BRAND RELATIONSHIPS 2.0:
An explorative study of consumer sense making in the context of proactive relational marketing

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The present study tabs in to the paradoxical intersection between brand management focused on the proactive facilitation of deep and committed relationship bonds with and among its consumers, and a consumer culture marked by reluctance and scepticism towards the marketplace and its commercial actors. With the pivotal case comprised by the Nike+ concept – an interactive tracking system for running exercise – the study sheds light on a proactive relational marketing strategy launched by a particularly troubled brand, namely the American sports brand Nike as the epitome of not only iconic brand status but also of socio-cultural criticism and mockery.

Guided by a general curiosity towards consumers’ responses to such proactive relational marketing approaches, the study more specifically explores consumers’ sense making in this new consumption scenario pointing to a fundamental question previously disregarded in brand relationship literature, namely whether consumers will embrace just any brand that proposes itself as a relationship partner and a social intermediary.

Through a qualitative interview study of six Danish Nike+ users and their experiences with Nike and the Nike+ concept, the study finds that these six participants are reluctant towards embracing Nike as an emotionally significant relationship partner/social intermediary even though the Nike+ concept fulfils central individual and social needs, and further that socio-culturally forged meanings pertaining to the brand’s cultural status and its commercial background are crucial to consumers’ sense making and the perceived acceptability of engaging in a relationship with a given brand or socialising around it. Accordingly, the study suggests that a comprehensive understanding of consumers’ assessment of a given brand cannot be founded on postmodernist views of consumer sense making alone as otherwise proposed in both brand relationship and brand community literature, but that a supplementary post-structuralist view is necessary in order to understand the broader dynamics between consumer culture, marketplace, and consumer actions that influence on brand meanings and consumer identity projects. In other words, a comprehensive understanding of relational phenomena in the marketplace – whether they are of individual or collective nature – requires an understanding of the socio-cultural context in which both brand and consumers are embedded.
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1. INTRODUCTION

In the wake of increasing media clutter and growing disregard of consumers to traditional marketing programs, marketers’ interest in novel means of engaging consumers continues to grow. Emotional branding focused on forging deep and enduring affective bonds between consumers and brands is one of the marketing approaches that has received substantial attention during the past decade (Thompson et al. 2006), and relational phenomena such as consumer-brand relationships and brand communities have been found to constitute great sources of brand attachment and loyalty (Bagozzi & Dholakia 2006; Fournier 1998; Muñiz & O’Guinn 2001) prompting even more attention to the field (Algesheimer et al. 2005; Fournier 2009; Fournier & Lee 2009).

Recently, the relational focus has been taken to new heights. Marketing approaches focused on brand personality and brand narratives intended to “demonstrate an empathetic understanding of customers’ inspirations, aspirations, and life circumstances” (Thompson et al. 2006: 50) have been supplemented and intensified through more concrete measures aimed at spurring rich interaction with and among consumers within the orbit of the brand, and thereby more proactively encouraging relationship bonds to develop and strengthen (Cova & Cova 2002; Cova & Pace 2006; McAlexander et al. 2002; Muñiz & Schau 2011; Schau et al. 2009). As such, marketers are no longer waiting for consumers to develop relationships with their brands, they are now proactively determined on creating those bonds. We will here refer to such a marketing approach as proactive relational marketing.

However, a fundamental question neglected in the literature is whether consumers will embrace just any brand that proposes it self as a relationship partner and a social intermediary. Pointing to current tensions in consumer culture, we may express our doubts. According to the research position of consumer culture theory (Arrould & Thompson 2005), prevalent cultural tensions in contemporary consumer culture concern the negative aspects of consumption and scepticism towards dominant commercial market forces. An often-cited social critic, Naomi Klein, has in particular succeeded in catching the attention of the masses. With her ‘No Logo’-movement (Klein 2000), she represents a critical and moral response to the impact of transnational corporations and their global, iconic brands pointing to environmental issues, human rights, and cultural
degradation (Heding et al. 2009: 220), and several studies have supported the impact of such cultural sentiments on consumer behaviour (Cherrier 2009; Holt 2002; Luedicke et al. 2010; Thompson 2004; Thompson et al. 2006).

As such, this study points to a paradoxical scenario: On the one side we have brand managers eager to build relationship between their brand and consumers; on the other side we have consumers embedded in a consumer culture marked not only by a general marketing fatigue but also by high levels of reflexivity and scepticism towards consumption, marketing practice and the dominance of certain commercial actors.

The focal case in the present study, American sports brand Nike, illustrates this paradoxical scenario. In 2006, Nike launched a tracking system for running exercise named Nike+ (web 1). Offhand, the concept was similar to other tracking systems in that it registers and processes data related to distance, pace, time, and calories burned while running. Yet the Nike+ concept reaches far beyond the actual tracking as it was launched along with an interactive online platform at Nike’s website (web 2), where the uploaded run statistics are basis for a range of evaluative tools and motivational features, and where Nike+ users are encouraged to interact with fellow Nike+ users through a variety of social features. In a local context, the relationship building efforts introduced with Nike+ have been further leveraged by the recent launch of a Facebook community site, ‘Nike Running Denmark’, which was jump-started with the promotional ‘TakeCPH’ campaign challenging the eight neighbourhoods of Copenhagen to run the most kilometres in a 60-day period (web 3). Similar marketing activities have been initiated in numerous markets.

Seemingly, Nike has created the optimal conditions for Nike+ users to develop relationship with and around the Nike brand (Fournier & Lee 2009; McClusky 2006). Through the Nike+ concept, Nike is thus being positioned in the dual role of being an active, reciprocating relationship partner and a social intermediary by simultaneously addressing the consumer as an individual as well as a social actor by providing various tools and features that support and help improve his running experience and performance while connecting him with other Nike+ users. At the same time though, the Nike brand is exactly one of these ill-seen global, corporate-sponsored brands coming with a considerable negative baggage having been fiercely rebuked by consumer
activists for cultural dominance and exploitative business practices in Third World countries (Klein 2000; Lasn 1999; Holt 2002; Thompson et al. 2006).

With that outset, the question remains how consumers respond to proactive relational marketing and to which extend they embrace the relational potential proposed by Nike and emotionally engage in relationship with Nike and other Nike+ users. Assuming that such embrace is contingent on some form of acceptance of Nike as a relationship partner and a social intermediary, the purpose of the present study is to shed light on and explore individual consumers’ sense making process related to the assessment of Nike in these relational roles and to examine the potential influence of socio-cultural sentiments on this process.

1.1 THEORETICAL POSITIONING

The natural starting point for exploring consumers’ responses towards a proactive relational marketing strategy is the literature on relational phenomena in the marketplace, most notably consumer-brand relationships (Fournier 1998) and brand communities (Muñiz & O’Guinn 2001), but also the many hybrid forms of collective relationships between brands and consumers (Bagozzi & Dholakia 2006; Cova & Cova 2002; Cova & Pace 2006; Fournier & Lee 2009; McAlexander et al. 2002; Schau et al. 2009). With the study’s emphasis on brand assessment, our interest is drawn to the issues of consumer sense making and brand meaning.

Starting with the literature on consumer-brand relationships, Susan Fournier’s (1998) seminal framework for understanding why and in which forms consumers engage in relationships with brands has remained the most comprehensive within the research position. A central notion in this regard is that of meaning provision whereby Fournier conceptualises consumers as active meaning makers and co-creators of brand meaning. As such, Fournier subscribes to a postmodernist view of sense making arguing that the meaning ascribed to a brand and to the consumer’s relationship with that brand is idiosyncratic and subject to the individual consumer’s particular context. Although Fournier aims for a holistic understanding of this context and briefly comments on the socio-cultural context of the consumer-brand relationship, she does not explain the matter further and does not link it to her conceptualization of relationship quality. Instead Fournier – along with most other theorists in the field – emphasise
psychologically-oriented self-brand connections as primary drivers of relationship formation and quality (Ahuvia 2005; Escalas & Betman 2005; Park et al. 2009; Thomson et al. 2005). As such, the research position can be – and has been – critiqued for a too narrow focus on the object-person dyad and a dominant focus on psychological motives in consumers’ relations to brands (O’Guinn & Muñiz 2009: 173).

In contrast to Fournier’s (1998) idiosyncratic view of sense making, Albert Muñiz and Thomas O’Guinn (2001) introduce a social view of meaning creation. With their conceptualization of brand community as a consumer-brand-consumer triad the scope of meaning creation is widened to include other dedicated brand consumers but is still confined to the community as a seemingly closed system of meaning creation. Due to the definition of brand community members as “admirers of a brand” (Muñiz & O’Guinn 2001: 412) it has in subsequent research been taken for granted that the brand is accepted as a social intermediary even if the brand marketer functions as the proactive initiator and facilitator of community interaction and activities (Cova & Cova 2002; McAlexander et al. 2002; Schau et al. 2009) among consumers who may not (yet) be particularly devoted to the brand (Algesheimer et al. 2005).

Exploring brand consumption in a non-brand-focused community, Steven Kates (2004) points to the problematic of taking such consumer acceptance of the brand for granted. Given the anti-brand, anti-globalization backlash, Kates argues that it is necessary to “unpack the meanings and socio-cultural processes that continually problematize and ensure a brand’s legitimacy to its various consumer groupings” (Kates 2004: 455). As such, Kates brings us to the research position of Consumer Culture Theory, CCT (Arnould & Thompson 2005), which for the past twenty-five years has explored the dynamic relationship between socio-cultural meanings, the marketplace, and consumer actions, i.e. the broad socio-historical, -political and -economic factors that shape consumer culture and constitute the context of any given consumption event including those related to brand relationships.

A significant theme within CCT is consumer ideology. While initial contributions with this research interest were concerned with emancipation from the alleged socially dominating structures of marketing and mass-culture through resistance and activism (Firat & Venkatesh 1995; Ozanne & Murray 1995), a post-structuralist view on consumer culture
and thus ideology has increasingly gained common ground (Arnould & Thompson 2005; Murray 2002; Thompson 2004; Thompson & Hayko 1997). As such, it has been found that ideological issues related to consumption and commercial forces are no longer reserved very committed (Holt 2002) or activist individuals (Kozinents & Handelman 2004), but that critical ideological discourses now permeate consumer culture and thereby influence on the way 'ordinary' consumers make sense of consumption, brands, other consumers and not least themselves (Cherrier 2009; Hemetsberger 2006; Luedicke et al. 2010; Thompson 2004; Thompson & Arsel 2004).

As such, the present study seeks to (re)install brand relationships within their obvious socio-cultural context of consumer culture. It does so by combining post-modernist and post-structuralist views on sense making, thereby arguing that a consumer’s approach to a brand is not only characterised by individual, psychologically grounded identity issues and brand meanings expressed in marketing communication. Rather, the individual consumer may be equally influenced by cultural discourses and socio-culturally forged brand meanings when assessing a brand as a relationship partner and a social intermediary.

1.2 PROBLEM STATEMENT

The new proactive approach to building relationship with consumers illustrated by Nike’s launch of the Nike+ concept brings our attention to consumers’ assessment of a brand as a relationship partner and a social intermediary. Gaining a more comprehensive understanding of this process and how it impacts on consumers’ embrace of the relational potential is thus the purpose of the present study. Accordingly, the study is guided by the following problem statement:

This study explores consumer attitudes and feelings towards proactive relational marketing through Nike+ users’ experiences with the Nike+ concept. Specifically, attention is given to how socio-cultural meanings related to consumer ideology influence individual consumers’ assessment of a brand as a relationship partner and a social intermediary and how this process of sense making further impacts on their embrace of the proposed relationship potential.
1.3 CONTRIBUTION

The present study contributes to the literature on brand relationship (individual as well as collective) in general and to the emerging stream of literature concerned with proactive facilitation of brand relationship in particular. Two important suggestions are set forth:

1: Consumers’ acceptance of a brand as a relationship partner/social intermediary is a prerequisite for a their full cognitive and emotional embrace of the brand relationship.

2: The basis for consumers’ assessment of a brand as a relationship partner/social intermediary does not pertain only to self-brand connection and to personal circumstances of the individual consumer but also to the socio-cultural context of the brand relationship influencing both brand meaning and consumer identity projects.

As such, the study accommodates recent critique of brand relationship literature as too narrowly conceptualised (Fournier 2009; Kates 2004; O’Guinn & Muñiz 2009) by including contextual socio-cultural aspects in consumers’ sense making related to brand relationships. The study furthermore directs attention to a fundamental point that is often neglected, namely that a relationship with a brand is fundamentally and qualitatively different from a relationship with another person (Csaba & Bengtsson 2006; O’Guinn & Muñiz 2009). A brand is basically a commercial entity and should be acknowledged as such. Hence, conceptualising brand relationships as self-contained systems sealed off from their socio-cultural context – that is, the marketplace and consumer culture – is futile if the aim is to obtain a comprehensive understanding of consumers’ sense making related to their connections with brands.

1.4 PHILOSOPHY OF SCIENCE

Due to the complexity and the many interrelated facets pertaining to the context of the case and the call for a holistic and deep understanding of it, any reductionist approaches to the present study was avoided. For this reason, the study subscribes to a moderate social constructionist philosophy of science (Hirschman & Holbrook 1986; Rendtorff 2003; Szmigin & Foxall 2000), and inscribes itself within the growing tradition of interpretive consumer research (Beckmann & Elliott 2001; Heding et al. 2009). Ontologically, this has the implication that a physical reality is acknowledged as existing beyond our experience of
it, but that we cannot access this reality in an objective, pure and unambiguous manner since our approach to the world around us is contingent on our preconceptions and prejudgement of it. As such, the question of what reality really is is left as irrelevant due to the epistemological challenges in assessing this reality. Instead focus is put on how reality is experienced and interpreted with the overriding goal of understanding this process – i.e. the social construction of multiple, holistic and contextual ‘realities’ (Hirschman 1986).

In the present context of consumer research, this means that the relevant ‘reality’ in a consumption situation is that which is subjectively experienced in consumers’ minds (Szmigin & Foxall 2000: 190). In understanding these consumer realities, we must reject any atomistic, overly individualistic, information processor view of consumers as individuals, who are to some extent sealed off and separated from their experiential worlds. Rather, it entails a holistic understanding of consumers as embedded in a social, cultural, and historic context. Consumer lives are thus rich, complex, and kaleidoscopic in nature and cannot be represented by ‘causes’ and ‘effects’ (Cova et al. 2007). What matters here is consumers’ interpretation of their experiences.

Epistemologically, the moderate social constructionist view has the implication that research knowledge is ‘created’ in partnership with theory and the empirical field of interest rather than ‘uncovered’ independently of these (Kvale & Brinkmann 2009; Szmigin & Foxall 2000). This stands in contrast to both positivist and naturalist philosophies of science.

With this outset in research philosophy, the present study is undertaken with a hermeneutic approach as will be described further in section 3 on method.
2. THEORETICAL FOUNDATION

In chapter two, the theories selected for illumination of consumers’ sense making related to the assessment of a brand as a relationship partner and social intermediary are presented and discussed. We start in section 2.1 with a discussion of the theory on consumer-brand relationships with a focus on how the individual consumer makes sense of a brand and of the relationship with that brand. Next, in section 2.2 we move on to discuss collective brand relationships and the dual role of the brand as a relationship partner and a social intermediary. Brand meaning and sense making are also central themes here and are further discussed in the light of recent market research into the proactive facilitation of brand communities. Finally in section 2.3 we turn to a cultural perspective on consumption. Here, the influence of consumer culture and socio-cultural dynamics on brand meaning and consumers’ sense making is focus for discussion.

2.1 BRAND RELATIONSHIPS

In the 1990s, relationship principles had virtually replaced short-term exchange notions in both marketing thought and practice, and the marketing buzzword at the time was just relationships (Fournier 1998). However, the basic foundation for understanding brand relationships from consumers’ point of view still remained unexplored (Heding et al. 2009).

Within consumer research, an increasing amount of attention had been given to the notion of compensatory or symbolic consumption; that consumers consume as much for symbolic and psychological reasons as for fulfilling functional needs – famously captured by Sidney J. Levy in his recognition that people buy products not only for what they do but also for what they mean (Levy 1959). Thus, a key driver of consumption was in this line of thinking understood as an endeavour to satisfy psychological needs with the marketplace constituting a preeminent source of symbolic resources through which people could create, reinforce, and express their self-concept (Belk 1988; Kleine et al. 1995).

Although initially applied to material possessions, brands soon found their way into this symbolic domain of consumption. Through attention to symbolic properties such as brand imagery and brand personality (Aaker 1997) rather than tangible attributes and benefits, it was explored how consumers used the symbolic properties of brands to
express certain aspects of their identity. As such, consumers were conceived of as identity seekers and makers (Arnould & Thompson 2005), and when this identity work involved the use of a certain brand, self-brand connection was described as the consumer’s experience of having something in common with the brand (Escalas & Bettman 2005; Heding et al. 2009).

