a multi-layered picture defined by contradictions. During our qualitative research, we were struck by the plurality of audiences' decodings, their interpretations occupying a broad spectrum of the positions towards the issue of social activism in advertising, from sympathetic to cynical. In the majority of cases, participants could not be placed in one particular category undoubtedly, and their interpretation was changing in the process of the meaning-making. Following our findings, we want to reflect on gender-role stereotyping in the Gillette ad, as well as on the important findings concerning the companies' role in society in relation to social activism.

Based on our research, some participants detected a certain decline in gender-role stereotyping. The advertisements produced and campaigns developed by companies have started stepping away from portraying men and women according to the stereotypical standards, and instead foreground characteristics that have not been showcased before. According to our findings, the Gillette commercial is an example of fighting gender stereotypes where the company is not afraid to show the vulnerability of men, departing from their older, more masculine advertisements. The audience rightfully spots this change in the portrayal of genders, and also in line with the original intention of Gillette, which was to challenge existing stereotypes and expectations of a modern man (Gillette, n. d). This commercial can be seen as an example of a new period for advertisements due to its contemporary approach to gender roles. Therefore, it could bring about social change by promoting the acceptance of all types of men and women and a more balanced relationship between the two genders. Due to the growing importance of gender equality, Gillette's message is something that has already been communicated before by social movements, such as MeToo. However, the way Gillette gets the message across through advertising is pioneering, according to some of our participants.

Although almost all of the participants could see the positive aspects of the inclusion of social activism in advertising, such as the potential to fight gender stereotypes, there was still uncertainty among some participants in terms of the implications of such advertising.

Our findings led us to reflect on the dynamics between social movements and companies integrating social issues in their advertising campaigns. What happens when companies are joining forces with social movements? Could that facilitate the dissemination of relevant messages on social issues? Or could this appropriation compromise the social movement by making it associated with consumer capitalist agenda?

In our research, we discovered how brand activism could be experienced as a positive phenomenon by some members of the audience. Some of our participants tended to interpret companies tapping into a social activist movement as a way to generate conversation about pressing social issues and, ultimately, support an existent social movement. In line with this, our participants acknowledged that this kind of activism, done through advertising, is also making social movements visible in ways that can generate attention from audiences, not necessarily engaged in any activist causes. Most of our participants reflected on how spreading the ideas of social movements among the general public can strengthen and reinforce them and, therefore, bring about desired social change.

However, in contrast, our findings also demonstrated that, at the same time, many of our participants were struggling to disconnect the ideals of social activism from corporate self-interest. Most of our participants could recognize brand activism as a possible marketing strategy conceived to associate a company's name with a rightful cause. Others were more pragmatic and accepted the underlying hypocrisy of consumer capitalism, due to the possibility that positive social change in society could be achieved. Skepticism about the motivations of the companies tapping into a social activist movement generated conversations on the consequences of such activism. Some participants, while indicating their support for causes of a social movement, reflected on the negative implications and potential drawbacks caused by capitalist enterprises. Here, we observed a significant degree of critical consciousness towards the extent to which corporate enterprises could incorporate social activism in their advertising. Some participants interpreted the appropriation of social movement ideals by private companies as not only cynical and opportunistic but also, to some extent, harmful and diminishing. In some cases, participants rejected the productive coexistence of profit motive and social change in society and expressed the idea that social movements could be weakened by association with private companies. Following this understanding, we argue that by associating social activist messages with consumer capitalism, the social movements' credibility could potentially be threatened.



Aside from the negative implications for social movements, another important question is whether brand activism could at all be disassociated from consumer capitalism. Given the fact that the genre of consumer advertising is strongly associated with corporate profiteering, some of the members of the audience tended to have individual reservations towards the social activist message commercials were trying to convey. Our interviews revealed that our participants were able to distinguish between consumer and social activist advertising; however, their awareness of how capitalist enterprises function as well as their skepticism towards capitalism in general made them doubt the efficacy of brand activism. Our findings show that in the majority of cases, people were sympathetic towards social movement ideals, but had suspicions about the authenticity of a social activist message coming in the form of advertising. Thus, we can conclude that audiences' interpretations were influenced by the atypical combination of genres, prompting them to question the validity of the advertisement as a medium. As a consequence, some members of the audience were opposed to the inclusion of social activism in advertising due to this combination of different genres.

