**Redefining Gender as Corporate Social Responsibility:**

**Examining Millennial Perspectives**

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**ABSTRACT**

With the rise of brand activism, a new trend is emerging where businesses are no longer only interested in selling products, but also taking a stance on social issues. As these efforts become more commonplace, consumer perceptions of CSR research explores the way consumers make sense of CSR initiatives and how this influences the way they behave towards the business and the supported cause. Compared to any other consumer group, millennial consumers have shown prime interest for socially active businesses. Although businesses advocate for various causes, one social cause that has garnered corporate attention is gender, the portrayals of which can shape the discourse around gender equality in a given society. To explore this topic further, a qualitative study was conducted to investigate millennial consumer perceptions of business efforts to redefine stereotypical gender roles via CSR campaigns. With five focus groups conducted with a total of 29 millennial participants, the findings suggest that consumers perceived that gender was a unique, ubiquitous and untarnishable cause compared to other CSR causes. The respondents processed CSR causes differently, identifying some that are riskier to advocate for than others. This perceived level of risk was associated with whether the participants attributed altruistic motives to CSR efforts or were more skeptical of the underlying motives. Gender was also seen as ubiquitous, as it is often approached using the same progressive messages. The findings suggest that a common topic like gender role redefinition may need uncommon approaches, such as relevant celebrity ambassadors and real-life incidents, in order to appear more relevant to millennial consumers. Lastly, the perceived untarnishable nature of gender led respondents to believe that businesses should advocate for the cause, even if it leads to profit, highlighting a renegotiated understanding of a business' role in society. This has led to various positive external outcomes such as spreading positive electronic WOM and recognizing the brand amongst competitors, but not positive purchasing behavior. The study concludes with various practical and theoretical implications as well as the limitations and directions for future research.

**Keywords:** Businesses, consumer perspectives, CSR, gender roles, millennials

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Although this thesis may be the culmination of months of hard work, it all started with a question I posed during a class activity on the first day in the Media and Business Masters Program in Dr. Vidhi Chaudhri's Corporate Management with Social Media course. On a slip of paper, she asked us to write down one burning question we wanted to answer about the business world. Writing our names behind the piece of paper, we then placed them on a table and each picked one question that interested us the most. All the unselected questions, including mine, were left on the table. I was feeling quite dejected until Dr. Vidhi approached me during our short break with my question in hand and told me, "*This* is your thesis topic".

Granted, the question and focus of my thesis has evolved from the question I first posed, but the passion that inspired it and the professor who encouraged me to pursue it remain the reasons why I was able to finish this research project. Therefore, I would like to express the greatest of appreciation to my supervisor, Dr. Vidhi Chaudhri, for her patience, valuable and constructive guidance, and encouragement throughout the thesis process. She provided the perfect balance of freedom and supervision that allowed me to explore how I could develop this topic further.

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# 1. INTRODUCTION

## 1.1 Background & Research Questions

On January 13th 2019, Procter & Gamble-owned (P&G) brand Gillette released a campaign that put into question their popular 30-year tagline, "The Best a Man Can Get" (Topping, Lyons, & Weaver, 2019). Titled "We Believe: The Best Men Can Be", the 2019 campaign referenced the #MeToo Movement and challenged viewers to confront and address issues surrounding toxic masculinity (Hess, 2019; Hsu, 2019). Within 48 hours, the campaign was viewed more than 4 million times on YouTube (Topping et al., 2019). The campaign received mixed responses (Hess, 2019; Hsu, 2019), generating both "lavish praise" and "angry criticism" (Topping et al., 2019, para. 4). Although supporters believe that the campaign wasn't "anti-male", but "pro-humanity" (Topping et al., 2019, para. 5), others took to social media to say that they would boycott the brand from now on, posting pictures of Gillette razors flushed down toilets (Hanbury, 2019). Despite the backlash, P&G CFO Jon Moeller called the campaign a "big success", as it had "generated significant conversation…and a huge number of impressions" (Meyersohn, 2019, para. 5). A few months prior to the release of Gillette's campaign, the Internet was abuzz over a 30-year anniversary campaign released by Nike, featuring American quarterback Colin Kaepernick who is famously known for protesting against racial injustice and police brutality (Dudharejia, 2018). The company's decision to take a social stance sparked a debate amongst consumers, with some burning their Nike apparel and boycotting the brand altogether (Martinez, 2018).

These campaigns are indicative of a new trend where businesses are no longer only interested in selling products, but also putting their "own stamp on social issues" (Cox, 2018, para. 1). Encapsulated in the idea of corporate social responsibility (CSR), this perspective advances an expanded role for business as not merely being responsible for the wellbeing of their shareholders, but also their stakeholders (Zadek, 2007), and "to do more than just make money" (Wilson, 2016, para. 5). Although initially regarded as only an add-on to a business' strategy development, CSR initiatives have become an integral way in which businesses can assume more socially responsible and ethical roles within the larger community (Weinzimmer & Esken, 2016). Although its definition is often contested, CSR fundamentally expresses a connection between companies and society (Branco, Delgado, Sá, & Sausa, 2014), where socially responsible businesses develop strategies that incorporate "social, environmental, ethical, human rights and consumer concerns into their business operations and core strategy in close collaboration with their stakeholders" (European Commission, 2011, p. 6).

As a result, companies are becoming increasingly aware of both the financial and societal benefits of engaging in CSR initiatives (Bhattacharya & Sen, 2004). Engaging in socially responsible behavior has been linked to numerous benefits for both external and internal stakeholders such as enhanced customer relationships (Morsing, 2005), increased customer satisfaction (Galbreath, 2010), improved firm reputation (Carroll & Shabana, 2010) and brand equity (Hoeffler & Keller, 2002), improved corporate image (Vanhamme, Lindgreen, Reast, & Popering, 2012), positively influenced purchasing behavior (Creyer & Ross, 1997), increased employee and consumer loyalty (Pirch et al. 2007), as well as greater levels of employee motivation and job satisfaction (Barić, 2017). While companies may be motivated to partake in CSR activities because of the numerous benefits previously mentioned, pressure from external stakeholders is increasingly becoming a strong motivator (Vlachos et al., 2009).

More specifically, external stakeholders such as consumers are increasingly expressing the need for companies to be socially responsible and to take a stand on social issues. According to a study conducted by Sprout Social in 2018, a growing number of consumers (66%) in the United States want brands to engage in social and political issues (Horst, 2018), a trend which is particularly evident amongst millennial consumers (73%). As the largest consumer market group since Generation X that "represent 50% of the world's workforce and will inherit $30 trillion in the coming decades" (Gilbert, Houlahan, & Kassoy, 2015, para. 11), understanding how millennials, who are distinctly different from their predecessors in the ways they behave and interact (Woo, 2018), perceive these efforts in order to develop and implement successful CSR campaigns (Valentine & Powers, 2013).

As a result of the changes in consumer expectations of a business' role, such business efforts are becoming more conventional and have fostered the development of *brand activism*, where businesses launch "carefully designed 'social good' campaigns aimed at building awareness about a particular issue while also promoting a positive corporate message" (Böhm, Skoglund, & Eatherley, 2018, para. 3). One social cause that has garnered corporate attention is gender (Unilever, 2017; World Federation of Advertisers, 2018). The Gillette campaign is the latest example of a brand's attempt to redefine stereotypical manifestations of gender role portrayals in media content that shape the discourse around gender equality in society (Oppliger, 2007). Despite global efforts, no nation to date has achieved 100% gender parity (World Economic Forum, 2018). Although progress has been made, issues regarding gender inequality still prevail (Kamrany & Robinson, 2012), indicating the truly global nature of this issue. Therefore, this study aims to explore the ways

in which consumers perceive business efforts to redefine stereotypical gender roles via CSR campaigns. The following research questions are formulated:

> *RQ1:* What motives do consumers attribute to business efforts to redefine gender stereotypes via CSR campaigns?
>
> *RQ2:* What is the impact of such efforts on consumer attitudes and behavior towards businesses?
>
> *RQ3:* In what ways do consumers perceive that such efforts redefine gender stereotypes?
>
> *RQ4:* Under what conditions do consumers perceive such efforts as successful?

## 1.2 Societal & Academic Relevance

Research on consumer perceptions of CSR (hereafter CPCSR) has often been limited to CSR initiatives in general (Horst, 2018; Kim & Lee, 2012; Schmeltz, 2012; Skarmeas & Leonidou, 2013). Therefore, CPCSR research is currently limited when looking at cases of brand activism, specifically business efforts to redefine gender stereotypes via CSR campaigns. Moreover, CPCSR research conducted by industry professionals is often explored using a quantitative approach. Qualitative research on CPCSR has explored the topic of CSR more generally from a business perspective (Öbereder et al., 2014). Due to the complex nature of the topic, further in-depth qualitative research is needed to explore consumer's perceptions of brand activism in order to continuously improve the quantitative measurement scales used to access the success of a campaign (Öbereder et al., 2014).

Using focus groups as the primary method of data collection, this study aims to fill the aforementioned research gap by exploring the ways in which consumers, specifically millennials, perceive business efforts to be socially responsible, specifically, via campaigns to redefine gender stereotypes. Besides trying to influence consumer behaviors and attitudes, exploring consumers' perceptions of the genuinity of these CSR initiatives is a particular interest of this study, as reducing consumer skepticism can enable stakeholders to alter the way in which they make sense of the world (Basu & Palazzo, 2008). Although consumers perceptions of CSR efforts differ and are contingent on several factors such as CSR attributions and consumer skepticism, which will be elaborated in the literature review, further scientific research is needed to explore these differences in perception. Understanding how consumers react to these CSR initiatives can help businesses develop better strategies that acknowledge that one message "does not fit all" (Bhattacharya & Sen, 2004, p. 10). Moreover, this study's focus only explores one of many other social causes, such as the

issues addressed in the Nike campaign, that can be investigated in future CPCSR research studies.

While the study may be more exploratory in nature, the results can have numerous implications for academic and industry professionals, as it intends to provide valuable insights on the perceptions of CSR campaigns that aim to redefine stereotypical gender roles and the subsequent outcomes this has on consumers' attitude and behavior, not only towards the business but also towards the cause. As the role of the business in society changes, academics and industry professionals alike may find that a business' true potential is not achieved from simply adhering to its profit-making role. Rather, developing a better understanding of how one of the largest consumers groups currently perceives these efforts could pave the way for the future where businesses may be less hesitant to take a stance. Therefore, this thesis intends to provide a holistic picture of CPCSR, by exploring the theories behind CSR, CSR motives, CSR external and internal outcomes, potential success factors for CSR campaigns, as well as the history of gender representation in campaigns.

## 1.3 Research Approach & Structure of Study

With this study's background and research questions in mind, the structure of this thesis is as follows. **Chapter 2** outlines the conceptual framework that introduces concepts and theories that are pivotal to this study such as: CSR, the motives often associated with CSR efforts, external and internal outcomes of CSR initiatives, the potential factors associated with successful CSR campaigns as well as an introduction to the history of male and female representation in campaigns and how it has changed. **Chapter 3** outlines this study's approach and method of primary data collection, as well as the steps taken to develop a moderator guide that would adequately answer this study's research questions and the way in which the data was collected. The findings are introduced in **Chapter 4** and discussed in relation to this study's research questions as well as previous theory. **Chapter 5** discusses the study's limitations, practical and theoretical implications, and directions for future research.

## 2. CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

This section addresses relevant academic literature with regards to concepts that not only form the foundational base of this study, but also guide the primary data collection and analysis process. More specifically, the CSR will be conceptualized, reflecting how it had changed and how it is interpreted for the purposes of this study. Moreover, the numerous benefits beneficial outcomes of CSR engagement will be discussed as well as the factors that frequently motivate businesses to partake in CSR activities. Common factors that influence the successful reception of CSR campaigns will also be discussed. The importance of the aforementioned aspects of CSR will be discussed in relation to the gendered CSR case of male and female representation in campaigns and attempts that have been made thus far to redefine stereotypical gender roles.

### 2.1   Conceptualizing CSR

Notwithstanding its long history, the concept of corporate social responsibly (CSR) and its exact constituents remain the focus of a contentious debate for businesses practitioners, academics and society at large (Carroll, 1999; Van Marrewijk, 2003, Okpara & Idowu, 2013). Attempts to define it have been made with no conclusive definition to date (Carroll, 1991; Cornelissen, 2011). Contrary to Milton Friedman's beliefs that a business's only social responsibility is to "to use its resources and engage in activities designed to increase its profits" (1970, para. 34), business professionals, government officials, and academic researchers are increasingly paying more attention to the non-profit-making responsibilities that businesses can have and how it has transformed in recent history (Reinhardt et al., 2008).

Although the discussion of CSR is social in nature (Carroll, 1999), it has transformed over the years to encompass other responsibilities. A business' former singular expectation of meeting the bottom line of profit-making has transformed into what John Elkington coined in 1994 as the triple bottom line (TBL), where the three P's of People, Planet and Profit should be satisfied if a businesses wishes to function and succeed in the 21st century (1999). The bottom line of *People*, also described as social equity or human capital, refers to the extent to which a business has been responsible in its operations and employees, where business efforts should not exploit, but seek to benefit as many stakeholders as possible. The bottom line of *Planet*, also described as natural capital, refers to the extent to which a business engages in socially environmental practices, where efforts are made, if not to benefit, to at least have minimal or no harmful impact on the environment. Although often thought of as referring to the internal profit that a business makes, the bottom line of *Profit* refers to the

economic impact that a business has on society at large. The TBL conceptualization of CSR illustrates an interdependent understanding of the concept, where societal and environmental causes are not just simply additional aspects to already existing profit-making business practices (Elkington, 1999).

