

Towards a Relational Conception of Branding:

what should the brand-consumer relationship be like to enable ethical branding?

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Abstract

Ethical branding can be understood as including moral commitments in a corporation's identity and creating awareness amongst stakeholders of these commitments. This practice can positively influence the financial value of a brand. Accepting the freedom that people have in liberal societies to determine their own moral commitments makes it difficult to evaluate exactly which moral commitments should be taken up by brands in order to achieve ethical branding. Therefore, I will focus on the relationship between brand and consumer and the expressive value of this relationship to set a pre-condition for ethical branding in the form of an *ideal* brand-consumer relationship that would allow for both brand and consumer to contribute to the expression of each other's moral identity.

Introduction

Lonsdale is a British sportswear brand with a special focus on boxing and martial arts.¹ In 1891 the Lonsdale family organised their first boxing match. In 1959 the Lonsdale name was first used for a clothing range by former-boxer Bernard Hart and in 1960 the first Lonsdale store opened in London.² Boxing legends such as Muhammed Ali became avid supporters of the brand.³ Nowadays, the brand enjoys global recognition. The Lonsdale range includes men's, women's and children's apparel and also offers sports nutrition. Its fashion has been picked up by a larger audience for a casual sports-inspired look and feel. Given its roots in boxing, the brand continues to use boxers as brand ambassadors. Lonsdale is currently owned by Sports Direct and available in 23 different countries.⁴ The brand used to be available in the Netherlands, but in 2005 London Mode – a Dutch retailer – decided to stop selling Lonsdale.⁵ Lonsdale apparel has since only been available to Dutch costumers online.⁶

In the Netherlands, Lonsdale became appropriated by a specific youth culture group that were believed to support racism through their fanatic nationalism. Members of this group were referred to as 'Lonsdalers'⁷ or 'Lonsdale youth'⁸. Consequently, the brand became associated with xenophobia, right-wing politics and even neo-Nazism. An official committee was appointed to investigate the Lonsdale Youth. In 2004, one year before London Mode decided to stop selling Lonsdale, the brand tried to neutralise their image by producing and selling items carrying the slogan 'Lonsdale loves all colours'⁹ and starting the Lonsdale Tough campaign. Posters with ethnically diverse boxers in Lonsdale attire were distributed in Venray and Uden.¹⁰ These efforts were in vain as the link between Lonsdale and extreme nationalism had become irreversible. Many people in the Netherlands still associate Lonsdale with racism.

¹ 'About Us | Lonsdale'.

² 'Lonsdale > Pages > Lonsdale > History'.

³ 'Lonsdale'.

⁴ 'Lonsdale > Stores'.

⁵ 'Kledingketen London Mode Stopt Lonsdale-Verkoop'.

⁶ For instance at www.lonsdale.com.

⁷ Novum, 'AIVD'.

⁸ AIVD (General Intelligence and Security Service), "'Lonsdale-jongeren" in Nederland. Feiten en fictie van een vermeende rechts-extremistische subcultuur.'; AIVD (General Intelligence and Security Service), 'Right-Wing Extremism and the Extreme Right in the Netherlands', 7. Lonsdale-jongeren translates to Lonsdale youth.

⁹ 'Art.1 - Lonsdale loves all colours'.

¹⁰ 'Art.1 - Lonsdale Tough'. The conception of the brand in Venray and Uden was considered furthest removed from the original brand message.

The Lonsdale case demonstrates how the perceived identity of a brand can change as soon as it is exposed to the public. Consumers influence the way in which a brand is perceived, meanwhile, brands are expressive of consumer's everyday identities. Therefore, I believe branding is a relational practice between brand and consumer in which both parties contribute to the expression of each other's identities. Based on my personal interest in branding and the brand-consumer relationship, I have developed the following research question:

What should the brand-consumer relationship be like to enable ethical branding?

By answering this question I would like to introduce a precondition for any possible form of ethical branding. Establishing this precondition is the main objective of this thesis. Methodologically, I have chosen to analyse existing literature. I will draw upon marketing research literature, as branding falls within the marketing domain from both a theoretical and managerial perspective. Philosophically, I will use Gotshalk's theory of expression¹¹, since I believe brand and consumer express their identities through their relationship. I will answer the question at hand with the liberal mindset that people in postmodern western society have the freedom to form their own conceptions of morality and ethics and consequently, I accept moral plurality. The individual conceptions of morality are foundational to our being. In other words, our moral beliefs are part of who we are. Therefore, I will focus on an everyday understanding of identity and the way in which it is expressed. Raising the question: *what does this brand say about me?*. Before delving into the theory of expression and the identity of brand and consumer alike, I will analyse what constitutes a brand and propose my conception of relational branding.

In chapter two I will elaborate on the idea of everyday identity and the way in which brands (understood as possessions) contribute to the expression of our identity. I will use Russel Belk's influential theory of the extended self as a backbone that links the self to possessions. I will also establish an understanding of the brand identity and its expression and see how the incorporation of moral commitments can constitute a *minimum, specific* and *maximum* moral brand identity.

¹¹ See: Gotshalk, 'Aesthetic Expression'.

In the third and final chapter I will build a model that represents the possible expressive brand-consumer relationships and evaluate them according to the criterion of authenticity. After having constructed this value analysis, and having provided a short comment on the ideal relationship as a precondition for ethical branding, a conclusion is to follow which includes my acknowledgement of the limitations of this research.

1. Branding

Branding is all around us. We are bombarded with logos, symbols, brands and names and many of us have even started branding ourselves online via social media such as LinkedIn and Facebook or personal websites.¹² To establish what branding is and ethical branding could be, a sound conception of brands is required. Brands are branded and the results of this process can be beneficial to brand owners. After a workable definition of brands and branding has been formed, I will analyse ethical branding. Although little is written on ethical branding, it raises many questions. I will end this chapter identifying some existing forms of branding that could be considered ethical. These different forms of ethical branding provide some noteworthy implications concerning brand-consumer relations.

1.1 Brands

The Oxford Dictionary of Marketing defines the word brand as follows:

A combination of attributes that gives a company, organization, product, service concept, or even an individual, a distinctive identity and value relative to its competitors, its advocates, its stakeholders, and its customers. The attributes that make a brand are both tangible and intangible: a name, a visual logo or trademark, products, services, people, a personality, reputation, brand loyalty, mental associations, culture, and inherent values which, together, create a memorable, reassuring, and relevant brand image in the eye and mind of the beholder.¹³

As is clear from the above definition, a brand is an identity which is subjected to the perception of the beholder. Brands play a key role in differentiating from competitors in the marketplace.¹⁴ A brand relies on the products and/or services it provides, the marketing strategy that is used to position the brand and its products and/or services and the

¹² See for instance: Labrecque, Markos, and Milne, 'Online Personal Branding: Processes, Challenges, and Implications'; Jensen Schau, Gilly, and [David Glen Mick served as editor and Eric J. Arnould served as associate editor for this article.], 'We Are What We Post? Self-Presentation in Personal Web Space'; Lair, 'Marketization and the Recasting of the Professional Self'; Van Dijck, "'You Have One Identity": Performing the Self on Facebook and LinkedIn'.

¹³ Doyle, 'Brand'.

¹⁴ Wood, 'Brands and Brand Equity', 662.

consumers who choose to use (or deliberately avoid using) the products and/or services that are on offer.¹⁵

From the above definition of a brand, that which is most relevant for my thesis is the brand of a company or an organisation. I will call the overarching brand of a corporation that consists of one identity spanning across all its activities the corporate brand. As an example, Apple is the corporate brand and Iphone and Ipad are product brands. My working definition of branding is: the practice of communicating a brand identity (or elements thereof) with the aim to influence people's perception of said particular brand.

1.2 Corporate Branding

John Balmer and Edmund Gray categorised branding into five different streams: (I) marks denoting **ownership**, (II) **image building** devices, (III) **symbolic representation** of key values, (IV) means for individual **identity construction** and (V) a conduit for **pleasurable experiences**.¹⁶

- I. **Ownership:** Branding constitutes marking something in a way that expresses ownership and creates recognisability. A logo or brand name on a product would suffice.
- II. **Image building:** Branding is used to construct an image that is directed at consumers, but not informed by them or created for a specific group.
- III. **Symbolic representation:** Branding is used to represent values that are part of/or related to the corporation and that which it provides or produces.
- IV. **Identity construction:** Brands are used by consumers to form their (desired) identities.
- V. **Pleasurable experiences:** Branding should be used to create pleasurable consumer experiences. This view is based on Bernd Schmitt's conception of consumers as both

¹⁵ Keller and Lehmann, 'Brands and Branding', 740.

¹⁶ Balmer and Gray, 'Corporate Brands', 973–74.

rational and emotional.¹⁷ According to Schmitt a brand is an experience rather than a means of identification.¹⁸

As can clearly be noted, the first three streams can be categorised as one-directional branding approaches. They are initiated by the corporation and directed at the consumer. The fourth approach is described from the consumer's perspective and the fifth approach, though described from the corporate perspective, appears sensitive to the human characteristic of being influenced by experiences.

I would, however, like to argue that our experiences influence who we are and as such are defining. Although I agree that a brand offers an experience, I also believe this experience can influence the conception we have of ourselves, others and the brand.¹⁹ The different streams of branding are not mutually exclusive. It is possible for brands to be branded in all five ways simultaneously. It can easily be argued that a brand is both a social and economic phenomenon as brands and branding play a significant role in our social interactions. Communities, nations and organisations brand themselves, either consciously or unconsciously and via branding create an attachment with others.

Branding is the act of creating a recognisable brand with which consumers can identify. Branding is considered one of the most valuable marketing practices because it can generate brand loyalty. The act of branding is not only reserved for corporations, but individuals, nations and cities can also be branded.²⁰ The image of a brand is highly influenced by its branding strategy. Formerly, individual products used to be branded,²¹ whereas more recently a shift can be seen from product branding to corporate branding.²² The shift to corporate branding is said to be caused by the increased complexity of global yet fragmented markets, the difficulty of differentiating products and the increase in savvy consumers who are more concerned with that which they buy into.²³ Where in product branding the primary relation is constituted between consumer and product, in corporate

¹⁷ Schmitt, 'Experiential Marketing', 53.

¹⁸ Ibid., 57.