2.1.1 The brand as a relationship partner

With her seminal paper ‘Consumers and their brands: Developing relationship theory in consumer research’ published in Journal of Consumer Research in 1998, Susan Fournier set out to answer the basic questions of whether, why, and in what forms consumers seek and value ongoing relationships with brands and did so by applying the principles of self-brand connection and interpersonal relationship theory finding that consumers do experience relationships with brands and that just like human relationships, consumer-brand relationships are of a very diverse nature (Heding et al. 2009). Although several authors have continued research under the relationship metaphor (MacInnis et al. 2009), Fournier’s (1998) initial framework for understanding consumer-brand relationships remains the most comprehensive and as such it will form the basis of this section.

A basic premise of Fournier’s brand relationship theory is the qualification of the brand as a relationship partner. The notion of reciprocity is central in this regard, i.e. for the legitimacy of the brand as “an active, contributing member of the relationship dyad” (Fournier 1998: 344) as well as for Fournier’s application of interpersonal relationship theories on the consumer-brand relationship. This qualification is undertaken by combining theories of animism and impression formation. The idea of brand anthropomorphization – that consumers endow brands with human-like personalities and characteristics, has been criticized however (Csaba & Bengtsson 2006; O’Guinn & Muñiz 2009), and was later dismissed by Fournier herself as “a moot point” (Fournier 2009: 7) stressing the sufficiency of impression formation in qualifying the brand as a relationship partner:

“We do not need to qualify the ‘human’ quality of the brand character as a means of identifying the brand’s relationship potential: all brands – anthropomorphized or not – ‘act’ through the device of marketing mix decisions, which allow relationship inferences to form” (Ibid.).
Based on this qualification of the brand as a relationship partner, Fournier (1998) proposes three central points explaining the nature of consumer-brand relationships:

a) Meaning provision: that the meaning the brand as a relationship partner is ascribed with depends on the situation and context of the consumer, i.e. that the relationship is purposeful for the consumer who engages it, b) Multiplexity: that consumer-brand relationships are multiplex phenomena that can take the shape of several relationship forms including negative forms, and c) Temporality: that consumer-brand relationships are dynamic and evolve over time – they may even be terminated.

Due to the focus on consumers’ sense making, we will here focus on the first point – meaning provision. However, as regards the multiplexity of brand relationships, it is important to note that due to the application of interpersonal relationship theory from the field of social psychology, the fifteen relationship types that Fournier detect in her study all reflect human types of relationships and as such she does not capture the qualitative difference for a consumer in having a relationship to another person and to a brand as an entity with basically commercial motives.

2.1.2 Meaning provision

The notion of meaning provision is a central point in Fournier’s understanding of consumers as active meaning makers and co-creators of brand meaning. In this connection, Fournier argues:

“What matters in the construction of brand relationships is not simply what managers intend for them, or what brand images “contain” in the culture (McCracken 1986; Solomon 1983), but what consumers do with brands to add meaning to their lives” (Fournier 1998: 367).

As such, Fournier dismisses the – until then – prevalent views of consumers as passive ‘cultural bearers’ (McCracken 1986) or ‘information processors’ (Keller 1993), while giving way for a subjectivist, postmodernist view of sense making with consumers perceived as active meaning makers.

Within this line of thinking, understanding a given relationship requires mastery of the meanings the relationship provides to the person who engages in it. Fournier identifies three important sources of meaning in this regard, namely the psychological, the socio-cultural, and the relational contexts of the relationship. In this way, relationships both
affect and are affected by the contexts in which they are embedded. However, as most research on consumer-brand relationship (e.g. Ahuvia 2005; Thomson, et al. 2005), Fournier stresses the psychological context, which concerns the identity of the participants in the relationship by specifying the identity activity in which the relationship is grounded. First, a relationship may help resolve life themes – profound existential concerns or tensions that individuals address in daily life. Life themes are deeply rooted in personal history and thus highly central to one’s core concept of self although they might operate below the level of conscious awareness (Fournier 1998: 346). Second, a relationship may deliver on important life projects, which involve the construction, maintenance, and dissolution of key life roles that significantly alter one’s concept of self as with role-changing events (e.g. college graduation), age-graded undertakings (e.g. retirement), or stage transitions (e.g. mid-life crisis). Third, relationships may be rooted in current concerns – a series of discrete, interrelated activities directed toward completion of daily tasks. Fournier describes such relationships as the most concrete and temporarily bounded. As such, we see how the notion of brand-self connection is closely connected to the psychological aspect of meaning provision as “the degree to which the brand delivers on important identity concerns, tasks, or themes, thereby expressing a significant aspect of self” (Fournier 1998: 364).

As goes for the socio-cultural and the relational contexts, Fournier only deals with these aspects of meaning provision briefly. The socio-cultural context is presented as related to changes in life conditions and five broad aspects are highlighted in this regard circumscribing relationship attitudes and behaviors: age/cohort, life cycle, gender, family/social network, and culture. Fournier notes that these factors “systematically influence the strength of relationship drives, the types of relationships desired, the nature and experience of emotional expression in relationships, styles of interacting within relationships, the ease with which relationships are initiated and terminated and the degree to which enduring commitments are sought” (Fournier 1998: 346), but she does not elaborate on the point, and especially the socio-cultural context of the brand relationship is disregarded in both the application of her theoretical framework on three women’s ‘lived experiences’ with brands as well as in her conceptualization of brand relationship quality.
2.1.3 Brand meaning

In Fournier’s (1998) interpretation, realised brand meanings are not inherent in the product, nor are they necessarily the meanings that have been reinforced and popularised through the firm’s advertising and marketing campaigns. Rather, brand meaning is presented as created by the individual consumer as the brand intersects with important identity themes and life projects (Allen et al. 2008: 799). As such, brand meaning is idiosyncratic, dependent on each individual consumer’s interpretation and use of the brand.

Still, in order to work strategically with brand relationship theory Fournier advise a managerial attention to brand personality and brand image management suggesting that brand personality is thought of as “a set of trait inferences constructed by the consumer based on repeated observation of behaviours enacted by the brand at the hand of its manager, that cohere into a role perception of the brand as partner in the relationship dyad” (Fournier 1998: 368). As such, it is implicitly assumed that consumers form their perceptions of a brand based on brand behaviours that are controlled by the brand manager. A similar assumption is found in subsequent research into brand relationship trajectory testing the correlation between brand personality (Aaker et al. 2004) or relationship type (Aggarwal 2004, 2009) and consumers’ expectations towards the brand, as these studies are based on a priori determination of brand personality and relationship type respectively in their experiential set up. Especially in regard to Aggarwal’s line of studies concerning the expectations and norms pertaining to exchange versus communal brand relationship types, it would have been relevant to assess the process by which consumers come to perceive a relationship with a given brand as communal in nature versus exchange-oriented rather than viewing relationship type as an antecedent variable.

In either way though, brand meaning is a matter held in between brand manager and the individual consumer as a closed circuit. In Fournier’s perspective consumers are active meaning makers but seemingly only on the basis of meaning resources made available by brand managers. As such, brand meaning can be described as co-created but still independently of other consumers and the surrounding milieu, that is, the socio-cultural backdrop of the relationship.
2.1.4 Summary

Despite Fournier’s (1998) focus on viewing consumers’ relationships with brands in a holistic manner, she ends up presenting brand relationships as consumer-brand dyads sealed off from their context. In fact, Fournier seems so focused on consumers as active meaning makers that she – perhaps non-deliberately – dismisses the influence of socio-cultural meanings and dynamics as a starting point or a moderating factor for this active meaning making. As such, Fournier’s framework is not able to accommodate for how brand meaning may be influenced by other parties than the brand manager and the sense making individual, or how broader contextual factors may influence on the way consumers relate to the marketplace in general and thereby affect relationship styles pursued.

Another shortcoming of Fournier’s relationship theory relates to the lack of distinction between purely exchange-based and more personal brand relationships. Although Aggarwal (2004, 2005, 2009) has contributed with an interesting line of research on the difference in expectations pertaining to what he distinguishes as exchange and communal brand relationships, the research does not deal with the process of how consumers come to perceive as given brand relationship as exchange-based or more communal/personal in nature. Despite the persistent research focus on the very committed brand relationships high in affection (e.g. Ahuvia 2005; Ahuvia et al. 2009; Fournier 1998, 2009), we may assume than most consumer-brand relationships are exchange oriented due to the commercial foundation of the connection. In this light, communal brand relationships are extraordinary and based on a process of acceptance that cannot be taken for granted even if it has taken place unconsciously. Proactive relational marketing makes attention to this issue more acute.

2.2 COLLECTIVE BRAND RELATIONSHIPS

That humans like to congregate, affiliate, and associate with likeminded and –spirited others without any underlying self-interest maximizing agenda (O’Guinn and Muñiz 2005) was a major recognition within consumer research around the turn of the millennium. This shift in attention towards communal aspects in consumption had its background in sociology and a second current of postmodern thought (Cova 1997), which saw group
level phenomena as increasingly important responses to the modern quest for individuality and freedom from social constraints (Mafesoli 1996).

The literature on collective brand relationship has roughly followed two streams of research: one concerned with loose-knit sub-cultural or tribal brand affiliation (Cova 1997; Coca & Cova 2002; Cova & Pace 2006; Schouten & McAlexander 1995), and one concerned with more close-knit brand community affiliation (McAlexander et al. 2002; Muñiz & O’Guinn 2001; O’Guinn & Muñiz 2005). The primary difference between the two streams of research relates to the role of the brand: in sub-cultures or consumer tribes, the brand itself holds secondary status as a supporter of social links, whereas the brand in a brand community setting enjoys primary status comprising the very linking value.

Especially the literature on brand community has received managerial interest and will form the backbone of this section. However, as the two streams of research have recently started merging (Cova & Pace 2006; Fournier & Lee 2009), tribal aspects of collective brand relationships will also be approached.

2.2.1 The brand as a social intermediary

The stream of research into brand communities took off with Albert Muñiz and Thomas O’Guinn’s (2001) seminal study of brand communities. The study resumed Fournier’s (1998) brand relationship metaphor but applied it in a social context extending the consumer-brand relationship dyad into a consumer-brand-consumer triad. Here the brand was no longer just a relationship partner but also a social intermediary linking consumers through their common interest in the brand. The study furthermore pointed to brand communities as vibrant sources of brand loyalty with a potential for “truly actualizing the concept of relationship marketing” (Muñiz & O’Guinn 2001: 427).

Central for Muñiz and O’Guinn (2001) was establishing brand communities as evident phenomena and “discovering their manners, mechanisms, and particularities” (Ibid.: 415). Based on observed consumer aggregations formed around the brands of Saab, Mac, and Ford Bronco, the authors defined a brand community as “a specialized, non-geographically bound community, based on a structured set of social relationships among admirers of a brand” (Ibid.: 412). The communities’ manners, mechanisms, and particularities were described along the lines of three core markers of traditional
community derived from classic sociology, namely 1) consciousness of kind, 2) the presence of shared rituals and traditions, and 3) a sense of moral responsibility.

Muñiz and O'Guinn found the most significant element of brand community to be consciousness of kind described as a sense of ‘we-ness’ with members feeling an important connection to the brand, but more importantly, feeling a stronger connection toward one another. Muñiz and O'Guinn stress that this triangular, rather than dyadic, social constellation is a central facet of brand community echoing Cova’s (1997) assertion that for postmodern consumers the link is more important than the thing (Muñiz & O’Guinn 2001:418).

In subsequent research, McAlexander et al. widened the conceptualization of brand community defining it as a web of several relationships including not only the brand and other consumers but also the product in use and the marketer/company behind the brand (McAlexander et al. 2002: 39). Muñiz and O’Guinn’s consumer-brand-consumer triad was thus situated within a more complex web of relationships, where the individual’s commitment to the community is subject to the strength of each of these relationships and their interconnectedness.

More recently, Fournier and Lee have summed up the research on brand communities and defined three basic forms of community affiliation: Pools where people have strong associations with a shared activity or goal, or shared values, and loose associations with one another, webs where people have strong one-to-one relationships with others who have similar or complementary needs, and hubs where people have strong connections to a central figure and weaker associations with one another (Fournier & Lee 2009: 108).

As such, we see varying emphasis of the brand as a one-to-one relationship partner versus a social intermediary. Although the linking value is often stressed, we also see instances of brand community where the individual cultivation of brand fandom is the pivotal point for socializing (e.g. Cova & Pace 2006) and where the community is the result of individual consumers wanting to express their brand relationship outwardly.

2.2.2 The social creation of meaning

As an extension of Fournier's (1998) idiosyncratic view of meaning creation, Muñiz and O’Guinn (2001) introduce a social view of meaning creation with their notion of the
consumer-brand-consumer triad, where meaning is created among a group of dedicated brand users. As Fournier (1998), Muñiz and O’Guinn (2001) thus emphasize the agency of community members in forming brand meaning while opposing to Schouten and McAlexander’s (1995) structuralist view on meaning in their description of the sub-cultural affiliation around the Harley Davidson brand, where the Harley brand was presented with a socio-culturally fixed meaning (Muñiz & O’Guinn 2001: 414). Instead Muñiz and O’Guinn see brand communities as having an active interpretive function with brand meaning being socially negotiated rather than “delivered unaltered and in toto from context to context, consumer to consumers” (Ibid.: 414). As such, Muñiz and O’Guinn emphasise community members’ story telling as an important part of building consciousness of kind whereby brand meaning is actively interpreted, negotiated and appropriated among brand community members.

In addition to community members’ personal experiences with the brand, important sources for storytelling include commercial brand texts such as contemporary and classic product logos and images and texts from brand advertisements (Muñiz & O’Guinn 2001: 423). Through storytelling, these brand texts are interpreted and appropriate thereby creating a unique communal ‘pastiche’, which Muñiz and O’Guinn link to a postmodern sensibility (Ibid.: 424). Moreover, in two of the three brand communities studied by Muñiz and O’Guinn, it was found that the identity and ethos of the corporation behind the brand mattered in community storytelling and thus in the process of sense making. As such, Saab community members felt troubled that a “pristine, small Swedish company with a good consumer ethic was being taken over by a big American corporation (GM) known for its bigness and, in their view, incompetence and poor consumer ethic” (Ibid.: 424). Similarly, Apple community members were found to widely celebrate the brand’s anti-establishment roots. However, the more specific relationships between product brand and corporate brand in meaning creation are not further commented.

All in all, significant for the social creation of meaning in brand communities was the finding that brand community members often felt they had a better understanding of the brand than the manufacturer or marketer. However, with this postmodernist emphasis of consumer agency, Muñiz and O’Guinn (2001) end up in the same confined position as Fournier (1998), where the brand relationship – here in the collective version of brand
community – becomes a self-contained system. Although Muñiz and O’Guinn note on how community members are concerned with how the brand is represented to those outside the community (Muñiz & O’Guinn 2001: 424), they do not recognize the reverse process; that those outside the community may influence on brand meaning or community members’ sense making in general.

2.2.3 Proactively building brand community

As Muñiz and O’Guinn (2001) and subsequent research proved brand communities to be strong drivers of brand loyalty, a natural managerial interest emerged around the question of whether brand communities could be successfully created by marketers. While Muñiz and O’Guinn were initially rather vague on the matter, other theorists have been more confident in regard to the managerial scope in proactively creating brand community and collective attachment to a brand. Two contributions stand out in this regard: McAlexander et al.’s (2002) “Building brand community” and more recently Schau et al.’s (2009) “How brand community practices create value”. Here it is argued that if the marketer understands and respects the dynamics of a brand community, it is possible to proactively create a platform that facilitates a brand community to evolve.

Central to McAlexander et al.’s (2002) assertion that marketers can build emotionally strong brand communities is the successful stories of Jeep and Harley Davidson in which customers’ participation in marketer initiated and organised events – brandfests – led to feelings of brand community attachment. Based on these findings it is suggested that brand community is built by initiating or supporting activities and customer experiences that provide optimal conditions for relationships between the customer, product, brand, company, and other customers to develop:

“Sharing meaningful consumption experiences strengthens interpersonal ties and enhances mutual appreciation for the product, the brand, and the facilitating marketers. Virtual ties become real ties. Weak ties become stronger. Strong ties develop additional points of attachment” (Ibid.: 44)

As such, brandfests are staged as “event-intensified brand communities” (Ibid.: 42), which speed up the process of socialization around the brand and thus enhance communal attachment with the brand. McAlexander et al. further introduce the notion of interlocking community ties (Ibid.: 40), referring to how existing community ties (e.g. extended family, neighbourhoods, or work relations) can be leveraged when building
brand community. The emphasis on strengthening interpersonal bonds among consumers as a means to build brand community has been supported by Bagozzi and Dholokia (2006) in their study of small group brand communities, where small webs of strongly interconnected consumers (typically groups of friends and/or family) existing within the larger frames of brand community were found to be effective drivers of brand identification among novice brand customers (Bagozzi & Dholokia 2006: 59).