This multifaceted approach to understanding CSR is also addressed in Archie Carroll's (1991) seminal work on the four major responsibilities that make up CSR practices: economic, legal, ethical and philanthropic (p. 40). Carroll situates economic responsibilities at the base of the pyramid, as he argues that companies that are financially stable create sound CSR efforts. Legal responsibilities make up the next tier of his pyramid of CSR, where society requires that businesses operate in line with a country's laws. Businesses are also expected to function in an ethical manner, taking up the third tier in the CSR pyramid. Lastly, businesses are expected to function as good corporate citizens, where they are able to have a positive impact on the communities in which they operate. Although not mutually exclusive, these components come together to form the "entire range of obligations business has to society" (Carroll, 1979, p. 499). Although he first introduced these components in 1979, they were then formed into a pyramid to "illustrate the building block nature of the framework" (Carroll, 2016, p. 4). In his 2016 revisit of the Pyramid of CSR (see Appendix A), Carroll stresses that, although these four components are positioned in a pyramid format, businesses must not see them as hierarchal where CSR can only be achieved starting from an economic base. Rather, he argues that businesses must attempt to engage in CSR activities and initiatives that "simultaneously fulfill" the four components (p. 6).

Although frequently referred to in CSR-related studies, Carroll's pyramid of CSR has been criticized for perpetuating business-centric goals, as his model "implies economic responsibilities take precedence over legal and ethical responsibilities" (Baden, 2016, p. 2). Considering the growing power businesses have in society, Baden (2016) argues that modern-day consumers and business professionals now have different conceptions of CSR, where economic responsibilities may no longer be seen as a businesses most important duty. An empirical study with 400 participants from business and non-business backgrounds revealed that the respondents' conceptions of the relative importance of different aspects of Carroll's pyramid differ from the order in which they appear in the actual model, producing a revised CSR pyramid (see Appendix B) with the responsibilities ranked in the following order: ethical, legal, economic, and philanthropic, where ethical responsibilities now makes up the bottom and largest tier of the pyramid, while economic responsibilities makes up the third tier. Consumer and business professionals' changing perception of the different levels of

importance for the various responsibilities of businesses is in line with what Baden argues is "growing criticisms of the way in which the potential moral power of the construct of CSR can be undermined by the dominant discourse of economic rationality" (2016, p. 10). This particular conceptualization of the change in the ranking of CSR responsibility is relevant for this study as it reflects the extent to which consumer perceptions can shape the direction and development of CSR initiatives.

The previously mentioned interconnected conceptualization of CSR is also evident in a more widely accepted definition of the concept provided by The European Commission, which suggests that a socially responsible business must develop strategies that "integrate social, environmental, ethical, human rights and consumer concerns into their business operations and core strategy in close collaboration with their stakeholders" (European Commission, 2011, p. 6). This understanding of the term reflects the extent to which consumer expectations are driving a shift towards the broadening of the case for CSR beyond its early conceptualization. The various conceptualizations of CSR presented in this section are useful for this study, as they not only acknowledge the important role that consumers' concerns play in the successful implementation of CSR initiatives, but also emphasize stakeholder collaboration, which takes into account consumer's perceptions and feedback when developing CSR efforts.

## 2.2   The Business Case for CSR

As CSR has become a high-ranking topic of research and discussion (McWilliams, Siegel, & Wright, 2006), it has also become "the most orthodox and widely accepted concept in the business world during recent years" (Moura-Leite & Padgett, 2011). The business case for CSR, or the underlying reasons that motivate businesses to advance CSR causes, are often associated with "the bottom-line reasons" to pursue CSR initiatives (Carroll & Shabana, 2010, p. 86). Research on the links between CSR initiatives and possible improvement to a company's financial performance has previously been carried out with varying results (Margolis & Walsh, 2003; Orlitzky et al., 2003). Therefore, a solid business case for CSR cannot be made by only looking at the financial benefits that companies may attain from engaging in such efforts (Kurucz, Colbert, & Wheeler, 2008). This is because possible improvement to a company's bottom line is not the sole purpose for engaging in CSR initiatives (Vogel, 2005). Specifically, companies that practice CSR often reap numerous benefits such as:

enhanced brand and reputation, reduction in operation costs, attracting new customers, balances power with responsibility, discourages government regulation, improves a company's public image, promotes long run profit, improved relations with the investment community and better access to capital, enhanced employee relations, productivity and innovation and stronger relations within communities through stakeholder engagement. (Asemah, Okpanachi, & Edegoh, 2013, p. 45)

In addition to that, businesses increasingly behave in a more responsible manner as a way of gaining competitive advantage in the market (Vogel, 2005), as businesses are pressured into implementing a strategy that will allow them to effectively compete in the market (Cegliński & Wiśniewska, 2016).

Taking into account these numerous benefits, the business case for CSR can be organized into four general clusters, where value is created on multiple fronts simultaneously: *cost and risk reduction, competitive advantage, reputation and legitimacy,* and *synergetic value creation* (Kurucz, Colbert, & Wheeler, 2008). While the business cases of *cost and risk reduction* and *competitive advantage* refer to consumer demands as an external factor that must be satisfied using a limited level of social and environmental performance so that it can be "leveraged for the benefit of the firm" (p. 89), the involvement and alignment of consumer demands play a vital role in the development of CSR initiatives in the business cases of *reputation and legitimacy* and *synergetic value creation*. This increase in consumer involvement is what Kurucz et al. (2008) argue is needed in order to build a better, more holistic and integrative business case, which can best be achieved by adopting the *synergetic value creation* approach (p. 104). This four-type classification highlights how the conventional business case for CSR may not fully capture the spectrum of stakeholder expectations, so adopting a more holistic approach that integrates various stakeholder groups simultaneously in the CSR development process may reap the most benefits.

Therefore, companies need to consider both external outcomes (i.e. purchasing behavior and customer loyalty) and internal outcomes (i.e. consumer attitudes towards the business and perceptions of the underlying motives that businesses have for engaging in CSR efforts (Bhattacharya & Sen, 2004, p. 10-11). Understanding how consumers perceive CSR initiatives can enable companies to develop CSR strategies that produce the best results not only for the business but also for society (Bhattacharya & Sen, 2004). Bhattacharya and Sen's (2004) CSR framework assesses the internal and external outcomes of CSR initiatives based on consumer perceptions on three main areas of focus: the business, the consumers, and the social issue. This CSR framework reflects a multifaceted understanding of CSR

outcomes, taking into account both internal and external effects that can shape not only the business, but also other consumers and the cause. However, what this framework suggests is the highly important role that internal outcomes such as consumer attitudes and perceptions have on the kind of external outcomes that a business can expect to receive. A certain level of individual processing takes place that differs from one consumer to the next, as a consumer's varying levels of company and cause awareness, attitude and attributions might not lead to the fixed set of external outcomes anticipated by the business. Therefore, understanding how consumers react to CSR initiatives can help businesses develop better strategies that acknowledge that one message most definitely "does not fit all" (Bhattacharya & Sen, 2004, p.10). Using this framework allows the researcher to explore the impact CSR efforts, particularly business efforts to redefine gender stereotypes via CSR campaigns, have on consumer attitude and behavior (internal and external outcomes) towards the business, society and the cause.

## 2.3   CSR Initiatives: Consumers Perceptions

### 2.3.1   CSR Motives

The business case for CSR and its development is closely linked to the creation of a connection with external stakeholders, such as consumers (Kurucz et al., 2008). However, in the face of a growing number of CSR initiatives, "consumer skepticism is on the rise", as consumers try to deduce the motives behind such efforts (Skarmeas & Leonidou, 2013, p. 1837). This is because consumers are often more sensitive to bad CSR efforts than they are to good ones (Bhattacharya & Sen, 2004). Consumers' positive perceptions of business motives can influence several factors such as purchase intention (Tsai, 2009), the credibility of the business (Bigné-Alcañiz et al., 2009), and choice of the brand over competitors (Barone, Miyazaki, & Taylor, 2000).

Consumers' perceived motives for CSR initiatives fall into one of two primary categories: firm-serving or public-serving motives (Kim & Lee, 2012). Firm serving motives refer to those that are seen as primarily benefiting the interests of the company, while public serving motives are those that are seen as primarily benefitting the interests of the public (Barone et al., 2000; Forehand & Grier, 2003; Kim & Lee, 2012; Tsai, 2009). Consumers perceive firm-serving motives negatively and public-serving motives positively, as the latter is seen as an act of a business acting altruistically (Becker-Olsen, Cudmore, & Hill, 2006). However, Kim and Lee's (2012) findings indicate that consumers attribute both firm-serving and public-serving motives to CSR initiatives, in various strengths, suggesting that some sort

of reconciliation process between the two contradictory motives takes place.

As consumer perspectives are more nuanced than this binary classification, recent research has used attributions theory to look into more specific drivers of CSR motives, such as egotism, values, strategy, and stakeholders (Ellen, Webb, & Mohr, 2006; Vlachos, Tsamakos, Vrechopoulos, & Avramidis, 2009). Of all four motivations (see Table 1), egoistic and stakeholder-driven motives have been linked with increased consumer skepticism of CSR initiatives (Skarmeas & Leonidou, 2013). While values-driven motives have been linked to reduced CSR skepticism, strategy-driven motives "neither facilitate nor alleviate" it (p. 1836). This categorization of CSR motives not only highlights the complex nature of consumer perceptions, indicating that a qualitative approach is most appropriate for this study, but it also provides sensitizing concepts that will guide the data collection and analysis process. Moreover, understanding consumers' explanations for socially responsible corporate behavior can reduce the likelihood of developing skepticism amongst consumers, as increased CSR skepticism can lead to negative business outcomes such as lower resilience to negative WOM and lower levels of retailer equity (Skarmeas & Leonidou, 2013, p. 1837). However, these findings are challenged when looking specifically at millennial consumers' perceptions of CSR motives, as millennials are more concerned with aspects related to the environment, ethical behavior and social justice (Ellis, 2010; Schmeltz, 2012).

**Table 1.** Summary of the four drivers of CSR attributions from
Vlachos et al. (2009) and Ellen et al. (2006)

| Motives | Descriptions |
| --- | --- |
| Egoistic-driven | The belief that a business is exploiting, not supporting, the cause (Vlachos et al., 2009) |
| Values-driven | The belief that a business truly supports the cause because they engage in efforts for moral and ethical reasons (Ellen et al., 2006) |
| Strategy-driven | The belief that a business can advance business objectives while also supporting the cause (Ellen et al., 2006) |
| Stakeholders-driven | The belief that a business engaging in CSR initiatives in response to stakeholder concerns and pressure (Vlachos et al., 2009) |

However, a company's support of a particular cause will not automatically prompt positive reactions from consumers (Barone et al., 2000). The impact of CSR initiatives in the form of external and internal outcomes such as influence on purchasing behavior and product choice depends on the "perceived motivation underlying the company's CRM

efforts as well as whether consumers must trade off company sponsorship of causes for lower performance or higher price" (Barone et al., 2000, p. 248). Barone et al.'s (2000) findings indicate that the extent to which a consumer perceives that a business engages in CSR initiatives as a way of truly supporting the cause does not have a strong impact when there are large performance and price trade-offs between products. However, when there are moderate trade-offs between products, the extent to which a consumer perceives that a business engages in CSR initiatives as a way of truly supporting the cause does have a strong impact. Because aspects such as performance and price trade-off as well as the perceived motives underlying CSR initiatives are some of the key factors that consumers take into consideration when assessing how behavior changes towards a business, this study intends to explore the extent to which these factors still play role when faced with the cause of redefining gender roles, particularly in the case of millennial consumers.

### 2.3.2   Millennial Consumers

As millennials are "quickly becoming the most important consumers encountered by most types of business" (Solomon, 2018, para. 3), they are distinctly unique from their predecessors in the ways they behave and interact, indicating why this target group often fascinates researchers (Woo, 2018). As a consumer group that is value-driven, more millennials are integrating their beliefs into the choices they make as consumers, which is less often the case with non-millennials (Solomon, 2018). As recent polls conducted in the United States have found, approximately two-thirds of American consumers want brands to engage in social and political issues (Horst, 2018). In a study consisting of 1,000 survey respondents conducted by Sprout Social, a social media management and analytics provider for businesses, findings show this need for businesses to take a social and political stance is higher amongst consumers between the ages of 18 and 34 years old, where 73% indicated that brands should speak up (Horst, 2018).

However, two thirds of the respondents indicated that, although they want more brands to speak up, brands "rarely or never" influence or change their views on purchasing the product. Instead, businesses can use these opportunities to promote and motivate the need for change (Horst, 2018). This finding is of particular interest for this study, as the focus will primarily be on millennial (also commonly referred to as Generation Y) consumers. This is in large part due to the fact that, as millennials make up approximately half of the world's current workforce, they "want to work with purpose, to buy products from companies they can trust, and to make investments that make money and make a measurable positive impact"

(Gilbert et al., 2015, para. 11). Not only are more millennials entering the world's workforce, but they are also the largest consumer market group since Generation X (Valentine & Powers, 2013), as they are approximately three times the size of their predecessors (Palmer, 2008). Moreover, millennial consumers are unique in their decision-making rationales (Boyd, 2010), their loyalty to their loved ones, and community rather than corporations (Hira, 2007), and their strong affiliation with environmental, ethical and social causes (Sheahan, 2005). This particular generation is also distinctive as it was shaped by technological advancements (Gorman, Nelson, & Glassman, 2004), enabling networked communication and easier and quicker exchange of information (Howe & Strauss, 2000).