¹⁹ I will look more closely into identity in the following chapter.

²⁰ See for instance: Kavaratzis, Warnaby, and Ashworth, *Rethinking Place Branding*; Lair, 'Marketization and the Recasting of the Professional Self'; Shepherd, 'From Cattle and Coke to Charlie'.

²¹ Fan, 'Ethical Branding and Corporate Reputation', 341.

²² Palazzo and Basu, 'The Ethical Backlash of Corporate Branding', 336.

²³ Jo Hatch and Schultz, 'Bringing the Corporation into Corporate Branding', 1041.

branding this relation is extended to include an array of stakeholders including consumers, communities, personnel, shareholders, suppliers, buyers and so on.²⁴ Corporate branding concerns the outward projection of values that resonate through an entire corporation instead of focusing on qualities of individual products.²⁵ As such, requiring the corporation and commitment of everyone invested in the firm.²⁶ If successful, the brand is able to generate brand loyalty, which could be described as the extent to which a consumer feels attached to the brand. The resulting value is a positive perception of a brand and the likelihood that a consumer will return. In the words of Carley Foster *et al.*: '[...] a brand acts as a promise between an organisation and its potential and existing costumers, the promise has to be understood internally and the entire organisation has to be committed to deliver on it.'²⁷ The brand promise exists out of the brands most fundamental commitments and guarantees that adherence to these commitments can be expected by potential and existing consumers. For example, Apple's brand promise entails innovative design, creativity, ease of use and quality.²⁸ The brand promise creates customer expectations and requires of brands that they live up to their promise. With the launch of the Iphone 6 and Iphone 6 Plus in 2014 Apple was criticised over what soon became known as *bendgate*: complaints had been made by costumers that the phone bent.²⁹ Arguably, Apple did not live up to its brand promise because in the public's general conception quality-phones do not bend. Apple responded with the statement that ordinary usage of the phone would not cause it to bend and that top quality materials were used in its design.³⁰ One of the improved features of the Iphone 6 and Iphone 6 plus second generation (Iphone 6s) is a sturdier design.³¹

Let us turn back to the Lonsdale³² case and examine the brand using the different streams of branding.

²⁴ Ibid., 1045.

²⁵ Palazzo and Basu, 'The Ethical Backlash of Corporate Branding', 336.

²⁶ Jo Hatch and Schultz, 'Bringing the Corporation into Corporate Branding', 1045.

²⁷ Foster, Punjaisri, and Cheng, 'Exploring the Relationship between Corporate, Internal and Employer Branding', 402.

²⁸ Balmer, 'Corporate Brand Management Imperatives', 15–16.

²⁹ Sparkes, 'iPhone 6 Owners Demand Answers on "Bendgate"'.

³⁰ editor, 'Apple Says Bent iPhones Are "Rare"'.

³¹ 'iPhone 6s - Design - Apple (UK)'.

³² It might be questioned whether Lonsdale is a corporate brand. I understand the corporate brand to be an organisation based identity that ranges across all the products and services on offer. On these terms Lonsdale would qualify. To me, one product or service with an individual brand identity is distinct from a group of different products and services that share one brand identity.

- I. **Ownership:** The Lonsdale logo depicts a lion on top of the word Lonsdale.
- II. **Image building:** The brand is “[...]renowned for its strength, courage and power.”³³
The lion represents these qualities.
- III. **Symbolic representation:** The brand’s message:

The Lonsdale brand is built on pride. It's about being proud of who you are, where you come from and what you can achieve in and out of the ring. Lonsdale believes that everyone can achieve great things. It's about being inspired by the heroes of the past, to become a hero of the future.³⁴

- IV. **Identity construction:** Could go two ways, either people wore Lonsdale to express their affinity with boxing and sports or people wore Lonsdale to express they sympathised with Lonsdalers. The latter being more plausible in the Lonsdale case.
- V. **Pleasurable experiences:** To my knowledge Lonsdale is was not, nor is, employing any pleasurable experience branding, apart from the promotion of physical activity.

When analysing the Lonsdale case it becomes clear that the branding efforts of the Lonsdale corporation were not effective enough to maintain the image and symbolic representation that was originally envisioned. The (III) **symbolic representation** of Lonsdale in the Netherlands around the 00s had become one of right-wing activism, xenophobia and neo-Nazi sympathy. The brand promise had changed through appropriation by a subculture. This phenomenon points towards the possibility that branding is relational.

1.3 Relational Conception of Branding

I would like to propose an additional conception of branding that falls outside the streams identified by Balmer and Gray:

³³ ‘Lonsdale’.

³⁴ Ibid. Even though the brand message is from 2014, it would be difficult to imagine that the message around the 00s would have been very different.

VI. **Expressive relationships:** branding establishes an expressive relationship between a brand and its consumers (and other relevant stakeholders)³⁵.

Consumers simultaneously contribute to the expression of the brand identity and use brands to express their own identity. For this conception consumers do not only express their own identities through brand association, but consumers are also express the identity of brands through that same association. This association between brand and consumer constitutes the brand-consumer relationship that is expressive of their respective identities. In this dynamic view, brand and consumer can influence each other's commitments, what they represent and who they are perceived to be. These commitments, including moral ones, form part of the identity of consumers and brands. In the Lonsdale case, the consumer-brand relationship changed the identity expressed by the brand through its consumers. I shed more light on my conception of brand and consumer identity and the expression thereof in chapter two.

The idea that branding is unilateral seems absurd when you consider the degree of co-dependency between brand and consumer. For example, when dealing with consumers corporations are expected to act according to a basic norm; newly bought products are expected to have warranty if they turn out to be faulty, consumers expect to be paying the price that was communicated by the brand or retailer, they also expect for products to function as promised, and so on. People do not want to buy products if there is no adherence to a basic moral norm required in doing business. Even if a consumer buys a product for practical reasons, she will expect this basic norm. This basic norm would include that the law is respected but also for instance include honesty concerning the functioning of a product.³⁶ It can be assumed that the potential consumer market will publically express their discontent with a brand if does not comply to this basic norm. Consumers are protected by this norm. Of course, it is also in a corporation's best interest to adhere to this norm since satisfied customers are potential returning customers and brand or product

³⁵ I acknowledge that relational branding could very well include a range of stakeholders. Nevertheless, the research question is geared towards the relationship between brands and consumers. The understanding of the expressive relationship between brand and consumer, therefore, takes precedence.

³⁶ Other basic norms in doing business are that items that do not work can be returned, sale-items can usually not be returned, etc. Even if a person buys a product for practical reason, she will have underlying expectations of a minimum norm and can choose to accept violations if her sole commitment is practicality.

advocates. On the other end of the relational spectrum there are people who wish to create the products they need autonomously to ensure that the product lives up to their standards. These standards will include their moral standards. However, it is impossible for anyone to create anything entirely autonomously. In other words, even if you wish to make your own clothes you will have to first go out and buy some of the required tools and materials. These tools and materials are provided by brands that have certain commitments. It is impossible to completely escape some form of consumption and you will have to buy those products pertaining to brands that best suit your personal standards.

This relational conception of branding as an (VI) **expressive relationship** between brand and consumer generates the moral responsibility for brands to clearly and truthfully communicate their commitments and for consumers to do what lies in their capacity to consume those products that best fit their most essential commitments. Ideally, brand and consumer are mutually representative. In practice this means that brands might reject certain customers, just as consumers might reject certain brands since the relationship between brand and consumer influences those commitments either party is believed to have. Their relationship shapes the perception of their identities, which in turn might affect the way in which their social surroundings react to them.

In today's world the relation between people and brands is inescapable. This means that establishing the right conditions for the brand-consumer relationship concerns all of us and not just those brands who wish to be ethical or those consumers who wish to buy ethical products. Every one of us establishes brand-consumer relationships. These relationships are relevant for every brand and consumer, irrespective their degree of moral commitment. However, if the idea that branding establishes (VI) **expressive relationships** is accepted this would also affect those brands that do claim to be ethical. I will now turn to the existing literature on ethical branding to see how its existing practice relates to the six different streams of branding that have been explored thus far.

1.4 Ethical Branding

Ying Fan explicitly writes about ethical branding defining it as a subcategory to ethical marketing in which decisions should be made according to moral principles.³⁷ Consequently, a good brand should, apart from economical success, uphold moral principles. Fan argues that 'an ethical brand should not harm public good; instead it should contribute to or help promote public good.'³⁸ Ethical values and moral principles should form part of a company's identity. Perceived adherence to ethical principles affects corporate reputation in a positive way and could increase sales and customer loyalty. Therefore, it is commendable that brands define their ethical principles and act upon them. The most fundamental principles could be included in the brand promise. If it turns out that a company has not honoured its own principles, due to for instance bad policy and management, then this can severely damage its reputation which could result in financial loss and decreased market value.³⁹ Scandals caused by dishonesty or irresponsible behaviour are not uncommon. Fan describes how an ethical image benefits the corporation:

The organisation needs to make systematic efforts to create and maintain an ethical corporate brand image that not only enhances its corporate reputation but also gives the business competitive advantages.⁴⁰

The maintenance of an ethical image requires only that the different stakeholders perceive the brand as being ethical, which means that there could very well be gaps between their perception and reality. However, upholding such an image should require real commitment by brands. At the very least real moral commitment is required to prevent future scandals and financial burden, but more importantly because the relational conception of branding generates the moral responsibility that brands and consumers have to ensure they are mutually expressive of each other's identities.

Mette Morsing coins the term 'moral corporate branding'; the most recent development in branding in which the emotional value that is added to a brand is based on moral principle

³⁷ Fan, 'Ethical Branding and Corporate Reputation', 342.

³⁸ Ibid., 343.

³⁹ Ibid., 347.

⁴⁰ Ibid.

and ethical value as well as a continued concern for aesthetics.⁴¹ The right combination of aesthetics and ethics can be used to distinguish the promise of a certain life style or even life philosophy of one brand and its products from the other existing alternatives. The difficulty of incorporating moral commitments into a corporation is that these commitments might not match with those of for instance employers. Employees are paramount to the success of having a unified moral culture that is projected outwards throughout the entire corporation. Morsing highlights that demanding moral uniformity from employers might not benefit the corporation for it could stagnate innovation and cause employers to lose their sense of individuality.⁴² Although this is an interesting concern, it surpasses the focus of this thesis on the brand-consumer relationship. It does, however, indicate that other stakeholders such as employees also stand in relation to the brand and influence the expression of the brand identity.

