

Erasmus School of Economics

MSc Economics and Business, specialisation Marketing

Master Thesis

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## Love it or hate it?

# The effects of brand polarization on consumers' loyalty and support towards the brand.

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The views stated in this thesis are those of the author and not necessarily those of the supervisor, second assessor, Erasmus School of Economics or Erasmus University Rotterdam.

# Contents

Abstract .....	3
1. Introduction.....	4
1.1 Research problem and motivation .....	5
1.2 Research objectives .....	6
1.3 Thesis Outline .....	7
2. Literature review .....	8
2.1 Polarization in political science .....	8
2.2 Polarization in social psychology .....	9
2.3 Definition of polarization in my conceptual framework .....	11
2.4 Brand Polarization .....	11
2.5 The effect of brand polarization on consumers .....	12
2.6 Behavioural Loyalty .....	13
2.7 Defending a brand. ....	15
2.8 Emotional connection with the brand as interaction with polarization .....	16
3. Research Methodology.....	18
3.1 Research design.....	18
3.2 Procedure .....	18
3.3 Measures .....	20
3.4 Sample .....	22
4. Results .....	23
4.1 Pre-test: Manipulation check .....	23
4.2 Data .....	23
4.3 Reliability Check.....	23
4.4 Descriptive Statistics.....	25
4.5 Hypotheses Testing .....	27
5. Discussion and Conclusions.....	32
5.1 Theoretical contribution.....	32
5.2 Conclusions.....	32
5.3 Managerial Implications .....	33
6. Limitations and Future research .....	34
6.1 External validity .....	34
6.2 Internal validity.....	34
6.3 Future research .....	35
References.....	36
Appendix.....	41

## Abstract

The purpose of this study is to develop a conceptualization of brand polarization and its effects on consumer activity. As brand polarization is quite freshly introduced in marketing, literature around three topics that polarization has already been extensively studied was reviewed. Common elements of the topics of: Social psychology, political science and brand rivalry were combined to form a definition. The situation of brand polarization was examined when brands follow advertising strategies related to social issues. The effect of this strategy on consumers was studied, specifically on their behavior. The aspects of behavior analyzed in this thesis are behavioral loyalty and defending the polarized brand. The emotional connection with the brand is taken into consideration as possible game- changer of the effects. For the investigation of the effects a between-subjects experiment was conducted. The measure of analysis for brand polarization was a polarized ad scenario. The data collection was realized through online survey and the questionnaire was powered by Qualtrics. Based on theory research, polarization around a brand was hypothesized to have negative effects on the behavior of consumers. The findings underlined those hypotheses. The connection of consumers that entailed emotional level was hypothesized to mitigate the negativity towards the brand regarding loyalty and intention to defend the brand. Those assumptions were not supported. As practical implications, managers should be cautious of situations when polarization of their brand arises, as this could hurt loyalty and might demotivate consumers to support the polarized brand. Even in presence of emotional connection between consumers and the brand the results can still be harmful. Therefore, communication strategies of firms should be carefully planned not to polarize the target audience and deter consumers away from the brand.

## 1.Introduction

The relationships between consumers and brands have been recognized through research, and two mutually exclusive types are mainly identified: positive and negative relationships. The nature of consumers -product relationship is not anymore just functional but involves feelings. Brand love and brand hate are the two poles of this emotional spectrum. However, the focus of existing research on these two edges of the spectrum, indicates that consumers form only either love or hate relationships with a brand, and this does not depict the full picture. In reality, brands may encounter simultaneously large groups of lovers and haters. These are “polarizing brands” have been defined by Luo et al., (2013a) as brands having at the same time “fervent supporters and passionate detractors.” This is the foundation of the brand polarization phenomenon (Ramirez O., 2019).

An attempt to measure polarization through the variance of ratings, called “brand dispersion”, is made by Luo et al. (2013b) , and indicates that the degree of polarization is analogous to the dispersion of consumers’ ratings. Jayasimha & Billore (2015) postulate that polarizing brands are rated with wide dispersion from love to hate and, from excellent to bad. A brand cannot be liked by everyone, and by aiming that, brands may lose their true essence and character. There are times that a brand needs to take a side and create a solid brand positioning with the hope that this will be perceived favorably by audience. Rather than trying to fight the fact that brand will not be liked by every consumer, they can embrace it, and adopt a more authentic approach in their advertisement and communication with consumers.

Advertising content that ends to be divisive can cascade negative reactions and problems. Polarizing content can be described as content that brings disagreement, and that on “witnessing” this content, consumers with moderate opinions on the topic, tend to extremify their opinions (Baliga, 2013). Measurement of consumers attitudes’ mean scores can be misleading, because a middling score could be stemming from a highly polarizing situation, with large numbers of ardent supporters and zestful opponents canceling one another out (Luo X. W. M., 2013a). Therefore, shedding some light on brand polarization can be fruitful. This will be the focus of my thesis.

## 1.1 Research problem and motivation

Delving into the topic, existent research has underlined the importance of polarization on disciplines like political science. However, polarization in the discipline of marketing is not widely explored. To my knowledge, there is no research studying the effect that polarization has on consumers and their loyalty towards those polarizing brands. Thus, in my paper I will try to zoom in the two aspects of loyalty: behavioral versus attitudinal loyalty and examine how brand polarization affects them.

Milfeld and Flint (2020) find that polarization is rooted on how the individual perceives realism and character activations, that is on how brand cues memories and reflect individual own experiences. Research on social narrative videos and polarization of the audience, infers that product placement in such advertisements can create damage, as the product can be associated with the social issue displayed in the ad (Milfeld Tyler, 2020). A recent study by Ramirez et al., (2019) investigates drivers that connect people with a polarized brand and how polarization can constitute way of improvement for the brand and brand management team. The research by Luo (2009) and Luo et al (Luo X. W. A., 2013b) address the matter of polarization consequences from a financial perspective. In the paper of (Xueming Luo, 2013) is it proposed that polarization can constitute a differentiation tool as part of a strategy for segmentation and positioning.

Research around consumer behavior shows that “relationships” are formulated between brands and consumers, that vary in strength, from “friends” to business partners” (Fournier, 1998). The connections develop with brands, can even be related to the self-concept of consumers, representing their self-beliefs or who they wish they were. Therefore, this linkage can be an important driver of how emotional the connection with the brand can be (Cheng, 2012). The degree of the consumer-brand “relationship” can play a major role on the resistance of consumers on counter-attitudinal information about the brands they deeply connect to (Petty, 1995). Thus, the impact of emotional connection can be a factor influencing the outcomes of polarization related with consumer behavior, worth examining.

To my knowledge there is notoriously little research exploring the effects of polarizing advertising on consumer behaviour and brand loyalty. Also, the motivations of consumers to defend a brand in a situation of brand polarization have not been

researched. The moderating role of the level of emotional connection between consumers and brands on the above-mentioned phenomena, would be important to be considered, as I believe it will alter the direct effects of brand polarization on consumer behavior. A study on the topic of brand polarization and the consequences of polarization on behaviors of consumers, like their willingness to stay loyal by repurchasing and their willingness to defend a brand, can be relevant for managerial implications. Firstly, it can serve as a tool of market segmentation. Secondly, it can serve for more focused brand positioning and brand cohesion, addressing the audience will really bond with the brand.

## 1.2 Research objectives

The topic of how controversial ads affect people's purchasing decisions and intention to defend a brand has not been studied yet. Therefore, I believe a thesis addressing the issue of consequences of polarizing brands, such as how brand polarization affects consumers' willingness to defend the brand and what effect has on consumer behaviour and behavioural loyalty, would cover an unresearched topic.

The purpose of this research will be related with occasions when brands take a positioning on issues which provoke polarization (i.e social issues like racism phenomena) and provide insights on what are the effects of this positioning and communication strategies on consumers. Specifically, I want to examine if polarization can have beneficial outcomes, on the behavioral loyalty of consumers and their willingness to support a brand. Through this I aim to investigate if polarization can have beneficial outcomes not only on the repurchasing intention, but also on the bond between brand supporters and the brand, and their willingness of defending it.

Thus, the research question posed by this study would be:

*What is the effect of brand polarization on behavioral loyalty and on willingness to defend the brand and how these effects are affected by emotional connection with the brand?*

Under this research question, the following sub-questions will be addressed:

- *How emotional connection with the brand moderates the relationship between brand polarization and behavioral loyalty?*

- *How emotional connection with the brand moderates the relationship between brand polarization and willingness to defend the brand?*

### 1.3 Thesis Outline

This thesis is structured as follows. Chapter 2 entails details exposition and explanation of the available literature on the variables that will be studied, namely brand polarization and consumers behavior. Based on this, the hypotheses are formulated. In chapter 3 the research design is elaborated. Chapter 4 presents the outcomes of the statistical analysis. Chapter 5 includes an overview of the findings, conclusions, and managerial implications. Lastly, chapter 6 posits the limitations of the study and proposes future research directions.

## 2. Literature review

This chapter provides a review of past research on the topic of polarization and what is known around the dependent variables that will be studied. The topic of polarization is mainly encountered in 2 other disciplines: political science & social psychology and shares common features with the concept of brand rivalry. Firstly, an effort to analyze existing literature from these sectors will be made. However, clear conceptualization of brand polarization does not exist. Through the literature review, research gaps on this concept can be identified, and this will lead to formulation of hypotheses and creation of the conceptual model for brand polarization that is relevant to the scope of this study. The papers cited were extracted from Google Scholar and top academic journals.

### 2.1 Polarization in political science

The phenomenon of polarization is prevalent in the fields of political science. Usually is referred as extreme *disagreement of ideologies*, among the two edges of an ideological spectrum (DiMaggio, 1996).