However, millennial consumers should not be seen as a singular target group (Bucic, Harris, & Arli, 2012). Instead, millennial consumers should be regarded as a "collection of submarkets that differ in their levels of awareness of ethical issues, consider discrete motives when making consumption decisions, and are willing to engage in cause-related purchasing to varying degrees" (Bucic et al., 2012, p. 113). Their findings indicate that there are distinct groups of millennial consumers, each with different sets of behaviors and primary concerns: *Reserved Social Conscience, Indifferents*, and *Committed*. The extent to which millennial consumers experience these primary concerns translates into various differences in the way they would purchase from a company. For instance, although millennial consumers within the *Reserved Social Conscience* cluster have the strongest social and personal motivations (both positive and negative) to consumer responsibly, these strong beliefs do not translate into increased purchasing behavior, which indicates that other factors besides personal motivation may come into play when deciding to exercise their purchasing power. Not all millennials feel as strongly about social responsibility, which is the case for millennials in the *Indifferents* cluster. This translates into ethical consumption purchasing only "if they feel like it" (p. 124). However, millennials who are highly motivated by personal and social positive feelings do not feel that it is a waste of time or too much of a hassle to support causes and are therefore "significantly less concerned about peers' impressions of their purchases" (p. 125). This classification of millennial consumers illustrates Bhattacharya & Sen (2011) CSR Framework of how external outcomes of CSR initiatives are dependent on the consumers' internal outcomes. Moreover, with the goal of exploring "the nuances of what works and what does not" for millennial consumers (Taylor, 2019, para. 4), understanding that not all messages may have the same effect on the entire consumer group allows for the possibility of various themes to emerge from the data that may not reflect the viewpoints of all millennial consumers.

### 2.3.3   Effective CSR Communication

In essence, CSR communication is the means through which businesses connect with stakeholders about their socially responsible behavior, ultimately enhancing consumer (Dawkins, 2005) and employee relations (Morsing, Schultz, & Nielsen, 2008). As CSR initiatives become more and more common, businesses need to make more strategic decisions about when, where and how their campaigns should be published in order provide "meaningful differentiation" (Barone, Norman, & Miyazaki, 2007, p. 437). At its core, effective CSR communication can lead to consumer awareness of a business' CSR initiatives, which is fundamental in gaining the benefits that come from engaging in such practices (Bhattacharya & Sen, 2004). However, not all CSR initiatives receive positive feedback from consumers, as CSR communication is a process of anticipating what stakeholders expect, while being able to articulate accurate and transparent information about a company's operations, as well as their environmental and social concerns (Podnar, 2008). Ihlen, Bartlett and May (2011) take this two-way conceptualization one step further by highlighting the need for companies to assess how various stakeholder groups have previously responded to other CSR initiatives, in order to develop effective CSR communication.

Taking into account the various ways in which CSR can effectively be communicated, there are three major strategies through which CSR could be communicated to external stakeholders such as consumers: the *Information*, *Response*, and *Involvement* strategies (Morsing & Schultz, 2006). What primarily differentiates these strategies is the extent to which consumers are a part of the development process, For instance, while the *Information* strategy primarily addresses CSR communication as a one-way stream of information that is meant to inform stakeholders about a business's CSR efforts, the *Response* strategy involves a more asymmetrical two-way flow of communication, where companies ask consumers for various forms of feedback such as surveys or opinion polls but still primarily dictate the kind of communication that is sent across. A symmetrical two-way flow of communication, also described as the *Involvement* strategy where consumers are an active part of the communication development process, is the most effective CSR communication strategy, as a business' corporate actions are shaped by this interaction (Morsing & Schultz, 2006). This strategy is in line with Ihlen et al.'s (2011) conceptualization of the CSR communication, reflecting the increasingly important role consumers play in the successful implementation of CSR initiatives. Studies investigating this classification of CSR communication have often been limited to general CSR reporting (Colleoni, 2013; Morsing & Schultz, 2006). Therefore, further research is needed to assess whether the employment of a consumer involvement

approach is suitable with millennial consumers when assessing the effectiveness of CSR campaigns that deal with a unique social cause of redefining stereotypical gender roles.

Successful CSR communication has been linked to the various benefits, such as favorable consumer perceptions and attitudes towards the business (Du, Bhattacharya, & Sen, 2010). With the aim of overcoming or limiting consumer skepticism, companies and researchers alike have explored several factors that may influence the successful reception of CSR campaigns by the pubic (Barone et al., 2007; La Ferle, Kuber, & Edwards, 2013; Lee & Chung, 2018; Myers, Kwon, & Forsythe, 2012; Strahilevitz, 2008). For instance, Lee and Chung (2018) found that negative emotional visuals (i.e. visual content that induces aversive motivation) were more effective in CSR campaigns than positive emotional visuals (i.e. visual content that induces approach motivation). Moreover, Myers et al.'s (2012) findings suggest that consumers are more likely to have favorable attitudes when the business is perceived as having altruistic motivations for engaging in CSR efforts. Perceptions of altruistic business motivations are heightened when consumers believe that there is a logical relationship between the company and the cause (Myers et al., 2012). Prior impressions of a business' ethical behavior also influence the degree to which consumers believe that a business has ulterior motives, where businesses perceived as ethically neutral stand to gain the most in terms of improving their image, compared to highly ethical or unethical businesses (Strahilevitz, 2008). The various perceptions that consumers have about CSR initiatives and whether they are favorable or not highly influences whether the campaign succeeds, which is why exploring the factors that influence consumer's perceptions of these campaigns can help businesses develop better CSR initiatives (Myers et al., 2012). Having so far explored various aspects of CSR motives and outcomes pertaining to millennial consumers as well as effective CSR communication strategies, this study moves forward to explore the social cause of redefining gender roles and the past and contemporary roles businesses play in its redefinition.


2.4   The CSR Case of Gender: Unstereotyping Advertisements

Over the past few decades, businesses have progressively focused their CSR efforts on female empowerment through the establishment of various training programs and scholarships (Herman, Geertz, & Alongi, 2017). Gender and CSR have often been discussed in relation to internal efforts that businesses make to not only achieve gender equality in the workplace, but to also ensure that female employees are treated equally (Kaur, 2013). While these CSR efforts primarily benefit internal stakeholders, businesses have made more recent

efforts to benefit external stakeholders as well. The study of gender and its portrayal in media content has been a topic of academic interest for many years (Eisend, 2009; Grau & Zotos, 2016; Matthes, Prieler, & Adam, 2016). While women have often been presented in more family-focused and beauty/body-focused roles and fewer professional roles (Uray & Burnaz, 2003), men have been portrayed as independent, professional and authoritarian (Reichert & Carpenter, 2004). These stereotypes are problematic because not only do they limit the opportunities of one social group but it also sets forth incorrect expectations for gender roles (Grau & Zotos, 2016). The rise of feminism in the 1960s paved the way for changes in gender role structures in the family and in the work force, which have brought "significant variations in both male and female roles and subsequently how it is reflected in advertising" (Grau & Zotos, 2016, p. 761). Because of the advertisements' pervasive nature, these portrayals shape the discourse around gender equality (Oppliger, 2007), as it promotes sexism and distorted body images (Lazar, 2006; Plakoyiannaki & Zotos, 2009). Because issues regarding gender inequality still prevail globally (Kamrany & Robinson, 2012), the discussion of gender representation and the role that companies can play in its rightful perpetuation is a global concern.

However, women's roles and their portrayals have undergone dramatic changes (Grau & Zotos, 2016). The rise of *femvertising*, the celebration of female empowerment through advertising and marketing campaigns (Abitbol & Sternadori, 2016), is one way in which businesses have attempted to redefine stereotypical gender role portrayals. Popular femvertising campaigns include Always' "Like a Girl" and Dove's "Real Beauty" campaigns. Female consumers have responded positively to such initiatives, stating that they liked the message it sends (51%) and bought the brand's product (52%) because of it (Castillo, 2014). Although research has often focused on changes in female portrayals over the years, the ways in which males are portrayed are also being redefined (Grau & Zotos, 2016). Illustrative campaigns include Gillette's "We Believe: The Best Men Can Be" campaign as well as Axe's "Find Your Magic" campaign, which present male characters as "softer" and more family-oriented (Grau & Zotos, 2016, p. 761). Both brands have historically presented a stereotypical image of masculinity that runs counter to the messages conveyed in their new campaigns. This was done with the intent of "shaking off outdated views of masculinity" (Marzilli, 2016, para. 2), which was something that consumers had responded positively to. In the case of Axe, purchase consideration amongst men peaked by 7% from January (when the campaign was released) to February (Baker, 2016). This highlights that rebranding efforts are appreciated if they reflect a more inclusive

understanding of gender roles.

Numerous studies have looked into the effectiveness of gender-stereotyped advertising on consumers, such as instances when humor is most effective (Eisend, Plagemann, & Sollwedel, 2014), and the underlying influence of individual personality traits on advertisement receptiveness (Chu, Lee, & Kim, 2016). For instance, when looking at consumer's perceptions of traditional and non-traditional gender role portrayals in various campaigns, Zawisza and Cinnerella (2010) found that content with traditional female roles (i.e. housewife) received more favorable and affective responses than traditional male roles (i.e. working businessman). On the other hand, non-traditional male roles (i.e. househusband who helps around the house) received more favorable and affective responses than non-traditional female roles (i.e. working businesswoman). However, limited academic research exists on the perceptions consumer have about the companies that engage in the efforts of presenting non-traditional gender roles via CSR campaigns, indicating a need for this study. Moreover, CPCSR research has often been studied under the assumption that consumers perceive all CSR initiatives equally, as no prior distinction has been by researchers to assess possible perceptional differences between social causes like gender role redefinition and environmental initiatives, highlighting the need for a nuanced study that explore this potential difference.

More recent efforts to unstereotype advertising include the creation of the Unstereotype Alliance, which aims to "eradicate outdated stereotypes in advertising" (Unilever, 2017, para. 1). The alliance consists of businesses that tackle "how the industry can affect positive cultural change by using the power of advertising to help shape perceptions that reflect realistic, non-biased portrayals of women and men" (para. 5). Created and led by UN Women and Unilever, the association consists of 35 members that include industry giants such as Facebook, Microsoft, Twitter, and Procter & Gamble (Unstereotype Alliance, 2018b), fostering the idea that the unstereotyping of our media content is "no longer only a social imperative, but a business one" (Unstereotype Alliance, 2018a). Therefore, this study aims to explore the ways in which millennial consumers perceive these efforts, the business motives they attribute to these initiatives as well as the perceived outcomes towards the business and the cause.

## 2.5   Summary & Research Questions

The literature review explored the development and subsequent increase of businesses that engage in CSR initiatives, despite there being no unanimous definition for the term. As

businesses' role evolves from profit-making entities to social and environmental activists, businesses are encouraged to engage in CSR initiatives due to the numerous benefits that they can attain from the process. However, the effectiveness of CSR activities is influenced by consumers' perceptions of these campaigns that influence the successful reception of these CSR initiatives, ranging from the perceived motives that underlie these businesses efforts to emotional visuals to a logical fit between the cause and the company. However, the factors that conclusively influence consumer's positive perceptions of these campaigns remain largely ambiguous, with no clear combination of success factors that businesses can rely on. Moreover, as millennials make up the largest consumer market group since Generation X (Valentine & Powers, 2013), exploring how millennial consumers make sense of CSR initiatives can help businesses develop more effective campaigns. As this study's focus is on business efforts that aim to redefine stereotypical gender roles, more and more businesses appear to taking stance for this cause, as is evident with the founding and development of the Unstereotype Alliance. Limited research has explored the ways in which millennial consumers, who are distinctly different from their predecessors, perceive these business efforts and whether that has an impact on their attitudes and behavior towards the business and cause.

With the literature review and the identified gaps, this study aims to explore millennial consumer perceptions of business efforts to redefine stereotypical gender roles via CSR campaigns. With this research goal in mind, this study aims to answer the following research questions:

*RQ1:* What motives do consumers attribute to business efforts to redefine gender stereotypes via CSR campaigns?

*RQ2:* What is the impact of such efforts on consumer attitudes and behavior towards businesses?

*RQ3:* In what ways do consumers perceive that such efforts redefine gender stereotypes?

*RQ4:* Under what conditions do consumers perceive such efforts as successful?

By examining these research questions, the study aims to provide a well-rounded exploration of a previously uncharted topic with regards to CPCSR of business efforts to redefine stereotypical gender roles. The next chapter reviews the research design employed to address the research questions.

## 3. METHOD

This chapter provides an overview of the primary method of data collection used for this study, as well as all relevant justification, sampling procedures, development of the research instrument, data processing and analysis.

### 3.1 Methodology

Because of the growing number of activities that constitute CSR, it is often criticized for being too difficult and general to measure (Öbereder, Schlegelmilch, Murphy, & Gruber, 2014). This is particularly true in the case of companies attempting to redefine gender stereotypes through CSR campaigns, as this is still a relatively new and unexplored area of consumers' perceptions of CSR (CPCSR). For this reason, a better understanding of how stakeholders make sense of these initiatives is needed, so that businesses are better able to strategize and produce effective campaigns.

CPCSR research has often been explored using a quantitative approach, as academics and business managers alike are more interested in developing scales that allow them to quantifiably assess the success or failure of these campaigns. Moreover, qualitative data in CPCSR research has explored the topic of CSR more generally from a business perspective (Öbereder et al., 2014). Due to its complexity, further in-depth qualitative research is needed from the consumer perspective in order to not only continuously improve the quantitative measurement scales (Öbereder et al., 2014), but to also explore the way in which consumers make sense of these recent manifestations of business efforts to redefine stereotypical gender roles. Therefore, this research study used a qualitative approach that allowed for flexibility and the possibility of adjustments to be made during data collection and analysis (Boeije, 2014; Brennen, 2017). Moreover, it allowed the researcher to consider socially constructed realities and perspectives (Brennen, 2017). Through conducting focus groups, this study aimed to get insights of participants' viewpoints and beliefs relating to the research questions, enabling participants to build off of and generate ideas (Breen, 2006).