Conceptually, ethical branding is similar to regular branding understood as: the practice of communicating a brand identity (or elements thereof) with the aim to influence people's perception of said particular brand; however, ethical branding focuses on communicating what I will call the moral brand identity⁴³ (or elements thereof). Since I accept moral plurality, I will not argue that ethical branding requires a predefined moral content. Moreover, establishing what the brand-consumer relationship should be like to enable ethical branding does not require a prescription of the moral content that should be communicated by brands. Similarly, Fan and Morsing's writing concerns the incorporation of ethical values and moral principles into the corporate identity without arguing what these exact values and principles should be. According to Fan brands themselves are amoral, however, the values they represent and way in which branding is practised can be moral or immoral.⁴⁴ She focuses on the act of branding and how this and its objectives can be good or bad. Morsing is concerned with the implementation of ethical values and moral commitments into the corporation's identity and the managerial difficulties that could arise. Some say ethical branding is a contradiction in itself, since making profit is the main objective. Money, nevertheless, is also required to do good and making profit and doing

⁴¹ Mette Morsing, 'Corporate Moral Branding: Limits to Aligning Employees', 98–99.

⁴² Ibid., 105–6.

⁴³ I will define the moral brand identity in chapter 2.

⁴⁴ Fan, 'Ethical Branding and Corporate Reputation', 348.

good can coincide. Reasons for corporations to engage in ethical branding are to differentiate themselves from their competitors, to respond to an increasing consumer demand for ethical brands and out of moral conviction. Again, corporate self-interest and 'doing good' can coincide. To reiterate, I understand ethical branding to be the incorporation of moral commitments in the brand identity and the successful communication of these commitments to all relevant stakeholders. Corporations can communicate their message via different branding methods. By analysing existing ethical branding methods, it is possible to gain an understanding of the underlying conception of the relationship between brand and consumer and whether these practices fit the relational conception of branding.

1.5 Ethical Branding Methods


Based on corporate websites, literature and my own experiences as a consumer the four primary ways to influence the perception of the moral corporate brand appear to involve:⁴⁵

- I. Labelling and Logos (LL)
- II. Corporate social responsibility (CSR)
- III. Corporate Sustainability (CS)
- IV. Social License to Operate (SLTO)

I am using these four methods merely as examples. Therefore, I will not discuss any of the methods extensively. If nothing else, these methods demonstrate the interest in incorporating moral commitments in businesses and the different views on how to accomplish their implementation in practice. These methods indicate that ethical branding is not an addition to the earlier mentioned streams of branding, but rather has a different substantive focus.

I. Labels and Logos (LL)

⁴⁵ Some examples: Salzmann, Ionescu-Somers, and Steger, 'Corporate License to Operate (LTO)—Review of the Literature and Research Options'; 'Business and Society'; Gunningham, Kagan, and Thornton, 'Social License and Environmental Protection'; Lindgreen and Swaen, 'Corporate Social Responsibility'; Dahlsrud, 'How Corporate Social Responsibility Is Defined'; Baumgartner, 'Managing Corporate Sustainability and CSR'; Joy et al., 'Fast Fashion, Sustainability, and the Ethical Appeal of Luxury Brands'; Robèrt et al., 'Strategic Sustainable Development — Selection, Design and Synergies of Applied Tools'; Joyce Stuart, 'An Identity-based Approach to the Sustainable Corporate Brand'; Joy et al., 'Fast Fashion, Sustainability, and the Ethical Appeal of Luxury Brands'.

This ethical branding method expresses the moral commitments of a brand and falls within a combined stream of (I) **ownership** and (III) **symbolic representation**. LL are used to differentiate from rival products or companies and generate recognisability. Ownership, however, should in this case not be understood as ownership by a corporation but rather as a recognisable mark of ethical approval. The label itself often owned by an independent body. This form of branding is one-directional and is furthest removed from the relational conception of branding. In ethical branding, multiple signs of ethical approval or marks of moral aptitude exist. From the B Corporation logo, that signals that for-profit organisations comply with a '[...] rigorous standards of social and environmental performance, accountability, and transparency.'⁴⁶, to the '[...]  logo as a symbol of their commitment to a humane, polite and just society.'⁴⁷ These branding initiatives are often driven by independent non-profit organisations that want to assist customers in making 'better' choices or at least spread awareness. There is a large variety in logos with different conditions to be met in order to become certified. These logos themselves need to be trusted in order for them to work. In fact, the logos need to be branded and have widespread recognition in order for them to be effective and an asset to corporations. These certifying logos and labels are used by corporations for differentiation purposes, as well as a demonstration of their moral commitments. The logos that have successfully been branded are desirable because they allow businesses to ask premium prices and turn into regulatory devices. Nevertheless, a checklist of conditions might not be enough to capture the full complexity of being an ethical company. LL are not the only method used to indicate that a brand is ethical. Alternative methods mark corporations, products and services in people's conception rather than on the product itself and therewith constitute branding.

II. Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR)

CSR contributes to the public's perception of brands. It knows many definitions and can be approached from a managerial and theoretical perspective.⁴⁸ In 2001 the Commission of the European Communities stated that:

⁴⁶ 'What Are B Corps? | B Corporation'.

⁴⁷ 'Helping Consumers Make Better Choices'.

⁴⁸ Lindgreen and Swaen, 'Corporate Social Responsibility', 1; Dahlsrud, 'How Corporate Social Responsibility Is Defined', 1.

Most definitions of corporate social responsibility describe it as a concept whereby companies integrate social and environmental concerns in their business operations and in their interaction with their stakeholders on a voluntary basis.⁴⁹

According to Alexander Dahlsrud this definition as stipulated by the Commission was the most prevalent definition of CSR based on a Google search for definitions of CSR at the time of publication of his article in 2008.⁵⁰ Moreover, Dahlsrud identified five dimensions that are regularly included in definitions of CSR: environment, social, economic, stakeholder and voluntariness.⁵¹ He also claims that most existing definitions of CSR include at least some if not most of these dimensions. It is argued that CSR policies contribute positively to businesses because they influence the purchase behaviour of consumers.⁵² Since the concerns can be multiple and their method of implementation and execution can be too, it is difficult to measure and compare the effectiveness of CSR policies.⁵³ Put more simply, questions to ask are: which of Dahlsrud's five dimensions would be of greater importance or have the biggest influence, and what should the balance be between CSR efforts and the economical foundations of businesses. Because there are many different ways in which CSR policies can be formed, it is difficult to assess in which category of branding the practice would fall. CSR can be considered a real-life manifestation of the moral commitments of a corporation and representing these commitments in a practical form.

Interestingly, a requirement of CSR activity and policy is incorporated in India's Companies Act, 2013.⁵⁴ This raises questions concerning the dimension of voluntariness and establishes a new baseline for a minimum norm that is expected of a corporation by stakeholders. Since the law dictates the amount of money that should be invested in CSR when a company reaches certain profit targets or a certain net worth, it is to be assumed that such a law is needed. Future research needs to establish whether mandatory CSR also means more and better CSR efforts or proves counterproductive and demotivates companies to invest beyond the governmentally imposed minimum. This development also shows how opinions

⁴⁹ Employment, *Promoting a European Framework for Corporate Social Responsibility*, 7.

⁵⁰ Dahlsrud, 'How Corporate Social Responsibility Is Defined', 7.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 4.

⁵² Castaldo et al., 'The Missing Link Between Corporate Social Responsibility and Consumer Trust', 1.

⁵³ Lindgreen and Swaen, 'Corporate Social Responsibility', 3.

⁵⁴ See: Agrawal, 'A COMPARATIVE STUDY OF UK COMPANIES ACT, 2006 AND INDIAN COMPANIES ACT, 2013', 35; Bahl, 'An Overview of CSR Rules under Companies Act, 2013'; 'India Companies Act 2013'.

regarding optimal CSR involvement not only differ between companies, scholars and CSR practitioners but also governments.

III. Corporate Sustainability (CS)

The definition of CSR as put forward by the Commission of the European Communities includes the environmental dimension. In CS the environmental dimension is the only relevant dimension. If this is the case – as suggested by Rupert Baumgartner⁵⁵ – CSR, and its multiple dimensions, is too demanding. Baumgartner's conception of corporate sustainability is based on four general principles that were defined by Robèrt *et al.*:

In the sustainable society, nature is not subject to systematically increasing...

1. Concentrations of substances extracted from the Earth's crust.
2. Concentrations of substances produced by society.
3. Degradation by physical means.
4. And, in that society human needs are met worldwide.⁵⁶

In this conception, companies' behavioural attitudes towards the ecological environment contribute heavily to societal problems. The above principles emphasise the importance of the environmental dimension rather than the other dimensions that can be found in CSR. The more strongly defined the definition of sustainability is, the lesser it allows room for interpretation of which ethical commitments companies should have. Baumgartner claims that every company should be sustainable.⁵⁷ This claim, however, assumes that the highest ethical good a company can bring about is sustainability. I claim that corporations should have the same freedom as consumers within a liberal framework. That framework would not allow one conception of ethics to be generally applied to corporations, because it would force consumers to express this view as their own through their brand-consumer relationship. Even though sustainability might be a great moral commitment for some companies and consumers, it does not necessarily have to be a primary objective of all companies and consumers. CS as a general doctrine does not fit the relational conception of branding, but on an individual brand-consumer basis it could fit the (VI) **expressive**

⁵⁵ Baumgartner, 'Managing Corporate Sustainability and CSR', 260.

⁵⁶ Robèrt et al., 'Strategic Sustainable Development — Selection, Design and Synergies of Applied Tools', 198–99.

⁵⁷ Baumgartner, 'Managing Corporate Sustainability and CSR', 261.

relationship. In which case, the consumer believes the environmental dimension is most important.

IV. Social License to Operate (SLTO)

Not unlike CS the SLTO can be thought of as a concept closely related to, if not falling under, CSR. In 2006 Oliver Salzman, Aileen Ionescu-Somers and Ulrich Steger defined the SLTO as ‘the degree of match between stakeholders’ individual expectations of corporate behaviour and companies’ actual behaviour.’⁵⁸ Traditionally, the license to operate meant that a corporation was granted legal permission to operate within a certain area. The SLTO is based on the acceptance of the local community and their level of satisfaction concerning the expectations they had of a particular corporation’s behaviour. Businesses are keen to be sensitive to the concerns of local, as well as larger, communities because these communities have the power to influence a business’s reputation. Therefore, businesses sometimes opt to surpass that which is required by law to ensure a good relationship with the local community. In the long run, this positive relationship is good for business.