Lupu (2015) states that Party polarization makes conflict between partisans more intense and establishes stronger the parties entity among citizens, making partisanship stronger (Lupu, 2015). Rogowski & Sutherland (2016) focus on affective polarization. Affective evaluation is different from voting choice. In affective evaluation the citizen would not just claim which party they support, but mainly express their affective orientation relative to another candidate. Thus, they state that high levels of affective polarization indicate stronger favorability between two political candidates (Rogowski, 2016). In similar vein of ideological difference, Lee (2015) p. 263, states “parties become more polarized when a) the preferences of members become more distinctly bimodal and b) the two modes move further apart. This adds a dimension of movement of ideas the disagreement between the two groups, even further.

Polarization in political science is also viewed as a *self-categorization* procedure, with the partisans relating with an ideology and as the distance between the two ends grows, their in-group identification grows correspondingly, creating internal attitude consistency (Harrison, 2016), (Lelkes, 2016). Another characteristic of polarization is *in-group favoritism versus outgroup hatred*. Affective polarization more specifically, is



the negative perception of opposing group, while viewing positively the group with the same ideas. This affective separation comes from classification of the two opposite parties and consideration of “outgroup” as the group of partisans of opposite party and “ingroup” the members of same part, the co-partisans. (Iyengar S. &, 2015). This is routed to the “social identity theory” of Tajfel (1974) which supports that individuals when they get a feeling of belonging in a group of similar-minded people (the ingroup), they tend to develop negative assessment and even inappropriate or hostile behavior towards the members of the outgroup (Lau, 2017) (Iyengar S. S., 2012). In other research polarization has been expressed as the move from the center to concentrate on the two poles of an ideological range, which brings bimodality (Fiorina, 2008). This concentration at the two extremes as Evans states (2003) p. 87, might happen because of the importance of the issue to people that politically active. The characteristic of importance of issue in polarization, is also stated in the research of Hetherington (2009), as higher level of importance of an issue brings more intense feelings and therefore more extremity of attitudes.

## 2.2 Polarization in social psychology

Polarization occurrence has been documented in social psychology. In this context, most recurrent thinking of polarization is that people’s *opinions become more extreme* than what initially were. Liu & Latane (1998) assert that polarization of attitudes is intertwining with attitude extremity. They define it as “a relatively consensual shift of opinion further in the direction of the initial leanings of the individual or group” (Liu, 1998,p.103).

In group polarization, rational and behavioral characteristics are incorporated, as the extremity of opinions exacerbates through group discussion (Landmore H., 2012). Wojcieszak (2011) states that individuals with extreme views on controversial issues, are more likely to become even more extreme when they perceive disagreement in deliberation. Also she postulates that group discussion shifts group opinion towards the extreme that is supported by the majority, thus people that have a moderate stand tend to converge (Wojcieszak, 2011, p.609). Polarization can occur from *inundation of information and increased level of involvement with an issue*, according to Harton and Latane (1997). People that are not intensely or not at all involved with an issue, when exposed to ambiguous messages they can get polarized, because the

importance of the issue increased. Attitudes of people that are intensely engaged with an issue from the beginning, do not extremify. Therefore, polarization of attitudes intensifies, proportionally to the degree of involvement (Harton, 1997). Increased amount of mixed-info brings “information-induced polarization” and increased involvement with an issue (Harton, 1997) . The influence of the group that has the power to move judgements towards the extreme is called “the law of group polarization” (Sunstein, 2002). Social influence, similarly with polarization in political science, is also pertinent here. The *need of individuals to fit into the group* of similar-minded people is observed, as well as the desire for positive self-conception by the other group members. Moreover, *self-categorization* appears, as members aim to identify with the majority and “espouse” the in-group views, while being different from the out-group (Friedkin, 1999).

Other research in social psychology refer to polarization as the *level of belief opposition or divergence of opinions* on an issue (Dandekar, 2013). Baliga et al. (2013) express that polarization is an ambiguity-aversion response when people are exposed to moderate signals. Kalai and Kalai (2001) define polarization from a strategic perspective. According to them players take opposite positions when they expect to have an arbitrary utility loss. Polarization is then a deliberate action in game theories, when similarly-minded players choose to implement opposing strategies because of preference disagreement (Kalai, 2001).

Some common points are emerging from the disciplines of political science and social psychology. Firstly, that polarization has the characteristic *of bipolarity or bimodality*, because it is the “movement from the center toward the extremes” (Levendusky, 2011, p. 229).

Then, both from political science and from social psychology discipline we get the insight of *in-group and outgroup identification*. There is *self-categorization* of individuals with the in-group and a feel of belonging, that makes them loath the opposite group (Iyengar S. &, 2015). In this insight the social identity theory plays a major role, as individuals identify with a group that acknowledge they have similar beliefs, conform to the extremity of the group and shift their attitudes towards the direction of the majority, while disliking or being hostile against the out-group (Lau,

2017) (Suhay, 2015) (Sunstein, 2002). Lastly, on situations of polarization there is incidence of extremity and divergence of opinions that leads to ideological differences and conflicts (DiMaggio, 1996). In politics, there is ideological incongruity among political parties (Wronski, 2016), and in social psychology group deliberation leads to extremity of opinions (Landemore H., 2012).

### 2.3 Definition of polarization in my conceptual framework

Given the literature analyzed before, there are 3 main characteristics on how polarization is defined among the two disciplines of Political Science and Social Psychology, namely: 1. Bimodality, 2. Group identification and 3. Conflicts.

Based on the above-mentioned common grounds of the three disciplines and on the definition in the paper of Ramirez et al. (Ramirez O., 2019, p. 7), I define brand polarization in my conceptual framework as follows:

***Brand polarization happens when significant number of consumers shift their emotions and beliefs simultaneously to the extreme edges of ideological and emotional spectrum, thus being ardent positive or intensely negative towards the brand. They relate with similar-minded consumers and distinguish themselves from opposite-minded consumers.***

The focus of this study will be to fill a gap regarding the effects of brand polarization on consumer behavior, with focus on behavior related to repurchasing and willingness of consumers to defend a brand.

### 2.4 Brand Polarization

Brand polarization is a topic that has not been saturated and there is lots of room for further study, (Ramirez O., 2019) (Milfeld Tyler, 2020), but has been identified to have common elements with other fields like brand love brand hate and brand rivalry.

Brand love is a state in which consumers may be passionate about a brand, attached to it and make declarations of love towards the brand (Noël Albert, 2007) . In the second situation, consumers have negative feeling towards a brand, express their negative experiences (negative WOM) and can be divided in active and passive brand haters (Zarantonello L., 2016). The topics of brand love and brand hate relate with brand polarization from the aspect that they represent the two poles, the two extreme feelings that are associated with polarization. Thus like in polarization we have

movement from the middle to the extremes (Fiorina, 2008), correspondingly brand polarization entails movement from neutral sentiment to extreme ones, as is love and hate .

In brand rivalry there are at least two brands involved. One is the brand that an individual is favorably attached to and willing to support and the second is a competing brand (Marticotte, 2016). Brand rivalry is expressed as oppositional brand loyalty and occurs when the evangelists of a certain brand react negatively or even attack the competitor brand. As Muniz and Hamer (2001) define it “loyal users of a given brand may derive an important component of the meaning of the brand and their sense of self from their perceptions of competing brands, and may express their brand loyalty by playfully opposing those competing brands. This phenomenon is termed as “oppositional brand loyalty” (Muniz Jr, 2001, p. 355). Therefore there is a similarity to the characteristics of polarization mentioned above: Identification with a brand by being loyal to it and distancing from an opposite-perceived brand.

### 2.5 The effect of brand polarization on consumers

The relationship between consumers and brands has been explored, as academics posit that is not only just transactional, but also emotional and interpersonal-like. Usually, these relationships are classified into positive or negative.

When consumer share positive feelings towards a brand, they engage with this brand in a way that is considered beneficial, like positive Word of mouth (WoM) and being loyal (Noel Albert, 2013) or willing to forgive a misbehavior of the brand (Hegner S., 2017). In the case when consumers have negative feelings for a brand, the outcomes are considered harmful like engaging in complaints and negative WoM, protests, likelihood to take revenge and reduced patronizing (Zarantonello L., 2016). The theories of Double Jeopardy and Negative Double Jeopardy indicate that important brands can have a large pool of loyal supporters, and at the same time attract more hate and anti-brand sites than less powerful brands (Ehrenberg A. S. C., 1990), (Kucuk, 2008). Therefore, there are brands that cause consumers to have a wide dispersion in attitude, from love to hate, which is considered polarizing.

What happens though in the cases when brands simultaneously have a substantial group of lovers and haters? We know that this can be the case, especially in sectors

where self-expression is pertinent, like politics, sports, art, religion-related organizations. The topics around racism and sexism have also historically constituted reason of polarization in politics, causing amplified dispersion on votes. A recent example is “white polarization” in 2016 (Schaffner, 2018), when according to the research an individual with attitudes on the most hostile edge of the sexism scale would have double probability to support Trump in elections rather than an individual with the least sexist attitudes. Thus, attitudes on sexism and racism are powerful enough to structure presidential voting preferences and intensify polarization (Schaffner, 2018).

In branding, polarization can occur because of various reasons. Analysis of the antecedents of brand polarization is out of the scope of this paper. As Milfeld et al., (2020) have concluded, polarization can emanate from a brand’s own way of communication. This can particularly happen if a brand, instead of traditional advertising with focus on product benefits, uses storytelling in the form of social narratives. Social narrative videos are defined as “brand-initiated social messages that use longer-form audiovisual format” (Milfeld Tyler, 2020, p. 533). These videos are a type of advertisement, which does not emphasize on the product, but on social messages structured around a story. Perceived realism<sup>1</sup> and character activation<sup>2</sup> of the viewer can cause ambiguous interpretations of such videos (Milfeld Tyler, 2020), potentially both positive and negative. Therefore, this study will focus on the consequences of polarization on consumers, that occur when brands take a stand on social issues through their campaigns. For this reason the unit of analysis for my research will be *polarizing advertisement*. The effect of brand polarization via polarizing ads on consumers will be examined from a behavioral and an attitudinal perspective.