Using focus groups as the primary method of data collection allowed for the possibility of identifying over-arching themes that could then provide the basis for further research on the topic. Because this research study's interest was to explore consumer perceptions of business efforts to redefine manifestations of gender roles, focus groups were conducted, as it allowed the researcher to assess how consumers collectively made sense of CSR initiatives through social interaction and experience (Patton, 2015), which is said to increase the validity of findings generated from focus groups, because "perspectives are formed and sustained in

social groups" (p. 935). A total of five focus groups were conducted with 5-7 people in each group, reaching a total of 29 participants over all.

### 3.2   Sample & Sampling Procedures

Non-probability sampling was used to recruit participants. The target participant (or respondent) group consisted of millennials, who are defined for the purposes of this study as individuals in the range of 22-37 years (Dimock, 2018). As this study focuses on gender-related campaigns, recruiting both male and female perspectives on the topic was of prime interest. More specifically, snowball sampling was primarily used as a means of participant recruitment, where each participant of the focus group was asked to suggest additional people who may be interested in taking part in future sessions (Babbie, 2011). Moreover, this sampling procedure also allowed for the possibility to put up advertisements on social media platforms, increasing the visibility of the study, and to check the relevance of those who were willing to participate in the focus group. A short advertisement for the focus group was posted on several student and groups on Facebook, which explained the topic of the focus group sessions, reflecting a sense of openness and trustworthiness (Harvey, 2011). Doodle, a poll-taking online service, was used as a way for participants to not only sign up for sessions that best suited them, but to also pass on the focus group link to other potential participants. Although sampling was conducted in a non-random manner and therefore cannot lead to empirical generalizations (Patton, 2015), using snowball sampling allowed for the possibility of yielding a deeper understanding and new insights into this specific research topic, which is in line with the advantages of conducting focus groups (Breen, 2006).

Although the data collection aimed to be conducted until the point of data saturation, the limited time frame had to also be accounted for (Ritchie et al., 2003), and therefore, the recommendations presented in the ESHCC (2018-2019) methodological guidelines were used as the primary reference point. Each session ran for approximately 90 to 105 minutes. The sessions took place between March 20th and April 19th, 2019. This extended timeframe made effective use of qualitative research's iterative qualities, as the moderator guide was expanded to include discussion topics that were not initially anticipated (Brennen, 2017). Despite the researcher's best efforts to obtain a diverse sample of participants from various academic backgrounds, this proved to be the most challenging, as most of the participants were familiar with others due to their current academic status. Moreover, it was considerably more difficult to get male participants to join the sessions than it was for female participants, resulting in a disproportionate gender ratio overall. However, it is important to note that the

sampling logic applied to this study should not be regarded as convenient or opportunistic sampling (Ritchie et al., 2003), as all participants, whether referred or not, were assessed against this study's selection criterion discussed above before being allowed to participate in the sessions.

In total, the sample consisted of 29 participants, most of whom were full-time university students, while some were part-time (see Appendix C). The students came from several countries of origin, such as Netherlands, Greece, India, Romania, Netherlands, Syria, Luxemburg, Colombia, Germany, Latvia, Croatia, Russia, Curacao, Turkey, Argentina, China, Taiwan, and Ireland, as well as various academic backgrounds such as Design, History, Tourism, Literature, Psychology, and Political Economics, to name a few. All participants who took part did so because they had shown interest in the study, indicating the likelihood that they had some opinions or perceptions about the topic. The focus group sessions were conducted in English, audio-recorded (with participant consent), and transcribed verbatim, yielding a total of 130 single-spaced pages of data.

### 3.3   Operationalization & Research Instrument

To facilitate focus group discussion, a moderator guide was formulated (see Appendix D). Based on previous literature, the moderator guide revolved around the following areas of discussion: perceived business motives behind these CSR campaigns, attitude and behavior changes towards the business, consumers and cause, and perceived risks and benefits towards businesses that engage in such efforts. However, this guide was open to continuous revision, as the study was exploratory in nature, where unanticipated topic areas could still be brought up (Brennen, 2017).

Moreover, in the focus group, the participants were shown two illustrative CSR campaigns. The first campaign was by Gillette, titled "The Best a Man Can Be" and the second campaign was by Nike, titled "Dream Crazier" featuring Serena Williams, the summaries of which can be found in Appendix E. The campaigns were employed by the respective companies to redefine stereotypical gender roles, and were used as a way of stimulating reactions from participants. While respondents may had felt inclined to provide socially acceptable responses, exposure to media fragments allowed them to express their immediate reactions to these campaigns and their subsequent thoughts about similar attempts.

### 3.4   Data Processing & Analysis

The focus groups were audio recorded, upon receiving consent from all the participants. In order to test the moderator guide, a pilot-test focus group session took place with five participants. The session was both audio and video recorded, upon receiving consent from the participants. The video recording was done as a way of easing the transcribing process. However, transcribing the sessions was still possible using only the audio recording and therefore, the video recording was not needed for future sessions. No changes were made to the moderator guide. Therefore, the results obtained from the pilot-test focus group session were included in this study's data analysis. Once the audio recordings of the focus groups had been transcribed, Atlas.ti, a qualitative data analysis and research software, was used to assist with the coding process. Because of the study's more exploratory nature and its aim to look for emerging patterns within the data, thematic analysis was used as the method for data analysis. However, the study was also open to the possibility of emergent themes that did not fit into these larger areas of research. The sessions were transcribed and coded soon after they took place, in order to make the most use of qualitative research's reiterative nature (Brennan, 2017).

As the data were collected and transcribed, thematic analysis was used to identify, analyze and report themes that "captured something important about the data in relation to the research question, and represented some level of patterned response" (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 82). Unlike other theme-emerging methods of analysis such as grounded theory or thematic discourse analysis, thematic analysis did not require detailed theoretical and technological knowledge, making it more accessible for novice qualitative researchers (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Braun and Clarke (2006) outlined six phases of thematic analysis: 1) data immersion, 2) generation initial codes, 3) collating codes into potential themes, 4) reviewing themes in relation to entire data set, 5) define and create clear definitions of final themes, and 6) producing the report where the final opportunity for analysis takes place. Although these steps act as a guide, they were followed flexibly based on the requirements of this study (Patton, 2015). A sample of the coding frame can be found in Appendix F.

### 3.5   Ethical Considerations

As this topic did not deal with sensitive subject matter, the participants were not at risk. In line with the methodological guidelines and ethics set forth by the Erasmus School of History, Culture and Communication (2018-2019), a consent form was given to all participants before the start of each focus group, highlighting the topic of the study as well

their right to withdraw from the focus group at any point if they wished to do so. Although the researcher kept the original copy of all the consent forms, participants were informed that it was possible to receive a copy of the consent form, if they requested on. During the introductory portion of the session, participants were also informed that there were no right or wrong answers to any of the questions the moderator or other participants shared with the group, encouraging them to speak candidly about their opinions and perceptions. Moreover, due to the sampling method, participants participated on a voluntary basis and were guaranteed of their anonymity outside of the focus group sessions. Number tags were placed in front of each participant and was the primary method in which the moderator and participants addressed each other. This was done to ensure the anonymity of the participants' identity in the audio recordings. When referring to participants, pseudonyms were used, where each session of new respondents was added to a numerical list that assigned each participant one number from 1 to 29 (i.e. P2, P15, P24, etc.). The participants were also compensated with snacks and beverages during the session. At the conclusion of each session, the participants were given the researchers contact details and were asked to contact the researcher if they had any lingering concerns after the session.

**4. RESULTS & DISCUSSION**

Having gone through this study's conceptual framework as well as the research approach that was taken to explore this topic further, the following section addresses this study's findings, grouping them into three primary themes. Highlighting that gender is a *unique, ubiquitous* and *untarnishable* cause, these themes provide answers to the research questions posed earlier on in this paper.

4.1 Gender as a *Unique* Cause

The uniqueness of gender primarily manifests as a result of the burden of proof and results in various perceptions of risk associated with a given cause, where higher levels of risk are associated with higher risk. Looking at the burden of proof, a distinction was made between CSR initiatives that advocate for gender role redefinition compared to other CSR efforts. Participants discussed this difference by comparing it to environmental causes. One participant explained that,

> *[…] something about fighting gender stereotypes, it's so different because you know that we need for example, trees and you know that […] companies cannot keep destroying entire forests because it affects us all. But then gender, I think is different […] Nobody is going to say, 'It's not that bad that trees are getting destroyed' right?* (P14)

This difference in the perception of CSR efforts is in large part due to the 'burden of proof'; in other words, participants argued that supporting environmental causes can be backed up by facts and evidence, making it less likely of a cause to be driven by opinion. The availability of scientific data implies that stakeholders are unlikely to argue to whether environmental causes are good or bad for companies to support. This gives the consumer the impression that supporting environmental causes is non-debatable, as the effects of environmental damage are more visible and immediate. By contrast, gender as well as other social causes are more loaded and nuanced, leading people to have varying opinions, particularly with regards to where they stand on gender role redefinition. As one participant put it,

> *[…] the harm in […] environmental or that kind of like you know, can be proven by science really concretely. It's like there are facts that you can see and like you know in nature, but other things are like […] more social or perspective-based problems. That's why it is problematic or is different in that sense for like gender and social class.* (P17)

It is this "perspective-based" perception of gender that makes it a unique cause on which companies can take a stance. Because consumers can not only have strong opinions about how they feel about the cause, but they may also stand on various points of the spectrum of gender role redefinition, CSR initiatives that advocate for gender were regarded by many participants as being a cause that could potentially divide a company's customer base. One participant aptly summarized this sentiment:

> *I think it's usually risky to participate in social issues, you know, if you voice your opinion about politics or social issues […]. [T]hose are some things that people have their own personal [beliefs]. [I]f a brand has an opinion on that […] and they publicize it, then they might stray away some other customers.* (P29)

Although this comment was made in light of the discussion that the group was having particularly about the Gillette campaign, what is interesting to note is that the participant had grouped political and social issues together, highlighting the potentially polarizing nature of social issues and what that could mean for a business that has an opinion on the issue. Similar to the tension in politics, companies that advocate for social causes could find themselves on the receiving end of criticism from consumers that do not share their expressed values. This polarizing effect was what made the case of gender as well as other social causes seem risky for a business to engage in.

### 4.1.1 Perception of Risky Business

Simultaneously, those who regarded it as a risky move to advocate for stereotypical gender role redefinition also saw the business as brave for doing so. When discussing the Gillette campaign, one respondent noted that, "Gillette putting this forward was a very brave move. […] they know the majority of their users are men and the majority of their users can go against them with this ad […]" (P11). This bravery is attributed to businesses that are "putting this forward" and engaging in initiatives that actively attempt to create a sense of controversy as a result of their campaigns, where the majority of consumers can potentially go against them. Participant 9 echoed a similar sentiment, noting that the Gillette campaign made references to the Me Too movement, which was a heated topic that originated in the United States, but spread beyond its borders. Using this campaign to actively target a demographic that makes up a large portion of their consumer base and make them feel accountable was seen as brave. As one respondent put it, "[…] the main message of this

video was trying to make the men accountable for each other […] so I think yes, it was very brave for them to do so" (P9).

Participants even diverged on the degree of risk. When discussing both the Nike and Gillette campaigns, differences were made with regards to the extent to which one campaign was risker than the other. Some noted that the message of female empowerment conveyed in the Nike campaign has been around far longer than the message conveyed in the Gillette campaign, leading them to applaud the latter campaign as riskier (and therefore, more brave):

> *[…] the Gillette ad is more brave in a way, because it's like, yeah, empower women [referring to the Nike campaign]. That's something we've heard […] for some time, but to hold […] men accountable. I think that's a bit more controversial […].* (P7)

The perceived level of risk associated with advocating for an opinionated cause like gender prompted some participants to believe that businesses engage in these efforts not only to make money, but to also genuinely support the cause, highlighting that the higher the perceived risk, the higher the reward. If the business was perceived as having put itself in a more vulnerable position, one that it is not required to assume as a profit-making entity in society, this influenced the perceptions of the kind of motives businesses have to engage in such CSR efforts. For instance, at the beginning of each session, when asking participants to provide examples of CSR campaigns they previously liked, one respondent provided the example of Nike's Colin Kaepernick campaign, stating that,

> *[…] they don't have any concrete reason to do that, but they wanted to support and actually, it changed my perception because I always hated Nike, because I thought that their prices are ridiculous compared to products that they were […] producing, but […] it changed my mind as a customer.* (P17)

What is interesting to point out here is how the perceived level of risk translated into a change in the associated motives and overall perception the participant had of Nike, indicating that CSR efforts that are regarded as risky may also be seen as being more genuine. This adds a new element to Myers et al.'s (2012) findings on consumer perceptions of businesses that are perceived as being altruistic, where the perception of risk may potentially be an added factor that consumers take into account when assessing the genuinity of a campaign. The level of risk and it's positive impact on the perceived genuinity of a campaign may also be what is needed for millennial consumers to associate value-driven motives to a business that is perceived as truly supporting the cause (Ellen et al., 2006).

However, there were other respondents who perceived the business' risky behavior was strategic and were thus more skeptical of the business' underlying motives, associating egoistic-driven business motives centered around exploiting the cause (Vlachos et al., 2009). As some respondents argued, businesses as large as Nike and Gillette do not initiate these efforts blindly. Instead they engaged in what one respondent had called "calculated risks", encapsulated in the following:

> *We're constantly saying that that they took a risk in some way […] but I'm very skeptical about the fact that they didn't like- I am pretty sure […] before taking this risk, they measured quite rationally which were going to be the positive and the negative answers from the public.* (P16)

This assessment of a business' strategy reflects not only the active role that consumers play in processing the content they receive, but also that consumers today may be more aware of a company's tactics. More specifically, a number of participants in the focus groups were quick to point out the various ways in which a business can assess the potential success of their campaign before it is released. Besides gauging the public's overall stance on the cause, some pointed out that these campaigns had piggybacked on ongoing societal developments such as the Me Too movement in the case of Gillette and the umpire feud with Serena Williams (Nike), and could, arguably, be certain of high awareness and possibly strong resonance among a large section of their target audience, masking the risk as a "safe bet". As he noted, "multiple studies had already shown that a majority of the population agrees with equal rights and no differences between men and women and so on, so safe bet, I would say" (P13).