That participation in activities and experiences related to a brand can lead to communal attachment and thus the creation of brand community is supported by Schau et al.’s (2009) findings that participation in community practices develops a sense of membership among brand users. Based on this central finding, Schau et al. set forth a basic proposition that “if firms give consumers the opportunity to construct brand communities and the freedom to modify their product, they will” (Schau et al. 2009: 41). As such, it is implied that commitment to a brand community will arise from participation in social practices related to the brand independent of consumers’ initial attitudes and feelings towards the brand, and hence the role of the marketer is to seed such practices.

However, as regards the success and durability of such created brand communities, O’Guinn and Muñiz (2005) argue that grassroot communities appear to fare better than inorganic or created communities, and further state their belief that “the strongest brand communities form out of a necessity. A challenge gives the community a reason to exist and persevere” (O’Guinn & Muñiz 2005: 265). Thus, contrary to Schau et al.’s (2009) proposition it is somewhat peculiar to note that two of the brand communities stressed by Schau et al. for their vitality and richness in practices are in fact brand communities that have formed around discontinued product brands, namely Apple Newton and 3Com Audrey. As such, one might argue that the necessity – the manufacturer’s abandonment of the brand – is the exact reason for the vitality of these communities, and that seeding or other proactive marketer initiatives would never be able to reproduce such sense of urgency in ‘sticking together’.

In addition to noting on the – perhaps – lower level of coherence in so-called created communities, we may point to another unexplored area in the literature on proactive brand community building, namely whether consumers accept any brand as the facilitator of a community and whether such acceptance is necessary for a successful
community. What we can infer from McAlexander et al. (2002) and Schau et al.’s (2009) reasoning is an implicit assumption that any brand will be accepted as a social intermediary, i.e. as a linking value, if the brand introduces the means and circumstances for consumers to socialize.

However, if we go back to Muñiz and O’Guinn’s (2001) initial understanding of brand communities as “united predominantly by their common interest in a brand” (Muñiz & O’Guinn 2001: 414) and their definition of community members as ‘admirers of a brand’, it is seen how brand identification is a core aspect of the individual consumer’s affiliation with the community, and thereby we may suggest that consumers have implicitly accepted the brand as a relationship partner. Moreover, as socializing around the brand is self-initiated in these organically formed brand communities, the brand is naturally accepted as a social intermediary.

Algesheimer et al. (2005) specifically discuss the relationship between a consumer’s identification with a brand and his affiliation with a brand community. In their study of the social influence of brand communities on individual community members, Algesheimer et al.’ (2005) found that a consumer’s relationship with a brand was an influential antecedent to his or her identification and affiliation with the brand community. Thus, if the consumer had a strong relationship with the brand, a positive commitment to the community was the likely outcome. On the contrary, if the consumer felt a weaker attachment to the brand, the consumer was more likely to experience brand community affiliation in negative ways, e.g. as normative community pressure towards social behavior, which again increased the likelihood of the consumer responding with ‘reactance’ in an attempt to regain ‘lost freedom’ (Algesheimer et al. 2005: 22). As such, we may argue that brand acceptance is critical to relationship success also in a collective setting.

The discussion is relevant as the practice of building brand community has been broadened to include efforts that do not centre on the brand per se but rather on an activity or a common interest, echoing a tribal marketing approach (Cova & Cova 2002). An example of this include the ‘Libragirl community’ facilitated by Libresse – a community website devoted to emotional subjects and the bodily changes of young teenage girls (Heding et al. 2009: 202). As such, consumers targeted for community building efforts may
not be ‘brand admirers’ (Muñiz & O’Guinn 2001) and thus not united by their common interest in the brand. In those cases we may argue that the necessity of accepting the brand as a social intermediary becomes more explicit.

2.2.4 Accepting the brand as a social intermediary

In the discussion of whether a brand needs to be accepted as a social intermediary in order for consumers to be willing to participate in marketer-facilitated activities, Kates (2004) brings us valuable insight. Kates’ research interest is collective brand consumption in a non-brand-focused setting; in the particular case a North American gay community. Because brands are not the central focus of community affiliation, Kates argues that it is necessary to unpack the meanings and socio-cultural processes that continually problematize and ensure a brand’s legitimacy to its various consumer groupings (Kates 2004: 455). In Kates’ study, it is seen how consumers continually evaluate brands according to the perceived fit with their political convictions regarding homosexual rights. If the brand is perceived as gay-positive and adhere to gay-friendly politics, it is deemed legitimate and thus accepted by gay community members. If not, it is rejected as a relationship partner and social intermediary.

Given the general reflexivity and sensitivity of consumers towards commercial actors – described by Kates as the “antibrand, antiglobalization backlash” (Kates 2004: 455) and also recognised by Muñiz and O’Guinn in their comment that “late twentieth century consumers are very aware of the commercial milieu in which they live […] The postmodern consumer is in fact quite self-aware and self-reflexive about issues of authenticity and identity” (Muñiz & O’Guinn 2001: 415) – it seems curious that issues of legitimacy and authenticity – acceptance more broadly spoken – have not been attended to within brand community research and literature. Especially when it comes to recent attempts of building brand communities that approach consumers in a tribal manner by facilitating interaction and activities that do not centre on a brand per se but rather on a common activity or interest (Cova & Cova 2002; Heding et al. 2009), we cannot expect consumers to be ‘devoted brand enthusiasts’ from the outset as otherwise implicitly assumed in recent literature on the matter (e.g. Muñiz & Schau 2011; Schau et al. 2009).
2.2.5 Summary

Significant for the notion of collective brand relationships is how the brand simultaneously acts as a one-to-one relationship partner and a social intermediary linking the consumer to other consumers. However, unlike the brand relationship theory discussed in section 2.1, literature on collective brand relationships does not deal with why consumers choose to affiliate around a certain brand, instead community members are conceptualised as 'brand admirers' (Muñiz & O’Guinn 2001) or 'devoted brand enthusiasts' (e.g. Muñiz & Schau 2011: 214).

As regards sense making, especially brand community literature eagerly stress the agency of brand communities in creating brand meaning independently of not only marketers' intended brand meaning, but also independently of the socio-cultural context of the brand community. Noting on the generally high awareness of the commercial conditions in society among contemporary consumers recognised by Muñiz and O’Guinn (2001) themselves, such a socio-culturally ‘detached’ process of sense making seems highly unlikely.

Moreover, in the wake of more proactive measures to build brand community or forge other kinds of collective brand relationships, where targeted consumers are not necessarily devoted to the brand or where the brand is not central to the facilitated activities, we may along with Kates (2004) argue for attention towards the processes that legitimize the brand as a relationship partner and a social intermediary and make consumers accept the brand in those roles.

2.3 THE CULTURAL PERSPECTIVE

Over the past 25 years, an ‘alternative’, primarily interpretive stream of consumer research has addressed the socio-cultural, experiential, symbolic, and ideological aspects of consumption as well as the dynamic relationships between consumer actions, the marketplace and cultural meaning. The notion of consumer culture plays a central role in this regard, and as such Eric Arnould and Craig Thompson coined the research tradition consumer culture theory in their article “Consumer Culture Theory (CCT): Twenty years of research” published in Journal of Consumer Research in 2005. Due to its theoretical fragmentation and methodological variance, Arnould and Thompson’s notion of consumer culture theory represents a perspective on consumption rather than a

The pivotal point is consumer culture, which is understood as a macro-level phenomenon closely intertwined with cultural meaning and the circulation of this meaning (Heding et al. 2009). Arnould and Thompson conceptualise it as the very fabric of consumer experience, meaning, and action:

"Owing to its internal, fragmented complexity, consumer culture does not determine action as a causal force. Much like a game where individuals improvise within the constraints of rules (Bourdieu 1990), consumer culture – and the marketplace ideology it conveys – frames consumers' horizons of conceivable action, feeling, and thought, making certain patterns of behaviour and sense-making interpretations more likely than others" (Arnould & Thompson 2005: 869).

Subscribing to a “distributive view of cultural meaning” (Hannerz 1992 in Arnould & Thompson 2005: 869), research within consumer culture theory has further developed this perspective through empirical studies that analyze how particular manifestations of consumer culture are constituted, sustained, transformed, and shaped by broader historical forces (such as cultural narratives, myths, and ideologies) and grounded in specific socio-economic circumstances and marketplace systems (Arnould & Thompson 2005).

Comprising the fabric of consumer experience, consumer culture also provides the setting of relational phenomena such as consumer-brand relationships and brand communities. This has consequences for both parties, namely the brand and the consumer(s). As such, the cultural perspective forges an opening of the consumer-brand dyad/consumer-brand-consumer triad by acknowledging that such relational entities are not sealed off from their socio-cultural settings and by implying a moderation of consumers’ agency when it comes to their interpretive strategies.

2.3.1 A cultural perspective on consumers

Applying a cultural perspective on consumption entails an understanding of the consumer as a 'no man is an island' man (Heding et al. 2009: 211) – a consumer woven into the intricate meaning found in culture and in cultural consumer objects. Askegaard (2006: 97) describe this consumer as a homo mercans; a market man, who is deeply embedded – or trapped, depending on the view – in consumer culture.
A much debated subject within consumer culture theory is just consumer agency, i.e. the extend to which consumers' sense making and identity projects are subject to socio-cultural influence (Arnould & Thompson 2005). Initial contributions dealing with the connection between consumers and consumer culture were structuralist in their view of culture as a closed and universal system of meanings that were transferred from the 'culturally constituted world' over consumer goods to consumers, who then internalised these meanings through various rituals (McCracken 1986). Along with postmodernist notions of consumer agency (e.g. Firat & Venkatesh 1995) came a less determining post-structuralist account of meaning transfer (Holt & Thompson 2004; Murray 2002; Thompson & Haytko 1997; Wallendorf & Arnould 1991).

Thompson and Haytko’s (1997) study is seminal in this regard and is often pointed out as one of the first studies to apply a post-structuralist analysis to consumer behaviour. Focusing on fashion – a domain of consumer culture often criticised for its hegemonic outlook and indoctrinating properties, the authors found that fashion discourses offered a myriad of countervailing interpretative standpoints that consumers combine, adapt, and juxtapose to fit the conditions of their everyday lives. Based on these findings and as a direct comment on McCrackens’ (1986) one-way meaning transfer model Thompson and Haytko conclude:

"The meaning transfer process is a diffuse transformative, and consumer-centered undertaking. In these terms, consumers’ appropriation of cultural meanings is a dialogical process in which individuals are continuously engaged in an interpretive dialogue, not only with those in their social spheres but also with broader socio-cultural history that is encoded in culturally conventional ways of talking about fashion and other distinct domains of consumer culture” (Thompson & Haytko 1997: 38)

2.3.2 A cultural perspective on brand meaning

While Arnould and Thompson (2005) did not explicitly comment on brand meaning in a cultural perspective, the view of brand meaning as socio-culturally created or ‘co-created’ rather than marketer determined has received considerable support recently (Allen et al. 2008, Holt 2004; Kates 2004; O’Guinn & Muñiz 2009; Schroeder & Salzer-Mörling 2006). The common assumption for these contributions is that brands are repositories for meaning (Heding et al. 2009), and that brand meaning is effectively co-created by numerous, and sometimes competing, sources (Allen et al. 2008).
Within this line of thinking, O’Guinn and Muñiz (2009) operate with a social model of brands in which the brand is conceived of as a “vessel of popular meaning” (O’Guinn & Muñiz 2009: 174). This meaning is plastic and dynamic; continually moulded by the social forces of marketers, consumers, consumer collectives, and institutions, through processes of accommodation, negotiation, mediated cultivation, collective memory, polity, rumour, and disruption (Ibid.: 176).

We will return to the socio-cultural influence on brand meaning further below, when discussing the often competing sources of brand meaning and the politicization of brands in section 2.3.5.

2.3.3 Critical consumer ideology

An important theme within consumer culture theory is consumer ideology and consumers’ critical interpretative strategies (Arnould & Thompson 2005: 874). Initial research interest in consumer ideology had its outset in critiques of modernity and was concerned with resistance to – and ultimately emancipation – from the alleged socially dominating structures of marketing and mass-culture (Horkheimer & Adorno [1944] 1996). Heavily inspired by critical theory and postmodernist thought respectively, Ozanne and Murray (1995) and Firat and Venkatesh (1995) both envisioned emancipation from these dominating marketing structures as a question of consumer defiance towards marketer-imposed cultural codes and meanings. However, where Ozanne and Murray (1995) saw this defiance as a deliberate, reflexive undertaking outwardly aimed at the restraining agents, Firat and Venkatesh (1995) saw it as a creative, often non-deliberate, endeavour to express a creative and fragmented self through the use of cultural resources in arbitrary and subversive ways with no regard of any ‘actual’ meanings.

Although the emancipatory potential of such defiant consumer undertakings has been disproved (Holt 2002; Kozinets 2002; Thompson 2004), and most theorists now understand consumer ideology in post-structuralist terms of power discourses (Thompson 2004), the themes of reflexive and creative defiance is central to most research in consumer ideology as will be seen in the next section.

However, in recent years a shift in consumer ideology has taken place. From a rather abstract critique of capitalism and marketing as socially dominating structures,
attention has been turned to specific commercial actors – most notably transnational corporations – and accordingly the critique has become more concrete, often aimed at the cultural dominance of global, corporate-sponsored brands and the immorality of corporate business practices. With their ‘No Logo’ and ‘Culture Jammer’ movements respectively, journalist Naomi Klein (2000) and documentarian and founder of Adbusters magazine Kalle Lasn (1999) have in particular had an impact on consumer ideology and culture (Arnould & Thompson 2005; Heding et al. 2009; Holt 2002; Kozinets & Handelman 2004; Thompson et al. 2006). For instance, Kozinets and Handelman’s (2004) study of ‘consumption adversaries’ illustrate how this ideological awareness is creating increasing tension in contemporary consumer culture. Through studies of three activist groups (anti-advertising, anti-Nike, and anti-genetic engineering), Kozinets and Handelman found that consumer activism was as much a question of cultivating a distinct consumer identity as of seeking actual societal change. As such, activists were not only opposing the ‘greedy corporations’ but also mainstream consumers, who were commonly portrayed as “unaware, hypnotised, selfish, and lazy” while activist described themselves as “aware, free, altruistic, and mobilized” (Kozinets & Handelman 2004: 702).

2.3.4 A consumer culture permeated by ideological discourses

Increasingly, it has been recognised that ideological issues related to consumption and commercial forces are no longer reserved very committed consumers found at the margins of society (Holt 2002) or activist individuals (Kozinets & Handelman 2004) as described above, but rather that critical ideological discourses, myths and narratives permeate consumer culture and thereby influence on the way ‘ordinary’ consumers make sense of consumption, brands, other consumers and not least themselves (Cherrier 2009; Dalli et al. 2006; Hemetsberger 2006; Luedicke & Giesler 2008; Luedicke et al. 2010; Thompson 2004; Thompson & Haytko 1997; Sandikci & Ekici 2009; Thompson & Arsel 2004). As such, consumer culture theory has approached a mid-range level analysis concerning the moral constitution of consumption and the nature of moral dilemmas and challenges that the commercialization of everyday life, including its most intimate moments, pose for ordinary consumers (Arnould & Thompson 2005: 876).

According to Holt (2002) a common myth in consumer culture pertains to the power of marketing practice, which he refers to as ‘the cultural authority narrative’. Here
marketers are portrayed as “cultural engineers organizing how people think and feel through branded products” and corporations described as “omnipotent”, making use of “sophisticated marketing techniques to seduce consumers to participate in a system of commodified meanings embedded in brands” (Holt 2002: 71). As a response to this alleged power of marketing, Holt’s two main participants both identity in opposition to the marketplace: the first as one who sees through market propaganda; the other as a commodity bricoleur, who never accepts market dictates and always use brands for self-creation rather than allowing brands to define him (Ibid.: 78). Holt thereby argues that people now use authoritarian marketing techniques as a trope to portray themselves as facile consumers able to out-manoeuvre brand managers (Ibid.: 83).

From a less oppositional milieu, Thompson and Haytko (1997) report on a ‘anti-conformist’ narrative expressing a theme of consumer autonomy and independence guided by the commonplace Western consumer value of being a self-directed individual (Thompson & Haytko 1997: 21). In Thompson and Haytko’s study this translates into an ideal of being a ‘fashion bricoleur’, i.e. a person who combines and adapts culturally available resources to make up a personal style – in this context reproducing a well-known brand image is in terms of style a ‘major faux pas’ (Ibid.: 27). Similarly, in Hewer and Brownlie’s (2010) study of consumers involved in car modification the motive of sovereignty is also strong. Here consumers are engaged in de-branding – removal of brand signage – in order to “avoid being ‘labelled and branded’ as a particular type of consumer” (Hewer & Brownlie 2010: 435).