A community often has the power to demand tougher regulations or have the law changed through local politics. This would force a company to change the way it operates and could narrow the legal licence to operate. Issues raised by the local communities are best to be respected by companies if they wish to avoid having to change policies forcibly or in efforts to restore a bad reputation. Moreover, a community can feel itself urged, or activate others, to boycott a certain brand which is likely to have negative financial consequences.⁵⁹ A SLTO is a seal of approval by those directly affected by a company’s material manifestation in the world. The SLTO is a social construct that influences how businesses should operate. The seal of approval is only achieved when brand and those affected are honest concerning their commitments and find a mutually agreeable consensus. Noteworthy, is the fact that the SLTO requires a more dynamic relationship between a brand and the people affected by it. A narrower understanding of the SLTO, namely between brand and consumer, would fit the relational conception of branding that is explored in this thesis.⁶⁰

⁵⁸ Salzmänn, Ionescu-Somers, and Steger, ‘Corporate License to Operate (LTO)–Review of the Literature and Research Options’, 4.

⁵⁹ Gunningham, Kagan, and Thornton, ‘Social License and Environmental Protection’, 319–24.

⁶⁰ A relational conception of branding that involves all stakeholders might be useful to explore at a later date.

In this chapter I have analysed Lonsdale's branding tactics and found that they were not effective enough to neutralise its nationalistic image in the Netherlands. Furthermore, I explored the concept of ethical branding, identified existing ethical branding methods and subtracted the views on the brand-consumer relationship from within these methods. I have also claimed that brands should have the freedom, in a liberal marketplace acceptant of moral plurality, to define their own moral commitments. Since the commitments of people and brands influence the brand-consumer relationship and form part of who they are, I will look more closely at the role of identity in the following chapter.

2. Identity

In order to assess what is required of the brand-consumer relationship as a precondition for ethical branding, a brief conception of everyday identity is useful. Especially because within the relational conception of branding the expression of the everyday identity of consumers is influenced by the identity of a corporate brand and vice versa.

2.1 Everyday Identity

The notion of identity that I will use in this thesis is that of identity in an everyday sense of the word. This everyday identity is referred to when we speak about people and what we believe they are about. This everyday conception is informative of characteristics, commitments and life styles that people have and identify with. We have the capacity to identify people and inform ourselves of what kind of people we think they are. We are also aware that people in our surroundings identify us and that we have some influence in how we come across. A relevant question to ask is what does *this* say about *me* or *you*? *This* can be a variety of things from actions, behaviour, language, backgrounds, experiences, knowledge, looks, clothes, locations, commitments and settings. This list can be extended with anything that provides us with information that could say something about someone. Of course, these elements are not always under our control and even if they were a lot of these elements unconsciously contribute to who we are. It is important to note that the moral commitments that people have form part of their identity.⁶¹ These commitments can be part of a person's expression of her everyday identity.

Since the focus of this thesis is the brand-consumer relationship I want to draw attention to the influence that brands have on the everyday identity of consumers. I will do this by first introducing Russel Belk's theory of the extended self, followed by applying D. W. Gotshalk's expression theory to everyday identity. Belk's theory is useful because it developed within the field of marketing and directly addresses how people, as consumers, use possessions to self-identify and be identified by others. Possessions express what kind of person we are or like to be and allow for brands to be used to express our everyday identity.

⁶¹ See for instance: Heiphetz, Strohminger, and Young, 'The Role of Moral Beliefs, Memories, and Preferences in Representations of Identity'; Strohminger and Nichols, 'The Essential Moral Self'; Stets and Carter, 'The Moral Self Applying Identity Theory'; Hitlin, 'Values as the Core of Personal Identity: Drawing Links between Two Theories of Self'.

2.2 Self, Extended Self, Aggregate Extended Self

In 1988 Russel Belk's influential paper *Possessions and the Extended Self*⁶² was published. The article supports the claim that what we own is part of who we are. Our possessions relate to our sense of identity. Belk uses the term *extended self* to cover the self and our possessions.⁶³ These possessions are not merely inanimate material objects, but can also consist of for instance people, locations, pets, our bodies and its parts. More recently, Belk has argued that immaterial online possessions are to be considered part of the extended self too. Because of differences in value that people attach to their virtual possessions compared to their analogue possessions and the often limited and non-transferable nature of virtual possessions, they should not be considered equal to worldly possessions.⁶⁴

The representation of our self, whether truly existent or just believed to exist, relies on more than just one product or a single brand.⁶⁵ Only an array of possessions is likely to capture and represent all different facets of the complete self. Those who are aware of this phenomenon have the ability to influence their identity perception by the outside world. The identity of a product or a brand rubs-off onto the consumer and vice versa. As such, a brand can speak possessively of her consumers and the consumer can speak possessively of the brand. In other words, L'Oreal Paris can say *their* customers are worth it and those who buy the product can say *my* favourite brand is L'Oreal Paris or even that L'Oreal Paris mascara is 'so me.' The distinction between mine and me fades as we identify with our possessions.

Moreover, our possessions play a role in the formation of our identities. As we grow older our possessions help define who we are, but also who we were. The dynamic exchange between the identity constructed thus far and the identity of a product affect our identity development. Debatably, our identity is in constant adaptation depending on the experiences we have of our possessions. Losing possessions that are part of our extended self affect us negatively. We feel as if our person has been wronged. Think of for instance losing loved ones, it feels like we have lost a part of ourselves. Or, losing our car after it breaks down beyond repair, it feels as if we have been incapacitated. The loss of possessions

⁶² Belk, 'Possessions and the Extended Self'.

⁶³ Ibid., 140.

⁶⁴ Belk, 'Extended Self in a Digital World', 490.

⁶⁵ Belk, 'Possessions and the Extended Self', 140.

that we have come to identify with affects our sense of self and regaining lost possessions (when possible) often leaves a mark. We hold on to the memory of having lost a possession and regaining it, even if replaced with an exact replica; it might never give us the same experience as the original acquisition. Both gaining and losing possessions shape who we are. Some possessions are more extended than others. We identify more with things we have made ourselves for instance. Perhaps, it would be possible to speak of a continuum of self extension in which we completely identify with a possession on one end and do not identify at all on the other. Possessions can inform others of what kind of being we are or what things we are capable of doing. They can also convince the self that the self can be what the possession represents or at least can take on some of its identity. People can create a sense of belonging by belonging. What I mean by this is that sharing similar or identical sorts of possessions with others might create a sense of belonging to a group. Up until now, a more individual conception of the extended self has been explored, but it is possible to have an *aggregate extended self* in which others and the possessions they share with you inform your sense of self. Through sharing we can group ourselves with others and identify with that group. Because of the internet the formation of group identities is no longer limited by geographical distance or even language and culture. Anyone is able to share their interests in a possession online, creating online communities. It is also possible to identify with people who, instead of associating strongly with possessions, publically disassociate themselves from specific brands and products. The binding factor in this case would be a shared thought or belief. Because of technological advancement it has become easier to identify with people who share similar, if not identical, thoughts and beliefs. Belk sets apart our individual and collective sense of self.⁶⁶ Put differently, people have a sense of personal and collective identity. These identities may overlap or exist at different levels. Every time Belk speaks of the self he refers to a person's conception of herself.⁶⁷

Aaron Ahuvia notes that since Belk's 1988 paper a narrative based conception of identity has been formed.⁶⁸ In their memory people's self-perceived personality traits are attached to influential events in their life history. These memories together form a narrative that helps people to understand who they were, who they are and possibly who they would like to

⁶⁶ Ibid., 152.

⁶⁷ Ahuvia, 'Beyond the Extended Self', 172.

⁶⁸ Ibid., 181.

be.⁶⁹ Ahuvia suggests that it might be best not to draw such a strong distinction between a core self and the extended self as Belk originally suggested.⁷⁰ Mainly because conflicts between possible identities that may in some aspects have overlapping features do occur and the quest for one singular authentic self appears to be incompatible with an ever developing and adjusting identity narrative. Ahuvia claims that conflicts between different aspects of the self during identity development can be resolved in three different ways.⁷¹ In “demarcation” one alternative identity or set of aspects of an identity is preferred and the other should be rejected. In cases where the alternatives are equally attractive consumers aim to find a consensus between the identity sets by “compromising” on both. Consensus is often required to find the balance between that which socially accepted and personally desired. “Synthesis” occurs when the possession or the act of acquiring the possession melts the seemingly conflicting sets of identity together into one.

In Belk’s later article *Extended Self in a Digital World*⁷² he seems open to the notion that multiple self-conceptions can conflict or even compromise and synthesise with each other through acquiring and losing possessions.⁷³ It appears that the core self should be reinterpreted as a coherent identity narrative based on the *belief* that a core self exists.⁷⁴ The core self might be of inspirational value, rather than an achievable reality.

2.3 Expression of Everyday Identity

I will use Gotshalk’s theory of aesthetic expression to support the notion that we can use brands to express elements that form part of our everyday identity. In my conception, our possessions are not necessarily who we are but only *expressive* of who we are. Some possessions are more fundamental in what they mean to us and say about us than others. This could be considered authenticity, in that some possessions express who we are and others do not.

When a person expresses his view, or when, as we say, his voice or walk or gestures are expressive, we mean that certain elements

⁶⁹ Ibid., 172.

⁷⁰ Ibid., 179–80.

⁷¹ Ibid., 181.

⁷² Belk, ‘Extended Self in a Digital World’.

⁷³ Ibid., 483.