## 2.6 Behavioural Loyalty

There is extensive research on the topics of consumer behaviour and brand loyalty. As Oliver defines it, “loyalty is a deeply held commitment to rebuy or patronize a preferred product/service consistently in the future, therefore causing repetitive

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<sup>1</sup> Perceived realism is defined as “the audience’s judgment of the degree to which the narrative world is reflective of the real world” (Cho, 2014) .

<sup>2</sup> The use of everyday people in the ad (instead of celebrities), facilitates identification with the characters of the story.

same-brand or same brand-set purchasing, despite situational influences and marketing efforts having the potential to cause switching behaviour” (Oliver R. L., 1999).

Loyalty is distinguished in two categories: attitudinal and behavioural. The first refers to feeling of being attached to a brand and the latter on the repeated purchases of the same brand (Mobin Fatma, 2016). Other distinctions of loyalty are into cognitive, which involves the beliefs about brand superiority, affective loyalty which incorporates the positive attitudes, conative loyalty which are the intentions of behaviour to repurchase a brand, and action loyalty, which is when the intentions convert into action (L. C. Harris, 2004), (D. El-Manstrly, 2013). Another definition of loyalty by Veloutsou and McAlonan (2012), is around consumer’s willingness to make an investment or sacrifice of something, in order to enhance the relationship with a brand, while avoiding the use of a certain brand they consider it as disloyalty. Thus, loyalty through its different conceptualizations has as core element the behavioral response of purchase on iteration. For the scope of this research, I will use the concept of *behavioral loyalty*.

Behavioral brand loyalty is common among brand lovers (Noël Albert, 2007). A clear connection though between behavioral loyalty and polarization, is not defined and not researched yet, to the best of my knowledge. Loyalty can be linked to a brand that is loved, and disloyalty to a brand that is hated. Brand polarization is a situation where there are both lovers and haters. In that context, rejection of a brand can bring disconnection from it and disloyalty. Identification of belonging in a cohesive group that share same (positive) feelings and ideas for a brand can enhance loyalty and purchase iteration. Similarly, getting polarized to the negative edge of feelings towards a brand can seize future purchases of this brand. Consequently, it would be interesting to examine the effect that brand polarization has via polarizing advertisement on consumers’ willingness to make a purchase of that polarized brand.

***H1: Polarizing ad will have a negative effect on consumers’ willingness to make a purchase of products of the polarized brand.***

## 2.7 Defending a brand.

Situations when customers defend a brand voluntarily, can be more efficient way of a defense strategy, than traditional ways when a firm defense itself (Kristal, 2017) . Iglesias et al. (2013) stated that consumers' active participation in co-creation of value, can be used as an effective a management style, because it can create positive feelings of consumers towards a brand, establish relationship of trust between them and make them feel more empowered. Value co-creation can constitute motivation for consumers to defend a brand, because stakeholders want to contribute with their perspectives. (Scholz, 2019)

Cheng et al., (2012) posit that in presence of negative information, consumers with high level of self-brand connection, and positive brand attitude, are more likely to defend a brand, like they would defend themselves. So, a motivation to defend the brand exists because they feel personally impacted by the objectively negatively performance of this brand or the negative information about this brand. According to Moe and Schweidel (2012), the environment of ratings of a product or brand, can have a significant effect on the incidence of evaluation of consumers. So, a person with a positive sentiment for a particular brand, might not proceed in rating the brand and expressing their satisfaction, if they perceive a rating environment that the majority have the opposite feeling. They also posit that positive rating environments encourage rating posting, while negative environments discourage consumers from posting ratings. At the same time, the positive posters are less active, whereas the negative posters would post more often and aim to differentiate from previously expressed opinions. As a result, customers that would be positive, will most probably be deterred to contribute with their evaluation.

In a case of brand polarization, there is confliction of opinions with existence of ardent supporters and fervent opponents. Simultaneously exists audience with negative evaluation of the brand and audience with positive evaluation. Therefore, the findings of Moe and Schweidel might apply, leading to discouragement of the supporters to express their positive evaluation and defend the brand.

Thus, I would suggest the hypothesis that:

**H2:** *Polarizing advertisement will have a negative effect on consumers' willingness to defend the brand.*

### 2.8 Emotional connection with the brand as interaction with polarization

The emotional concept of the connection between consumers and brands is well documented. Besides the utilitarian and practical purposes of purchasing a brand, there are also symbolic motives and self-expression purposes to prefer a brand (Aaker J. L., 1997). Brands are "dyed" by consumers with human personality characteristics. Aaker (1997) defines Brand personality as "the set of human characteristics associated with a brand".

Among the consequences of brand personality formulation is the emotional evoking to consumers. Consumers "are motivated to approach those products which match their self-perception" (Sirgy, 1982, p.294). According to Sirgy's theory of self-esteem congruity, consumers would be willing to purchase a product that is positively valued in order to sustain a positive self-image or to improve their ideal self-image. Correspondingly, they would avoid a negatively valued product for the same reasons. From a point of self-consistency, consumers would stick to a product that they believe it fits their self-image belief, whether this product is valued either positive or negative (Sirgy, 1982). Past research has shown that consumers with stronger and more positive brand connections are likely to disregard negative information about a brand, and they would be willing to make favorable attributions to mitigate the failure of the brand. (Cheng, 2012). Hence, there are "*self-brand connections*" that can influence consumers behavior and reaction to oppositional information. Another emotional aspect of attachment with a brand is commitment. Based on the research of Ahluwalia et al., (2000), consumers with lower levels of commitment to a brand would assess negative publicity about a brand more objectively, relative to consumers with higher levels of commitment. Highly committed consumers are more resistant to negative news of a brand and more willing to counter-argue negative messages about the brand, even though negative information is believed to be more diagnostic, compared with positive information. Thus, emotional connection with a brand, as expressed by commitment, can be a moderator of attitude change in presence of negative information (Ahluwalia, 2000). Given that in a context of brand polarization, negative and positive information is disseminated, I would propose that emotional connection



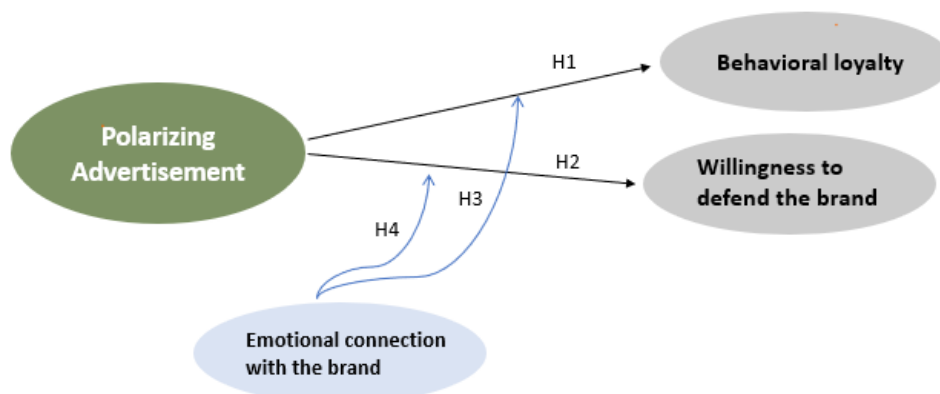
with the brand can have a moderating role on the effect of brand polarization on willingness to purchase and willingness to defend a brand creating an interaction effect.

Thus, the following hypotheses are formulated:

**H3:** *There is an interaction effect between polarizing ad and emotional connection with the brand, such that polarizing ad with high emotional connection leads to higher behavioral loyalty.*

**H4:** *There is an interaction effect of polarizing advertisement and emotional connection with the brand, such that the polarizing ad with high emotional connection leads to higher willingness to defend the brand.*

The Conceptual framework of this study will be the following:



## 3. Research Methodology

### 3.1 Research design

Experimental research design can be used to measure the effects of polarizing ads, on the opinion of the respondents. The appropriate research design is important for the accuracy of the results and for minimizing errors (Malhotra, 2012). A reliable way is to conduct a controlled experiment, through the web as this will offer results quicker (Kohavi, 2009).

This study investigates the effect of brand polarization as expressed via a polarizing ad on consumers' willingness to purchase and consumers' willingness to defend a brand. So, aims to investigate if the polarization around a brand – via polarizing brand content, will cause a difference in consumers' behaviour, thus trying to study if there is a causal relationship between brand polarization and its outcomes on consumers. A survey was distributed via internet, through social media and websites for efficacy. For the design of the questionnaire, Qualtrics was used. Respondents were divided in two groups: control and treatment. Participants assigned to control group were presented as stimulus a scenario of a brand that aired non-polarizing ad. The ones assigned to treatment group were exposed to a stimulus of a situation where the brand created polarizing ad content. After the stimuli both groups answered the same questions, and their answers would be compared. This is a between-subjects design in an online experiment. The choice of the between-subjects design is most suitable because respondents are exposed to one condition, thus the demand-effects<sup>3</sup> are eliminated and the survey would have more external validity (Charness, 2012).