Another more moderate but not less profound consumer discourse pertains to the enduring cultural tension between the ideal of authenticity and popular conceptions of commercialism (Thompson et al. 2006: 53). Underlying this contrast is a quasi-religious belief that certain spheres of human existence should remain sacred and distinct from the profane spheres of commerce and profit seeking (Belk et al. 1989) and it is often this distinction between the sacred and profane that is activated when the ‘cultural degradation’ caused by global brands is decried.

In light of the sharp criticism of transnational corporations, Thompson et al. (2006) outline a common ‘corporate exploitation’ discourse as a particular form of market populism that portrays large corporations as “exploitative and rapacious agents whose
actions run counter to the best interest of ordinary consumers” and as “modern-day robber barons” (Thompson et al. 2006: 55). In a similar vein, Luedicke et al. (2010) report on a common cultural viewpoint – ‘the jeremiad against consumerism’ – that sees certain forms of consumption as looming threats to the civic and communal integrity of society, personal well-being, and most recently the ecosystem (Luedicke et al. 2010: 1016), and in Sandikci and Ekici’s (2009) study it is in particular American corporatism that is criticized and opposed by Turkish consumers.

In more concrete instantiations, we see examples of how these discourses are put into play. As such, Thompson and Arsel (2004) present the extreme form of such discourse activation through their demonstration of how a specific anti-corporate discourse, namely an anti-Starbucks discourse, has structured the entire competitive landscape in the North American coffee shop market by shaping people’s ideas about the category and its operative values. Similarly, Luedicke and Giesler (2008) and Luedicke et al. (2010) have explored how various ideological consumer discourses are applied when the legitimacy of Hummer-ownership is contested and defended by anti-Hummer, hybrid car proponents and Hummer enthusiasts respectively, thereby demonstrating how consumer ideology also resides among consumers endowed with similar social and economic capital in their mundane, everyday contestations of other consumers’ consumption choices, behaviours and ideologies (Luedicke & Giesler 2008: 812).

All these discourses each propose certain identity positions, which we may describe as meta-level consumer identities (Holt 2002: 76) relating to consumer ideals, i.e. how one ought to behave as a consumer. In this light, consuming is not only a question of ‘who am I’ but also becomes a question of ‘who am I as a consumer’. As such, one may identify as a critical or a creative consumer all based on the different culturally created ideals we see expressed in this plethora of ideological consumer discourses – or one may be less committed to any actual cause but still be reluctant towards being equated with the antithetic consumer positions described by Kozinets and Handelman’s (2004) activist consumers as the “unaware, hypnotised, selfish, and lazy” mainstream consumers associated with the less than attractive characteristics of limited mental capacities, lack of cultural savvy or even bad morals.
2.3.5 The politicized brand

Consumer ideology does not only influence on consumer culture and consumers, it also influences directly on brands. As discussed above in section 2.3.2, brands are ascribed with meaning from a number of sources – some of them competing (Allen et al. 2008).

With his work on iconic brands, Holt (2004) demonstrated how brands can take advantage of pressing cultural issues and contradictions in consumer culture by addressing them with storytelling that conveys a carefully crafted and culturally informed brand myth. However, there also exist a flip side to the interplay between culture and brand meaning, namely when a brand is hit by a cultural backlash where autonomous, ironic or openly negative brand images – ‘doppelgänger brand images’ (Thompson et al. 2006) – start circulating in consumer culture, a socio-cultural process commonly referred to as culture jamming (Lasn 1999; Heding et al. 2009; Thompson et al. 2006) or the politicization of brands (O’Guinn & Muñiz 2005).

Culture jamming often hits when a disjuncture between brand promise and corporate actions is brought to the fore (Holt 2002: 85). A classic example is the culture jamming of the Starbucks brand (Thompson & Arsel 2004; Thompson et al. 2006) based on a perceived misfit between a brand image oriented towards a countercultural, bohemian sensibility on one side and an aggressive corporate growth strategy and highly publicized market domination on the other side (Thompson et al. 2006: 60). In this way, the Starbucks brand’s authenticity in pursuing an emotional connection to consumers is widely rejected.

The politicization of brands (O’Guinn & Muñiz 2005) is a broader tendency, which can have both positive and negative consequences for brands in the limelight. Here the focus is shed on how the values and behaviour of the corporation behind the brand live up to certain ethical standards or political norms. In this light, consumer ideology is not informed by an emancipatory agenda concerned with the choice of consuming or not consuming, but is rather enacted through identification, group sanctioning, and championing of brands that are deemed to be the best vessels of one’s political and ideological beliefs (O’Guinn & Muñiz 2005: 266).

As a general tendency, Thompson and Arsel (2004) argue that brands that attain a significant portion of culture share are inevitably pulled into the politics of consumption
debates. As such, the authors mention Starbucks, Microsoft, Disney, Nike, and McDonald’s as global brands that all enjoy considerable success while simultaneously being the recurrent targets of antibrand activism due to a common interpretation of these brands as the corporate Goliaths of global capitalism (Thompson & Arsel 2004: 639). In this light, Nike is an example of a brand that has become particularly negatively politicised through criticism of corporate business practices (Holt 2002; O’Guinn & Muñiz 2005) and through mockery of the globally recognised Nike brand symbolism such as the ‘swoosh’ logo and the ‘Just Do It’ slogan. Grass roots organizations and specific anti-Nike activist groups have taken the lead in this criticism but have generally enjoyed great public support and received tremendous media coverage (Holt 2002: 87) and thereby these negative brand associations have been effectively distributed.

All things considered, it is evident that brand meaning is also influenced by social actors, who relate negatively to the brand. In this process, the brand may be ascribed with negative brand meaning and brand virtues turned into vice dependent on perceptions of the brand’s authenticity (Holt 2002; Thompson et al. 2006) based on the fit between the communicated brand image and its corporate background as well as on evaluations of the brand’s legitimacy in a given context – for instance in sub-cultural (Kates 2004) or tribal groupings that the brand may be approaching (Cova & Cova 2002).

2.4 SUMMARY: THEORETICAL FINDINGS

As mentioned, the present study is motivated by a fundamental research interest in understanding how consumers embedded in a consumer culture marked by ideological tensions assess a brand that is proactively approaching the individual consumer as a relationship partner and a social intermediary. In order to lay the foundation for a more comprehensive understanding of this process of sense making, this chapter has reviewed the literature on individual (section 2.1) and collective brand relationships (section 2.2) vis-à-vis an alternative cultural perspective on consumption and consumer culture (section 2.3). In all three cases, attention was primarily given to consumers’ sense making in regards to a given brand and to having a connection with that brand.

Both in brand relationship theory and brand community literature, seminal authors (Fournier (1998) and Muñiz and O’Guinn (2001) respectively) were found to subscribe to
a postmodernist view of sense making. Although the level of analysis differed and meaning therefore was perceived as respectively idiosyncratic and socially forged, both streams of literature emphasized the agency of consumers in shaping brand and relationship meaning independently of not only marketers’ intended brand meaning, but also independently of the socio-cultural context of the brand relationship. Consumers’ acceptance of a given brand as a relationship partner/social intermediary was not problematized, seemingly due to a prevalent research interest in strong, committed brand relationships/communities.

However, giving the recent interest in the proactive facilitation of consumer-brand bonds where the approached consumers may not be particularly devoted to the brand as a starting point, it was along with Kates (2004) argued that the meanings and socio-cultural processes that continually problematize and ensure a brand’s legitimacy to its various consumer groupings should be unpacked. Turning to a cultural perspective on consumption, a post-structuralist view on meaning and socio-cultural processes related to the distribution of meaning was suggested. It was argued that consumers are embedded in consumer culture and that this consumer culture is currently marked by tensions towards the cultural dominance of global brand and corporate exploitation resulting in a range of ideological consumer discourses and thereby shaping both brand meaning and consumer identity positions.

By combining the post-modernist and post-structuralist views on sense making, we may argue that an individual consumer’s approach to a brand is not only characterised by individual, psychologically grounded identity projects and brand meanings expressed in marketing communication. Rather, the individual consumer may be equally influenced by cultural discourses and socio-culturally forged brand meanings when assessing a brand as a relationship partner and a social intermediary. Moreover, with the described awareness of and prevalent sensitivity among consumers regarding anti-branding and commercial exploitation etc., we might expect consumers to be more reflexive towards this process of sense making when faced with a brand as Nike that is generally associated with cultural dominance and corporate exploitation and thus more sensitive towards a proactive relational marketing approach.
3. METHOD

Until now the present study has been concerned with a theoretical discussion of the foundation for understanding consumers’ sense making related to their assessment of a brand as a relationship partner and social intermediary when simultaneously taking the socio-cultural context of the brand relationship into account. In the following part, we turn to the empirical setting of the study, namely the Nike+ case and consumers’ actual experiences with Nike and the Nike+ concept as an example of proactive relational marketing.

In order to acquire a close and comprehensive understanding of consumers’ attitudes and feelings towards the Nike+ concept and their assessment of the Nike brand as a relationship partner/social intermediary against the backdrop of a critical consumer culture, a qualitative research approach was chosen over any reductionist approaches. Moreover, due to the focus on sense making and the research interest in the interplay between personal and socio-cultural meanings in this process, a hermeneutically grounded interpretative framework was deemed particularly appropriate for the study (Højberg 2004). In the context of consumer research, the contributions of Arnold and Fischer (1994), Thompson (1997), and Thompson et al. (1994) have in particular addressed the relevance of hermeneutics to consumer research while laying a thorough foundation for applying a hermeneutic approach to the interpretation of consumer meaning.

3.1 DESIGN

Basis for a hermeneutic approach to consumer research is the ‘texts’ of consumer stories (Thompson 1997). Thus, in order to generate these texts, a qualitative interview study design was chosen based on semi-structured interviews (Kvale & Brinkmann 2009) with six users of the Nike+ tracking system.

3.1.1 Collection of participants

Participants were identified online at the Facebook ‘Nike Running Denmark’ (NRDK) site and contacted through the Facebook message service except for one participant, who was identified through the author’s personal network. Qualifying criteria for participation in the study was regular use of the Nike+ sport kit. Moreover, an equal
distribution of gender was specifically sought out in order to reduce gender bias in ways of relating to a brand (Fournier 1998).

In regards to the actual selection of participants, two aspects were considered. Firstly, personal characteristics such as education, profession, and personal network (assessed through participant candidates’ Facebook profiles) indicative of high levels of cultural capital (Bourdieu 1986) was positively valued in selection, as cultural capital has been associated with higher levels of brand literacy (Bengtsson & Firtat 2006; Wallendorf 2001) and reflexivity towards consumption (Roux 2007). The aim was participants capable of reflecting more ideologically about brands and the marketplace, not participants explicitly identifying as critical or antagonistic. Secondly, participants were selected to maximize chances of uncovering insights on important brand relationship phenomena in the broadest sense of the relationship notion. Thus, participants were chosen to represent different positions in the ways of relating to Nike ranging from basic use of the Nike+ sport kit, over regular use of Nike+ online features and the NRDK Facebook platform, to more extensive affiliation with Nike including membership of Nike-supported running groups.

3.1.2 Presentation of participants

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Background</th>
<th>Contact points with Nike</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Malene</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Holds a bachelor’s degree in communications. Currently applying for cand.merc. in marketing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mette</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Holds a master’s degree and is looking for a job in the field of communications</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sofie</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Holds a master’s degree and works with communication and PR</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Matias</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Autodidactic photographer</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
In regards to demographics, the group of participants was relatively homogenous in terms of age, education and family situation. Thus, the six participants were all relatively young (25-32 yrs), singles or cohabitants with no kids, all typical big city people expressing rather high levels of social and cultural capital (Bourdieu 1986) being well-informed and engaged with knowledge intensive or creative occupations (journalism, communications, marketing, photography). This matched with selection preferences regarding cultural capital and further reflected Nike’s target group for the TakeCPH campaign, namely the “young urban demographic” (web 2). As such, the group of participants can be described as a core audience of the new proactive relational approach and was hence deemed highly relevant to explore in terms of response and sense making.

3.1.3 Interview

Prior to the conduct of interviews, an interview guide was created (see appendix I). Due to the explorative nature of the study, the interview guide was structured around five broad areas: 1) personal background and current life situation, 2) general approach to running and exercise, 3) experiences with the Nike+ sport kit and online Nike+ features, 4) social orientation in regards to exercise in general and experiences with the social aspects of the Nike+ concept and related promotional activities, and 5) perception and attitudes towards the Nike brand.

As such, the interview guide was not directly structured around the study’s actual themes of brand relationship and consumer ideology. Rather, the idea was to keep these
themes implicit in order to let them develop naturally during the interview in line with participants’ expressed sentiments and thereby avoid any potential bias related to the participant feeling any expectation from the interviewer towards certain answers. For the same reason, participants were only informed in very broad terms about the research purpose, namely that the study centred on ‘new means of consumption exemplified with the Nike+ concept’. Moreover, participants were in advance asked to prepare for the interview by thinking about their relationship to Nike+ and writing down a few keywords on their thoughts and feelings in this regard. Thus, the interview session could be opened by letting the participant talk freely about these thoughts and feelings in an uninfluenced terminology to which later interview questions and probing could be adapted.

In line with the wish of keeping the research purpose implicit, a ‘funnel shaped interview’ approach to questioning was adopted (Kvale & Brinkmann 2009: 130). As such, each of the four initial areas of inquiry was opened with general questions about experiences and habits and then followed up by more specific questions about feelings and attitudes towards Nike’s role in this new way of consuming. When deemed relevant, further probing was informed by the interviewer’s background knowledge in relational phenomena and consumer resistance and ideology. For instance, in regards to participants’ assessment of Nike as a relationship partner, participants were probed in terms of ‘feeling a link or connection with Nike’ and whether this ‘connection had strengthened or changed from use of Nike+’, and furthermore whether they perceived Nike+ services as a ‘help’ and thereby implicitly exploring perceptions of Nike related to the inter-personal characteristic of helping – according to Aggarwal (2004, 2009) a key distinction between exchange and communal brand relationship as it relates to the motivation for providing benefits to the partner.

The last area of inquiry – perceptions and attitudes towards Nike – was in it self more specific and probing here sought to relate these perceptions and attitudes with accounts of Nike+ experiences discussed earlier in the interview. This often resulted in multifaceted and more conceptual discussions of the Nike brand and the Nike+ concept.

As regards the setting of the interview, all interviews were held in the homes of participants and conducted in Danish in order to keep the interview situation natural
and stress-free for participants (Thompson & Haytko 1997). To create a good contact with participants, time was allowed for initial small talk – typically while the participant prepared tea/coffee. During the interview, an informal interview style was pursued focusing more on having a rich dialogue with the participant than of strictly following the interview guide (Thompson & Haytko 1997). As such, the interviews were characterised by mutual and continuous interpretation throughout the sessions exploring and generating meaning with the participant rather than ‘discovering’ meaning from within the participant (Kvale & Brinkmann 2009: 49) cf. the study’s applied epistemological conception of knowledge.

All interviews were digitally recorded with participants’ consent and lasted between 60 and 95 minutes with an average of 77 minutes. Participants were given a bottle of wine as a symbolic appreciation of their participation.

3.2 ANALYSIS

The basis for a hermeneutic approach to consumer research (Arnold & Fischer 1994; Thompson 1997; Thompson et al. 1994) is found in Hans-Georg Gadamer’s concept of philosophical hermeneutics presented in his major work Truth and Method ([1960] 1989). Here Gadamer breaks with the dominant principle in science concerning the relationship between truth and method arguing that no matter which method is being applied it is not possible to arrive at any truth as such. Instead interpretation – the original meaning of hermeneutics (Højberg 2004) – is understood as the principal condition for human existence and this has important implications for research into social phenomena in particular, which is why we will briefly go through the main principles of philosophical hermeneutics.

The pivotal principle in hermeneutics is the hermeneutic circle describing the relationship between part and whole in interpretation. In traditional hermeneutics this is understood as text parts and the text whole, but in philosophical hermeneutics the hermeneutic circle becomes an ontological principle pertaining to the text and its interpreter. The notion of ‘text’ is here broadly understood as any given object or phenomenon and interpretation of it builds on the interpreter’s ‘horizon’ (Gadamer 1989), that is, his/her preconceptions and prejudice shaped by experience and his/her
embeddedness in a linguistic, cultural, and historic context (Højberg 2004). Meaning is thus created in the meeting between the interpreter and the object of interpretation as a ‘fusion of horizons’ (Gadamer 1989; Thompson et al. 1994), which challenges preconceptions and leads to a reconsideration of prejudgements due to a widening of one’s horizon (Thompson et al. 1994). As such, the horizon of understanding is continuously widened and nuanced concurrently with the ongoing interpretation of the object.