⁷⁴ Ibid., 490.

objectively manifest certain other elements of the person, suggesting to us what these other elements are.⁷⁵

According to Gotshalk the expressiveness of an object is inherent to it or build into it.⁷⁶ If a person's voice or walk or gestures are expressive of those other elements of the person, elements that I understand to make up his identity, then his possessions can be expressive of that which constitutes his identity too. As such, possessions are of instrumental value for the expression of everyday identity. The expression of the everyday identity of a person does not need to be deliberate and can be subconscious. Gotshalk's understanding of expression is not limited to feelings but can include life views and other elements that make up a person. These views and elements could reasonably include moral commitments. Concerning the variability in the perception of the expressiveness of an object Gotshalk writes:

[...] the variability will be owing not to the object, but to the different capacities of the different persons, conditioned by their background, i.e., to subjective sources. Different sensory, imaginative, and other capacities, and different cultural conditioning, will result in different readings of the expression of an expressive system.⁷⁷

I consider the expression of our everyday identity to be the aesthetic object. The expressive system is build out of expressive elements that are suggestive of other elements. Possessions, either intentionally or not, are suggestive of elements that are part of the everyday identity of people. Interpreting these suggestions depends on the recipients contextual knowledge. If a brand enjoys global recognition with a singular and transparent brand promise then the interpretation of its suggestion is more prone towards a universal standard. In other words, if Tesla is globally recognised as a classy and environment friendly brand then those who own a Tesla car will likely express those commitments as part of their everyday identity. The more globalised the knowledge and experience of a brand is, the more universal the interpretation of its contribution to the expression of a person's everyday

⁷⁵ Gotshalk, 'Aesthetic Expression', 80.

⁷⁶ Ibid., 81.

⁷⁷ Ibid.

identity. At the same time the lesser known a brand is, the more the individuals who use the brand transfer meaning onto it.

I claim that we should strive for *authenticity* in the expression of our everyday identity through our brand relationships based on the presupposition that:

1. People are social beings.

And the presumption that:

2. The expression of our identity informs others and possibly ourselves of who we are.

As social beings we interpret the everyday identity of others to establish relationships and connections. We see people and interpret what they are about. Based on our interpretation of their everyday identity we determine whether and how to engage with them socially. We should care enough about ourselves and our social nature to be authentic in the expression of our everyday identity. If our expression is inauthentic, then we risk entering relations under false pretences. In our daily lives we need to deal with other people and we seem to be selective as to whom we choose to deal with. In branding literature it is accepted that brands can be used for (IV) **identity construction**.⁷⁸ This will have to serve a purpose: it can be inferred that this process influences our social relations. Via the (VI) **expressive relationship** between brand and consumer, the latter's social relations are influenced. The brand says something about the individual who supports it.

The idea of authenticity is that some elements best express who we are, whereas other elements do not.⁷⁹ Authenticity is required if we wish to enter relationships of any kind. Authenticity provides us with a truthful understanding of what someone is about. Perhaps it is best understood as a virtue needed to identify others and be identified by others. We can consciously choose the brands that are most expressive of elements of our everyday identity or we can do so subconsciously. The conscious choice can either be authentic or not. It is authentic when we choose a brand because it is most expressive of who are. If the choice is not expressive of who we are and this is a conscious decision than we are inauthentic. We consciously make others, and perhaps ourselves, believe that there are certain elements to

⁷⁸ See chapter 1.

⁷⁹ Jeffries, 'The Quest for Truth'. Bernard Williams discusses authenticity in this interview.

our identity that are not really there. Conscious authenticity requires skills of self-reflection. What do I think are my most fundamental commitments and is a certain brand expressive enough of those commitments? I consider our subconscious decision to always be authentic until we have become aware either of our own changing commitments or of a corrected view of that which we express through a certain brand.⁸⁰

2.4 Brand Identity

John Balmer has suggested five types of brand identity: (I) actual, (II) communicated, (III) conceived, (IV) ideal and (V) desired.⁸¹ These five types of identity, which later on he calls 'elements'⁸², have to be aligned as much as possible to avoid an identity crisis which could harm the corporation significantly.⁸³ Interestingly, calling these types of identity elements sounds more holistic than calling them types. The elements form a dynamic and dependent relationship with each other. The actual identity is at the core of the business and represents its present state. It includes the organisational structure, the management strategy, product quality, the industry in which a corporation operates, the corporate values and the extent to which employees identify with these values.⁸⁴ The communicated element is the identity as it is broadcast out into the world. The third element consists of the conception that stakeholders have of the brand. The fourth element is the strategic future of the brand. The final element is the conception of individual business leaders and where they would like the brand to go. When the identity elements are synchronised they should be represented through all the conceptual streams of a brand. The brand identity influences the way in which branding is approached as: (I) marks denoting ownership, (II) image building devices, (III) symbolic representation of key values, (IV) means for individual identity construction and (V) a conduit by which pleasurable experiences may be consumed.⁸⁵ Relevant to my thesis are the commitments businesses incorporate in their brand identity. To me the corporate brand identity consists of *a corporation's moral and other commitments*. Of course my conception can still be divided into the different identity elements that are categorised by Balmer. However, these elements should be synchronised to establish a

⁸⁰ See chapter 1 for my definition of a brand.

⁸¹ Balmer, 'From the Pentagon', 12.

⁸² Ibid.

⁸³ Ibid.

⁸⁴ Ibid., 17.

⁸⁵ Balmer and Gray, 'Corporate Brands', 973–74.

coherent corporate brand identity. Moral commitments can form part of the brand identity in different ways, depending on how fundamental they are and how much they surpass the expected norm.

2.5 Minimum, Specific, Maximum, or Inauthentic Moral Brand Identity

Based on what I have written so far concerning the incorporation of moral commitments in brand identities, I would like to propose a categorisation of possible moral brand identities. Although this model needs future improvement, I believe it could contribute to a research area that has not been much explored yet. The moral brand identity can be minimum, specific, maximum and could simultaneously be inauthentic.

The *minimum moral brand identity* requires commitment to a basic set of principles that have come to be expected from brands in business. These principles form the moral norm. Most basically, corporations have to operate within legal boundaries, this is both expected and required. Another principal is honesty about the product, being sold a red t-shirt that turns out to be an orange jumper falls below the norm of expected honesty. Another example is fair pricing: a product needs to be priced based on its considered value. There seems to be a basic set of principles that has been part of doing business for a long time and ensures that costumers are not left dissatisfied. Committing to these basic principles is needed for a corporation to succeed and be economically viable. Most of these principles are taken for granted by consumers. These basic commitments, that are to be expected, could differ per industry. For the cosmetics and fragrance branch the illegality of animal testing is more relevant than for a bank. From banks it is expected that they only provide the PIN number for debit cards to their respective owners and no one else.

The *specific moral brand identity* is formed when a corporation picks a (set of) moral objective (s) that exceed the minimum. This objective translates well into the brand promise. The specific moral aim is recognisable and contributing to this aim is ingrained in the corporations entire being. Since it is only one objective (or possibly a set of relatable objectives) it is very straightforward for all stakeholders to understand what a brand stands for and can be applied throughout the entire business. It would make sense for brands to pick objectives that relate to the field in which they operate. It makes sense for Tony

Chocolonely to contribute to slavery-free chocolate,⁸⁶ whereas it would be less obvious if the objective would be to fight against global warming. Because of the variety in moral conceptions of consumers, corporations can use moral commitments to differentiate their brand from other brands.

A *maximum moral brand identity* requires commitment to the highest and most varied moral standards possible. The corporation strives to be perceived as ethical by as many people as possible, which means it needs to commit itself to a broad range of moral considerations that exist amongst the broad audience it wishes to cater to. Because of the variety in moral principles covered, a larger proportion of consumers might be inclined to support the brand. Covering a large variety of moral principles does beg the question how committed a corporation can be to those principles that individual consumers find important. It seems unlikely that corporations can be as committed to a large number of principles as they could be to a select few. Moreover, the bigger the corporation the harder it will be to maintain a maximum level of moral commitment. The larger the market, the larger the variety in moral considerations. From a practical point of view, corporations depend on other businesses to provide materials or services they need to provide their own products and services. This raises questions whether full commitment with moral principles can be guaranteed, especially if the number of these commitments is large and the amount of external contributors to the final product or service increases.

An *inauthentic moral brand identity* entails superficial commitment to moral principles, because of hype, or purely because of financial gain. The morality is not part of the corporate identity, but simply a façade. There is only weak commitment to moral objectives since they can easily be abandoned and changed to a different objective if for one reason or another this might benefit the corporation.

The moral brand identity of a corporation is part of its overall corporate brand identity. The corporate brand identity includes all the commitments that a corporation has. The corporate brand identity should run through every fibre of a corporation's being. The moral brand identity should inform the content for ethical branding. What this means is that the content for ethical branding is directly aligned with the moral brand identity. There needs to be a

⁸⁶ '100% Slave-Free Timeline'.

balance between a corporation's moral and other commitments. The leeway that a corporation is permitted concerning its amoral commitments depends on its moral brand identity and the perception thereof by consumers. With a minimum moral brand identity, a higher degree of other commitments will presumably be accepted, whereas a maximum moral brand identity will likely be more vulnerable concerning her amoral commitments. Like the everyday identity of people, the corporate brand identity can be considered a form of expression. Branding enables a brand to be expressed.

2.6 Expression of Brand Identity

Based on Gotshalk's theory of expression, brands as a form of expression are not an end in themselves, as the expression of the everyday identity is, but an instrument. They are an intentional construct for financial gain. Within the context of marketing the brand identity is a pragmatic expression as it 'serves as an invitation or signal for a financial maneuver—to buy, sell, hold, etc.'⁸⁷ Corporations use all lines of communication at their disposal to express the brand identity in formal terms. For example, the brand's website can clearly state the brand promise. What is often overlooked, however, is that consumers are instrumental for the expression of brand identity. As we have seen in our Lonsdale case, consumers who use a brand to express their everyday identity also shape the perceived identity of a brand.

Just as authenticity should be required in the expression of our everyday identity, so should the pragmatically constructed brand identity be authentic. There is an additional presupposition (3) that compliments the earlier argument for authenticity.

1. People are social beings.
2. The expression of our identity informs others and possibly ourselves of who we are.
3. People are intrinsically more valuable than brands.