### 3.2 Procedure

The procedure of the experiment was as follows. Participants were led to the Qualtrics environment via a survey link. There they saw an introduction message which explained the reason of survey for my master thesis, verified that their answers are anonymous and would not be used for any promotional purpose prompting them to reply honestly and lastly a question if they agree or not to participate to the survey appeared. Those clicking “yes” were led to the questionnaire. Initially, a drop-down

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<sup>3</sup> Demand effect is created when the participants of the experiment understand the goal of the experimenter and the research, and amend their behavior to fit the research intention (consciously or subconsciously). (Charness, 2012)

menu appeared, and participants had to choose out of 5 brands the one they feel more connected to including the logo of each brand next to each option. Giving participants option of choosing the brand instead of using one brand name across the survey makes more sense as I seek to examine loyalty and emotional connection. The brands were from different product categories to maximize the possibility that a respondent can find a brand they have a connection, and the options were Nike, Heineken, Apple, Gillette, L'Oréal. The option "none of the above" was also in the drop-down menu that if clicked was leading to the end of the survey to eliminate responses of "fake" brand attitude. Afterwards each respondent was randomly assigned to one of the two groups (polarizing vs non-polarizing ad) and a scenario of the brand of their choice was presented accordingly. In the treatment group appeared a scenario where the brand of their choice aired a polarizing ad appeared. The scenario indicated that the brand aired an ad related to a social message and that some people supported it but some others not. Then a definition of brand polarization was given and after participants had to rate how polarizing they believed was the ad in this scenario. After extensive research I could not find scale dedicated to brand polarization. Thus, two more questions regarding the in-group identification were asked, in attempt to capture notion close to polarization. The control group saw a scenario in which a brand aired a product-focused ad that received neutral reactions and were asked to rate how funny they believe was the ad and if they felt identifying with the in-group or not. I placed the same number of questions to ensure that both groups would need similar amount of time to answer, have similar response quality and any differences among groups could not be attributed to fatigue (Barth, 2018). Then questions for the dependent variables and the moderator followed in both groups. I used piped text, so each respondent would have to reply to every question seeing incorporated the brand name of their initial choice. An attention-check question was added for both groups, to sort through random responses. Towards the end of the survey respondents were asked demographic questions concerning their gender, age, and level of education. Participants were thanked for their participation and the survey was finished. I had inserted forced answer for all questions to avoid missing values. The full questionnaire can be found on the Appendix.

### 3.3 Measures

The items used to measure the constructs of this study should have content validity and reliability (Odin, 2001). That is why a selection of relevant scales used in top academic and peer-reviewed papers, was used for the variables of this research.

#### **Dependent Variables**

In this study two dependent variables are examined.

*Behavioral loyalty.* To sufficiently encapsulate the concept of loyalty, items from the scale of Harris & Goode (2004) were used. Harris & Goode had developed a four-dimension loyalty scale to reflect on the original loyalty conception of loyalty by Oliver (1997) and the loyalty chain. In the survey I used the following questions from the action loyalty: “I would always choose this brand before others”, “I will always prefer the features of this brand before others”, and “I would always favour the offerings of this brand compared to offering by other brands.” It is believed that loyalty has two dimensions: behavioral and attitudinal (Odin, 2001). The behavioral part is more profoundly expressed, by the action of repeated purchase of the same brand. For this reason, I also used a question from the 4-item scale of repeated purchasing behavior from Odin’s et al. (2001) paper: “I would buy this brand during my next purchase.” All items were measured on a 5-level Likert scale ranging from 1 for “Strongly agree”, to 5 “strongly disagree”.

*Intention to defend.* Most academic research has focused on the support that consumers offer to a brand through oppositional brand loyalty (Aaker J. F., 2004). According to Kuo et al. (Kuo, 2013) people, in order to express their support towards brand, they engage in “oppositional brand loyalty” so trash-talking or attacking a rival brand, in order to protect their own favorite brand. Thus, the measurement items of Kuo et. Al (2013) were used as a measure in willingness to defend a brand. People that are more likely to engage in hostility towards rival brands, do so out of their motivation to defend their own brand choice (Kuo, 2013, p.948). The items were measure in a 5-point Likert scale, with 1=“strongly agree”, to 5=“strongly disagree” and are the following: “I will not support competitive products, even if these products are considered better” , “I have no intention to try products of opposing brands even if the products are widely discussed by other people”, “I will not recommend to people products of a competitive brand.” Additionally, a statement from a

measurement adapted from the paper of Marticotte et al., (2016) and their desire-to-harm-scale, was used to capture the willingness to defend the polarizing brand: “I want to take actions to support this brand”.

### **Moderator**

*Emotional connection with the brand.* In this study, emotional connection with the brand was used as a moderator, to test for any interaction of the main effects studied. To measure this factor, I used some of the items from the comprehensive scale by Loureiro et al., (2012): “This is a wonderful brand”, “This brand symbolizes the kind of person I really am inside”, “This brand reflects my personality”, “This brand has a positive impact on what others think of me”, “I’m very attached to this brand”, “ This brand is trustworthy and reliable”, to capture the degree of emotional connection. I used a 1-5 Likert scale, with 1 meaning “strongly agree” and 5 “strongly disagree”.

I also included a question for the self-reported emotional attachment to the brand as used by Thomson et al. (2005) “I am emotionally attached to this brand” and it was measured in a 5-point Likert with 1= “Does not describe me well” to 5= “Describes me extremely well” scale. This could be used as to spot differences between the measured and the self-reported connection to a brand.

### **Independent Variable**

*Brand polarization.* To capture brand polarization, a scenario of a brand making a polarizing ad was presented to the treatment group. A short definition of Brand polarization was written below. Then respondents were asked to rate on a 5-point Likert scale how polarizing they think the ad was. This will capture their perceived polarization around the brand. As an established scale to measure brand polarization does not exist, I used items that measure the intergroup identification and outgroup dissimilarity, as this is deemed an important characteristic of polarization, from the group disidentification scale developed by Becker & Tausch (2014), on a 5-point Likert scale: “I have things in common with people who feel the same way I do about this brand.”, “I feel a distance between myself and the people who feel the opposite way about this brand than me.”

## Overview of scales

In the table below is presented an overview of all the items that were used and adapted to measure each variable of my conceptual model.

**Table 1: Items per scale**

Scale	Source of reference	Items
Brand polarization	Becker and Tausch (2014)	2
	Self-developed	1
Behavioral Loyalty	Odin et al. (2001)	1
	Harris and Goode (2004)	3
Intention to Defend a brand	Marticotte et al. (2016)	1
	Kuo et al. (2013)	3
Emotional connection	Loureiro et al. (2012)	7
	Thomson et al. (2005)	1

### 3.4 Sample

The appropriate size of sample is believed to be 10-times analogous to the number of items of the most complex construct. (Gefen, Straub, & Boudreau, 2000) In this study the construct that is most complex is Emotional connection with brand that has 8 items. Based on this rule the sample size should be at least  $8 \times 10 = 80$ , and twice multiplied  $80 \times 2 = 160$ , because my design is between-subjects and participants were allocated in one out of two conditions (polarizing ad versus not). Another rule suggest that the sample size of a survey should be at least 100 participants. (Hoyle, 1995). Thus, a sample of around 150 respondents would be sufficient.

## 4. Results

### 4.1 Pre-test: Manipulation check

I wanted to conduct a pre-test analysis to check the manipulation of the experiment. The mean for the variable “polarizing ad” of Group1, which was the control group with the non-polarizing scenario, was  $M=4.409$  and for the polarizing was  $M=1.866$ . I conducted an independent samples t-test to compare the means of this variable across groups, to check whether the manipulation was perceived. The p-value of the mean difference across the two groups was  $\text{Sig.}=0.000 < 0.05$ . Thus, at a 5% significance level the null hypothesis of equal means is rejected. This means that the difference between groups was statistically significant, and the manipulation was successful (Exhibit A). However, having only one item measuring my independent variable (brand polarization) I could not calculate the Cronbach’s alpha for this scale, because more than two items are needed for the computation. For this reason, I added two more items to increase reliability. Also, in the 90 people of the pre-test, the Cronbach’s alpha ( $\alpha$ ) on the other factors (intention to defend, emotional connection and behavioral loyalty) was not surpassing 0.65, which is lower than the accepted level of  $\alpha=0.70$ . Thus, for the main study I increased the sample size.

### 4.2 Data

The collection of primary data through Qualtrics yielded initially 152 responses. From those, 17 people did not reply correct in the attention check question (“The Earth is flat”) and 12 questionnaires were not completed, therefore got excluded from the sample. From the remaining 123, 10 respondents answered that with none of the brands in the list felt connected, so they were never proceeded to the questions. Thus, 113 responses were used for the analysis.

### 4.3 Reliability Check

I performed reliability check by calculating the Cronbach’s alpha for each scale used in this survey. Table 2 presents the estimated alphas.

**Table 2: Reliability Analysis of Factors**

Factor	Questions	Cronbach's Alpha ( $\alpha$ )
Intention to defend a brand	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. I want to take actions to support this brand.</li> <li>2. I have no intention to try products of opposing brands, even if those products are widely discussed by other people</li> <li>3. I will not recommend to people products of a competitive brand.</li> <li>4. I will not support competitive products, even if these products are considered better.</li> </ol>	0,723
Behavioral loyalty	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. I would always choose this brand before others.</li> <li>2. I will always prefer the features of this brand before other similar brands.</li> <li>3. I would always favor the offerings of this brand, compared to offering by other brands.</li> <li>4. I would buy this brand in my next purchase.</li> </ol>	0,783
Emotional connection	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. This brand reflects my personality.</li> <li>2. The brand has a positive impact on what others think of me.</li> <li>3. This brand symbolizes who I really am.</li> <li>4. It is a wonderful brand.</li> <li>5. I am passionate about this brand.</li> <li>6. I 'm very attached to this brand.</li> <li>7. This brand is trustworthy and reliable.</li> </ol>	0,739
Polarizing ad	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. How polarizing you think was the ad that launched?</li> <li>2. I have things in common with people who feel the same way I do about this brand.</li> <li>3. I feel distance between myself and the people who feel the opposite way about this brand than me.</li> </ol>	0,729

Value of  $\alpha > 0.6$  is the minimum acceptable and above 0.7 means that the scales yield reliable results (Gefen, Straub, & Boudreau, 2000). The intention to defend a brand measured by 4 items had alpha of .723 and the Emotional connection with the brand measured by 5 had alpha of .739. The alpha of Behavioural loyalty was .783 meaning that the four questions measure accurately the intention to purchase again in the future and stay loyal. Items of Polarizing ad yield alpha of .729 so the three items are acceptable. It is obvious that all factors above have accepted internal reliability.

The coding among the Likert scales of the different variables was not the same for all the questions, intentionally to avoid random answers. In some items 1 meant "strongly disagree" but in other 1 was for "extremely agree" or "a great deal". Thus, I recoded the values by reverting the Likert scales in order the value 1 to signal the



extreme positive option and value 5 to signal the extreme negative in all items. Then I calculated the average of the items compiling each factor.