In the specific research context, preconceptions and prejudice refer to the theoretical foundation of the study that has provided the researcher with a specific horizon of understanding. In the meeting with the object, i.e. consumers’ experiences with Nike+, this provisional understanding is challenged by consumers’ own interpretations of their Nike+ experiences and a fusion of horizons takes place resulting in a new horizon of understanding presented as the study’s findings. As such, the study does not aim towards any absolute, representative research results, but merely presents a interpretation of consumers’ responses to proactive relational marketing while arguing for its relevance in understanding the subject matter.

3.2.1 Transcription

The recorded interviews were transcribed immediately after each interview by the interviewer herself. Due to the basic acknowledgement of transcriptions being “constructions from an oral conversation to a written text” (Kvale & Brinkmann 2009: 183), interviews were transcribed in a slightly modified verbatim mode to make up for the rather fragmented mode of spoken language. As such, most pauses were left out and spoken language gently ‘translated’ into written language in order to ease the generation of meaning. Considerable time was spent on this process and as such transcription was considered a critical part of interpretation. For clarifications of doubtful or unclear points in the interview deemed critical for the interpretation, a few transcript excerpts were sent to one participant along with clarifying questions. The revised excerpts were then incorporated back into the transcript.

For the purpose of reporting, transcript excerpts used to illustrate findings in chapter 4 were translated from Danish into English. As linguistic nuances and use of slang proved
difficult to translate, translation was undertaken at the very end of the process and has thus not influenced on the process of analysis and interpretation.

3.2.2 Iterative part-to-whole analysis

As stated above, philosophical hermeneutics does not provide any actual methodological guidelines towards interpretation as a method of analysis (Højaberg 2004). However, from the growing use of hermeneutics in consumer research (e.g. Arnould & Fischer 1994; Thompson 1997), the general principle of an iterative, part-to-whole reading strategy to interview texts has been derived. This entails a process of analysis where provisional understandings are formed, challenged, revised, and further developed through an iterative movement between individual transcripts and the emerging understanding of the entire set of textual data (Thompson et al. 2006: 632).

The present study was guided by this principle in the analysis of interview texts. More specifically the following steps of analysis were undertaken:

First, each interview transcript was read several times and analysed as a text by itself focusing on understanding the specific participant in relation to personal background and general approach to running, the scope and modes of using the Nike+ tracking system including online features, highlighted consumption experiences related to Nike+ (both positive and negative), and their own accounts of feelings and attitudes towards the Nike+ concept and the Nike brand. In this process, 10-15 pages of analysis were written for each participant focusing on the influence of personal identity issues on one side and broader socio-culturally informed issues on the other side on the ways of using Nike+ and on the expressed attitudes and feelings towards Nike and Nike+.

Next, interpretations of the individual transcript was held up against the entire set of textual data and cross read with attention to commonalities and differences. Slowly various issues, themes and patterns started appear, which through overview tables and working papers gained more form and substance.

Third, these emerging issues, themes, and patterns were (more specifically) related to the theoretical foundation, i.e. theory concerned with relational phenomena in the marketplace and socio-cultural dynamics related to consumer culture and consumer ideology. In the end, issues, themes, and patterns were synthesized into broader
thematic categories that helped identify holistic relationships (Thompson & Haytko 1997) among the meanings and categories participants used to describe their experiences with the Nike+ concept and the Nike brand as will be seen in section 4.

3.3 DELIMITATION OF THE EMPIRICAL FIELD OF INTEREST

The present study is not a thorough evaluation of Nike’s new proactive relational marketing approach and is not meant to be so. Rather its empirical basis is Danish Nike+ users and their experiences with the Nike+ concept as an example of the marketing approach. As such the scope of the empirical field of interest was defined through the scope of participants’ touch points with Nike through Nike+. In addition to use of the actual Nike+ tracking devices, central touch points were the Nike+ interface (web 2), the Danish Facebook platform NRDK (web 4), the TakeCPH campaign executed through the NRDK Facebook platform in autumn 2010, and Nike’s support of informal running groups ‘CPH Joggers’ ‘NBRO Running’ (web 5) and ‘NBRO Running’ (web 6) independently developed by participants during the TakeCPH campaign and with which three participants were affiliated and two others aware of.

3.4 LIMITATIONS OF THE METHOD

While the hermeneutic method is particularly well suited in understanding individual consumers’ sense making and the influence of their socio-cultural context on this process, other methods such a netnography (Kozinets 2002b) into consumer behaviour at Nike+ online platforms as well as participatory observation (e.g. Muñiz & O’Guinn 2001) in the TakeCPH challenge or in running groups would possibly have granted deeper insight into the subject matter and have provided the opportunity to relate consumers’ sense making with their actual behaviour. However, as the purpose of the study did not relate to behaviours or social dynamics per se, but to the individual Nike+ user’s experience of them, these more ethnographic research approaches were deemed too time consuming compared to their potential benefit for the purpose.

3.5 LIMITATIONS OF FINDINGS

Limitations of the findings can be related to the number of participants. While the necessary number of participants in a qualitative interview study is a contested issue (Kvale & Brinkmann 2009), this study leans towards the tradition in hermeneutic consumer
research of using relatively few participants (e.g. Thompson et al. 1994) allowing for more in-depth understanding of each participant’s experiences with the field of interest. As such, findings are not argued to be representative for all Nike+ users, but rather to reveal plausible relationships between socio-cultural meanings and consumer sense making that are of relevance to the domain of interest, namely brand relationships.
4. FINDINGS

As noted in the introduction, Nike has seemingly created the optimal conditions for Nike+ users to develop or strengthen relationship bonds with Nike and other Nike+ users. However, as will be evident in this chapter, the present study cannot attest to such consolidation of relationship bonds. Rather, the relationships between Nike and the six participants in the study are characterized by ambivalence and conflict caused by the new consumption scenario Nike+ has brought about.

The chapter is structured into three main sections echoing the structure of the theoretical foundation. Accordingly, section 4.1 is concerned with participants’ assessment of Nike as a relationship partner and their behavioral and emotional/cognitive responses in this regard – the overarching theme is here participants’ expression of ambivalence towards the relationship with Nike. Section 4.2 is concerned with the assessment of Nike as a social intermediary with the main theme relating to participants' preoccupation with the terms and conditions for socialization, while section 4.3 is more broadly concerned with the influence of consumer culture on participants' understanding of themselves as consumers. The main theme here is that of power plays referring to how participants seemingly perceive interaction with the marketplace and commercial parties as a kind of game, where consumers accept the rules of play but simultaneously feel a need to tend to their own interests. This final section will furthermore include two significant ‘consumer tales’ illustrating the paradoxical intersection between proactive relational marketing and a consumer culture informed by ideological issues.

4.1 RELATIONSHIP AMBIVALENCE

Significant for the six participants in the study is a considerate amount of ambivalence in their responses to Nike+ and their assessment of Nike as relationship partner. On the one hand, participants have a long history with Nike and generally describe the brand in positive terms; on the other hand they find the brand incompatible with any sense of emotional or personal engagement. Thus, while the Nike+ tracking system addresses a genuine need among participants, which have largely caused them to become dependent of the Nike+ tracking device, it has also resulted in a relationship with Nike marked by ambiguity and friction.
As seen in section 2.1, in brand relationship literature the most emphasised aspect of how a brand relationship is ascribed with meaning is the psychological context of the consumer, and according to Fournier (1998), the nature of a brand relationship is closely related to the identity activity in which it is grounded. Thus, the basis for a strong brand relationship, it is argued, is found in how use of the brand assist in important identity concerns, tasks, or themes and how it expresses a significant aspect of the self (Fournier 1998: 364). In this context, such identity issues are evident in how the participants describe their approach to running in general and also in their user stories related to Nike+. As such it is seen that the more central or conflicted running is or has been in the participant’s personal history, the more it influences on how meaning is ascribed to the use of Nike+.

Generally, the use of Nike+ assist participants in current concerns of keeping fit (Malene, Jacob) and in life projects related to feeling the first signs of aging and wanting to keep healthy (Matias, Rasmus, Mette, Sofie). However, for three of the participants, Sofie, Mette, and Matias, we further see how deeper personal issues and conflicts also influence on the feelings towards Nike+. Starting with Sofie, a central identity issue pertains to the eating disorder she struggled with for ten years. Accordingly, Sofie’s approach to running is marked by a conflict between extreme exercising for loosing weight and living up to beauty ideals on one side and more moderate exercising for the fun of it and keeping healthy on the other side. In these conflicted waters, the use of Nike+ has been ascribed with a positive valence due to its positive role in helping Sofie finding her way back to the fun aspects of running. As such, Sofie is the most extensive user of the ‘softer’ and more playful Nike+ features, e.g. the ‘Mini’ – a virtual alter ego that behaves according to registered running exercise.

For Mette, running has been a natural part of life since early childhood, but a clear conflict is seen in how she portrays herself within a dichotomy between intellectuality and a pure bodily focus. Although Mette has a long history with orienteering at top national level, she is as proud of her academic master’s degree and describes herself as ‘analytical’ and a ‘geek’. Mette’s way of dealing with this dichotomy when exercising is by striving for individual control while rejecting any notion of herd mentality related to
following orders without personal reflection – for Mette the individual mind is always the master. This mindset influences on her approach to running and can also be clearly related to her attitudes and feelings towards Nike+. As such, Mette accounts for her use of Nike+ in very practical, non-sentimental terms, stressing her sovereignty in being in charge of own efforts but also being aware of and seeing through the various mechanisms applicable to the Nike+ concept – both technical and psychological:

Mette: Well, the whole idea is that you get motivated to run, it’s the surveillance effect, you know, that you do more when there are others at work. Well, I’m pretty aware of the psychological mechanisms in it and why it works and stuff, and that’s okay with me, that’s effective

For Matias, a central life theme is his introverted personality, which is a challenge in his occupation as a self-employed photographer where networking is important in order to get new clients. Here running helps him achieve a mental energy surplus, which again results in better self esteem in work relations. Nike+ has an important role in this as the tracking system has made Matias considerably more consistent in his running efforts.

However, for all six participants the central feature of the Nike+ concept is the tracking functionality, which is described as highly motivating and which have caused four out of six participants to become dependent on using their Nike+ sport kits. In this way Malene would rather wait exercising than doing it without her Nike+ sport kit; Sofie feels a running exercise is wasted if it has not been registered properly at Nike+; Matias notes that it is annoying to go for a run that is not going to be logged on to his online profile because “then it is missing and there’s no reason for that”; and Rasmus feels much the same way due to a wish of keeping track of “how many kilometres you actually have in your legs”. Only Mette and Jacob are slightly more relaxed on the matter, although both bring the Nike+ sport kit most times when exercising.

As such, the use of Nike+ has developed into a dependency, which is one of Fournier’s (1998) markers of a strong brand relationship. What we also see, however, is a trivialization of this dependency, where participants not necessarily relate their dependency of the Nike+ sport kit to the Nike brand, and where the brand generally is not acknowledged in the everyday use of the sport kit – a scenario that has not been
dealt with in brand relationship literature. This is seen in how both Malene and Sofie for instance refer to their iPod in their everyday use of Nike+:

Malene: To be totally honest I rarely think about that this chip or thingy on my iPod has anything to do with Nike. (...) I probably relate it more to having my iPod with me rather than bringing Nike+

Sofie: I guess I think more about it as being my iPod rather than Nike when I exercise (...) You see, it's more my iPod universe and then Nike is linked to that

In a similar way, other participants (Rasmus, Jacob) refer to their Nike+ sport kit in more neutral terms as the 'wristband'. This seems to indicate that through everyday use, the Nike+ sport kit is somehow decommodified (Belk et al. 1989; Wallendorf & Arnould 1991) or mentally de-branded (Hewer & Brownlie 2010). In the case of Mette, this process of de-branding has been extreme and seems to be related to her affiliation with the Danish orienteering community with which she closely identifies. The Nike+ system is technically inferior in that context and is consequently disparaged:

Mette: If I talk about it [Nike+ sport kit] with other orienteering racers, who are notorious gadget geeks, I usually refer to it as my pauper's GPS

From this lack of acknowledgement of Nike in the everyday use of Nike+ it is also seen that although the previously described personal circumstances related to identity themes and current concerns may mark participants’ approaches to and use of the Nike+ concept, they do not seem to be significant for how the participants assess Nike as a relationship partner. This is evident when participants describe their connection to Nike and when they respond to the question of whether they feel they have developed a closer relationship with Nike from using Nike+. In several instances the connection with Nike is described in functional terms of using Nike’s products and services, for example in the cases of Matias and Mette:

Matias: Yes, there is one [a connection], I think so... I don’t really know what kind it is, but it is there. I use their stuff and their software and their Facebook site (…)

Mette: Well, personally in the sense that you use their stuff all the time

When probed for a more emotionally significant connection to Nike, participants have trouble accounting for such. Although Matias for instance rather strongly identifies with
the Nike brand and its design aesthetics (Escalas & Bettman 2005), and the use of Nike+ has provided him with significant positive rewards, he does not ascribe Nike with the interpersonal quality of ‘helping’, which one would expect from e.g. a ‘best friendship’ (Fournier 1998) or any other affective, communal-style relationship (Aggarwal 2004, 2009). Instead Matias describes the connection with Nike as a question of helping himself:

Matias:  (... I don’t know if Nike is helping me, I’m just a bit like... Well, I think that I help myself by using those things, because that is what’s working for me and what makes me the happiest and feels the most right for me. And that has something to do with Nike being the brand that I think offers the things that are most ‘me’ compared to the other [sports brands]

The situation is similar in the case of Sofie. Even though the use of Nike+ has helped Sofie obtain a healthy and positive approach to running and despite the fact that she is the participant of the six who most extensively uses the various features in the Nike+ online forum and at the Nike Running Facebook site, she declines feeling an emotional connection to Nike (Ahuvia 2005; Fournier 1998). Rather she feels that Nike is very closely intertwined with running, which interests her a lot. The connection is thus indirect. On the explicit question of whether she perceives Nike as acting as a support of her running efforts or whether she is helping herself through Nike+, Sofie expresses a feeling of self-reliance as opposed to making Nike subject to any reliance. Again, Nike is not credited:

Sofie:  Yes, that would be myself. And then I would probably say Apple instead. (...) It’s not them [Nike] after all, who get me going, it’s just part of motivation... In the end, it’s myself who got to take the decision

Thus, what we see among the six participants, it that although identity concerns influence on the approach to Nike+ and the use of the sport kit, these concerns do not seem to be a significant issue in the evaluation of Nike as a relationship partner. Thus, although one might argue that the Nike+ concept actually has had a very positive impact on participants – especially Sofie and Matias – evidenced by the prevalent dependency developed towards the tracking system, this product dependency is not recognised in everyday use and it is not readily linked to the Nike brand.

4.1.2 ‘Just not that kind of brand’

As discussed in section 2.1 and 2.2 both brand relationship and brand community literature stress consumers’ agency in the formation of brand meaning (Fournier 1998;
Muñiz & O'Guinn (2001) and do not deal with the socio-cultural context of the brand relationship or brand community. What we see here is a clear influence of socio-cultural meanings (Arnould & Thompson 2005) on participants' assessment of Nike as a relationship partner. Although Nike's product design is interpreted differently – seemingly according to individual preferences – we see many commonalities among the six participants’ descriptions of their perceptions and attitudes towards Nike indicating a significant socio-cultural impact on individual sense making echoing the post-structuralist view on sense making discussed in section 2.3 (e.g. Thompson & Haytko 1997). Another significant finding in this context are the many layers in participants’ perception of the Nike brand and their attitude towards it and how perceptions and attitudes at these different layers contrast.