Brands and consumers establish expressive relationships. These relationships are expressive of the brand identity as well as elements of the consumer's everyday identity. In order to act in accordance with their commitments consumers rely on the authenticity of brand identities. This means that brands should also act in accordance with their commitments, so

⁸⁷ Gotshalk, 'Aesthetic Expression', 81.

that consumers can select brands that are most aligned with their own commitments. The authenticity of the expression of our everyday identity is important because it is this expression that contributes to social interaction between human beings. Human beings are social beings, whereas brands are primarily an economic tool. Surely, this means that the ability for authentic expression of consumers takes precedence over economic considerations. Simply put, human beings are more important than brands. However, since brands are instrumental for the expression of the everyday identity of consumers, brands should be authentic to the extent that it enables consumer's authentic expression. This does not mean that brands that are committed to financial gain are necessarily inauthentic. The financial gain simply is one fundamental commitment of any brand and as such should be accepted to the degree considered reasonable by the consumer. In the economic reality of today's world, a brand needs to make money to be able to provide the products and services that consumers need to lead the lives they wish to lead. Since the expressive relationship is dynamic, brands can discourage custom from certain people to safeguard their authenticity and that of customers who rely on the brand for the authentic expression of their identity.

In the existing literature corporations are believed to be in control of the formation and maintenance of their brand identities.⁸⁸ Since a brand identity is an intentional construct its commitments are explicitly known. Even more so when a brand's most fundamental commitments constitute the brand promise and this promise is representative of the brand identity. This promise is taken up by consumers. An analysis of Lonsdale's brand identity and promise can be used to clarify why the efforts to re-brand Lonsdale in the Netherlands were in vain. Lonsdale's brand identity revolves around strength, power, courage, pride (all symbolic attributes of a lion) and its boxing heritage. Labelling clothes with 'Lonsdale loves all colours' was an unsuccessful branding tactic since this message was never explicitly part of Lonsdale's brand identity. Perhaps, a stronger message would have been to employ Dutch professional boxers with multicultural backgrounds to be brand ambassadors because this would have been more in line with Lonsdale's brand identity. The Lonsdale Tough poster campaign seems too little too late.⁸⁹ The Lonsdale brand message – the communicated

⁸⁸ See: Bhimrao M. Ghodeswar, 'Building Brand Identity in Competitive Markets: A Conceptual Model'; de Chernatony, 'Brand Management Through Narrowing the Gap Between Brand Identity and Brand Reputation'; Anna Blombäck and Marcela Ramírez-Pasillas, 'Exploring the Logics of Corporate Brand Identity Formation'; Balmer, 'From the Pentagon'; Balmer and Gray, 'Corporate Brands'.

⁸⁹ See case description in introduction.

brand identity – that focuses on strength, power, courage and pride regrettably and unintentionally overlap with nationalistic sentiment. Branding products with ‘Lonsdale loves all colours’ might have been too superficial a response and changes should have been made in the brand’s identity as a reaction to the appropriation of the brand by youth with nationalistic tendencies. Apple, though probably also used by consumers with nationalistic feelings has a brand message – innovation, creativity, quality, design – that cannot easily be appropriated and ‘mis’-used to express these nationalistic feelings. Regardless the message, if a large community of people starts to express themselves via a brand the conception of the brand identity will likely change. If Apple were to only become used by pensioners, this would change the conception of Apple’s brand identity.

As soon as the intentionally constructed brand identity is communicated outwards and the products and services pertaining to the brand are available to consumers the brand establishes its expressive relationship with consumers.⁹⁰ This means that the conception of the brand is no longer just the corporate construct, but dependent on its relationship with its consumers. This view is supported by the research of Catherine da Silva *et al.*:⁹¹ there is a foundational set of principles that is first established by the corporation itself, after which some adaptation might be needed in reaction to the market and the social environment in which a brand operates. For the successful communication of its core principles a corporation is dependent on its consumers to a certain degree. Brands express their identities via their consumers. The consumers are a communicative tool. Put plainly, if a brand is committed to strength and its consumers are considered weak a brand cannot stay true to its commitment to strength. Through the relationship with its consumers, the brand’s commitment to strength weakens.

In this chapter I have provided a conception of every day identity and demonstrated how this relates to the research question. I have focussed on the expression of consumer’s everyday identity through brands. I have also provided a conception of the corporate brand identity and shown how consumers – through the expression of their everyday identity – influence the brand identity. Moreover, I have argued for authenticity as a necessary norm for both brands and consumers. This norm is required to establish relationships between

⁹⁰ I focus on consumers primarily because of the research question, however, the relationship also involves other stakeholders.

⁹¹ da Silveira, Lages, and Simões, ‘Reconceptualizing Brand Identity in a Dynamic Environment’.

brand and consumer that benefit both, and protect consumers from being inauthentic. In the following chapter I will use the norm of authenticity as a criterion to determine what the brand-consumer relationship should be like to enable ethical branding.

3. The Expressive Brand-Consumer Relationship

In this chapter I will build on the idea that the (VI) **expressive relationship** that is established between brands and consumers affects both parties in different ways. Like the various sorts of social relationships that can be formed between people, I will demonstrate that the **expressive relationship** knows several forms in a representative model (figure 1). There is, however, a criterion that can be used to evaluate the brand-consumer relationship, which is that of authenticity. First I will provide a short analysis of how this relationship is described in marketing terms.

The term “brand equity” originated in marketing literature and has since been much discussed in both the fields of marketing and accounting.⁹² In its simplest form it can be described as the value that can be added to products and services due to the brand that it is marked with.⁹³ Brand Y is worth more than brand Z. The relationship between brand and consumer generates this additional value. A distinction can be made between the financial value of a brand, its consumer attachment and the consumer’s perception of the brand.⁹⁴ The rapport between brand and consumer is a valuable asset to any corporation. Without a positive perception of the brand there can be no equity at all. The brand is dependent on the consumer. Marketing strategies are used to influence whatever perception a consumer might have of a brand. Traditionally, brand identities are considered to be manageable by the corporation and believed to influence stakeholder perceptions of that same identity.⁹⁵ Consequentially, the relationship between brands and consumers has often been considered unilateral. The brand directs its brand identity at the consumer and bases their branding strategy on marketing research regarding its target population. Susan Fournier compares the brand-consumer relationship to possible forms of relationships between people.⁹⁶ People’s relationships are almost exclusively dynamic in nature. It is possible to draw the comparison between human relationships and the brand-consumer relationship because brands are

⁹² Wood, ‘Brands and Brand Equity’, 662; Cathy J. Cobb-Walgren, Cynthia A. Ruble, and Donthu, ‘Brand Equity, Brand Preference, and Purchase Intent’, 25–26.

⁹³ Cathy J. Cobb-Walgren, Cynthia A. Ruble, and Donthu, ‘Brand Equity, Brand Preference, and Purchase Intent’, 25.

⁹⁴ Feldwick, ‘Do We Really Need “brand Equity”?’

⁹⁵ Balmer, ‘Corporate Identity and the Advent of Corporate Marketing’.

⁹⁶ Fournier, ‘Consumers and Their Brands: Developing Relationship Theory in Consumer Research’, 362.

personified and able to communicate through marketing efforts.⁹⁷ Brands also influence identity formation and personal development.⁹⁸ Moreover, the brand-consumer relationship forms part of a larger interconnected web of relationships and is used to establish a social sense of belonging.⁹⁹ Just like regular relationships, brand-consumer relationships develop and evolve over time. Brands can assist people in living their lives as they see fit.¹⁰⁰ It could be argued that the rise of social media facilitates brand-consumer communication by allowing more instant, direct and public forms of communication that can evoke online reactions by brands (think of consumer's complaints on Twitter that get a response from the corporate brand). It has not only become easier to publically communicate with brands but also about them with others.

A distinction can be made between practical based relationships and essence based relationships. My relationship with my dentist is formed out of practicality: I needed a dentist and she lives close. A more essential relationship is the one I would have with my husband for instance. The same can be said about brands: I buy ASDA Smart Price washing-up liquid¹⁰¹ out of convenience; my dishes need to be washed and it was the first bottle down the aisle whereas I buy a pair of Kuyichi¹⁰² jeans because I am committed to conscious fashion.

Brands cohere into systems that consumers create not only to aid in living but also to give meaning to their lives. Put simply, consumers do not choose *brands*, they choose *lives*.¹⁰³

This quote by Susan Fournier illustrates the self-defining importance of brands. Corporate brands help express and shape our identity and can be possessed by consumers via ownership of (or guardianship over) a product. The product or service is differentiated by the corporate as well as product brand. Even though Belk originally only refers to material purchasable objects he later includes non-material virtual possessions and seems open to

⁹⁷ Ibid., 344–45.

⁹⁸ Belk, 'Possessions and the Extended Self'; Fournier, 'Consumers and Their Brands: Developing Relationship Theory in Consumer Research'; Ahuvia, 'Beyond the Extended Self'.

⁹⁹ Fournier, 'Consumers and Their Brands: Developing Relationship Theory in Consumer Research', 345–46.

¹⁰⁰ MacInnis et al., 'Lessons Learned about Consumers' Relationships with Their Brands', 5.

¹⁰¹ ASDA, 'Smart Price | Asda'.

¹⁰² 'About Us'.

¹⁰³ Fournier, 'Consumers and Their Brands: Developing Relationship Theory in Consumer Research', 367.

the idea of including brands.¹⁰⁴ The idea of including corporate brands as possible possessions finds support in recent literature.¹⁰⁵ A reasonable explanation for the need to incorporate corporate brands into the definition of possible possession is that when *possessions and the extended self*¹⁰⁶ was published in 1988 marketing generally focussed on selling individual products or product brands rather than corporate brand identities.¹⁰⁷ According to Balmer, the interest in corporate identity only started growing in the late 80s.¹⁰⁸ Apart from the identity based approach to the brand-consumer relationship, which forms part of the theoretical construct needed to answer the main research question, alternative approaches exist within the literature.¹⁰⁹ I have chosen not to discuss these alternatives, but merely acknowledge their existence.

3.1 Model of Brand-Consumer Relationships

Now I will build the brand-consumer relationship model based on a dynamic conception of identity that fits within the relational conception of branding.

Relational branding: *branding establishes (VI) expressive relationships between a brand and its consumers (and other relevant stakeholders¹¹⁰). Consumers simultaneously contribute to the expression of the brand identity and express their own identity through their brand relations.*

I have provided a conception of everyday identity: *the everyday identity is that which we refer to when we speak about people and what we believe they are about. This everyday conception of a person's identity is informed by the expression of characteristics, commitments and life styles that people have and identify with.*

¹⁰⁴ Belk, 'Extended Self in a Digital World', 493.