#### 4.4 Descriptive Statistics

##### Summary Statistics

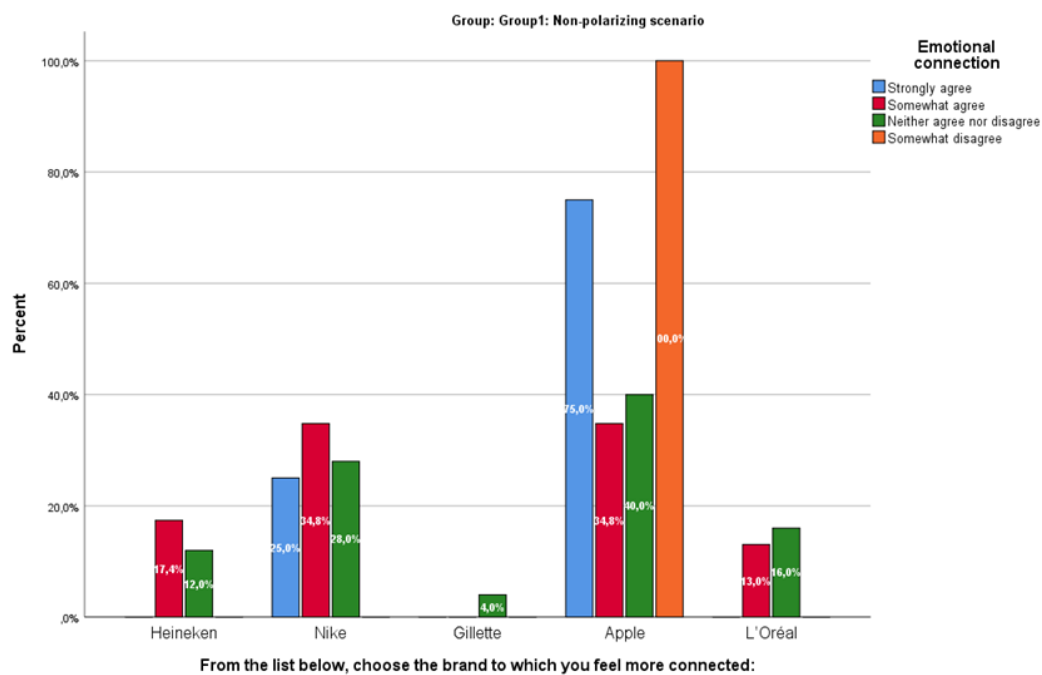
The frequencies for demographics of the sample are presented in Table 3. The majority of the 113 respondents were between the age of 18-40 with 75% of total sample being 25-40. 63 participants declared their gender as female and 49 as male and one respondent preferred not to reveal gender. The majority of the sample (96.5%) had education background above high school, with the most frequent level being Master's degree stated by 76 participants. 31 had completed Bachelor studies and 2 had obtained PhD. It can be inferred that the sample is highly educated. With regards to nationality the largest proportion of replies was from Greek people (57.5%). The second largest frequency was people from other European countries (20.4%), some were Dutch (12.4%) and a few from non-European countries (9.7%).

**Table 3: Demographics**

Variable	Categories	N	%
Age	18-24	21	18,6
	25-40	85	75,2
	40+	7	6,2
Gender	Female	63	55,8
	Male	49	43,4
	Prefer not to say	1	0,9
Highest/ current level of education	High School	4	3,5
	University Bachelor	31	27,4
	University Master	76	67,3
	PhD	2	1,8
Nationality	Greek	65	57,5
	Dutch	14	12,4
	Other European country	23	20,4
	Other Non-European country	11	9,7
Brand to which you feel more connected	Heineken	11	9,7
	Nike	40	35,4
	Gillette	1	0,9
	Apple	50	44,2
	L'Oréal	11	9,7

Participants had to choose out of 5 options the brand for which they feel connection and were then answering the survey questions regarding that brand. Overall, the most chosen brand was Apple with 44.2%, followed by Nike with 35.4%. Heineken and L’Oréal were equally preferred by 9.7% of the sample each. Least chosen was Gillette with only 1 respondent selecting it.

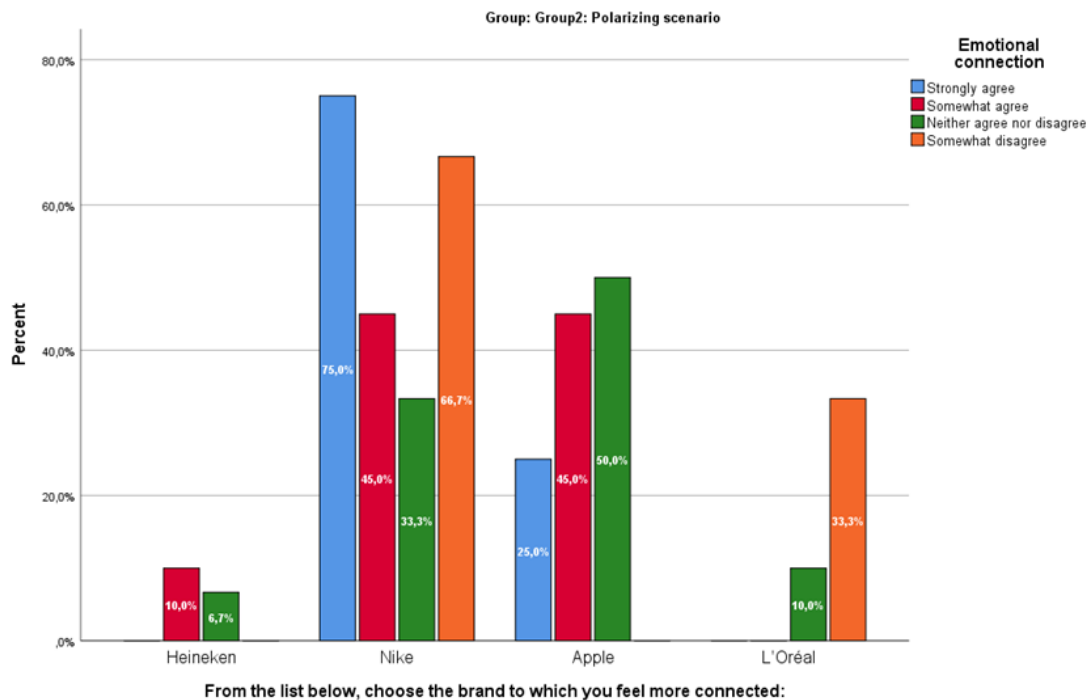
Diving into the brand selection, in the graphs below we see the frequencies of the variable emotional connection per selected brand for each of the two groups. In the control group (Graph 1), 75% from the people that ranked strongly agree on their emotional connection after the stimulus had chosen Apple and the rest 25% had preferred Nike. From those that ranked on the somewhat agree were equally distributed among Nike and Apple. For Heineken and L’Oréal participants remained neutral. No responses were measured for strong disagreement to emotional connection (Exhibit B).



Graph 1: Crosstabs of emotional connection with selected brand for control group

From the participants of the polarizing group (Graph 2), the majority of those stated strong emotional connection with their brand of choice had selected Nike (75%). 50% of people that stated neutral emotional connection in this group, were concentrated in the selection of the brand Apple. Interesting in this case is that 66.7% of those that

rated their emotional connection with the brand low, had chosen Nike as the brand that they feel connected. So Nike had almost equal frequencies of reports for strong and low emotional connection. Heineken was chosen mainly by people that reported quite neutral emotional connection. Again no one had reported absence of emotional connection with the brand (strongly disagree) (Exhibit C).

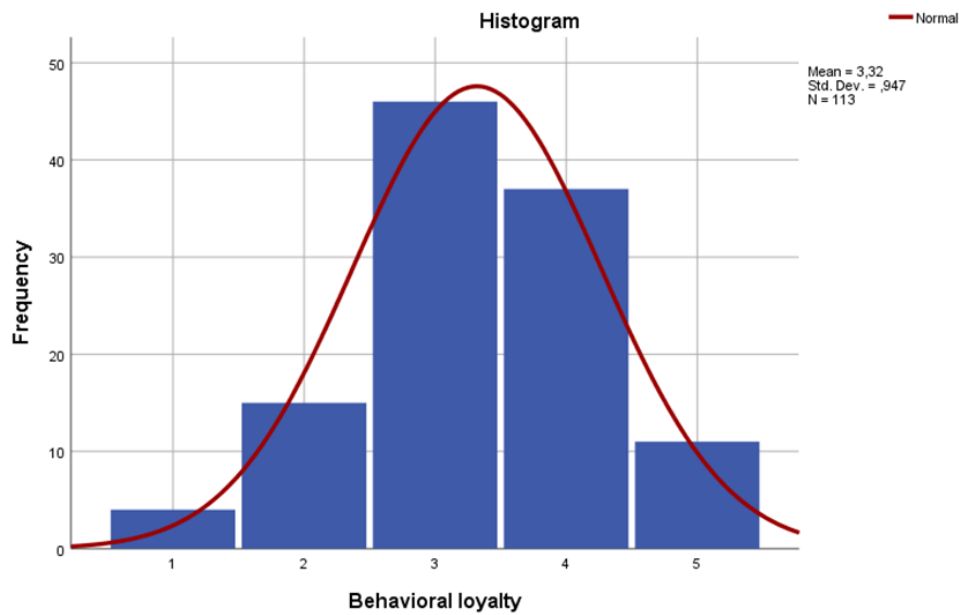


Graph 2: Crosstabs of emotional connection with selected brand for treatment group