First of all, Nike is perceived as a young, cool, and innovative brand and a favourite sports brand when compared to other sports brands. As such, all six participants have a lot of Nike sports gear and also a long personal history with the Nike brand echoing Fournier's (1998) notion of brand intimacy. These positive attitudes especially pertain to product design and brand imagery. For Mette, Nike's design is more 'elegant, feminine and timeless' while it for Malene is 'more fun and less dull' compared to other brands, and it for Rasmus is more discreet and less like the 'Alpine skiing look' that he associates with regular running gear and which he finds ugly and uniforming. However, most participants also note that they do not think the Nike product quality is any different from other sports brands. In other words, participants readily recognise that their preference for Nike is a question of aesthetics. Matias expresses the general attitude:

Matias: Nike is just great when it comes to launching [new] things and get out to the young people, and it works. Many of the others [sports brands] are a bit stuck I think. (...) Now I only have Nike running shoes because I run with that thingy [Nike+ sensor], but of clothes I’ve got plenty of other [brands] too, it’s not like it has to be Nike, it's not like that at all because the others make things that are just as good. It’s probably just Nike’s universe and their design that appeals more to me, and then they have a bigger selection. I mean, when I’m in the USA they have huge stores, and I just love stuff like that, right. They're just leading within that

As regards brand imagery, a curious tendency is present in the sense that all six participants speak very positively of the brand in terms of advertising, promotions,
slogan etc. but that only Sofie and Matias seem to connect personally with Nike symbolism (Escalas & Bettman 2005; Levy 1959). Instead the four other participants describe it in a rather detached manner although still in positive terms. An example is the famous 'Just Do It' slogan. Here Matias and Sofie express rather high levels of self-concept connection (Escalas & Bettman 2005; Fournier 1998) with the Nike slogan:

Matias: Nike has a history within running and sports that I identify with, right. And a style that I would like to be identified with. (...) Their whole universe appeals to me and the whole concept of 'Just Do It' is right on, right – spot on! And that is probably one of the most important things after all, that it is something you identify with

Sofie: Well, that 'Just Do It' thing is really a truth one might say. I mean, they do really hit something

Sofie's self-concept connection with Nike is supported by a personal engraving in her iPod reading ‘Sofies iPod – Just Run’ directly reflecting on Nike's famous slogan.

Rasmus on the other hand also recognises the value of the 'Just Do It' slogan, but does not ascribe it with any personal significance:

Rasmus: Well, professionally speaking it's a brand that has always been pretty clever at branding themselves, right. Putting themselves above the crowd and make an impact. They have done a bunch of exciting campaigns over the years, and their 'Just Do It' slogan is one of the three – if not the – most successful in world history I guess. So that's why I think it's pretty exciting, right

(...) Interviewer: How about the slogan, does that mean anything personally to you?

Rasmus: Hmm, no, I don’t think it ever has. I don’t think it’s been inspiring in that way. (...) I think I just saw it as a cool slogan. But a slogan doesn’t necessarily have to – when you have a company like Nike which is infecting everything by now and which is just around as a concept in it self – that doesn’t necessarily have to say so much

As seen, Nike's branding efforts are positively acknowledged but apart from Sofie and Matias it is done so in an objective rather than in an emotional or personal significant manner. In this way, the general message seems to be 'Nike is a cool brand but not a brand that necessarily makes a difference for me personally'.
Rasmus’ comment on how Nike is “infecting everything” brings us to another significant tendency in how participants ascribe meaning to the Nike brand, namely how cultural discourses related to consumer ideology are evident in this process of making sense. In this way, Rasmus’ reference to Nike as ‘infectious’ seemingly draws on a contamination metaphor (Belk et al. 1989) related to the social critique of brands as culturally pervasive (e.g. Klein 2000) as evidenced in other consumption studies (e.g. Dalli et al. 2006; Roux 2007; Thompson & Arsel 2004).

However, in contrast to most findings concerned with consumer ideology as discussed in section 2.3, participants’ articulation of Nike within these ‘brands as culturally dominant’ discourses (Holt 2002; Kozinets 2002a; Kozinets & Handelman 2004; Thompson & Arsel 2004; Thompson et al. 2006) does not take place in a particularly negative tone of voice. As such, Nike is plainly recognised as culturally dominant and not criticised for it per se:

Rasmus: I guess they've sometimes taken up too much space in sports events and stuff like that, right

Interviewer: With the things they've sponsored or?

Rasmus: Yeah, and that it is them who's on the soccer jerseys of seven out of eight national teams in a World Cup quarter finale and stuff like that… A little too American and somewhat too – culture imperialist is a wrong word to use – but you know, too almighty I guess you might say

Sofie offers a similar unsentimental description of Nike’s cultural status in society, illustrating consumers’ general awareness of this aspect of the Nike brand:

Sofie: But well, they’re also a big mastodon and the epitome of something American, and for good or bad they live the American Dream with all that entails… But it’s probably the sports brand you’ve got – that I’ve got most thoughts about because they’ve just been really clever with branding

Noteworthy here is the reference to Nike as “something American” used as an adjective seemingly connoting the idea of something particularly mainstream or commercial (Sandicki & Ekici 2009). This connotation is shared by all six participants.

As regards the harsher critique Nike has received in connection to exploitative business practices in Third World countries (Holt 2002; Klein 2000), this does not seem to be an issue
for participants. Mette and Sofie both briefly mention Nike’s former use of child labour but do not place any significance here – Nike is neither better nor worse than any other big company:

Mette: Of course it’s a pity to realize if everything is just being run on child labour, right. I mean, you don’t want that. But I don’t think there’s much of a difference between the different brands. (...) China is like the great factory, right?

However, although participants are generally positive towards Nike and they seemingly do not take much further notion of the prevalent criticism, it clearly influences on how they relate to Nike. The following excerpts from the interview with Mette illustrate this prevalent process of sense making related to Nike as a relationship partner seen in the study:

Mette: Well, you do like some of their things, but you don’t get that kind of personal relationship, which you would have to other brands (...) Nike is just more kind of everywhere

The brands that Mette really likes and feels emotionally engaged in are small niche brands, which she knows from her affiliation with adventure sports and orienteering, and to which she attributes more genuine and authentic motives due to a perceived passion for product quality and the common field of interest. Compared to these niche brands, Nike is perceived as mainstream and impersonal because the brand is not tied to any specific field of interest, and the brand is moreover associated with a dominant cost-benefit rationale similar to Kozinets and Handelman’s (2004: 697) notion of ‘the bottom line mentality’ commonly attributed to large corporations by consumer activists:

Mette: Also because I’ve been into more adventure-like sport previously and orienteering, where you’re more accustomed to small niche brands from Germany and England and Norway in particular which manufacture some really highly specialised, super quality goods, and you have a totally different partiality towards those (...) Also because you know that this is what they’re dedicated to, right (...) So it’s about sensing that they too love what you’re into and that they are so good at it

(...) Mette: With Nike there’s always some kind of calculation behind concerning what’s gonna pay and where they have it manufactured and how much quality they actually put into it. And that’s just fine; I guess 95 percent of what we buy is just like that, but it just means that you don’t
become emotionally engaged in it (…) In that way you don’t get that kind of emotional-hoo-ha when it comes to Nike

What we see is that Nike is readily associated with general prejudice against big corporations in terms of cultural dominance and exploitative business practices seen in section 2.3, but also that this does not really upsets participants per se or cause them to ascribe Nike with immoral motives (Dalli et al. 2006; Holt 2002; Kozinets & Handelman 2004). However, it does influence on how Nike is assessed as a relationship partner where it seems evident that these cultural connotations related to Nike’s corporate background and the cultural status of the Nike brand are found incompatible with emotional brand attachment.

4.1.3 A clash of expectations and norms

A remarkable point in regards to the participants’ connection with Nike is how the new proactive relational marketing approach has placed consumers in a peculiar and unknown situation, where they become ambivalent in regards to how they ought to relate to the Nike brand. The crux of the matter is whether to regard the relationship with Nike as a professional, exchange-based relationship or as a more personal, communal relationship based on goodwill and mutual concern (Aggarwal 2004, 2009).

As a starting point Nike is categorised as an exchange partner. As seen in the previous section, participants perceive Nike as a cool brand and a brand that has done well for itself and which should be respected on those grounds. At the same time though, it is also deemed impersonal and culturally dominant to a degree of omnipresence, and hence not the ‘kind of brand’ one would be passionate about or emotionally attached to. That Nike is associated with a strong cost-benefit rationale also implies an exchange-oriented understanding of the connection with Nike.

In this way, the prevalent characterization of Nike as impersonal and cost-benefit driven clashes with the new more personal marketing approach Nike has embarked on, and the close everyday interaction with Nike through Nike+ seemingly confuse participants in regard to how they should relate to the brand. Especially Mette, Matias and Rasmus express this dilemma when they comment upon some kind of obligation to ‘return the
favour’. Mette’s ambivalence is expressed in her surprising concern for Nike’s profitability and her description of herself as a bad customer exploiting Nike:

Mette: In that sense, I somehow feel that I have benefitted from Nike, because I’ve actually given surprisingly little money to their system, which I’ve actually been using quite a lot really. So, I hope they’ve made money on somebody else (…) because I think it’s a really good idea [Nike+]. And it’s so cool that they and Apple made that collaboration too. I reckon the idea is brilliant, because people already had their iPod compared to one having to get a new electronic brick and the costs would be tripled. But I’ve probably been one of their worse customers, I’d guess

Matias also comes across the issue of gratitude when asked whether he feels some kind of connection with Nike. He starts out with a comment on ‘giving back’ but then somewhat aggravated dismisses the idea mumbling that he did not ought to feel obligated since Nike only behaves according to self-interest and profit maximization – again Nike is ascribed with the bottom-line mentality of large corporations (Kozinets & Handelman 2004). Important to note in this regard is that Matias through his affiliation with the NBRO Running group has been sponsored with sports gear by Nike:

Interviewer: All right. Do you think there is something special that connects you and Nike? Do you feel a connection?

Matias: Yeah, there is one, I think so… I don’t really know what kind it is, but it is there. I use their stuff and their software and their Facebook site and their… Yeah, and then you’ve been given some things from them at that running-thingy, and then you feel a bit like… that then you might as well give something back or… It’s crap actually… [last sentence said in a very low voice]

Interviewer: What?

Matias: It doesn’t matter really or…

Interviewer: That you’ve been given those things?

Matias: Yeah, it’s not like it’s something … Of course it’s something they do for their own benefit. I mean, they don’t do it for our sake [laughs sarcastically]. They do it for their own sheer profit, there’s no doubt about that

Rasmus’ stance on the matter is opposite but expresses a similar confusion in regards to relating to Nike in a professional versus personal way. His stance is based on of his
personal experiences with Nike marketers during the TakeCPH campaign. Rasmus was an eager participant and put a lot of hours into the competition. He was not, however, able to register his run data at the Facebook campaign site and thus his kilometres did not count. Rasmus made Nike marketers aware of the problem but they did not act on it, and at the finals Rasmus’ neighbourhood almost lost their victory due to this problem. Rasmus’ recount of the incident is marked by great emotional aggravation as if he was personally offended, but when asked whether he felt like doing Nike a favour and whether he was disappointed when Nike did not seem appreciative, Rasmus strongly dismisses such an interpersonal-oriented (Fournier 1998) interpretation of his relationship with Nike:

Rasmus: No!, Then you’re naïve, right, if you think they sort of owe you something. I guess you just expect that a company so big and well-run and competent are ready when they… I mean, that they’re able to deliver the goods really (...) So no, it’s not like I’m thinking I did them a favour. Then I wouldn’t have done it. If I’d been there in the process thinking ‘shit man, I’m so getting onto – sorry for the expression – Nike’s dick right now’, then... I mean, it’s evident that you ought to be relatively cynical and take it for what it is. Of course they’re using me for something, and I shouldn’t expect getting anything back other than the plain contract there is

My question of doing Nike a favour seems to trigger something in Rasmus and at the end of the interview, he returns to the topic wanting to explain what he meant about being naïve:

Rasmus: Well, I don’t think you can expect that Nike owes one something, because it is this mastodon after all, which doesn’t correct individual mistakes. But you could have expected that they would have gotten things under so much control in advance so that you didn’t end up in that situation

As such, Rasmus’ account of his experiences with Nike clearly illustrates the ambivalence and dilemma associated with relating to Nike in this new consumption scenario: at the same time, Nike is a big impersonal mastodon but acts like a close partner, and the expectations to Nike in each of these roles are different (Aggarwal 2004; 2009). Although Rasmus takes on a cynical attitude and criticises Nike with expressions like ‘unprofessional’, ‘unprepared’ and ‘sloppy’, it is evident judging from his frustration that he would not have become this disappointed if he had not been so intimately
involved with Nike through the TakeCPH challenge. Accordingly, it is curious to notice that being the two participants most personally involved with Nike due to affiliation with Nike-sponsored running groups, Matias and Rasmus are also the ones who have experienced the most significant change in their feelings and attitudes towards Nike. We will return to these changes in section 4.3.

4.2 CAUTION TOWARDS THE TERMS AND CONDITIONS FOR SOCIALISING

With Nike+, Nike not only addresses consumers as individuals but also as social beings when taking on the role as a social intermediary by providing the means and occasions for Nike+ users to socialize. Whereas the role of an one-to-one relationship partner is performed primarily through the Nike+ tracking device and Nike+ online services and features, the role as social intermediary is performed through multiple channels: at the Nike+ online forum through social features such as Nike+ friends, challenges, and cheering; at Facebook through the community site NRDK; through the creation and promotion of social events like the TakeCPH neighbourhood challenge; and finally through the support of informal running groups. As seen, the central aspect in these initiatives is often related to the activity of running rather than to the Nike brand itself. As such, Nike’s approach to building community among consumers incorporates tribal aspects (Cova & Cova 2002), thereby fostering community affiliation in the form of pools and webs (Fournier & Lee 2009), that is, creating community cohesion by emphasising common interests and inter-personal networks respectively.

That consumers like to “congregate, affiliate, and associate with likeminded and –spirited others” (O’Guinn & Muñiz 2005: 265) is widely supported in the present study. However, contrary to often-cited literature on the topic arguing that consumers will assemble around any brand if the opportunity and means to do so are provided (McAlexander et al. 2002; Schau et al. 2009), it is here found that two aspects critically impact on consumers’ attitudes and feelings towards initiatives that seek to connect consumers, namely how much they identity with the central activity (here running) and in which – or rather whose – domain the facilitated socialization takes place implying that participants respond differently to Nike’s endeavour to link consumers depending of the social platform in question and the perceived centrality of the Nike brand in the specific context.
4.2.1 The social dimension

To varying degrees, five out of the six participants in the study all enjoy social interaction related to running. However, across the participants it is seen that the more one identifies as a runner, the more one enjoys participating in social activities centred on running and the more one readily connects to ‘something larger’, that is, a sense of consciousness of kind or ‘we-ness’ among runners (Muñiz & O’Guinn 2001).

At one end of the continuum we have Malene who does not identify as a runner and who does not relate to the community feeling among runners. For her running is not great fun, just practical, easy to do, and efficient. While the Nike+ sport kit makes running more fun for her while also increasing the efficiency of the exercise, Malene does not buy into any notions of socialising related to running:

Malene: Well, the whole issue about being friends because you run and creating [new] contacts through running and stuff like that… I’m just not that enthusiastic about running. Sometimes I think – when I’m out running and meet other people who are running too (…), then I think ‘all right, now we’re greeting but it’s only because we’re both wearing our running gear’ [laughs] (…) And I find it absolutely peculiar, because you don’t say hello down in the supermarket just because you’re out grocery shopping. It’s like the thing about ‘oh well, we’ve got something in common because we run’ is just something I find strange.

Next we have Mette, Jacob and Rasmus. As previously noted, Mette is personally ambivalent about running and thus also ambivalent towards connecting to something ‘larger’ centred on running; orienteering is really what satisfies her need for social identification. On the other hand, Jacob and Rasmus are interested in several sports and thus more committed to various projects rather than the sport itself; for them the notion of a social dimension is mostly related to hanging out with friends and family while exercising, i.e. making individual exercise part of a social activity through which two needs are met simultaneously. For both Rasmus and Jacob the close affiliation with CPH Joggers seems more like a commitment to an interesting project with a group of personal associates than commitment to any sense of running fellowship thereby echoing a web-type of community affiliation (Fournier & Lee 2009).

Finally, at the other end of the continuum we have Matias and Sofie, who both identifies strongly as runners and who have found great pleasure in connecting with other
runners – Sofie primarily though the Copenhagen running association Sparta and Matias through the NBRO Running group.

For Sofie the social dimension is about being around likeminded persons, where it is all right to be very focused on running and brag about accomplishments without being met with prejudice or scepticism – similar to Muñiz and O'Guinn’s (2001: 421) comment on brand community members, who know that their passionate interest in a brand may be perceived as signs of shallowness or fanaticism:

Sofie: It's awesome sometimes to meet in those communities where you get to be geeky about this one thing and really focused because there are not so many others who bother listening

(...) Sofie: It was just cooler to participate in that neighbourhood challenge [TakeCPH] or whatever it could be where it’s all right to brag. I mean, where there is a fellowship about everybody is running (...) Then, that is what you meet about and there's never that mentality about ‘aw, you ran longer than me’, it is just ‘wow, well done!’