¹⁰⁵ Bhattacharya and Sen, 'Consumer-Company Identification: A Framework for Understanding Consumers' Relationships with Companies', 86.

¹⁰⁶ Belk, 'Possessions and the Extended Self'.

¹⁰⁷ Jo Hatch and Schultz, 'Bringing the Corporation into Corporate Branding', 1041–42; Palazzo and Basu, 'The Ethical Backlash of Corporate Branding', 336.

¹⁰⁸ Balmer, 'Corporate Identity and the Advent of Corporate Marketing', 977–78.

¹⁰⁹ See for instance: Jeff Hess and John Story, 'Trust-based Commitment: Multidimensional Consumer-brand Relationships'; Chang and Chieng, 'Building Consumer-brand Relationship'; Swaminathan, Page, and Gürhan-Canli, '"My" Brand or "Our" Brand: The Effects of Brand Relationship Dimensions and Self-Construal on Brand Evaluations'.

¹¹⁰ I acknowledge that relational branding could very well include a range of stakeholders. Nevertheless, the research question is geared towards the relationship between brands and consumers. The understanding of the expressive relationship between brand and consumer, therefore, takes precedence.

I have also provided a conception of brand identity as *a corporation's moral and other commitments* and explained the importance of the perception of the corporate brand identity by stakeholders.

The important identity related questions become:

What does *this* say about me or you? This being the brand in the brand-consumer relationship.

And:

What does *this* say about the brand? This being the consumer in the brand-consumer relationship.

Furthermore, I have argued for a norm of authenticity for both consumers and brands:

Consumers should express those commitments that are most expressive of who they are via the brand-consumer relationship. The brand identity should be authentic in that brands should truly be committed to their commitments.

Because of the expressive relationship between brand and consumer, both need to be open towards each other concerning their commitments. A brand diminishes the authenticity of a consumer if the promised commitments of a brand are nothing but a promise and not actually pursued. The brand that does not have its moral brand identity resonate through the entire corporation, but is still making consumers believe the brands fits the consumer's personal commitments is causing the consumer to falsely express that element of her identity. Consequently, the consumer's identity suffers from inauthenticity, possibly without the consumer being aware. It is known that consumers will rid themselves of their possessions if they have come to believe they are no longer representative of their identities.¹¹¹ As soon as a consumer realises a brand is not expressive of elements within her identity, she will discontinue the relationship. Presumably, UK citizens who visited the Netherlands and were warned of the meaning of the Lonsdale brand in Netherlands decided not to publically use their Lonsdale products.

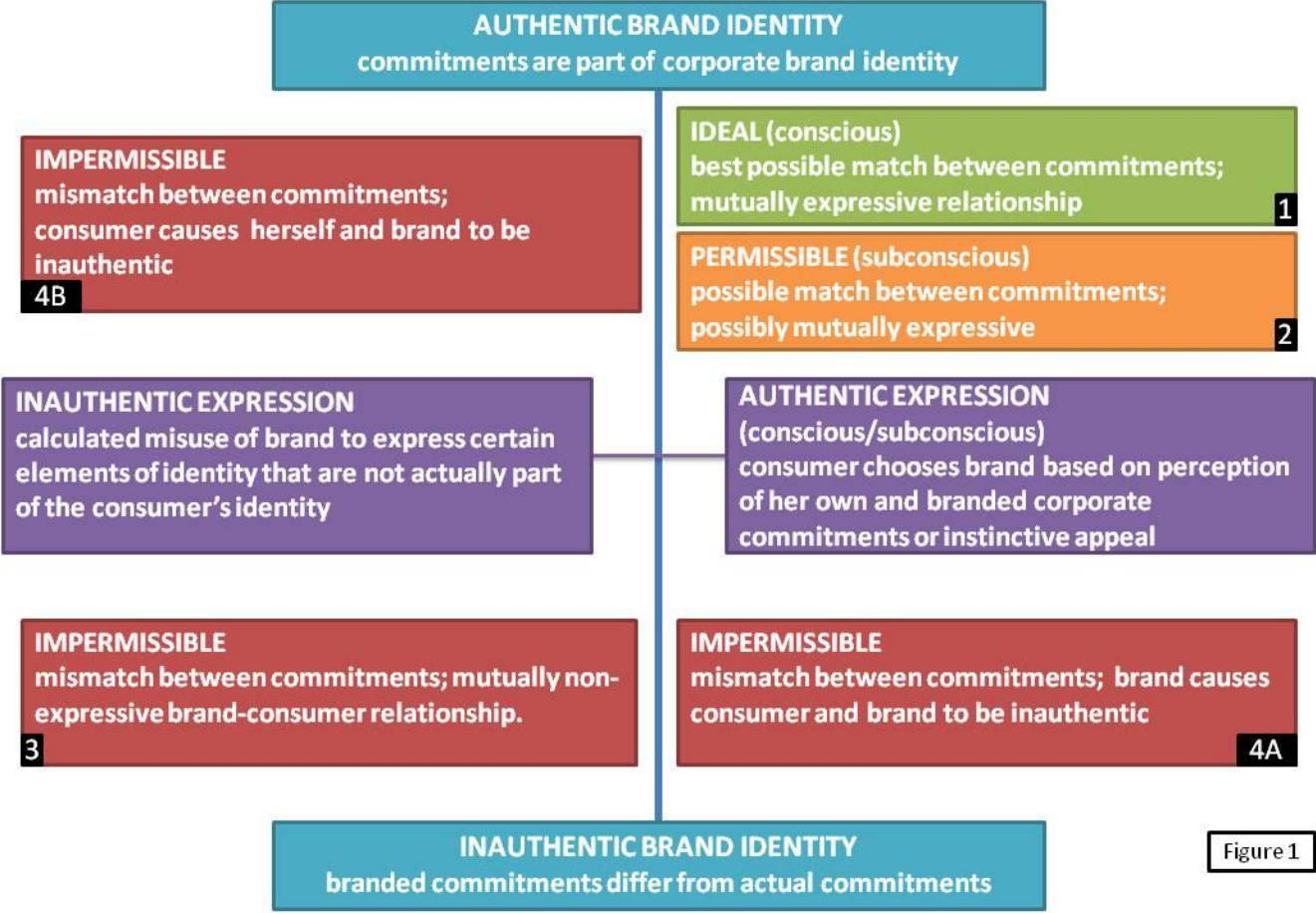
¹¹¹ Anthony la Branche in Belk, 'Possessions and the Extended Self', 143.

Factors that affect the positivity of the brand-consumer relationship include the hierarchical order of commitments and the trade-offs that are made when conflicts between commitments arise, as well as the degree to which commitments are honoured. Authenticity is needed in order to establish positive brand-consumer relationships that are mutually beneficial: the situation in which brand and consumer are mutually expressive of their respective identities.

The relationship between brands and consumers allows for consumers to appropriate certain brands and consequentially transfer elements of their identity onto that brand, therewith changing the conception of the brand identity. Brands become associated with people, which in turn affects the way other people perceive that brand and slowly influences a brand's identity. If a certain brand is appropriated by a group of people with certain commitments, values and norms the corporate brand will inevitably change. From a financial perspective, brand appropriation by a certain group of consumers is not necessarily a bad thing as group appropriation generates attachment and secures future custom. In other words, it generates brand equity. However, if members of such a group use a brand to express what is generally conceived as ethically questionable commitments, this might devalue the brand in financial terms. A brand that becomes an expressive tool for racism, while it never intended to express this value, will see a decline in customers.

Brand identities can only be managed from within a corporation to a certain degree, because consumers contribute to the expression of a brand's identity. Managers and executives might not desire the consumer expressed brand identity, but basic economic considerations will most likely ensure that such subjection will not be prevented as long as it generates sufficient revenue. The brand identity does evolve over time and this process is influenced by the consumer. If the direction a brand's evolving identity is taking does no longer suit its employees, they either have to separate the professional from the personal or find a better fitting job. When a brand grows in popularity a change in its identity can occur. Think of brands who cater to a niche. Their brand identity might include commitments that only appeal to a smaller amount of costumers. When such a commitment becomes more standard a brand can easily grow in popularity. The more mainstream a brand becomes, the

more publically accepted its commitments will have to be. The model of possible brand-consumer relationships is captured in figure 1:



3.2 Explanation of Model

The main criterion I use to evaluate the different brand-consumer relationships is that of authenticity:

Consumers should express those commitments that are most expressive of who they are via the brand-consumer relationship. The brand identity should be authentic in that brands should truly be committed to their commitments.

As a result, brand and consumer should through their relationship contribute to the authentic expression of each other's identity.

The consumer-brand relationship is *ideal* when it adheres to the above criterion. In which case, there is the best possible match between the authentic commitments of a brand and those of a consumer (figure 1, 1.). This would mean that the consumer is consciously acting in accordance with her own commitments in the best possible way by entering a relationship

with a brand. Both brand and consumer are authentic and contribute to each other's capacity to be authentic in their commitments. The commitments that a consumer is looking to express via her relation with a brand are also upheld by the brand and can be recognised as such by her surroundings. The brand is part of the consumer's expression of her identity and suggestive of related elements of her identity. In other words, by relating herself to Chanel she must not only share the brand's commitments, but also belong to a social setting in which luxury brands are respected, have the means to acquire these luxury goods, have brand specific knowledge and so on.

The *permissible* brand-consumer relationship is formed when the consumer picks a brand subconsciously for it is intuitively appealing or for instance because there are no other brands to choose from (figure 1, 2). This is permissible because we do not consciously ponder over every brand identity before picking a brand and because sometimes we simply have no other choice but to choose that which is available. In this category fall products bought impulsively and out of urgency. The impulse buy is a subconscious expression of identity that is authentic because impulse is more often than not most informative concerning our most fundamental commitments. The urgency buy is authentic because it trumps all other commitments.¹¹² The consumer is authentic to the best of her ability. In cases where there is only one possible choice, it automatically becomes the *most* expressive choice. Furthermore, this relationship is permissible because a consumer can become conscious of the brand's identity and decide it is most expressive of her own identity or consciously decide to find an alternative because it is not. The stronger a brand's recognition, the less likely it is for consumers to be completely unaware of a brand's identity. Of course, the conception of a brand's identity could become subconsciously known to a consumer, which is why intuitive appeal might very well be correct. In all likelihood a subconscious choice for a certain brand is most authentic. If this turns out not to be the case, a consumer will find a suiting alternative. In sum, the relationship is permissible because a consumer might subconsciously be aware of the brand identity, it could lead towards a more ideal relationship over time or because it is the only and, therefore, best option.