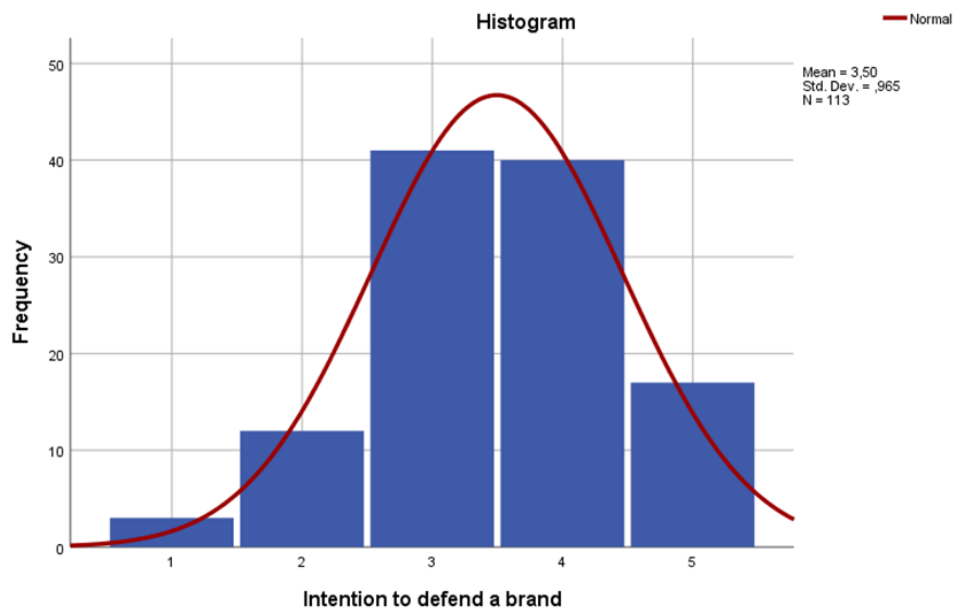
#### 4.5 Hypotheses Testing

##### Assumption

Before starting the analysis of hypotheses, I checked the assumption of normality for the variables behavioral loyalty and intention to defend the brand, for the whole sample. The Shapiro–Wilk test A suitable testing method for small sample sizes ( $N < 50$ ), while Kolmogorov–Smirnov test is more appropriate to check normality when the sample is larger ( $N \geq 50$ ). In both histograms below (Graph 3, Graph 4) the null hypothesis is obvious that that data is taken from normal distributed population. The output of the normality test showed that in 5% significance level for both dependent variables the Sig. was larger than 0.05 (Exhibit D), thus the null hypothesis was not rejected.



Graph 3: Normality plot for behavioral loyalty



Graph 4: Normality plot for intention to defend the brand

### 1st Hypothesis

*H1: Polarizing ad will have a negative effect on consumers' willingness to make a purchase of products of the polarized brand.*

According to the Table 4, the mean value of "behavioral loyalty" in the non-polarizing group (M=2.6607) is statistically significant from the mean value in the polarizing group (M=4.0351) as Sig.=0.000 <0.05. Therefore in 5% significance level the 1<sup>st</sup>

hypothesis is not rejected (Exhibit E) and can be inferred that brand polarization negatively affects consumers' behavioral loyalty.

**Table 4: Independent samples t-test for the “Behavioral loyalty” between non-polarizing and polarizing scenario**

Factor	Group	N	MEAN	t(111)	p
Behavioral loyalty	Group1: Non-polarizing scenario	56	2,6607	-11,539	0,000
	Group2: Polarizing scenario	57	4,0351		

### *2<sup>nd</sup> Hypothesis*

*H2: Polarizing ad will have a negative effect on consumers' willingness to defend the brand.*

In Table 5 is observed that the mean of the variable “intention to defend a brand” in the non-polarizing scenario (M=1.7679) differs statistically significant from the mean of “Intention to defend the brand” in the polarizing scenario (M=4.2105), because Sig.=0.000 < 0.05. Consequently, in 5% significance level the 2<sup>nd</sup> hypothesis is not rejected (Exhibit F). It is then accepted that Brand polarization has a negative effect on consumers' willingness to make a purchase of products of the polarized brand.

**Table 5: Independent samples t-test for the “Intention to defend a brand” between non-polarizing and polarizing scenario**

Factor	Group	N	MEAN	t(111)	p
Intention to defend a brand	Group1: Non-polarizing scenario	56	1,7679	-19,450	0,000
	Group2: Polarizing scenario	57	4,2105		

For the last two hypotheses is hypothesized that high emotional connection and existence of polarization through the polarizing ad will have an interaction effect on the dependent variables. Therefore, I divided the moderator “emotional connection” in a binary variable in order to create two levels: high and low. (Exhibit G)

### *3<sup>rd</sup> Hypothesis*

*H3: There is an interaction effect between polarizing ad and emotional connection with the brand, such that polarizing ad with high emotional connection leads to higher behavioral loyalty.*

I conducted a two-way ANOVA the results of which are summarized in the table below. It is obvious that the p-value for the effect of polarization on behavioral loyalty is  $0.000 < 0.05$  thus in a 5% significance level the null hypothesis is rejected and there is a main negative effect (confirmed result of H1). In the row below we see that the effect of emotional connection on behavioral loyalty has a value if  $\text{Sig} = 0.000 > 0.05$ , so the null hypothesis is not rejected. This means that emotional connection does not affect the intention to repurchase products of the polarized brand. In the next row the interaction between polarizing ad and emotional connection is checked, and this gives a p-value of  $0.997 > 0.05$ . Thus in 5% significance level the null hypothesis is not rejected, which means that H3 is rejected. So high emotional connection does not have an interaction effect with polarizing ad on behavioral loyalty (Exhibit H).

**Table 6: Two-way ANOVA for “Behavioral loyalty” between high and low emotional connection**

Factor	Group	N	MEAN	p
Behavioral loyalty	Group 1: Non polarizing scenario	56	2.6607	0.000
	Group 2: Polarizing scenario	57	4.0351	
Behavioral loyalty	High emotional connection	51	3.3922	0.200
	Low emotional connection	62	3.3226	
Behavioral loyalty	High emotional connection with polarizing ad	51	4.1250	0.997
	Low emotional connection with polarizing ad	62	3.9697	

#### *4<sup>th</sup> Hypothesis*

*H4: There is an interaction effect of polarizing advertisement and emotional connection with the brand, such that the polarizing ad with high emotional connection leads to higher willingness to defend the brand.*

In the table below can be observed that there is an effect of the polarizing ad group on intention to defend a brand, as the  $\text{Sig} = 0.000 < 0.05$ . The effect of emotional connection on intention to defend a brand though is not significant at a 5% level, as the  $\text{Sig} = 0.947 > 0.05$ . Seeing the row below, the effect of interaction between high emotional connection and the polarized ad group on the intention to defend a brand gives a p-value of 0.109 which is larger than 0.05. So, in a 5% significance level null hypothesis is not rejected and H4 is rejected. It can be inferred that high emotional

connection does not have interaction effect with the polarizing ad on respondents' intention to defend the brand (Exhibit I).

**Table 7: Two-way ANOVA for “Intention to defend a brand” between high and low emotional connection**

<b>Factor</b>	<b>Group</b>	<b>N</b>	<b>MEAN</b>	<b>p</b>
Intention to defend a brand	Group 1: Non polarizing scenario	56	2.6607	0.000
	Group 2: Polarizing scenario	57	4.0351	
Intention to defend a brand	High emotional connection	51	2.9216	0.947
	Low emotional connection	62	3.0645	
Intention to defend a brand	High emotional connection with polarizing ad	51	4.3333	0.109
	Low emotional connection with polarizing ad	62	4.1212	

## 5. Discussion and Conclusions

In this chapter the outcomes of my research and the contributions on theory and on managerial use will be discussed.

### 5.1 Theoretical contribution

This study has built on existing research and combined elements of three bodies of literature (political science, social psychology, and brand rivalry) in which polarization has been studied, to develop a conceptualization of the topic in branding. Common grounds of the three disciplines have been identified and combined to give a better understanding of the phenomenon and a definition. Moreover, this study adds on existing qualitative research, by offering quantitatively measured effects of brand polarization on consumers.

### 5.2 Conclusions

The main purpose of this study is to contribute to the existing theory and research around brand polarization and its effects on consumers. The research question of this thesis was “What is the effect of brand polarization on behavioral loyalty and on willingness to defend the brand and how these effects are affected by emotional connection with the brand.”

Firstly, I found that brand polarization that occurs from a brand’s own way of communication, when especially the communication evolves around social messaging and social issues, influences consumer’s loyalty and intention to repurchase the brand in the future (behavioral loyalty) in a negative way. Moreover, my suggestion that in light of brand polarization consumers will be discouraged to defend the brand, was supported from the hypotheses testing. Even though in brand polarization both fervent supporters and ardent opposers exist, the main effect of the phenomenon on the behavior of consumers is negative in this study.

Based on theory that brands can be vehicles of self-perception and people formulate strong self-brand connection, it is believed that consumers highly connected to the brand will react more objectively to negativity towards this brand. Therefore, I proposed that existence of emotional connection with the brand will moderate positively the negative effects of brand polarization on consumers. This suggestion however was not endorsed by the findings of this research for both loyalty and willingness to support the brand. This study supports the finding that emotional



connection did not influence the effect of polarization on the dependent variables. That could underline the strength of the negative effect of polarization and the apathy of people to support the polarized brand. So emotional connection was not a strong moderator in this study.

### 5.3 Managerial Implications

This thesis can provide valuable insights to global organization regarding their advertising strategies. This study verifies the consequences of deviating from product-focused advertising, to adopt communication strategies with social narrative and involvement in social issues, as this can polarize consumers. As the current study shows, these approaches might bring negative implications on how consumers behave towards the brand and their intention to be loyal. The polarizing phenomenon needs to be taken seriously into account when planning the brand communication strategy of a firm. Polarization of the brand will lead to negativity which in turn can drive up volumes of negative messaging posting in a faster pace than positive information about a brand. This will lead to a “negativity spiral” (Hewett, 2016).