By tapping into existing public sentiment and interest on a given topic, businesses are on the "safe side" when they engage in such efforts, a sentiment also expressed by others. Participants also noted that 'size matters.' Nike and Gillette as brands and the companies behind them were often invoked as an expression of power and influence that acted as a risk net/buffer. It is the size of these companies that enable them to survive any potential downfalls from engaging in CSR efforts. As one respondent aptly described, businesses engage in these calculated risks only when they know "they can handle the consequences of either the money they invested or the reputational risk, […]. Otherwise, they wouldn't even invest this much in a campaign like that" (P22).

Ultimately, if the business faced some sort of loss, it was assumed that it was loss they could "recover from", which was a sentiment that was also shared by other respondents. Through the process of engaging in efforts that are perceived as being safe bets, a business

can *appear* like it is engaging in risky behavior and can create the illusion that they're sacrificing a great deal to support a certain cause, appearing to have value-driven motives when consumers may perceive it as egoistic-driven motives (Ellen et al., 2006; Vlachos et al., 2009). It is the perceived level of risk that may allow consumers to associate value-driven motives to a business' CSR initiatives instead of egoistic-driven motives, the latter of which has been linked with negative external outcomes (Skarmeas & Leonidou, 2013). As one participant argued about the Nike and Serena Williams campaign,

> *There's Nike, who says that they also believe in something and they may be sacrificing but they're not really sacrificing everything, are they? They are seen as so brave though. They say that they are ready to sacrifice […] so the message is a really smart way to say we are risking a lot.* (P19)

She went on to explain that the reason why this is particularly smart is because businesses can use this illusion of risky behavior as a way of appearing cool, edgy and trendy in the eyes of their consumers. As a handful of respondents had pointed out during the sessions, jumping on the political and social bandwagon is now a popular trend, which impacts the degree to which they believe that these business efforts are genuine attempts to support the cause. As CSR efforts become more popular and commonplace, the initiatives put forth by businesses were met with skeptical consumers who believed these companies had only created the illusion of engaging in risky behavior as a way of not only gaining publicity but also appearing "cool" and "up-to-date". Through engaging in contemporary controversy, businesses can create the impression that they are "up-to-date", an attention-grabbing tactic that allows them to appear relevant to a consumer group that are looking for brands that are distinct from those of their predecessors (Horst, 2018; Woo, 2018). Passive brands were equated with those that belonged to a previous generation, reflecting a shift in what consumers nowadays expect from businesses. As participant 19 explained,

> *I think for young people […] you want to see somebody being cool like that. You want to see them having a voice, having a stance. It's not just being passive, your grandma's brand […] that has no message. You have your own views and you want them to have your views as well, because the brand then is a little bit like a human. If a human has no beliefs then it's just boring, right? So the same with a brand.* (P19)

It is this increased sense of social responsibility that not only makes businesses appear more up-to-date and "cool", but also humanizes it, as voicing opinions increases the

likelihood of attracting the attention of millennial consumers that have varying opinions about these causes, a finding which is reflected in Sheahan's (2005) research on millennial consumer's affiliations with environmental, political and social causes. Ultimately, the perceived level of risk that consumers associate with a business' efforts to support gender role redefinition impacts the extent to which they perceive these efforts to be genuine. This, in turn, influences the way they behave towards the business (Bhattacharya & Sen, 2011). What this study found was that the respondents processed CSR causes uniquely, identifying some that are riskier to advocate for than others, which highlights that not all CSR causes are perceived equally. This reflects that what works for one CSR cause may not work for another, and must therefore be approached in a way that makes effective use of these differences.

### 4.2 Gender as a *Ubiquitous* Cause

Besides just being regarded as a unique cause compared to other CSR efforts, gender was also regarded as being a cause that has already been heavily discussed. Gender as a ubiquitous cause manifests as a result of the perception that the topic of gender stereotyping and redefining have been perpetuated and tackled by businesses previously, resulting in the need for newer approaches in order to appear relevant and memorable to millennial consumers. Looking more specifically at the ubiquitous case of gender, some participants emphasized the fact that gender and attempts to tackle stereotypical gender role portrayals is not a new phenomenon. As some participants had argued, Nike and Gillette's campaigns did not introduce the cause to the world. As one respondent put it, "[…] it's not like these issues-it's not like these conversations didn't happen before" (P5). She went on to explain that businesses have often been one of the reasons why these issues have lasted as long as they have in society, as they perpetuate these stereotypical gender roles through the content they produce. When talking particularly about Nike and Gillette, she argued,

> [T]hey have, in the past, in their ads and just generally how they present their brand through any kind of visual content, it's always been feeding into the traditional notions of masculinity and femininity. (P5)

Speaking particularly about Gillette, she went to on to explain that "all of their ads in the past have been kind of feeding into that traditional idea of what masculinity looks like" (P5). Other participants were also quite familiar with Gillette's past, highlighting this business' role in being part of not only the problem but also the solution. Despite its paradoxical past,

numerous participants considered the new Gillette campaign simply a product of the times. One respondent credited this to the fact that society in the past primarily catered to the wishes of men, which was often reflected in the content that businesses produced. References made about a business' alignment with societal values were also discussed in relation to the point about level of perceived risk that was brought up in the previous theme. Reflected in Vlachos et al.'s (2009) research on stakeholder-driven CSR motivations, the level of perceived risk associated with supporting this cause may also be related to the extent to which consumers perceive these efforts as being driven by stakeholder pressure and concerns. One respondent also remembered Gillette's previous campaigns, arguing that the business's change in the message they conveyed is understandable. As she put it, "of course they are changing because society wants them to change" (P28), reflecting the active role stakeholders play in shaping the practices and meanings of social responsibility. This perceived receptiveness that companies have to the changing needs of society was voiced by the majority of participants in different sessions who believed that businesses engage in such efforts as a way of responding to consumer concerns and pressure. When pressed for further details during the sessions, they argued that businesses are realizing that they can no longer go about selling "sexist messages" and that "making progressive statements" is the way to appeal to consumers nowadays (P5). The perceived business' alignment with societal values particularly with regards to gender reflects a situation where millennial consumers have seen businesses be the problem, the solution or both for a long time.

### 4.2.1 Common Issue, Uncommon Solution

To the respondents, the topic of gender role redefinition has lost its novelty because it is often approached using the same message, highlighting that a common topic like gender may need uncommon approaches in order to appeal to millennial consumers. To exemplify this idea further, participants often referenced the Nike campaign with its message of female empowerment and how it simply adds to existing campaigns that advocate for the same cause in the same manner. As one respondent argued,

> *[I]t was a little bit going towards a cliché. It's like this kind of concept of women should empower themselves […] This kind of concept is really falling into the social cliché. The implication […] behind this message is […] to imply that women somehow cannot do what society thinks women cannot do as well as men.* (P10)

This puts forward the implication that consistently approaching the topic using the same message may be losing its appeal when trying to gain the attention of millennial consumers, who have seen the same message one too many times. In contrast to the Nike campaign, numerous participants praised the Gillette campaign for its fresh and innovative perspective on a previously discussed topic. Although the participants had noted that the idea of the liberation of the "typical traditional macho image" (P3) is somewhat more recent than the message of female empowerment, it was first time that many participants had seen this message conveyed from a male perspective. As one participant noted about the Gillette campaign, "you don't see it that often, that image of a man, on TV" (P3), reflecting that even within gender, there are differences where the issue of masculinity is novel but issues of feminism are seen as a cliché because they have captured our imagination for a long time. More specifically, the Gillette campaign highlights an angle of gender role redefinition that is often not approached. As one respondent argued in response to preliminary thoughts that she had about the Gillette campaign,

> *What's really beautiful about this ad is that whenever you talk about any kind of issues regarding feminism or how we can kind of tackle it [...], it doesn't come from the male perspective, so here it really shows how men can the allies in the feminist movement, which is something that never really gets covered, like men are always shown in a very bad way, like you have to fix this or you have to fix that, but this is like kind of approaching it from a very fresh perspective.* (P5)

This "fresh perspective" was what many participants had credited as being the reason they had taken notice of the campaigns in the first place. Because the cause of gender role redefinition has become common, efforts made to support it may be more effective in garnering the attention of millennial consumers when approached in uncommon ways such as from a new angle or fresh perspective. This, in turn, allowed the participants to not only relate to the campaign, but to also find it more memorable. While there may have been various factors that were more influential to some participants more than others, two factors were often brought up as being key reasons why the participants liked the Nike and Gillette campaigns: Effective use of relevant ambassadors and real-life incidents.

Particularly in the case of the Nike campaign, the majority of participants had agreed that the company's decision to use Serena Williams as the ambassador of the campaign was "smart" and "effective". One participant even argued that Nike are "very good at choosing their ambassadors" (P23), reflecting back on both the Serena Williams and Colin Kaepernick

campaigns. She went on to explain that Nike makes effective use of choosing a face for their campaign that has previously stood up for the cause. One respondent made a similar remark, stating that

> *[Serena Williams] has been an advocate for gender equality for some time already. And she has got public attention and she's speaking about these things, so I think using her as a main actor for this campaign, it's a very successful move.* (P28)

This insight, which was also expressed by other respondents, begins to highlight an associative process that consumers actively engage in, whereby the cause and the ambassador must be somewhat related. The 2017 Pepsi campaign featuring Kendall Jenner that was heavily criticized for trivializing demonstrations about social justice issues (Batchelor & Hooton, 2017) was a frequently brought up as an example of a campaign that participants thought had failed in making that logical connection between the cause and the ambassador. The campaign received a great deal of backlash, so much so that Pepsi bowed to consumer pressure and pulled the campaign off of their social media platforms (Batchelor & Hooton, 2017). As one participant argued, "they couldn't find anyone else better than Kendall Jenner to do it?" (P2). A need for there to be a logical connection between the ambassador and cause was made more explicit by another respondents remarks,

> *Unless the celebrity is directly involved with the cause, like Colin Kaepernick's case, I wouldn't give a shit about the celebrity. Like Kendall Jenner, why is she there with the Pepsi? […] it doesn't really make sense. She's not with the cause.* (P11)

The view expressed by this respondent was not unique, as this was one of the underlying reasons the Pepsi campaign received a great deal of backlash. This reflects that consumers may be more sensitive to the use of ambassadors that are more directly related to the cause the business is advocating for. The use of celebrity ambassadors has received only mild enthusiasm from consumers in previous CPCSR research but has often pertained to CSR initiatives in general (Loch, 2015), highlighting that consumers may be more enthusiastic about the businesses that partner with ambassadors if the celebrity is relevant to the cause. As one respondent explained, the reason why the use of relevant ambassador may be a smart tactic is because it gives the business the credibility it needs to make its efforts appear genuine. Therefore, the business is regarded more as a platform that amplifies the voice of an individual like Serena Williams or Colin Kaepernick who consumers may associate with more credibility and genuinity.

With the case of Serena Williams, participants pointed out that, like the message expressed in the Dream Crazier campaign, she too is a woman who has experienced unequal treatment in her sport because of her gender. Despite this, she is seen as having a very good reputation, which is something that Nike could have used to make their efforts appear more genuine. With a cause as common as gender role redefinition, it can potentially be seen as too abstract to effectively tackle and therefore requires uncommon solutions. As one respondent put it, "[I]t's an extremely abstract issue and the company trying to help that abstract issue is not as effective as if it gives a platform to say, a celebrity and make them speak through the brand's campaigns" (P19). What may make gender appear abstract is its controversial nature. Unlike other CSR causes such as those related to the environment, social causes such as gender can be approached in a multitude of different ways. Moreover, consumers can have various opinions about the topic, making it more difficult to concretely argue that a single approach is sufficient as one message does not work for all consumers (Bhattacharya & Sen, 2004).

Closely connected to the topic of relevant ambassadors was the discussion that both Nike and Gillette referenced real-life incidents in their campaigns. More than a handful of participants were aware of the incident that transpired in October between Serena Williams and the dispute she had with the umpire at one of her games. Similarly, the Gillette campaign referenced the Me Too movement, an incident that started in the United States but has since become global. Participants believed that using these real-life incidents as the basis of these campaigns helped ground the cause in contemporary discourse. As one respondent put it,

> [I]t's what people are talking about now, so this makes the ad more relevant because the timing is great, so people can actually understand better and talk about it more because this is what they are talking about in their daily life. (P6)

Using these contemporary examples made the business appear more up-to-date to the respondents. Similar to the case with the ambassadors, a certain degree of relation between the company and the incident must be perceived in order for participants to interpret a business' motives as genuine. After watching the Gillette campaign, one respondent questioned the company's use of the Me Too movement. Skeptically, she explained,

> […] They just put it into their campaign because everybody knows about it and especially if it's in the US, it's a very prominent issue. So I felt […] it was not necessary to put that thing into a campaign. I've never thought of linking Gillette and somebody

*fighting against sexual harassment in US. […] They just put it in there because it's a bit of a buzzword unfortunately.* (P19)

This difference in how consumers interpreted the link between the company and the real-life incident was also expressed by participant 25, who was also wondering why Gillette decided to bring up the Me Too movement, failing to see the "fit". However, those who saw the link noted that the both the Nike and Gillette campaigns were released quite some time after their respective incidents took place, as previously noted. The timeliness in which Nike and Gillette released these campaigns reminded one participant of the "Goldilocks Formula" (P5). She went on to explain, "if it's too close, it's too soon then it's exploitation and if it's too far out, then you're just like 'Why? This isn't even relevant anymore'" (P5). Another respondent expressed a similar opinion, highlighting the balance with which businesses should approach heated topics. As he put it, "on the one hand, it's good to leverage on the whole thing to get the hype and all, so you transmit the message, but if it's too close, it feels like their exploiting the whole cause" (P4).