Matias also derives great pleasure from interacting with likeminded persons. For him, the sense of fellowship with other runners was really what triggered him to get the Nike+ sport kit. Having considered for some time to get a kind of tracking system for running, Matias heard about the TakeCPH campaign and was convinced that Nike+ was the right solution for him despite previous concerns that Nike would not be serious enough for tracking. With this link to social interaction around the activity of running, Matias felt everything came together:

Matias: Then I saw this competition [TakeCPH] and thought it was pretty brilliant! Then I looked at some user profiles and saw that there were a lot people who ran as much as I did and who were having as much of a spin about it (...) I though it was really cool with the neighbourhoods [competing] against each other and visually well executed with the map and who had been running the most and stuff like that. I just got this kind of Nørrebro-feeling or such a 'I’m gonna bloody get them’. (...) So that was pretty much what made the decision and then I also realised the thing about the iPod and the music at the same time, and then all of a sudden it all made perfect sense

For Matias, the brief participation in TakeCPH for the Nørrebro neighbourhood resulted in close affiliation with the NBRO Running group, - an informal running group, which
formed during the TakeCPH campaign among Nørrebro residents and which has continued afterwards. Matias’ interaction with this group has really enriched his running experience and has helped integrate running into his social life. As such, Matias’ account of his affiliation with this running group most closely resembles Muñiz and O’Guinn’s (2001) notion of consciousness of kind:

Matias: Well, it really gives me something. Also in relation to the social intercourse I really feel that there are some people that you didn’t know before but with whom you now kind of share something because of running – or so it feels

4.2.2 Socialising away from the brand epicentre

As seen in the above section, all participants except for Malene generally deemed social interaction related to running relevant and rewarding. However, significant for the participants’ responses towards the social dimension integrated in the Nike+ concept is a prevalent disregard of the various inter-personal features in the Nike+ online forum at the brand’s web site. None of the six participants have more than a couple of Nike+ friends – if any at all, they cannot imagine forming new friendships through Nike+, and the cheering feature is mostly ridiculed. These social features are described as irrelevant at best:

Matias: I don’t really care about the social stuff at the Nike+ site because it’s not gonna stand a chance anyway compared to Facebook, because everything in there also links to Facebook. So there’s no reason for being at such a small place when you can be at a bigger place

- and as unnatural and exploitative at worst. Interestingly, Facebook is in this regard perceived as a ‘natural’ medium:

Rasmus: (...) If you go into that Nike universe and sign up for all the stuff and make your challenges in there, then I don’t think that people think ‘okay, what’s in it for me’. I mean, you just become a kind of foot soldier

Interviewer: But don’t you think people get something out of it?

Rasmus: Well, I’m aware that it can be used for tracking and to see when you ran the fastest on the route and when you get your crises for instance, but the thing about making Nike challenges, I mean, where you invite … ‘now I challenge the guys from Fanø [Danish island, where Rasmus’s family has a summer cottage]’… You know, then it has to take place in there… No, come on! If you wanna go for a run with some guys, then you bloody don’t need
Interviewer: So you think it's unnatural that it is has to happen that way through? 

Rasmus: Yes, I think it's an absolutely monumental extra link. Such a mastodon [Nike] where it's not transparent what you get and what you take. Where you actually just do everything on their premises and go 'wow, it's awesome how they've put that website at our disposal', right. (...) So it's just there that I think it's becoming creepy, right. As long as you can see what you get out of it and Nike is not wasting your time, then it's all right. But that thing, it's just such an excessive umbrella this website [nikeplus.com]

Clearly, participants are reluctant or – as in Rasmus’ case – even openly hostile towards letting the Nike brand act as a mediator of inter-personal relationships. As such, the Nike brand is not immediately accepted as a linking factor (Cova 1997; Cova & Cova 2002; Muñiz & O’Guinn 2001) – at least not in the brand-centred Nike+ online forum, which Rasmus explicitly describes as a “totalitarian universe”. The prevalent perception of the Nike brand as a “mastodon” seems an issue in this regard too. Thus, an underlying sentiment in participants’ accounts of their experiences with Nike+ is the circumstance that Nike is perceived a very commercial, profit-focused brand as also seen in section 4.1.2. In the context of brand-facilitated socialization this is supported by Sofie’s way of contrasting Nike with the Copenhagen running association Sparta, where Sparta is emphasised for more virtuous characteristics and a “spirit of freedom” referring to the many volunteers in the association, i.e. something less profane than Nike (Belk et al. 1989), or by Mette’s continuous contrasting of Nike with the orienteering community, which she clearly associates with something more authentic due to its sub-cultural status.

While social features in the online Nike+ forum is only half-heartedly welcomed if not downright rejected, participants more readily embrace Nike’s facilitation of interaction and social activities when such take place outside the brand-centred forum at nikeplus.com. The important aspect, it seems, is socialising around an activity or an event rather than a brand, and in this regard Nike is to some extend allowed to act as an initiator or facilitator. Two motives for this are indicated: one concerned with relevance in consumers’ everyday lives, and a second motive of power play dealing with a cautious concern for the premises and conditions for social interaction.
The motive of relevance is readily supported by the participants. As such, the presence of Nike at Facebook with the NRDK platform is deemed more relevant than the social features at nikeplus.com. Matias’ previous comment about how he doesn’t care about the ‘social stuff’ at the Nike+ site because Facebook is more relevant illustrates this as does Rasmus’ comments about Facebook as the natural place for social interaction. In this way, it is seen that Facebook is generally perceived as an integral part of consumers’ everyday lives. Accordingly socialising through this medium is deemed more relevant. This is also seen in how Matias, Mette and Sofie regularly skim news and status reports from the NRDK Facebook site as a part of their everyday Facebook routine.

The motive of power play is less obvious, but can be related to how Facebook generally is referred to as a ‘natural’ medium and how the NRDK Facebook site is more associated with running as a generic activity than with the Nike brand. For instance, when asked how much she associates NRDK with Nike, Sofie answers:

Sofie: Of course a bit, but more that is it just running that is the common interest (...) So I reckon that this Facebook thingy is something different for me... It's a bit the same as the fact that I'm a member of Sparta's various running groups. It's a bit like the running social [aspect] in it, that you can ask about things and also things that lie outside the domain of Nike

Sofie generally perceives the NRDK Facebook site as something apart from the rest of the Nike+ universe and as something more in line with various other sports-related sites at Facebook including the sites of a major Danish newspaper, an athletics/running association, and a national sports retailer. Sofie refers to these as “knowledge portals” and uses them as sources of inspiration and knowledge about products, events and training.

The general feeling among participants is thus that interaction through the NRDK Facebook site is more concerned with running as a common interest than it is with the Nike brand, and furthermore that interaction here does not take place solely on Nike’s premises. Rather Facebook is an open forum perceived as a kind of common property. Rasmus’ description of how he perceives the difference between the Nike+ online forum and Facebook as platforms for social interaction illustrates this attitude:

Rasmus: It [Nike+] is a universe where you are also able to have friends like at Facebook or MySpace or whatever there has been there previously, and where you can make mood
reports and invite friends and all that stuff. It’s simply too much! Nike is forgetting that it’s all about running and not about being part of their… It’s simply too violent and too obvious and too much to tie your identity to a brand that we all know already and which is just sort of a part of our popular culture’s commercial premises or whatever

Interviewer: But do you feel then that it is too much because it was Nike who did it?

Rasmus: Because it was so… because they got greedy (…) One thing is to be able to create a challenge in there, but well, the moment where you have a medium like Facebook, which is that unifying for people, then it simply becomes too gross that you try to get all the same functions into a place like [Nike’s]… Of course there are also commercial ideas with Facebook, I’m aware of that, but after all it’s not an umbrella in the same way – I mean, a brand umbrella. It’s all kinds of different things, which offer you something that you can just ignore or something like that. Here [at Nike+] you had to become a Nike soldier, a foot soldier (…) – once again, a bit gross! It was simply too much of a good thing

Because the use of Facebook is as versatile as it is, it seems to be regarded as more democratic in that it is open for everyone. Facebook is thus accepted as an egalitarian, although commercial, forum where users are free to pick and choose from offers as they please – or as Rasmus remarks, just ignore them. Nike is accepted in this forum on the same terms and conditions as everybody else. However, due to Nike’s cultural status as almighty and profit-driven, the brand’s attempt to gather consumers in the brand-centred Nike+ forum is perceived as totalitarian and exploitative – an act of greed as Rasmus expresses it.

4.2.4 Community membership when relevant

As seen in the above section, participants are generally more open towards social initiatives when they take place outside the brand-centred Nike+ forum. The positive evaluations of the TakeCPH campaign detected in this study attest to this. The campaign was executed through Facebook during autumn 2010 and challenged the residents of the eight Copenhagen neighbourhoods to run the most kilometres in a 60-day period. As such, the event can be compared with McAlexander et al.’s (2002) notion of ‘brandfest’. Five out of the study’s six participants took part in this challenge and genuinely liked the concept with neighbourhoods challenging each other. Moreover, they all found the challenge highly motivating and readily describe their participation as being part of ‘something larger’ echoing Muñiz and O’Guinn’s (2001) notion of ‘we-ness’.
A major success factor appears to be the perceived relevance of the TakeCPH concept. Participants relate this relevance to the interplay between reality and virtuality and a sense of proximity to everyday life due to the campaign's conceptual basis on Copenhagen neighbourhoods, which provided the campaign with a local, intimate feeling that especially Matias, Sofie and Mette connected to. For Jacob and Rasmus intimacy was related to their personal networks, which were activated for the participation in the campaign. As such, the created feelings of 'we-ness' did not pertain to Nike. Rather, participants' excitement is described as an 'I'm-in-this-with-my-friends-we-ness' or a 'neighbourhood-we-ness' as seen in section 4.2.1 in Matias' description of how he was struck by a 'Nørrebro-feeling' when he first approached the TakeCPH campaign as well as in Mette and Sofie's animated accounts of the good-humoured neighbourhood banter that took place at the NRDK Facebook site. In this sense, participants' positive attitudes and feelings seem dependent on the campaign's interlocking with neighbourhood communities and other social networks (Bagozzi & Dholakia 2006; McAlexander et al. 2002), whereby the centrality of the Nike brand is also weakened.

As regards consciousness of kind more specifically centred on Nike, only Sofie and Mette come close in related sentiments and none of them 'allow' themselves to give in to this feeling. For Sofie, the sense of 'we-ness' associated with Nike+ is described as momentary and self-imposed. Unprompted, Sofie introduces the idea of Nike having created a universe, which you become a part of when you use the Nike+ sport kit. When asked whether she feels part of this, she however replies:

Sofie: Well yes, at that interface [nikerunning.com] I feel that I can become a part of it if I want to; that I can join and drop out as I please - for instance with that race during summertime... So in the periods when there's a challenge I feel like part of some community, and then when there isn't, it's just my own little logbook.

Similarly, Mette mentions a Nike+ World Race challenge, which she participated in a few years back. It appears that this challenge triggered something in her, but Mette quickly tones down her excitement and explains it in more rational terms of motivation:

Mette: I've actually also participated in (...) something where everybody is running 10 kilometres or something like that, I mean everybody in the whole world, and I got my friend persuaded into being part of it, because I just thought it was good fun the thing about 'oh,
then it’s everybody in the whole world who’s using Nike+ and now we’re also doing it’. So I thought that was pretty good fun and we got pretty devoted to that. (...) Well, it’s not like you feel the world peace settling just because everybody’s doing it. It was also just because I hadn’t been running 10 kilometres so much at that time, so it was a bit longer [distance] that usual

In this way, it is seen that participants do not accept Nike as a linking factor per se and that any excitement related to feeling a part of something in a social context facilitated by Nike is either explained as communal feelings towards another social entity, i.e. a neighbourhood or social network, made subject to one’s own discretion, or swiftly subdued.

4.3 POWER PLAYS

What we have seen in the above sections is that participants unprompted associate Nike with negative brand characteristics articulated by critical consumer discourses related to the politicization of brands as discussed in section 2.3.5. Thus, due to the fact that Nike is a brand with a global impact and an American corporate background, Nike is automatically associated with cultural pervasiveness, highly commercial motives and a dominant cost-benefit rationale. While such socio-culturally informed brand associations do not cause the participants in the study to reject Nike as a cultural resource (due to cool brand imagery and design aesthetics), it is not welcomed either as an emotionally significant relationship partner or a social intermediary.

In the next section we will see how participants also relate more personally to ideological consumer discourses when they make sense of themselves as actors in the marketplace. Moreover, we will go closer into two telling participant accounts of how Nike’s proactive relational marketing approach centred on Nike+ has changed their relationship with the Nike brand. Here we see how attention to the socio-cultural influence on consumers’ assessment of a brand as a relationship partner and a social intermediary make us able to comprehend new and very different motives in consumers’ attitudes and feelings towards a brand than the consumer motives previously treated in the brand relationship and brand community literature discussed in section 2.1 and 2.2.
4.3.1 Being a savvy consumer playing the game

General for the participants in the study is their attentiveness towards the marketplace and its commercial actors. In contrast to most literature on consumer ideology, this attentiveness is not, however, an expression of antagonistic sentiments in any way as participants openly admit to be commercially-minded and driven by materialistic desires as illustrated by Rasmus’s comment:

Rasmus: I’m probably a critical consumer, one might say. I reckon that I think a lot about most things... the things that I occupy myself with. But it’s not like I’m anti-commercial or balk at branded goods – almost quite the opposite. I like quality, I like signal values and so on

As such, commercialism, branded goods, and even corporations are presented as basic premises for the marketplace and consumer life and accepted as such as when Mette in section 4.1.2 as a matter-of-fact refers to China as the ‘great factory’ of world manufacturing.

However, while participants reject being ‘anti’ towards consumption and commercial actors (Kozinets & Handelman 2004), they all – except for Jacob – somehow relate to the ideological consumer discourses discussed in section 2.3.4 when referring to themselves in the consumer role (Holt 2002). As such, the overarching consumer ideal guiding participants’ sense making of themselves as consumers comes forth as a sensible and rational consumer mindset, where the ability to see through market structures is highly esteemed. Reason is the keyword here as well as marketplace know-how and cultural savvy that allows one to take brands and other commercial offerings for what they are – nothing more, nothing less. Thus, in contrast to Holt’s (2002) participants, the participants in this present study do not define themselves in opposition to the marketplace, but still subscribe to similar ideals of seeing through market structures in order to partake in an undertaking deemed inevitable, namely consuming, on an informed and reflexive basis.

Central in this regard is how participants describe their attitudes towards Nike in analytical terms as if professionally evaluating a marketing strategy thereby demonstrating their own competences in seeing through market mechanisms and potentially alluring schemes. The important point, it seems, it not to become a ‘target’ – at least not unknowingly. Sofie, for instance, admits with a considerable degree of
insight, that she is ‘on the take’ of big brands – implicitly conveying the impression that one ought to be cautious in this regard. By admitting this ‘weakness’ as an ironic meta-evaluation of herself as a consumer, she assures that she does actually know the dos and don’ts of ‘acceptable’ consumer behaviour, in other words, that she is not totally unaware of marketing practice’s seducing properties cf. consumer activists’ criticism of mainstream consumers’ lack of reflection (Kozinets & Handelman 2004):

Sofie: But I don’t think I’m the kind of person who’s critical towards a big brand. I’m like ‘all right if they make something that…’. I think that I pretty easily become excited sometimes. Apple also has me in the palm of its hand, and there’s just nothing to do about it. And I laugh about it myself and I’m perfectly aware that that’s just the way it is

Mette on the other hand, identifies as a critical consumer and describes her approach to advertising as analytical and something she chooses to let herself be exposed to. Accordingly, she downplays the role of brand symbolism while emphasising tangible aspects such as product quality and technical know-how in her general fascination of product offerings that have “demanded quite a few engineers to develop”. She does, however, admit that the endeavour to make an ‘informed’ rational purchase is difficult in practice:

Mette: But well, we bloody try to see through all that [market clutter]. It does sometimes become too much of a sport for me to be a consumer, and then you sit there and all of a sudden you’ve spent half a day reading some user reviews about some thing you want to buy, and then it’s suddenly an impossible task

A related aspect of participants’ way of making sense of themselves as consumers can be explained by Thompson and Haytko’s notion of the anti-conformist narrative related to consumer autonomy and the deeply ingrained Western value of being a self-directed individual (Thompson & Haytko 1997). For Malene, this is illustrated in her reluctant enthusiasm for Apple products. Having established that she actually places more emphasis on her iPod than Nike when running with Nike+, Malene is asked about her attitudes towards Apple and whether she is a fan of the brand (as most participants in the study). Somewhat gloomy she agrees and confirms that she besides her iPod also owns a Mac laptop and an iPhone. More as a casual remark than a question, the interviewer then note that she has jumped the Apple bandwagon, which triggers a reaction:
Malene: I hate that Apple bandwagon! But yes, I am. But it’s more because I kinda... no... I get kinda annoyed by just following an Apple bandwagon like that (...) Also because I actually don’t want to be such a person that follows suit just because... But I guess I just am [laughs]. I just like the stuff, and I like that it’s so intuitive and easy

Related to the notion of anti-conformity, creative autonomy (Cherrier 2009; Holt 2002; Thompson & Haytko 1997) is also a strong issue among participants in their relationship with the marketplace – curiously enough mostly among the male participants. Here the ideal is that of a ‘bricoleur’ mixing brands and styles to further one’s own sense of individuality. For example, Rasmus expresses a clear aversion to complete sets of running gear, which he finds unattractive and uniforming in the sense that one’s identity is subdued:

Rasmus: I don’t like running around like a billboard (...) It just looks too, you know... then everybody is in the same. (...) Like ‘I’ve just bought myself a new identity’, right, as a runner that is. I mean, you’re allowed to be yourself. So if you like to wear a hat, even if it’s an ugly hat, then you gotta wear it, right. It definitely shouldn’t be a Nike hat. That would just be a bit too much I reckon

Thus, the study reveals how relatively ordinary consumers exemplified by five out of six participants in the study clearly relate to cultural discourses with ideological content when they interact with the marketplace and make sense of themselves as consumers even if they do not explicitly identity as antagonistic or critical.