Nonetheless, depending on the marketing objectives managers might need to evaluate communication approach that creates polarization and use it opportunistically or to diagnose cultural nuances and consumer insights (Thomson, 2005). Polarization can create a buzz around a brand, so in case the main objective of brand strategy focuses on increasing awareness and attract attention, creating polarization can achieve this. The topic though on which polarization will be about needs to be carefully chosen, and the firm needs to be cautious of the position will chose on that matter. Thus, managers need to assess each situation and carefully act when choosing bold brand strategies that might polarize people.

## 6. Limitations and Future research

### 6.1 External validity

This research aims to examine whether brand polarization negatively affects consumer behavior and how this is impacted by emotional connection to the brand. The findings concern specific and restricted sample of 113 observations, which cannot be considered representative of the general population. The sample consists of mainly Europeans, thus generalization of results to other nationalities might not be accurate. Also, the results cannot be applicable to various brands as there was a specific choice availability of brand for respondents to fill in the survey. Another threat of external validity is the normality of sample. In my analysis normality is confirmed from the output and the graph, but because Sig. is marginally above  $\alpha=0.05$ , so it could be even larger.

### 6.2 Internal validity

To check the validity of the questionnaire I calculated the Pearson-correlation between each question in the questionnaire and its total value. For almost all questions, the p-value is  $0.00 < 0.05$ , meaning that all the items of the questionnaire were valid (Exhibit J). The data collection happened through a convenience sample approached mainly via WhatsApp and social media and this might lead to selection bias, as people without access to those social media were not surveyed. On top of this, there might have been measurement effects influencing internal validity. The definition of polarization given under the stimulus, might had revealed the direction of the question and respondents might had adjusted their reply to the desired direction.

From the last two hypotheses that have not been supported, it can be inferred that the given options of brands are not sufficient to provoke situation of strong emotional connection with those brands. A potential reason might be that the 5 brands in the drop-down menu at the beginning of the questionnaire was a very limited pool of options and some respondents could not find brands that fully connect with. Moreover, the majority of respondents in my sample were female, so the listed brands were such that female could not identify easily and emotionally connect with. Also, I had reverted the Likert scale in some questions in a way that the most positive option in most items was 1 and, in some others, the most positive was 5. From this, there is

the possibility that respondents who were answering randomly, reported lower emotional connection, being idle to check the options given in each question.

### 6.3 Future research

The study focuses on polarization around the advertising strategy and polarizing executions of campaigns rather than polarizing products themselves. Might be interesting how polarizing products affect consumers' behavior, isolating from the study the execution of the campaign.

Although my results confirm a negative effect of brand polarization on behavior of consumers, possible positive outcomes of the phenomenon might be possible. For instance, brand polarization might boost brand awareness by creating a “buzz” around a brand. It would be fruitful to examine the outcomes of polarization on awareness for both in short and long-run, as the effects might difference in longer time horizon. Future research on the drivers of polarization can give important learnings for marketing practice and brand managers and enable them to prevent situations of polarization when not wanted. Lastly research on mapping the dimensionality of brand polarization is crucial to develop a scale that accurately captures the phenomenon.

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## Appendix

### Survey:



**Welcome!**

You are about to participate in a survey that will be used for my thesis project in the MSc of Marketing, at Erasmus University Rotterdam.

The questionnaire will take 2- 3 minutes. Please read the questions carefully and reply honestly (there are no wrong answers).

All responses are anonymous and your privacy is guaranteed. Goal of this research is to solely capture reactions on any information presented and does not have promotional intend.

In case of questions, you can reach out to the research administrator via email at 540380mv@student.eur.nl

Your participation will be of great help :)






Thank you,  
Marina Varoutsou

Consent  
Please click "I Agree" if you have understood the information regarding participation in this survey, confidentiality of the records and that you agree to participate.


I Agree


I Do not Agree

From the list below, choose the brand to which you feel more connected:

<input type="radio"/>  Heineken	<input type="radio"/>  Nike
<input type="radio"/>  Apple	<input type="radio"/>  Gillette
<input type="radio"/>  L'Oréal	<input type="radio"/> None of the above

(control)

Imagine that Nike  has aired an advertisement. The ad was **focused** on a **new product of the company** and was mostly highlighting the product features and benefits.  
People seeing that ad had **neutral reactions** to it.


	A great deal	A lot	A moderate amount	A little	None at all
How polarizing do you think was the ad that Nike  launched?	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I have things in common with people who feel the same way I do about this brand.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I feel a distance between myself and the people who feel the opposite way about this brand than me.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

(treatment)

Imagine that Nike  made an advertisement that had a **social message**. The **ad** was generally **well received**.  
Many people liked the ad and were **supporting its message**, but there were also people that **did not like it**.


*[Brand polarization happens when there is significant number of consumers with strongly positive opinion and simultaneously significant number of consumers with intensely negative opinion and feelings towards a brand. Each person relates with similar-minded people and distinguish themselves from consumers with the opposite opinion.]*

	None at all	A little	A moderate amount	A lot	A great deal
How polarizing you think was the ad that Nike  launched?	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I have things in common with people who feel the same way I do about this brand.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I feel a distance between myself and the people who feel the opposite way about this brand than me.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

Please evaluate the following statements for the brand Nike 


	Strongly agree	Somewhat agree	Neither agree nor disagree	Somewhat disagree	Strongly disagree
I want to take actions to support this brand.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I have no intention to try products of opposing brands, even if those products are widely discussed by other people	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I will not recommend to people products of a competitive brand.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I will not support competitive products, even if these products are considered better.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>




For each statement below, choose the option that fits you best regarding Nike , from "Strongly Agree" to "Strongly Disagree".

	Strongly agree	Somewhat agree	Neither agree nor disagree	Somewhat disagree	Strongly disagree
I would always choose this brand before others.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I will always prefer the features of this brand before other similar brands.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I would always favour the offerings of this brand, compared to offering by other brands.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Planet Earth is flat	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I would buy this brand in my next purchase.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>



Answer the statements below for the brand Nike 

	Strongly agree	Somewhat agree	Neither agree nor disagree	Somewhat disagree	Strongly disagree
This brand reflects my personality.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
The brand has a positive impact on what others think of me.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
This brand symbolizes who I really am .	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
It is a wonderful brand	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I am passionate about this brand.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I 'm very attached to this brand.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
This brand is trustworthy and reliable.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

Choose the option that best describes you regarding Nike .

	Does not describe me	Describes me slightly well	Describes me moderately well	Describes me very well	Describes me extremely well
I am emotionally attached to this brand.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>



Age

18-24

25-40

>40

Gender

Female

Male

Non-binary / third gender

Prefer not to say

Please select your highest level of education. If you are currently studying, select your current level of education

High School

University Bachelor

University Master

PhD

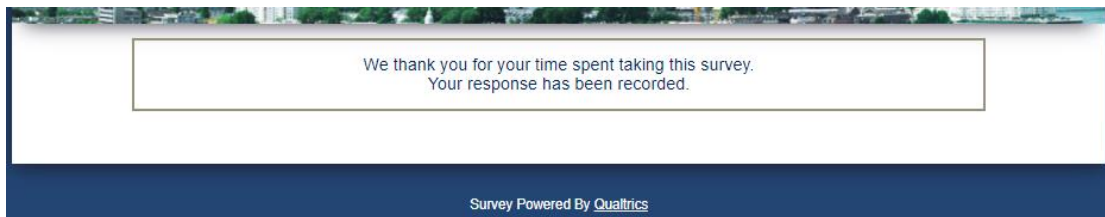
Please select your nationality

Greek

Dutch

Other European country

Other Non-European country



### Exhibit A: Pre-test for manipulation check

#### Group Statistics

Group		N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Polarizing ad	Group1: Non-polarizing scenario	44	4,4091	,49735	,07498
	Group2: Polarizing scenario	46	1,8696	,34050	,05020

#### Independent Samples Test

		Levene's Test for Equality of Variances		t-test for Equality of Means						
		F	Sig.	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	Std. Error Difference	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference	
									Lower	Upper
Polarizing ad	Equal variances assumed	40,705	,000	28,373	88	,000	2,53953	,08950	2,36166	2,71740
	Equal variances not assumed			28,144	75,667	,000	2,53953	,09023	2,35980	2,71926

**Exhibit B: Crosstabs for emotional connection and brand choice for non-polarizing scenario**

**Emotional connection \* From the list below, choose the brand to which you feel more connected: Crosstabulation<sup>a</sup>**

		From the list below, choose the brand to which you feel more connected:					Total	
			Heineken	Nike	Gillette	Apple	L'Oréal	
Emotional connection	Strongly agree	Count	0	1	0	3	0	4
		% within Emotional connection	0,0%	25,0%	0,0%	75,0%	0,0%	100,0%
		% of Total	0,0%	1,8%	0,0%	5,4%	0,0%	7,1%
	Somewhat agree	Count	4	8	0	8	3	23
		% within Emotional connection	17,4%	34,8%	0,0%	34,8%	13,0%	100,0%
		% of Total	7,1%	14,3%	0,0%	14,3%	5,4%	41,1%
	Neither agree nor disagree	Count	3	7	1	10	4	25
		% within Emotional connection	12,0%	28,0%	4,0%	40,0%	16,0%	100,0%
		% of Total	5,4%	12,5%	1,8%	17,9%	7,1%	44,6%
	Somewhat disagree	Count	0	0	0	4	0	4
		% within Emotional connection	0,0%	0,0%	0,0%	100,0%	0,0%	100,0%
		% of Total	0,0%	0,0%	0,0%	7,1%	0,0%	7,1%
Total	Count	7	16	1	25	7	56	
	% within Emotional connection	12,5%	28,6%	1,8%	44,6%	12,5%	100,0%	
	% of Total	12,5%	28,6%	1,8%	44,6%	12,5%	100,0%	

a. Group = Group1: Non-polarizing scenario

**Exhibit C: Crosstabs for emotional connection and brand choice for polarizing scenario**

**Emotional connection \* From the list below, choose the brand to which you feel more connected: Crosstabulation<sup>a</sup>**