Due to the ubiquitous nature of gender, consumers developed the impression that the cause has lost its novelty because it is often advocated for with the same progressive message. In attempts to attract consumers, businesses have resorted to using new approaches that millennial consumers found relevant, relatable and, thus, worthy of their attention, highlighting the idea that common causes may need uncommon approaches.

### 4.3 Gender as an *Untarnishable* Cause

The idea of gender as a ubiquitous cause is also closely connected to the perception that the participants had of gender is an *untarnishable* cause, which manifests as a result of the perception that no harm can come (to the cause, not the company) for advocating for the cause. Although this results in the belief that businesses should engage in social advocacy, this belief does not necessarily lead to tangible gains. Looking more specifically at the untarnishable nature of gender, the respondents noted that the fight for gender role redefinition is a cause that is "bigger than all of us". As one respondent put it,

> *[…] the causes that these two companies have chosen, they are bigger than all of us you know? So if the company fails, if they portray the message in a backwards way, it doesn't matter because gender stereotypes have been around for a long time. People have been trying to break them for hundreds of years […].* (P19)

She went on to explain that because of the sheer magnitude of the cause that these businesses are supporting, "it's really outside of their control to damage such big issues" (P19). This was a sentiment that was expressed by other respondents as well, who believed the cause of gender was much bigger than one company could influence on its own, either positively or negatively. As one participant remarked, "it can't just be like, you know, one ad and then 'okay, this is going to change everyone's perception'" (P11). As the participants expressed, any attempts made by a business to support the cause is unlikely to harm its progress. As one respondent explained, "they cannot harm or worsen the issue. By raising the issue, whether it's successful or not successful, they're still raising the issue. People are still debating and leading things to change" (P28). As highlighted by participant 28, even poorly executed campaigns can still generate publicity for the cause. However, in instances where a business fails to produce an effective campaign, participants believe that more harm goes to the company's image and reputation than to the cause. With regards to a gender campaign that "failed", numerous participants brought up Dove's Real Beauty campaigns. One respondent highlighted that even if a campaign goes wrong, people often question and criticize the way the company had gone about advocating for gender role redefinition and not the cause itself. As he explained about the Dove campaigns,

> *[…] people didn't start to question whether, you know, we should redefine standards of beauty for women. They started to question how Dove was doing it, so I think […] even when the campaign goes wrong, people start blaming the company and not the cause. So the cause always remains […] on this higher pedestal.* (P18)

Because of its perceived untarnishable nature, participants argued that any attempts to support gender role redefinition should be taken as it allows the cause to be situated in mainstream discourse. Not only does advocating for the cause of gender give it exposure, but it also may encourage other businesses to engage in similar initiatives. A participant outlined the incremental impact:

> *[…] one campaign in itself might not cause a change, but I think if it's done well, then it allows for future campaigns to also take something like this up and the bigger the company is that does it, then smaller ones which maybe earlier couldn't have started the conversion can at least join the conversation now.* (P5)

His perspective was resonated by others who believed that together, businesses have the opportunity to become a global force for social change. This highlights the perception that the

participants had that "the voice of many, trump the voice of the few" (P18). Because of this, a majority of the participants adopted the stance that a business that engages in such efforts, if ill-handled, can be forgiven because "something is better than nothing" (P18; P19; P26).

This "something is better than nothing" perception of the role of businesses in society comes from a place of still perceiving that businesses are not obliged to engage in such efforts in the first place, resulting in the idea that any attempts to do so are appreciated by consumers. As one respondent put it,

> *[…] companies don't need to support environmental causes. They don't need to support social issues, like that's not their mandate because they are a corporate organization. They're a business, so the fact that they are using their resources for some sort of positive impact, […] that's already an extra step, which is being taken even if their intentions are completely ulterior […] if the action is good, then the intentions don't matter as much.* (P5)

It appeared as though, in the way that the participants were taking about the changing role of businesses in society, that a sort of compromise takes place where businesses are not limited to being either profit-making entities or social activists (Kim & Lee, 2012). One respondent highlighted this by explaining that, for the longest time, we've always assumed that businesses could not do both. She argued,

> *I think it's a big problem that I think we have is thinking that money and doing good are two different things or are opposite things, right? So why do we have to always think of these thing in terms of either you make money or either you make good?* (P14)

This leads to an understanding of the role of businesses as one that challenges the idea that making money is an inherently bad thing. As another respondent put it, "just because someone makes money, doesn't mean it's necessarily now a bad company" (P18). This sentiment was expressed by the majority of participants who agreed with the idea that businesses engage in such efforts in order to not only advance business objectives, but also support the cause. This revealed that the participants were more aware of the fact that businesses are expected to make money, but did not allow this knowledge to influence their perceptions of the campaign or company, particularly with a cause like gender role redefinition that was regarded as untarnishable. One respondent argued that the knowledge that all companies profit from engaging in such efforts is always in the back of her mind, and therefore "clears that out as a factor" when assessing whether she likes the campaign or not.

What this reflects is a renegotiation in the consumers minds of the idea that businesses can either be one or the other. Why this may be the case is because of the perception that businesses profiting from their CSR initiatives is understandable "as long as it's for a good cause" (P4). As respondent 4 highlighted, "it's a win-win situation. The company wins its money, but also the cause gets supported and gets to be a part of bigger discussions" (P4).

### 4.3.1 Millennials: Paradoxical Consumer Group

This renegotiated role for businesses that support social causes like gender role redefinition, in turn, influences the external outcomes that a business may receive from engaging in such CSR efforts (Bhattacharya & Sen, 2004). However, what makes millennial consumers an interesting group compared to their predecessors is that they are more selective of how they exercise their purchasing power. Many other factors such as price and product quality come into play when assessing whether they would buy a product from a company that engages in CSR initiatives, which differs amongst the various types of millennial consumers (Bucic et al., 2012). When questioned about whether they were more likely to buy from the businesses that engage in such efforts, almost all of the participants agreed in one way or another that they would not change their purchasing behavior as a result of these campaigns, a finding which was reflected in Horst's (2018) research on millennial consumers. As one respondent noted about the efforts made by Nike, "[…] I can appreciate that for what it is. But another reason is behind why I wouldn't buy from them" (P23). This sentiment of appreciation that does not translate into positive purchasing behavior was expressed by other respondents as well, who highlighted that "it depends on the product because different products are different investments" (P25). As participant 4 similarly argued,

> *"You go back to an actual product in the end, yes or no? That's what makes my decision to buy the product, but if it's made with a campaign with a nice message, I would support that, but that would not change my buying perspective. It would be two different things for me, it will always be."* (P4)

Although the participants appreciated the efforts made by these businesses, this did not translate into positive purchasing behavior, as other factors come into play. Although Bucic et al.'s (2012) study positive attributions associated with CSR initiatives does not necessarily lead to positive purchasing behavior amongst consumers, it can also be argued that this may be the case because the participants that took part in the sessions were all students who were not earning full-time salaries. Thus, they may have been more aware of their financial status

as a full-time student. Expressing a similar opinion to that of the previous participants, participant 2 noted the important role her financial situation plays in the way she exercises her purchasing power. She explained about the Dream Crazier campaign,

> *[E]ven though I really enjoyed the commercial and think that they might be doing it for a good cause and everything, it still doesn't make me think, 'Okay, I'm gonna go buy their product because they support this cause'. It always comes back to what my financial situation is"* (P2).

In addition to that, a product-price evaluation may take place more often amongst consumers who are more conscious of their financial situation. This process involves assessing a product's quality against its price. Once again, favoring of the company does not appear to directly sway millennial consumers. As one respondent argued when talking about Nike, "I can appreciate them as a company, love them as a company, but not have a single product from them, because I just think it's super expensive" (P11).

While it may not directly influence their purchasing behavior, numerous participants said that they would remember the brand amongst competitors, assuming that the price of other items within the same product category are similar. As one respondent argued, "If I'm at a store and the prices are the same, so excluding that factor, I would, at least I'd like to believe so, I would think of the Gillette ad" (P29). As other participants noted, these campaigns may aid consumers in brand recall when faced with other competing brands. Ultimately, if no big price differences exist between products in the same item category, the participants expressed an increased likelihood that they would remember and thus potentially pick the brand amongst competitors but would not go out of their way to purchase a brand's products if it supports certain causes. This idea can best be illustrated with what one respondent remarked about how he exercises his purchasing power,

> *I prefer to choose the companies that have corporate social responsibility, better than the companies that don't have this responsibility, so if I need to choose between two different companies, [...] I'd rather go for the company that at least has something to do with the social corporate responsibility.* (P26)

This preference for socially responsible businesses amongst the respondents is also reflected in Boyd (2010) and Sheahan's (2005) findings on the purchasing preferences of millennial consumers.

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While positive associations with a company's CSR initiatives may make the business more attractive amongst competitors, but does not directly influence consumers' purchasing behavior, participants pointed out that have previously refused to buy from a business if they developed negative associations with the campaign or company. This finding is also reflected in Bhattacharya & Sen's (2004) CPCSR research, which found that consumers are not as sensitive to successful CSR initiatives as they are to unsuccessful one. As one respondent eloquently explained about her purchasing behavior, "I'm more likely not to buy it if I dislike it than I am likely to buy it if I do like it. I think the negative side has a bigger impact" (P29). One explanation as to why negative associations have a larger impact may be because acting on negative associations may be easier than acting on positive associations. This relationship was made explicit by numerous participants. For instance, one respondent argued,

> *[…] for liking the campaign and actually purchasing, there are also different important factors such as price, convenience to get the product, and such things, but for disliking, if you just dislike the communication of the brand, you just don't purchase it.* (P28)

The ease with which consumers may exercise their purchasing power when faced with negative associations with a brand or campaign may be linked to the idea that millennial consumers are not only more conscious of their financial situation, but are also more socially and environmentally conscious (Sheahan, 2005). One respondent recalled his reaction towards the H&M advertisement that received a great deal of backlash for dressing a black boy in a sweater that read, "Coolest monkey in the jungle" (West, 2018). He explained, "since the H&M ad, I haven't bought any H&M […] so after that backlash, I was like 'Yeah, I'm done with that company'" (P22).

Besides purchasing behavior, the participants highlighted the important role that social media plays in the way they would engage with the campaigns produced by Nike and Gillette. This is to be expected as millennials have grown up alongside technological advancements (Gorman, Nelson, & Glassman, 2004), making it a significant way in which they have learnt to interact in an online setting (Howe & Strauss, 2000). Numerous participants shared the Nike and Gillette campaigns on their social media accounts such as Facebook and Instagram, while others were tagged or sent the campaigns from friends online. The kind of exposure these campaigns received was aided by the multi-channel campaign strategy.

In addition to being released online, participants were conscious of how quickly something can go viral on social media platforms and that this is something that businesses

are aware of. As one participant explained, "I think most of those ads are actually also tailored to go viral and to have that impact online" (P13). Despite using these platforms to voice their opinions, the participants associated a great deal of power with social media, arguing that it can affect the impressions and subsequent purchasing behavior of many other consumers. As one respondent argued, "by purchasing and not purchasing, you are affecting only yourself, but by spreading the word, you're affecting not only yourself, but also somehow influencing also the choices of others […]" (P28). Spreading positive or negative word of mouth (WOM) about the campaign online can allow it to potentially influence the external outcomes a company receives in places far from where the campaign has originated. Many participants noted that both campaigns were released for the consumer market in the United States, but they were still subsequently impacted by the campaigns' spread on social networking platforms. As participant 19 argued about the power of social media,

> *[…] a consumer in the States is tweeting something and I, here in the Netherlands, see it and then I think, 'wait a minute' and I start looking into that issue and I realize, 'Oh, this brand actually is unethical and it also has shops here, then I am not going to go to their shops here' […] so the brand will maybe notice that not only in the States there's some sort of backlash, but also in the Netherlands where they did not really expect that.* (P19)

This perceived sense of power may also come from a place where consumers may attribute more importance in their online identifies and how that can influence the success or failure of a campaign than how they spend their money. This importance is highlighted by numerous respondents, such as respondent 29 who argued, "I'm giving you my presence and giving you my likes online […] (P29). She went on to explain that her activity online is a way of "representing [her] social media identity", so she's more aware of how she interacts with media content online as it can be seen as a reflection of herself. Another respondent similarly argued,

> *[…] if I'm putting in the effort to make a post to promote anything, I feel like it takes another three minutes on my phone just like, "okay, this has to be worth those three minutes of me actually doing this because I'm not getting any monetary awards for it anyways or anything". I think time investment nowadays could be maybe the ultimate compliment you could give anyone right now […].* (P18)

Ultimately, the various external outcomes that consumers can reward companies with are linked with their perception of gender as an untarnishable cause, as this has led to the belief that businesses should support the cause anyways. In line with previous literature on millennial consumer perceptions of business that support causes (Horst, 2018), a renegotiation of a business' role in society has taken place, where the ideas that a business can make money and do good coexist. As a result of this new understanding of a business' role, millennial consumers are more inclined to spread electronic WOM and may even recall the brand amongst competitors. However, millennial consumers are not likely to exercise their purchasing power as other factors come into play, despite how they may feel about businesses that support gender role redefinition.

### 4.4 Summary

While this study focused on the cause of gender role redefinition, respondents explored and brought up other causes, often grouping or juxtaposing the cause of gender with other CSR initiatives. This point was explored when looking at gender as a unique CSR cause, which highlights that, at its root, not all CSR causes are perceived as equal. The respondents processed CSR causes differently, identifying some that are riskier to advocate for than others. This perceived level of risk was associated with whether the participants attributed altruistic motives to a business' CSR efforts or were more skeptical of the underlying motives (RQ1). This has led to various positive external outcomes such as spreading positive electronic WOM and recognizing the brand amongst competitors, but not positive purchasing behavior, as millennial consumers take other factors into consideration when deciding to exercise their purchasing power (RQ2). At the same time, millennials were conflicted about this and therefore, there is reason for optimism with the untarnishable cause, as they do believe that businesses should continue to advocate for such causes, despite the fact that it may not lead to tangible gains (RQ3). And finally, participants also offered recommendations for making campaigns more relevant and thus more memorable in order to address the issue of gender as a ubiquitous cause (RQ4).