Another important issue that was discussed by our participants was corporations' role in social change. Our findings showed that some participants considered the social change to be outside the realm of corporate enterprises. They openly doubted the involvement of companies in social activism through producing advertisements, pointing out that companies' role is to provide services and generate employment. Some expressed an opinion that it is public institutions, such as governments, that have to spearhead the social change initiatives, but not capital enterprises. Instead, they highlighted other possibilities where companies could take stands and express their opinions on existing social issues in society, such as gender equality. Other than producing commercials that integrate social activism, companies could show their support on matters relevant to society by, for example, donating money to different foundations or NGO's.

## **VI. Conclusion**

In this project, we have discussed whether corporations have the potential to initiate social change or if they only complement and support already existing social movements. Our research raised essential questions on fundamental roles companies play in society.

Through qualitative research, we analyzed the audience's interpretations of the Gillette ad and their perceptions on social activism in advertising in general. We have used these findings to gain further understandings of audiences' positions towards the integration of social activism in advertising. We discovered that audiences tend to be sympathetic towards the social activist message in advertising, considering it to be the means to generate conversation and draw the public's attention to critical social issues. However, they are simultaneously skeptical of this message due to the combination of consumer and social activist advertising.

Thus, we conclude that companies should get involved in social activism by doing advertising due to the uncovered potential to instigate social change, through fighting gender stereotypes, as seen in the case of Gillette. However, certain members of audiences will reject the message due to the source it is coming from and the suspicion towards companies' capitalist agenda in general. Therefore, while considering their involvement in social activism, companies should take into account the risks mentioned above.

## VII. Reflections on the project

Here we will suggest other possible angles in relation to the method we applied to investigate social activism in advertising.

As previously explained, we used qualitative interviews in order to gain knowledge into the field of social activism in advertisement. Notably, we relied on Gillette advert as a case, which was undertaken to provide insights into more general issues. We thought the ad would be an interesting example that could allow us to gain insights into general issues concerning social activism in advertising. Nevertheless, here we will present some other possible methodological approaches the project could have employed.

Due to our search for knowledge concerning whether people think corporations should engage in social activism or not, we could have extended our case study to multiple case studies for two reasons. Firstly, this could have made the participants reflect more broadly on social activism, due to having more information to draw on since some of them had limited knowledge regarding the topic. Secondly, some of our participants used more time on the Gillette's message, and less on the concept of social activism in advertising. If there had been several ads shown to the participants, they might have spoken about the similarities or the differences between them, and consequently compelling them to speak more generally about advertisements that use social activism. On the other hand, speaking in favor of our project and our choice of method, the majority of our participants did have interesting points to say. Furthermore, showing only one case allowed participants to solely concentrate on the ad, as opposed to getting confused in a variety of ads. Moreover, the participants had preexisting knowledge on the topic of MeToo and, therefore, they had points to share.

Another example of the project could have been carrying out focus group in order to find out how people in groups create meaning or understanding of the advertisement. In our existing social world, many of us communicate with each other and thereby constantly refigure our meaning-making. By doing a focus group, we could have obtained knowledge about how one particular group, say, for instance, people receiving their news from social

media, and how they would have reacted to this advert. Additionally, we could have selected one other particular focus group which share another set of characteristics, and thereby contrasting them to each other.

A third option could have been studying comments and/or reactions on the Gillette case through social media, e.g. Twitter or Facebook. From this method, we would have obtained a great deal of various opinions. Moreover, we could have additionally contrasted the comments (qualitative data), with reactions (quantitative data) such as likes etc. Studying the concept of social activism in an advertisement through social media would have given us a larger quantity of data with more general thoughts, by a diverse selection of people.

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