There are three *impermissible* brand-consumer relationships. One of them occurs when the relationship is entered by a conscious inauthentic consumer with and inauthentic brand

¹¹² For instance, I have a cut in my finger I need band aids now, no matter the brand, price, quality, and so on.

(figure 1,3). Both brand and consumer disrespect the consumer's need for authenticity as a functioning human being. As a result, their social surroundings might identify them with commitments they do not have and misconceive of their identities. Their relationship is non-expressive of who or what either party is. The relationship does not express anything of truth about their identities. From this relationship, an ideal relationship cannot be achieved. The consumer can never know whether she would have opted for another brand if the brand would have communicated its commitments genuinely. And the corporation behind the brand, on the other hand, is not able to determine whether the consumer can justifiably make any claims concerning the inauthenticity of the branded corporate identity when the consumer herself chose the brand for no authentic reason at all.

The inauthentic relationship is least beneficial to all parties because it is very susceptible to being misused for the benefit of one party only. Think of situations in which through branding a corporation claims to surpass the minimum set of moral commitments, for instance by claiming that it provides free education to the children of its factory workers in Bangladesh, while in fact it does not and the consumer was never committed to this objective but opted for the brand because of her commitment to for instance a certain aesthetic. If word came out that the corporation does not in fact practice what it preaches, the consumer could dupe the corporation by claiming she was committed to that objective and was not allowed to act in accordance with her commitments. The other way around the corporation could have the consumer support commitments that she would never have agreed to support if these commitments were known. The situation is impermissible because either party is easily duped and there is no possibility to grow towards a mutually expressive relationship because neither the brand nor the consumer are authentic. This is especially worrisome if these consumers become labelled by others as supporting commitments they never intended to support. They become misidentified in their social surroundings.

The other two *impermissible* brand-consumer relationship are brought about when a consumer tries to consciously or subconsciously buy products that fit her own commitments while these commitments are falsely represented by the brand (Figure 1,4A) or the other way around, when a consumer falsely expresses the commitments that are part of the brand identity, but do not resonate with her own identity (Figure 1,4B). The reason for both cases

to be impermissible is that the consumers expression of her identity is inauthentic. In the former case caused by the brand, because it does not commit to its own commitments and in the latter because of the consumer who does not commit to her own commitments. The authenticity of the consumer is reliant on the brand's commitment to its own commitments. As soon as a brand's commitments are only a facade that the consumer buys into, she is no longer in fact supporting her own commitments. Not only could it be argued that this is wrong because a brand disrespects that which is of fundamental value to different people, their commitments, but also because people inevitably, while unaware, are no longer in control of the degree to which they adhere to their own commitments. Most people care about who they are and would like to strive for consistency within. If by buying certain products this consistency is lost, then they are harmed. If the consumer were aware of the brand's authentic commitments from the start and these would not suit her, she would never have entered the relationship.

When the consumer through her relationship with a brand expresses commitments held by brands that are not part of her own identity she is inauthentic. If this is apparent, because it is inconsistent, then this might reflect poorly on the brand identity. The brand, through the inauthentic expression of certain commitments by a consumer, becomes less committed to its own commitments. A consumer uncommitted to saving the rainforest and purely using the brand for its aesthetic, might in everything else she does and say be contributing to the destruction of the rainforest. The negative effect of this relationship will be greater when the commitment to the rainforest is more fundamental to the brand than its aesthetic. Speculatively, in the case of Lonsdale, consumers might have focussed on pride and taken that commitment further than the brand, while completely forgetting the brand's commitment to boxing. Ultimately, the brand decided to stop selling in the Netherlands. If brands become used by consumers and the expression of their identity reflects poorly on the brand, it can decide to want to avoid these costumers.

There is one final relationship that I have not included in the model because it does not concern consumers, but rather ex-consumers, never-to-be consumers or potential consumers. It is, nevertheless, an interesting relationship that I wish to mention only briefly. This relationship is the one in which people publically and explicitly express elements of their identity by avoiding specific brands. This avoidance can say a lot about a person when it is

voiced publically and with reasons. Of course, this is the kind of expressive relationship that many brands would wish to avoid. When a person actively disassociates herself from a specific brand and makes this fact and its reasons known, it establishes an expressive relationship, albeit, negative.

3.3 Relational Branding Requirement for Ethical Branding

Having established a variety of possible brand-consumer relationship and described the *ideal* situation I will briefly explain why the *ideal* relationship should be a precondition for ethical branding.

When moral commitments are part of a brand's identity and considered fundamental for its identity, the brand cannot allow dissonance between its brand message and living up to its moral commitments. When a moral commitment is part of the brand promise, consumers will come to expect that the commitment is authentic. They will either consciously or subconsciously rely on the brand to express part of who they are. This part of who they are, will be their own moral commitment. The expression of their identity is an end in itself. Those who wish to interpret the identity of someone will need the knowledge that enables them to do so. For this reason, it is pertinent that brands whose fundamental commitments are moral are clear on these commitments and aim to make them as recognisable, understandable, and transparent as possible. A brand will need to be clear about the extent to which it can commit to its own moral commitments. Brands that aim to be ethical seem to fall in the category of conscious choice by consumers. Consumers are consciously expressing their views on morality through their relationships with these brands. Whatever the moral commitment might be, it is vital that it is authentic and not just a superficial tool to generate profit. Even though brands are pragmatic forms of expression meant as means to generate money, they can at the same time be authentic in their commitments. The pre-condition for ethical branding would be a mutually authentic expressive relationship between brand and consumer.

In practice, new technological developments such as the Tagologic Tag¹¹³ (TTag) enable consumers to access information concerning individual products that they can buy at a

¹¹³ 'Tagologic Consumer Connector'.

retailers.¹¹⁴ The TTag is a tag that can be scanned with for instance a smart phone. Think of the barcode or QR code. Once scanned, the tag provides information: who produced the item, where, under which conditions and so on. It can assist consumers in making the best choice. Since access to this information only requires a smart phone on the consumer's end, it can be a powerful tool to ensure that the promise of brands is kept concerning their products. This simple technological development can enable transparency and easy access to information to aid decision-making. It consciously contributes to the knowledge people have of a brand and its products, resulting in the conscious responsibility to be authentic in the choice of brands that are part of the expression of people's everyday identity. Technological advancements like these enable consumers to support brands that best fit their moral commitments.

¹¹⁴ Buddingh', 'Streepjescode Gaat Op de Helling'.

Conclusion

Lonsdale has proven a great indicator of a possible relational conception of branding. Although little has been written about ethical branding, this does not mean that there is little to say on the subject. Ethical branding can be understood as the incorporation of ethical values into the corporate brand identity and the outward communication of these commitments. Sometimes branding is approached as a one-directional practice, directed at consumers by corporations, which would mean that the corporation determines which values to engrain in the corporate identity. This unilateral conception of branding fails to acknowledge that there is a certain co-dependency between a brand and its different stakeholders. A brand needs the support of people in order to operate and people need to consume in order to live the lives they wish to lead. The brand-consumer relationship is an inescapable part of our daily existence and therefore makes for an important area of theoretical exploration.

In chapter one I have looked into the meaning of branding and presented the relational conception of branding. I have proposed the idea that branding establishes an expressive relationship between brand and consumer. Furthermore, I explored the literature on ethical branding and identified some methods that can be considered ethical branding in practice.

In chapter two I have built on the idea that people's commitments are part of who they are and that a variety of elements can be used to express our everyday identity. I focussed on the question what does *this* say about *me* or *you*. *This* being the brands with which we have established a relationship. I have used Russel Belk's theory of the extended self because it captures the idea that possessions can say a lot about who we are. People identify with objects, with some more than others, and these objects are part of who they are. I argue that our possessions are expressive of who we are, rather than part of who we are. Corporate brands function similar to possessions an expression of elements of our everyday identity. I have used Gotshalk's theory of expression to show how we express our identity as an end in itself that is suggestive of other elements of our identity. The reading of our identity is dependent on the knowledge that the reader possesses. The same theory was used to distinguish the expression of our identity from that of brands, since brands are an instrument for financial gain rather than an expressive end in themselves. Furthermore, I claimed that the brand identity exists of moral and other commitments.

The relationship between brand and consumer influences both parties' identity. Because humans are inherently more valuable than brands the authenticity of their identity should be respected. Consumers rely on brands for the expression of their identity and its authenticity, which is why a brand is required to be authentic too. Both brand and consumer need to be committed to their commitments and seek to authentically express these. They should keep in mind that some commitments are more expressive of who they are than others and strive to find this balance within their relationships.

In chapter three all of the ideas that were presented in the preceding chapters were combined to form a model of evaluation for the brand-consumer relationship. The model shows how consumers simultaneously contribute to the expression of the brand identity and express their own identity through their brand relations. Impermissible are the relationships in which neither brand nor consumer enter the relationship knowing each other's true commitments; the situation in which a consumer has based her choice for a specific brand on her commitments while the brand is only falsely representative of these commitments; or the relationship that is established when consumers misuse a brand's expressed identity and this reflects poorly on the brand. A permissible brand-consumer relationship would be the one in which the consumer's choice is subconscious or the only possible choice. Ideally, however, the brand-consumer relationship is mutually expressive of the elements that make up both parties' identities. The commitments that brand and consumer have are congruent and authentic. To enable ethical branding the consumer-brand relationship should be *ideal*. It should be mutually expressive of their matching moral commitments.

I acknowledge that more research is needed in the area of ethical branding and that this thesis has only been a starting point. Not only is further development of the ideas proposed in this thesis required, but some of these ideas might benefit from empirical research. It could be useful to research how much influence employees of organisations believe consumers have on the corporate identity. From a more philosophical perspective, it could be worth examining whether moral plurality should be the foundation to a conception of ethical branding as was proposed in this thesis. Even if moral plurality is accepted, it could be worth debating the extent to which consumers or brands have responsibilities to protect their identities and establish what this would mean in practice. An important issue remains

to define what moral commitments would be worth perusing for ethical brands, and which might not.

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