**5. CONCLUSION**

5.1 Theoretical & Practical Implications

With the rise of businesses as social activists, a new trend is emerging where businesses are no longer interested in only selling products, but are also advocating for social change (Cox, 2018). This increased involvement in societal improvement has been linked to various benefits for businesses, which supports the business case for CSR (Carroll & Shabana, 2010; Galbreath, 2010; Hoeffler & Keller, 2002; Morsing, 2015; Vanhamme et al., 2012). However, the external outcomes that companies can expect to receive as a result of their CSR efforts is closely related to the perceptions consumers have of these businesses and their initiatives (Carroll & Shabana, 2010). As this trend gains traction, researchers and businesses alike should increasingly explore consumer perceptions of CSR (CPCSR), as understanding how consumers make sense of these initiatives can not only effectively benefit the business but also society at large and the supported cause. Gender is just one of many causes that businesses are supporting, reflecting the various other causes that can be studied in the future.

However, what makes gender different from other CSR issues is that companies have often been part of the narrative that has perpetuated gender stereotypes, raising the question of where businesses are the right actors to engage in CSR efforts that attempt to redefine stereotypical gender role. What this study finds is that consumers were conflicted about the kind of role businesses have in society, with some who were more supportive and others who were more skeptical of the underlying motives. Even though there is some divergence, the majority agreed that businesses that use their power and resources in any way that supports causes of various kinds is highly appreciated, even if it is done for a profit. Based on previous literature, this degree of support is an expected finding amongst the millennial consumer group. Although this does confirm previous studies, given the current discourse around millennial consumers and their concern for society, what this study shows is that millennials are also a paradoxical group, who encourage business engagement in social causes but are not necessarily willing to change their behavior or signal their appreciation through tangible business outcomes. Despite this, millennials are a consumer group that cannot be ignored, given their size (Valentine & Powers, 2013), spending capability (Barone et al., 2000) and propensity for social activism (Horst, 2018). Developing a deeper understanding of the reasons behind this paradoxical behavior can advance CPCSR research by moving past the question of whether consumers support these initiatives and addressing how businesses can go about effectively communicating their advocacy for certain causes.

What this study also finds is that not CSR causes are created equal, which can have implications for the way consumers perceive and attribute emotions to certain efforts, subsequently resulting in external outcomes that may differ. This may highlight that companies benefit most from engaging in CSR efforts from which they can definitely reap tangible benefits, a finding that is supported by Serafeim (2015). However, there is reason to hope that engaging in such efforts led to some benefits, such as brand awareness amongst competitors as well as the spreading of positive WOM online. Ultimately, businesses should not only be cautious of how they approach this paradoxical consumer group, but should also recognize the internal differences that can have an impact on the kind of external outcomes they would expect to receive.

5.2 Limitations

Throughout the process of conducting this study, certain decisions were made in order to conduct this study with maximum rigor. However, this also led to several limitations that must be mentioned when assessing the results of this study. Firstly, the data sample consisted of 5 focus groups with a total of 29 participants. The ideal data collection period should have continued until the point of data saturation was reached, which could have been achieved if more focus group sessions were conducted and more respondents participated. Secondly, because the sessions primarily took place on campus, only students had taken part, meaning that the sample consisted of consumers who were academically oriented and analytical. Young working professionals may have expressed different perspectives on business efforts to redefine stereotypical gender roles through CSR campaigns.

Ultimately, these shortcomings were a result of the somewhat challenging recruitment process, as the time and location of the sessions were dependent on available rooms on campus as well as ensuring that a minimum of five participants were available to take part during each session. Despite these limitations, the sessions were conducted with respondents who had previously studied in various academic institutions around the world, reflecting a diverse set of backgrounds and perspectives that were brought to the table during the sessions.

5.3 Direction for future research

The phenomenon of consumer perceptions of CSR initiatives has often been limited to CSR initiatives in general (Horst, 2018; Kim & Lee, 2012; Schmeltz, 2012; Skarmeas & Leonidou, 2013) and should therefore be explored using various themes and methods to allow for a

more nuanced investigation of the topic. Therefore, this study recommends several directions for future research.

First and foremost, researchers in the field of CPCSR could explore the various initiatives that fall under CSR and assess whether there are differences in the way these efforts are perceived. What this study's findings suggest is that millennial consumers perceive differences in CSR initiatives that are more social in nature compared to those that are related to the environment. This difference in perception can lead to various differences in the external outcomes that companies could receive from these consumers. More specifically, CPCSR research can benefit from a more nuanced approach that assesses in-depth perceptions of how one cause differs from another and how this impacts subsequent perceptions of the business and initiative. This prompts an understanding of CSR where not all causes are perceived as equal, paving the way for a more nuanced approach to CPCSR in the future. By challenging this understanding of CSR, CPCSR research can advance novel approaches depending on the cause being studied. In turn, understanding how these various causes are perceived can lead to the development of more effective initiatives, encouraging other businesses to engage in similar efforts.

Secondly, although this study only focused on the topic of gender role redefinition, businesses are also supporting various other social causes that address issues pertaining to racial inequality, religious discrimination, or the LGBTQ+ community. As brand activism becomes a more prevalent business practice, researchers in the field of CPCSR could explore whether differences exist in the ways that consumers perceive these different causes. Deeper investigation may reveal that some tactics are more effective when advocating for certain social causes than others. Although the findings suggest that consumers' personal perceptions about causes that businesses support are not influenced as a result of these campaigns (Horst, 2018), an experimental study can be conducted that allows for the possibility to test this claim. Exploring whether consumer's personal opinions are somewhat influenced by these business efforts could support the argument that these initiatives lead to social change. Although experimental studies in CPCSR research can be conducted to assess the effectiveness of certain campaign elements, the importance of further qualitative research in the field should not be understated. While it may be used to improve the quantitative measurement scales used in CPCSR research (Öbereder et al., 2014), going beyond investigating whether consumers like or dislike the campaigns and understanding how they make sense of it can allow researchers to develop underlying reasons as to why consumers react to these campaigns the way that they do.

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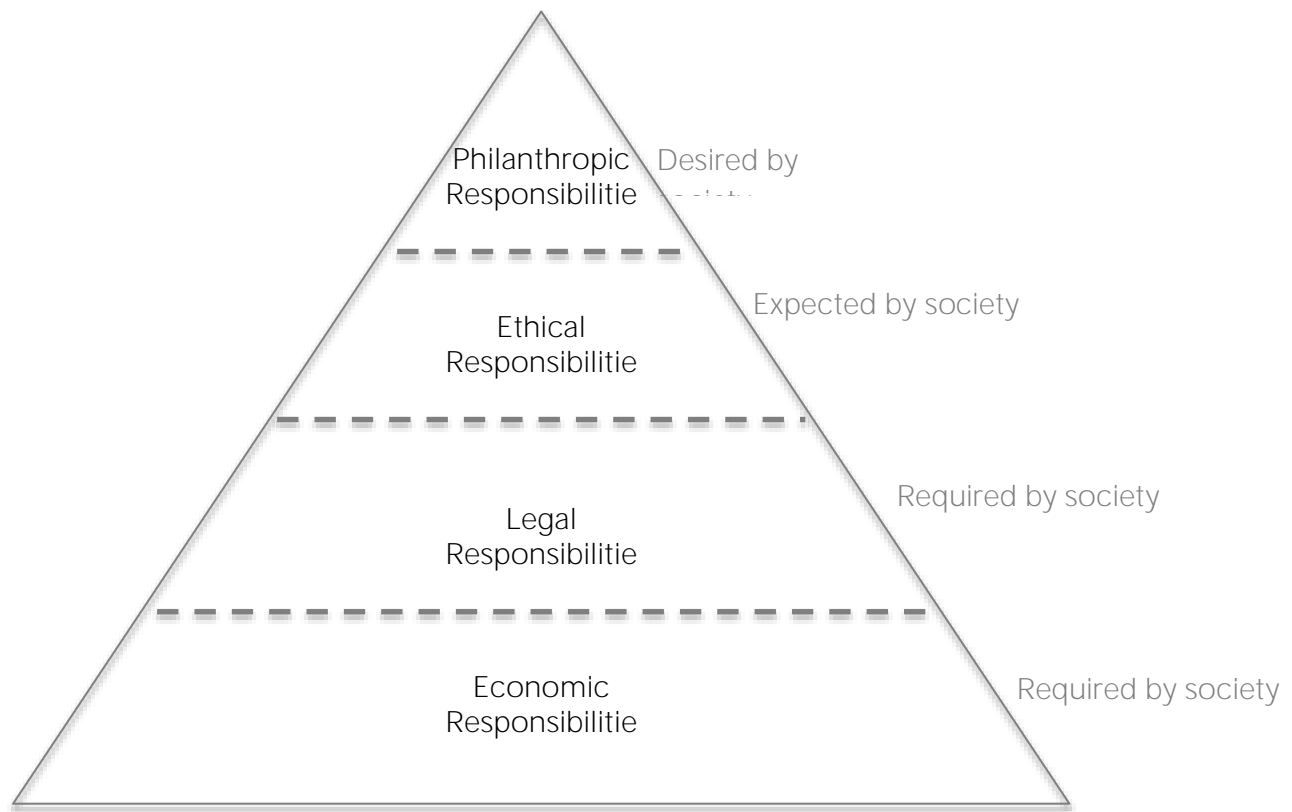
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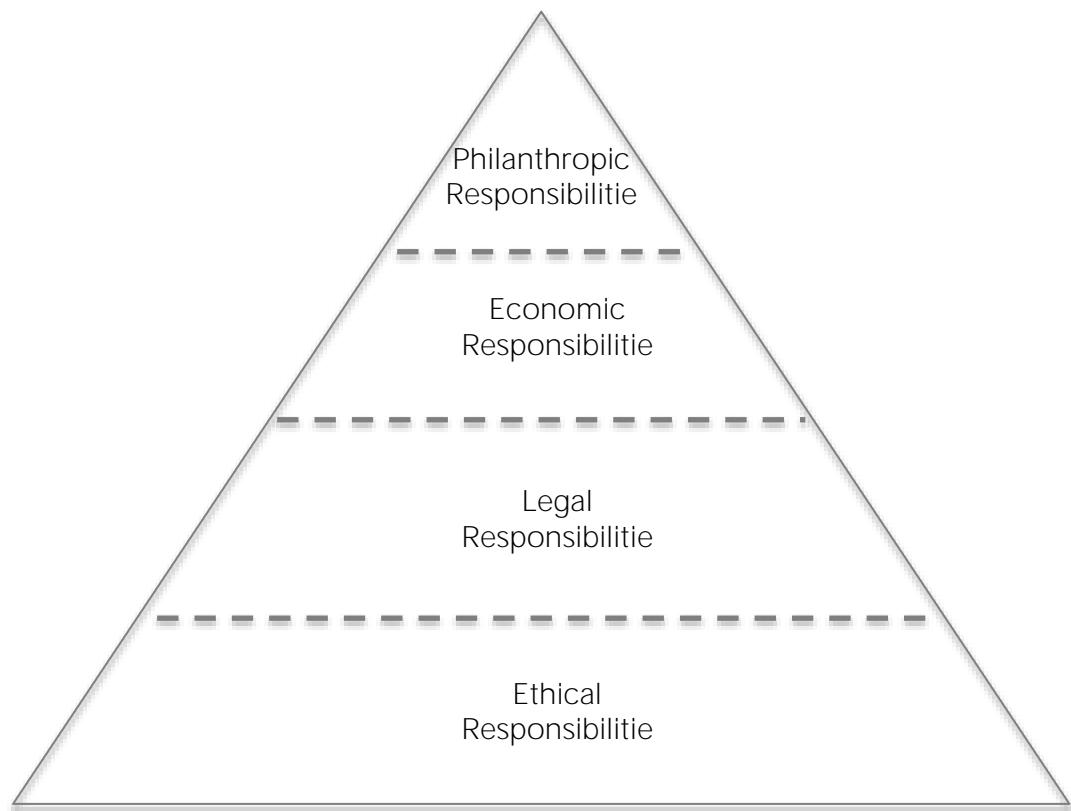
Appendix A

**Figure 1.** Carroll's (2016) revision of his Pyramid of CSR*



*Self-made figure from original diagram

Appendix B

**Figure 2.** Baden's (2016) revision of Carroll's Pyramid of CSR*



Philanthropic
Responsibilitie

Economic
Responsibilitie

Legal
Responsibilitie

Ethical
Responsibilitie

*Self-made figure of original diagram

Appendix C

## Participant List

| Pseudonym | Code | Age | Sex | Educational Degree* |
|-----------|------|-----|-----|---------------------|
| P1 | S1-P1 | 24 | Female | Masters |
| P2 | S1-P2 | 25 | Female | Premasters |
| P3 | S1-P3 | 23 | Female | Premasters |
| P4 | S1-P4 | 28 | Male | Masters |
| P5 | S1-P5 | 24 | Female | Masters |
| P6 | S2-P1 | 23 | Female | Masters |
| P7 | S2-P2 | 23 | Female | Masters |
| P8 | S2-P3 | 24 | Female | Masters |
| P9 | S2-P4 | 24 | Female | Premasters |
| P10 | S2-P5 | 30 | Female | Premasters |
| P11 | S2-P6 | 22 | Female | Masters |
| P12 | S2-P7 | 28 | Male | Masters |
| P13 | S3-P1 | 25 | Male | Masters |
| P14 | S3-P2 | 26 | Female | Masters |
| P15 | S3-P3 | 27 | Female | Masters |
| P16 | S3-P4 | 25 | Female | Masters |
| P17 | S3-P5 | 26 | Female | Masters |
| P18 | S3-P6 | 22 | Male | Masters |
| P19 | S4-P1 | 26 | Female | Masters |
| P20 | S4-P2 | 25 | Female | Masters |
| P21 | S4-P3 | 28 | Female | Masters |
| P22 | S4-P5 | 26 | Male | Bachelors |
| P23 | S4-P6 | 23 | Female | Masters |
| P24 | S5-P1 | 22 | Female | Masters |
| P25 | S5-P2 | 25 | Female | Masters |
| P26 | S5-P3 | 32 | Male | Masters |
| P27 | S5-P4 | 23 | Female | Masters |
| P28 | S5-P5 | 24 | Female | Masters |
| P29 | S5-P6 | 25 | Female | Masters |