		From the list below, choose the brand to which you feel more connected:					Total
			Heineken	Nike	Apple	L'Oréal	
Emotional connection	Strongly agree	Count	0	3	1	0	4
		% within Emotional connection	0,0%	75,0%	25,0%	0,0%	100,0%
		% of Total	0,0%	5,3%	1,8%	0,0%	7,0%
	Somewhat agree	Count	2	9	9	0	20
		% within Emotional connection	10,0%	45,0%	45,0%	0,0%	100,0%
		% of Total	3,5%	15,8%	15,8%	0,0%	35,1%
	Neither agree nor disagree	Count	2	10	15	3	30
		% within Emotional connection	6,7%	33,3%	50,0%	10,0%	100,0%
		% of Total	3,5%	17,5%	26,3%	5,3%	52,6%
	Somewhat disagree	Count	0	2	0	1	3
		% within Emotional connection	0,0%	66,7%	0,0%	33,3%	100,0%
		% of Total	0,0%	3,5%	0,0%	1,8%	5,3%
Total	Count	4	24	25	4	57	
	% within Emotional connection	7,0%	42,1%	43,9%	7,0%	100,0%	
	% of Total	7,0%	42,1%	43,9%	7,0%	100,0%	

a. Group = Group2: Polarizing scenario

**Exhibit D: Normality test of sample**

**Tests of Normality**

	Kolmogorov-Smirnov <sup>a</sup>			Shapiro-Wilk		
	Statistic	df	Sig.	Statistic	df	Sig.
Intention to defend a brand	,204	113	,124	,895	113	,138
Behavioral loyalty	,207	113	,125	,897	113	,139

a. Lilliefors Significance Correction

**Exhibit E: H1 testing**

**Group Statistics**

Group		N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Behavioral loyalty	Group1: Non-polarizing scenario	56	2,6607	,66815	,08929
	Group2: Polarizing scenario	57	4,0351	,59656	,07902

**Independent Samples Test**

		Levene's Test for Equality of Variances		t-test for Equality of Means						
		F	Sig.	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	Std. Error Difference	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference	
Behavioral loyalty	Equal variances assumed	3,845	,052	-11,539	111	,000	-1,37437	,11911	-1,61040	-1,13835
	Equal variances not assumed			-11,527	109,139	,000	-1,37437	,11923	-1,61068	-1,13807

**Exhibit F: H2 testing**

**Group Statistics**

Group		N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Intention to defend a brand	Group1: Non-polarizing scenario	56	1,7679	,76256	,10190
	Group2: Polarizing scenario	57	4,2105	,55860	,07399

**Independent Samples Test**

		Levene's Test for Equality of Variances		t-test for Equality of Means						
		F	Sig.	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	Std. Error Difference	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference	
Intention to defend a brand	Equal variances assumed	2,804	,097	-19,450	111	,000	-2,44267	,12559	-2,69153	-2,19380
	Equal variances not assumed			-19,397	100,770	,000	-2,44267	,12593	-2,69248	-2,19285

**Exhibit G: Binomial test for splitting emotional connection in two groups (high-low)**

**Binomial Test**

		Category	N	Observed Prop.	Test Prop.	Exact Sig. (2-tailed)
Emotional connection	Group 1	<= 2,5	51	,45	,50	,347
	Group 2	> 2,5	62	,55		
	Total		113	1,00		

**Exhibit H: H3 testing**

**Descriptive Statistics**

Dependent Variable: Behavioral loyalty

Emotional connection	Group	Mean	Std. Deviation	N
High	Group1: Non-polarizing scenario	2,7407	,81300	27
	Group2: Polarizing scenario	4,1250	,44843	24
	Total	3,3922	,96080	51
Low	Group1: Non-polarizing scenario	2,5862	,50123	29
	Group2: Polarizing scenario	3,9697	,68396	33
	Total	3,3226	,91927	62
Total	Group1: Non-polarizing scenario	2,6607	,66815	56
	Group2: Polarizing scenario	4,0351	,59656	57
	Total	3,3540	,93465	113

**Descriptive Statistics**

Dependent Variable: Behavioral loyalty

Emotional connection	Mean	Std. Deviation	N
High	3,3922	,96080	51
Low	3,3226	,91927	62
Total	3,3540	,93465	113

### Between-Subjects Factors

		Value Label	N
Group	1,00	Group1: Non-polarizing scenario	56
	2,00	Group2: Polarizing scenario	57
Emotional connection	1,00	High	51
	2,00	Low	62

### Tests of Between-Subjects Effects

Dependent Variable: Behavioral loyalty

Source	Type III Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Corrected Model	54,026 <sup>a</sup>	3	18,009	44,802	,000
Intercept	1255,427	1	1255,427	3123,211	,000
Group	53,387	1	53,387	132,814	,000
Emot_con_binary	,669	1	,669	1,664	,200
Group * Emot_con_binary	4,123E-6	1	4,123E-6	,000	,997
Error	43,814	109	,402		
Total	1369,000	113			
Corrected Total	97,841	112			

a. R Squared = ,552 (Adjusted R Squared = ,540)

### Exhibit I: H4 testing

#### Between-Subjects Factors

		Value Label	N
Group	1,00	Group1: Non-polarizing scenario	56
	2,00	Group2: Polarizing scenario	57
Emotional connection	1,00	High	51
	2,00	Low	62



### Descriptive Statistics

Dependent Variable: Intention to defend a brand

Emotional connection	Group	Mean	Std. Deviation	N
High	Group1: Non-polarizing scenario	1,6667	,87706	27
	Group2: Polarizing scenario	4,3333	,48154	24
	Total	2,9216	1,52109	51
Low	Group1: Non-polarizing scenario	1,8621	,63943	29
	Group2: Polarizing scenario	4,1212	,59987	33
	Total	3,0645	1,29147	62
Total	Group1: Non-polarizing scenario	1,7679	,76256	56
	Group2: Polarizing scenario	4,2105	,55860	57
	Total	3,0000	1,39514	113

### Descriptive Statistics

Dependent Variable: Intention to defend a brand

Emotional connection	Mean	Std. Deviation	N
High	2,9216	1,52109	51
Low	3,0645	1,29147	62
Total	3,0000	1,39514	113

### Tests of Between-Subjects Effects

Dependent Variable: Intention to defend a brand

Source	Type III Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Corrected Model	169,703 <sup>a</sup>	3	56,568	127,667	,000
Intercept	1000,763	1	1000,763	2258,603	,000
Group	169,097	1	169,097	381,631	,000
Emot_con_binary	,002	1	,002	,004	,947
Group * Emot_con_binary	1,157	1	1,157	2,612	,109
Error	48,297	109	,443		
Total	1235,000	113			
Corrected Total	218,000	112			

a. R Squared = ,778 (Adjusted R Squared = ,772)

**Exhibit J: Pearson correlation for questionnaire validity**

		Total
I want to take actions to support this brand.	Pearson Correlation	,357
	Sig. (2-tailed)	,000
	N	113
I have no intention to try products of opposing brands, even if those products are widely discussed by other people	Pearson Correlation	,573
	Sig. (2-tailed)	,000
	N	113
I will not recommend to people products of a competitive brand.	Pearson Correlation	,566
	Sig. (2-tailed)	,000
	N	113
I will not support competitive products, even if these products are considered better.	Pearson Correlation	,714
	Sig. (2-tailed)	,000
	N	113
I would always choose this brand before others.	Pearson Correlation	,698
	Sig. (2-tailed)	,000
	N	113
I will always prefer the features of this brand before other similar brands.	Pearson Correlation	,644
	Sig. (2-tailed)	,000
	N	113
I would always favour the offerings of this brand, compared to offering by other brands.	Pearson Correlation	,587
	Sig. (2-tailed)	,000
	N	113
I would buy this brand in my next purchase.	Pearson Correlation	,450
	Sig. (2-tailed)	,000
	N	113
This brand reflects my personality.	Pearson Correlation	,433
	Sig. (2-tailed)	,000
	N	113
The brand has a positive impact on what others think of me.	Pearson Correlation	,408
	Sig. (2-tailed)	,000
	N	113
This brand symbolizes who I really am .	Pearson Correlation	,512
	Sig. (2-tailed)	,000
	N	113
It is a wonderful brand	Pearson Correlation	,407
	Sig. (2-tailed)	,000
	N	113
I am passionate about this brand.	Pearson Correlation	,578
	Sig. (2-tailed)	,000
	N	113
I'm very attached to this brand.	Pearson Correlation	,551
	Sig. (2-tailed)	,000
	N	113
This brand is trustworthy and reliable.	Pearson Correlation	,450
	Sig. (2-tailed)	,000
	N	113
I am emotionally attached to this brand.	Pearson Correlation	-,131
	Sig. (2-tailed)	,168
	N	113
Age	Pearson Correlation	,037
	Sig. (2-tailed)	,694
	N	113
Gender	Pearson Correlation	,078
	Sig. (2-tailed)	,410
	N	113
Please select your highest level of education, if you are currently studying, select your current level of education	Pearson Correlation	-,008
	Sig. (2-tailed)	,931
	N	113
Please select your nationality	Pearson Correlation	,031
	Sig. (2-tailed)	,744
	N	113
From the list below, choose the brand to which you feel more connected:	Pearson Correlation	,137
	Sig. (2-tailed)	,148
	N	113
People seeing that ad had neutral reactions to it. - How polarizing do you think was the ad that [QID1-ChoiceGroup-SelectedChoices] launched?	Pearson Correlation	,402
	Sig. (2-tailed)	,002
	N	56
I have things in common with people who feel the same way I do about this brand	Pearson Correlation	,141
	Sig. (2-tailed)	,135
	N	113
I feel distance between myself and the people who feel the opposite way about this brand than me	Pearson Correlation	,141
	Sig. (2-tailed)	,135
	N	113
How polarizing you think was the ad that [QID1-ChoiceGroup-SelectedChoices] launched?	Pearson Correlation	,206
	Sig. (2-tailed)	,124
	N	57
Total	Pearson Correlation	1
	N	113