*Educational degree that is currently being attained at the time the sessions were conducted*

Appendix D

## MODERATOR GUIDE

### Introduction: (10 mins)

i. Welcome
   ➢ Hello everyone and welcome to this session. I'm Nada Ramadan and I'm a Media and Business master's student at Erasmus University Rotterdam and I'm pleased that you could be a part of this focus group.
   ➢ You've been selected to join our on-going discussion on the changing role of businesses in society, which is what my research and master's thesis are largely based on.

ii. Background
   ➢ Today, we'll be exploring your opinions and perceptions of businesses as social activists for a cause.
   ➢ Although businesses have been activists for a variety of causes, we'll specifically be looking at businesses' attempts to redefine stereotypical gender roles through campaigns.

iii. Ground Rules
   ➢ Please ensure that your mobile phones are kept on silent to avoid disrupting the session.
   ➢ This session is expected to last approximately 90 minutes.
   ➢ The session is also being audio recorded for the sole purpose of transcribing the session later on.
   ➢ Throughout the session, please bear in mind that there are no right or wrong answers and I therefore encourage you to be candid about your personal views on any of the topics that come up.
   ➢ Before we start, I will pass around the consent forms. Please read it carefully. If you agree with everything that is said on the form and agree to participate in this focus group, please go ahead and sign it. Please let me know if you have any questions.

iv. Opening Exercise
   ➢ To ease our way into this session, lets start by each answering a few questions on the sheet of paper in front of you. Take a few minutes to answer the questions and please let me know if you have any questions.
   ➢ Now, let's go around the room and share what you wrote down. Before sharing your thoughts, let's start with a quick round of introductions of where you're from. Let's start with you.
   ➢ **What were some of the companies you had listed that had successfully taken a stance on social issues?**
      ➢ **What was the issue they were addressing?**
      ➢ **Why was this successful in your opinion?**

**Body: (15 mins)**

➢ In order to guide the discussion a little bit, I will be showing you two campaigns from two different companies that specifically aim to redefine stereotypical gender roles. You may be familiar with both campaigns as they were released within the last few months and attracted a great deal of global attention.

**[PLAY VIDEOS OF CAMPAIGNS]**

➢ Just a quick show of hands, who had already seen the Gillette campaign before this? How about the Nike campaign?

➢ What were some of your thoughts when you first saw these campaigns? For those who saw the campaigns for the first time today, what were some of the initial thoughts that came to your mind while watching the campaigns?

**i. Business motives (15 mins)**
*(RQ1: What motives do consumers attribute to business efforts to redefine gender stereotypes via CSR campaigns?)*

   a. What do you think Nike and Gillette are trying to accomplish with these campaigns?
      ➢ Why do you think they're doing this?
         ▪ Could you elaborate on that?
         ▪ Could you maybe give an example?
         ▪ Does anyone have a different perspective on the topic?

   b. What do you believe motivates businesses to engage in such efforts?
      ➢ Whose interests do these efforts benefit?
         ▪ In what ways?
         ▪ Why do you think that is the case?
         ▪ Does anyone have a different perspective on the topic?

   c. What do you think drives businesses to engage in such efforts?
      ➢ Thinking about the Nike and Gillette campaigns, how many of you think these campaigns are **exploiting the cause**?
         ▪ In what ways?
         ▪ Could you please elaborate?
            o **For moral and ethical reasons?**
            o **Can advance business objectives while still supporting the cause?**
            o **Way of responding to consumer pressure and concerns?**

**ii. Impact on consumers' behavior towards businesses (15 mins)**
*(RQ2: What is the impact of such efforts on consumer attitudes and behavior towards businesses?)*

a. When you see a company advocate a particular social cause, what is your first reaction toward the business?
   ➢ Could you elaborate on that?
   ➢ Could you maybe give an example?

b. Have you ever rewarded a company for engaging in such behavior?
   ➢ Could you elaborate on that?
   ➢ Could you maybe give an example?
      ▪ Purchasing behavior?
      ▪ Increased loyalty?

c. On the other hand, have you ever punished a company for engaging in such behavior?
   ➢ In what ways?
   ➢ Why do you think that is the case?

d. Is your perception of a business impacted when it engages in such efforts?
   ➢ If so, in what ways?
      ▪ Could you maybe give an example?
   ➢ If not, why do you think that is the case?
      ▪ Could you maybe give an example?

### iii. Perceived impact on the cause (15 mins)
*(RQ3: In what ways do consumers perceive that such efforts redefine gender stereotypes?)*
a. Thinking about the Nike and Gillette campaigns, how do these campaigns impact the cause of redefining stereotypical gender roles?
   ➢ Could you elaborate on that?
   ➢ Could you maybe give an example?

b. Do these campaigns do more harm than good for the cause?
   ➢ If so, in what ways?
      ▪ Could you maybe give an example?
   ➢ If not, why do you think that is the case?
      ▪ Could you maybe give an example?

### iv. Successful campaign factors (10 mins)
*(RQ4: Under what conditions do consumers perceive such efforts as successful?)*

a. Lets talk about the different factors that come together to form successful and not so successful campaigns. For example, literature has often referenced the importance of a fit between the company and the cause for successful campaigns.
   ➢ In your opinion, how important is cause-company fit for the success of such campaigns?
      ▪ Could you please elaborate on that?
      ▪ Why do you think that is the case?

- o Company's history of socially responsible behavior
- o Company's reputation

- ➢ What would you say is the most important factor that a successful campaign must have?
  - ▪ Could you please elaborate on that?
  - ▪ Why do you think that is the case?
  - ▪ Does anyone have a different perspective on the topic?

b. Think back to a time when you were skeptical about a campaign similar to the ones I showed you today.
- ➢ Why do you think you felt the way that you did?
- ➢ Could you please elaborate on that?

## Conclusion: (10 mins)

- ➢ We're almost at the end of our allotted time so I'd like to begin wrapping up the session. Even though we only focused on the social issue of stereotypical gender role portrayals in today's session, businesses are taking a stance on various social issues such as racial inequality and religious discrimination.
- ➢ **In your opinion, what role do businesses play in the overall betterment of society?**
- ➢ **Is there anything else that anyone would like to add that was not brought up in our discussion today?**
- ➢ Thank you everyone for taking part in this truly informative session. I hope it was as interesting for you as it was for me. Please feel free to email me with any questions you may have about today's session. Thank you again and have a lovely day!

Appendix E

### Gillette's "The Best a Man Can Get" Campaign



**Video link:** https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=koPmuEyP3a0&t=23s

**Summary:** The two-minute video features scenes of young boys of various ethnicities being bullied, of young teens watching "macho" men on TV objectifying women and of news reports that reference the Me Too movement. As the brands introspective reflection on how it has previously contributed to society's idea of toxic masculinity, the campaign shows how men can do better by holding other men accountable when they notice toxic behavior, such as when men catcall women or when children are being bullied.

### Nike's "Dream Crazier" Campaign



**Video link:** https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=whpJ19RJ4JY

**Summary:** The 90-second video features various female athletes who have previously struggled with being called emotional, crazy, or delusional for playing in their respective fields. Narrated by Serena Williams, the campaign showcases how these athletes have worked to break these barriers, featuring several iconic moments in women's sports from athletes such as gymnast Simone Biles, fencer Ibtihaj Mohammed and sprinter Caster Semenya.

Appendix F

Thematic Coding Frame

| Themes | Subcategories | | Illustrative quotes from the data |
|---|---|---|---|
| Gender as Unique | Unique because... | Cannot be proven with facts | [...] the harm in [...] environmental or that kind of like you know, can be proven by science really concretely. It's like there are facts that you can see and like you know in nature, but other things are like [...] more social or perspective-based problems. That's why it is problematic or is different in that sense for like gender and social class. |
| | | Seen as more perception-based | [...] something about fighting gender stereotypes, it's so different because you know that we need for example, trees and you know that [...] companies cannot keep destroying entire forests because it affects us all. But then gender, I think is different [...] Nobody is going to say, 'It's not that bad that trees are getting destroyed' right? |
| | As a result... | Seen as risky move | I think it's usually risky to participate in social issues, you know, if you voice your opinion about politics or social issues [...]. [T]hose are some things that people have their own personal [beliefs]. [I]f a brand has an opinion on that [...] and they publicize it, then they might stray away some other customers. |
| | | Company is brave | Gillette putting this forward was a very brave move. [...] they know the majority of their users are men and the majority of their users can go against them with this ad [...]. |
| | | Company efforts seen as genuine | They don't have any concrete reason to do that, but they wanted to support and actually, it changed my perception because I always hated Nike, because I thought that their prices are ridiculous compared to products that they were [...] producing, but [...] it changed my mind as a customer. |
| | | Skeptical of risk | There's Nike, who says that they also believe in something and they may be sacrificing but they're not really sacrificing everything, are they? They are seen as so brave though. They say that they are ready to sacrifice [...] so the message is a really smart way to say we are risking a lot. |
| | | Engaging in calculated risk | I am pretty sure [...] before taking this risk, they measured quite rationally which were going to be the positive and the negative answers from the public. |
| | | Effort seen as less genuine | I usually get the feeling that all these- but especially, specifically this one, that they're just trying to make themselves look cool, to seem cool and be trendy and joining a trend [...]. |
| Gender as Ubiquitous | Ubiquitous because... | Not new issues | [...] it's not like these issues- it's not like these conversations didn't happen before. |
| | | Issues perpetuated by companies | [T]hey have, in the past, in their ads and just generally how they present their brand through any kind of visual content, it's always been feeding into the traditional notions of masculinity and femininity. |
| | As a result... | Company's change due to social pressure | [...] of course they are changing because society wants them to change. |
| | | Clichéd approach not appreciated | [I]t was a little bit going towards a cliché. It's like this kind of concept of women should empower themselves [...] This kind of concept is really falling into the social cliché. The implication [...] behind this message is [...] to imply that women somehow cannot do what society thinks women cannot do as well as men. |
| | | Fresh approach appreciated | What's really beautiful about this ad is that whenever you talk about any kind of issues regarding feminism or how we can kind of tackle it [...], it doesn't come from the male perspective, so here it really shows how men can the allies in the feminist movement, which is something that never really gets covered, like men are always shown in a very bad way, like you have to fix this or you have to fix that, but this is like kind of approaching it from a very fresh perspective. |
| | | Appreciated use of relevant ambassadors | [Serena Williams] has been an advocate for gender equality for some time already. And she has got public attention and she's speaking about these things, so I think using her as a main actor for this campaign, it's a very successful move. |
| | | Appreciated use of relevant real-life events | [I]t's what people are talking about now, so this makes the ad more relevant because the timing is great, so people can actually understand better and talk about it more because this is what they are talking about in their daily life. |

| Themes | Subcategories | | Illustrative quotes from the data |
|---|---|---|---|
| Gender as Untarnishable | Untarnishable because... | Cause is bigger than all of us | [...] the causes that these two companies have chosen, they are bigger than all of us you know? So if the company fails, if they portray the message in a backwards way, it doesn't matter because gender stereotypes have been around for a long time. People have been trying to break them for hundreds of years [...]. |
| | | Bigger than one company can negatively impact | [...] it's really outside of their control to damage such big issues. |
| | As a result... | Cause cannot be harmed and should therefore be supported | [...] they cannot harm or worsen the issue. By raising the issue, whether it's successful or not successful, they're still raising the issue. People are still debating and leading things to change. |
| | | Company, not cause, is questioned for ill-handled campaign | [...] people didn't start to question whether, you know, we should redefine standards of beauty for women. They started to question how Dove was doing it, so I think [....] even when the campaign goes wrong, people start blaming the company and not the cause. So the cause always remains [...] on this higher pedestal. |
| | | Social activism not required from businesses so it is appreciated | [...] companies don't need to support environmental causes. They don't need to support social issues, like that's not their mandate because they are a corporate organization. They're a business, so the fact that they are using their resources for some sort of positive impact, [...] that's already an extra step, which is being taken even if their intentions are completely ulterior [...] if the action is good, then the intentions don't matter as much. |
| | | Negotiation of business role as profit makers & social activists | As long as it's for a good cause. It's a win-win situation. The company wins its money, but also the cause gets supported and gets to be a part of bigger discussions. |
| | | Stands out amongst competitors | If I'm at a store and the prices are the same, so excluding that factor, I would, at least I'd like to believe so, I would think of the Gillette ad. |
| | | Power of social media to influence decision of others through spreading eWOM | By purchasing and not purchasing, you are affecting only yourself, but by spreading the word, you're affecting not only yourself, but also somehow influencing also the choices of others [...]. |
| | | No impact on purchasing behavior, despite appreciation of company effort | [E]ven though I really enjoyed the commercial and think that they might be doing it for a good cause and everything, it still doesn't make me think, 'Okay, I'm gonna go buy their product because they support this cause'. It always comes back to what my financial situation is. |