4.3.2 Fighting back

Of the six participants in the study, Rasmus is the one most critical towards Nike’s new proactive relational marketing approach as already seen in his harsh comments about the Nike+ online forum in section 4.2.2.

In Rasmus’ view, Nike’s cultural dominance is not a question of cultural degradation per see as otherwise decried in social critiques of global corporate-sponsored brands (Klein 2000; Lasn 1999; Luedicke et al. 2010). Rather, he finds Nike presence somewhat over the top and momentarily too much. However, in connection with Nike’s new proactive relational approach, Rasmus reacts very strongly when it comes to Nike’s attempts to mediate contact among consumers, which he clearly perceives as an illegitimate endeavour to control and exploit socialization among consumers. His response is articulated drawing
upon the ‘cultural authority narrative’ (Holt 2002) and popular anti-corporate David vs. Goliath discourses (Dalli et al. 2006; Holt 2002; Kozinets & Handelman 2004; Luedicke et al. 2010; Thompson et al. 2006), but the actual meaning is new and somewhat flipped in that Rasmus places himself in the role of David that must ‘outsmart’ the Goliath of Nike.

Central in Rasmus’ narrative is his perception of the Nike+ online forum as a ‘totalitarian’ brand universe. Consequently, participation in this forum is perceived as running the errands of Nike without receiving anything substantial back – Rasmus expresses this as being a ‘Nike foot soldier’. Several other variations of this uneven exchange are used such as being naïve, being a ‘sucker’, and being a prostitute, and although Rasmus is not consistent in his use of these expressions, his general attitude is clear: a full embrace of the Nike+ concept and in particular its social features is tantamount to letting go of personal sovereignty and interacting with other Nike+ users on the terms and conditions of Nike:

Rasmus: (...) This website is too much, it’s overdone in my opinion. Exactly there – prostitution is probably a harsh expression – but you gotta be starry-eyed for not recognising that you’re being screwed. (...) I just think it’s a bit like... that they can’t see – Nike – that it’s too complete. That they can’t see that they in this way are making themselves into such a factor that is inseparable from the activity of running and that’s pretty damned creepy if you’ve got just a bit reluctance towards being subject to some totalitarian - whether it’s political government forms or other isms. It’s just so violent that they are trying to make it inseparable from running.

For Rasmus this power imbalance is striking; in his view the personal benefits for the common Nike+ users will always be minimal compared to the total winnings of Nike.

Because Rasmus has come to regard the Nike+ concept and especially its online execution as an expression of a totalitarian regime disposed to exploitation of the common consumer, his relationship with Nike has become a matter of minimizing giving and maximizing receiving; the use of the Nike+ online forum is kept minimal and generally disparaged, while Nike’s sponsoring of CPH Joggers with free sports gear is readily welcomed – his ongoing affiliation with the running group is partly premised upon this sponsoring:
Rasmus: And then I also feel that there are good prospects [laughs] of Nike continuing to pump me with [free] gear for the times to come (...) So in that sense I get something out of it and count on continuing to get that

For Rasmus personally, the relationship with Nike is thus tolerable because he makes sure to uphold a ratio of giving and receiving that he finds acceptable. As such, Rasmus partakes in what he clearly perceives as a power play with Nike while portraying himself as a facile consumer that has been able to out-manoeuvre (Holt 2002) the brand and avoid its exploitative practices.

4.3.3 Keeping things apart

Matias’ recount of his experiences with Nike through Nike+ is not marked by the same critical outset as Rasmus’ and his connection with Nike is not one of explicit power play. Rather the guiding principle for Matias seems to be a distinction between the sacred and profane in his personal life (Belk et al. 1989) based on his personal experiences with Nike rather than principles.

One of the central facets of Matias’ experiences with Nike’s proactive relational marketing is how he through the TakeCPH campaign got together with the NBRO Running group. The affiliation with the group has opened up a whole new social dimension for Matias, which he really connects to and finds inspiring. However, during the interview Matias seems to realize that the group is actually imbued with a certain “Nike undertone”, which he after a few intermediate steps relates to the fact that one of the group administrators has “some kind of contact” with Nike. Matias refers to this as “Nike infiltration” and returns to the notion a few times, clearly feeling ambivalent and bothered by this as if referring to some kind of unwanted contamination (Belk et al. 1989: 21).

Matias accounts for a few recent incidents where he specifically found Nike’s behaviour ‘too much’ in the sense of authoritarian. One incident was a photo session Nike had arranged with the regular runners from NBRO Running. The session itself was great fun and hassle-free, but in retro perspective, Matias felt somewhat exploited by Nike and induced to compromise his sense of a creative, independent self (Thompson & Haytko 1997)
by participating in the session with no personal reservations and thus ending up feeling too ‘Nike-ish’. Ironically he remarks:

Matias: There was no dress code, but they would be happy to see some swoosh. (...) Coincidentally we had just been given those new things from Nike, right – coincidentally [grins ironically], and of course I wanted to wear it, it was to be tried on and I wasn’t quite aware of what we were doing, if we were meant to wear it – ‘is this some kind of Nike event we’re going to do?’ or... But there’s definitely some kind of infiltration related to it and I’m not quite sure where I stand in this regard. But yes, I felt very Nike-ish... Perhaps a little too much even... (...) I guess it was just too much with both Nike jacket and shoes, you know (...) In that regard I thought I just ought to have mixed it some more

Another recent incident concerns Nike objecting to an image posted in the NBRO Running group forum at Facebook by a group member. This intrusion by Nike was not taken well by the group and was at the time of the interview still a subject for discussion. The recalling of the incident causes Matias to question the presence of the Nike swoosh logo in the group’s Facebook forum. Clearly Matias feels a growing need to keep Nike apart from certain spheres of his life although his thoughts are hesitant and not yet quite developed:

Matias: And then I think, why is it that we have that logo in our NBRO running-thingy? So I guess I’ve just become more aware that Nike is fine and it’s good and they make some things that I can use, but I also just need to remember why I run

Interviewer: And keep it separate?

Matias: Yes, so that everything is not... hmm...

Interviewer: That they’re not interfering?

Matias: Yes, that they don’t interfere and dictate how I think about running and which competitions I enter and which things I should buy and stuff like that, because that’s where you’re quickly led, I reckon. And that has happened for me as well, and that’s just where I think more about it, - that now it has come pretty close, so now I have... [Matias holds up his hands]

Interviewer: So now you are putting up your guards?

Matias: Yes. I just don’t hope that it’s going to become something anti, because it’s still some great stuff and the best I reckon
This feeling of Nike as somewhat intrusive and authoritarian if one does not pay attention is underlined when Matias is asked whether his perception of Nike has changed due to his use of Nike+. Matias’ way of describing this is somewhat backwards, but the meaning is unmistakable: Nike’s presence in his life has grown to an extend he feels invading:

Matias: The funny thing is that there has become more of it. You see, Nike was not as big before, but because this running group also is somewhat Nike infiltrated and you have been given some things, then there has become so much more of it, but that has also meant that I little by little have developed some other thoughts about me damned not being some kind of... You see, I’m just me and this running club is not going to be a Nike running club and they are not going to come and decide which images to post

With Matias’ emphasis of how he is just him, i.e. not a Nike-person, and how the running club is just a running club and how it should not be a Nike running club, we see how Matias is aware of keeping the sacred (the friendship and the ’Nørrebro-feeling’) separated from the profane (Nike being a highly commercial brand) in order to minimize the likelihood of unwanted contamination (Belk et al. 1989: 21) and sustain both personal and group sovereignty from Nike.
5. DISCUSSION

As stated in the introduction, the present study taps into the paradoxical intersection between brands proactively seeking to establish deep and committed relationships with its consumers, and consumers generally being reluctant and cautious towards the marketplace and its commercial actors. With the pivotal point comprised by the Nike+ case, the study has shed light on a particularly troubled brand, namely the American sports brand Nike as the epitome of not only iconic brand status but also of socio-cultural criticism and mockery. As such, the study has been guided by a general curiosity towards consumers’ response to a proactive relational marketing approach and the fundamental question of whether consumers will embrace just any brand that proposes itself as a relationship partner and a social intermediary.

The short answer to this is no, consumers will not embrace just any brand. On the other hand, they do not reject it all together either and this leave us with an important discussion of the subject matter.

In accordance with the problem statement, we will now discuss consumers’ sense making when assessing a brand as a relationship partner and a social intermediary as well as the basis, i.e. the sources of meaning, for this process. Subsequently we will discuss how this process of sense making influences on the embrace of Nike as a relationship partner and social intermediary.

5.1 CONSUMER SENSE MAKING IN A SOCIO-CULTURAL CONTEXT

As part of the theoretical foundation for the present study, it was in chapter 2 argued that the post-modern understanding of consumer sense making advanced by both brand relationship and brand community literature implied an artificial conceptisation of brand relationships (individual and collective alike) as closed meaning-systems sealed off from their socio-cultural context. It was moreover argued that such a view on meaning creation was inappropriate if the aim was to comprehensively understand consumers’ responses to proactive relational marketing, i.e. a situation where the consumer did not take the initiative to intensify the connection with the brand and where the consumer’s devotion to the brand was questionable.
The empirical findings supported these arguments. More specifically the study found that even though both individual- and socially-oriented aspects of the Nike+ concept were genuinely relevant to the participants, they still did not fully embrace Nike as a relationship partner or a social intermediary. As such, we saw in section 4.1.1 how the Nike+ concept addressed current concerns of keeping fit and deeper identity issues related to aging and making exercise a natural and healthy part of life, and how Nike+ did that so well that four out of six participants had actually developed a behavioural dependency towards their Nike+ sport kits. Yet, it was also seen that Nike was not acknowledged in this regard, i.e. that psychological meanings related to the actual use of the Nike+ sport kit were not applied when making sense of Nike as a relationship partner in stark contrast to Fournier's (1998) assertion that the meaning ascribed to a brand relationship depends on the identity work the relationship is grounded in.

Similarly, in section 4.2.1 we saw how a social dimension related to running exercise was deemed relevant for five out of six participants and for two of them even highly rewarding, but also that these five participants were reluctant if not openly hostile towards letting Nike act as a social intermediary. Moreover, any emerging sense of community from social activities facilitated by Nike was ascribed to other social entities rather than to the Nike+ universe or to ones own discretion as if community membership was self-imposed on temporarily basis. As such, it was evident that participants refused to ‘give in’ to any sense of consciousness of kind explicitly centred on the Nike brand. Thus, in the assessment of Nike as a social intermediary, the brand was not judged according to the actual linking value it provided in contrast to the general belief in brand community literature (Bagozzi & Dholakia 2006; Muñiz & O’Guinn 2001; McAlexander et al. 2002) and tribal marketing (Cova 1997; Cova & Cova 2002). Accordingly, the assertion that “the link is more important than the thing” (Cova 1997: 307) could not be supported here.

What instead characterised five out of six participants’ assessment of Nike as a relationship partner and a social intermediary were socio-culturally forged meanings related to consumer ideology and the politicization of brands. Thus, although Nike was readily recognised as a cool sports brand with superior design aesthetics, it was also perceived as a culturally pervasive brand sponsored by an American corporation
associated with a domineering cost-benefit rationale. While such associations did not cause a problem for participants per se as evidenced by their long histories of preferring Nike gear to other sports brands, the associations became an issue when assessing Nike in the more emotionally prominent roles of relationship partner and social intermediary introduced with the Nike+ concept. Accordingly, it was seen how participants simply deemed Nike inappropriate for these new positions. As Mette very tellingly describes it (cf. section 4.1.2): While Nike makes nice stuff, it is just not the kind of brand to which one develops ‘emotional-hoo-ha’, i.e. compassionate sentiments.

Thus, while individual identity issues characterised participants’ approach to running and their liking for a social dimension associated with running, socio-cultural formed connotations to the Nike brand and its corporate background were more prominent in the assessment of Nike as a relationship partner and social intermediary. As such, this study indicates that primary attitudes and feelings about a brand (based on identity issues, personal experiences with the brand, and marketing activities) are made subject to a process of meta-evaluation influenced by socio-cultural meanings and sentiments concerning the acceptability of the relationship. This has important consequences for both brand relationship literature (concerned with individual as well as collective brand relationships) and marketing practice. It indicates that brands are assessed on parameters previously not included in relationship literature such as brand prevalence (mainstream vs. niche), commercial background (e.g. corporate ownership), and brand/company history to name but a few, i.e. aspects that play a role in the politicization of brands (O’Guinn & Muñiz 2005), and accordingly that the notion of brand-self connection may be subject other factors than the mere congruence between brand imagery and consumer self (Heding et al. 2009). Thus, while Escalas and Bettman (2005) demonstrated how brand-self connection was critically influenced by reference groups, this study has demonstrated how it is also influenced by broader socio-cultural dynamics.

Moreover, the attention to aspects of the brand that lies beyond imagery and other symbolic properties echoes what Holt in 2002 identified as an urge among postmodern consumers to ‘peel away the brand veneer’ (Holt 2002: 86), that is, to attend to contradictions between a brand’s espoused ideals and the real world activities of the
corporation that profit from the brand as Holt explained it. The critical issue in this regard is that of authenticity, which has changed from being a question of creative positioning linking the brand to special ‘authentic milieus’ to being a question of the quality of the brand sponsor (Holt 2002: 86).

Everything considered, the findings in the present study indicate that the qualitative difference between interpersonal relationships and commercial consumer-brand relationships should be more carefully considered than it has previously been in brand relationship literature and that the highly committed and affective laden ‘marital’ relationship ideal advanced in literature (Ahuvia 2005; Fournier 1998, 2009) is far from the reality of today’s consumer culture – at least when the brand is in the hands of a proactive, highly commercial marketer. As evidenced here, consumers readily recognise brands as entities with basic commercial motives and accordingly, principles derived from human social psychology naturally meet their limits in explaining consumer-brand interaction (Fournier 2009).

5.2 CONTESTED BRAND RELATIONSHIP

Fournier (1998: 346) noted how the socio-cultural context of a brand relationship has an impact on relationship attitudes and behaviours but did not unfold the point. This study does and has demonstrated the ways in which the socio-cultural context of a brand relationship vitally influences on relationship attitudes and behaviour.

A fundamental finding in the study can be ascribed to the fact that none of the six participants embrace Nike as an emotionally significant relationship partner or an explicit social intermediary although the Nike+ concept provides all the means and occasions to develop or strengthen relationship bonds with the Nike brand as well as with other Nike+ users. Four of the participants had developed a significant dependency of their Nike+ tracking devices, but did not willingly acknowledge it. Five of them also enjoyed participating in social activities facilitated by Nike, yet any sense of consciousness of kind was not attributed to Nike. Why? Because Nike due to socio-culturally forged meanings was not considered authentic as a relationship partner and a social intermediary. As such, the study clearly demonstrates how socio-cultural meanings ascribed to a brand are significant for consumers’ responses towards it. As
regards the recent attention in marketing literature to the proactive facilitation of brand community (Heding et al. 2009; McAlexander et al. 2002; Schau et al. 2009), this implies that building community is more than a 'how-to' question of providing a context for interaction as in McAlexander et al.'s (2002) notion of brandfests or of introducing social practices in a community setting as otherwise suggested by Schau et al. with the confident assertion that if firms give consumers the opportunity to construct brand communities, they will (Schau et al. 2009: 41). Rather, findings in the present context of Nike+ suggest that understanding community dynamics (Heding et al. 2009) is secondary to a more foundational understanding of brand authenticity as also implied by Kates (2004) in his discussion of brand legitimacy in gay men’s communities.

However, apart from the issue of authenticity, findings in the present study point to another important issue, namely one of control. Significant for the participants in the present study is how they have no problem in accepting a more distanced, exchange-based relationship with Nike (Aggarwal 2004, 2009). Their negative responses become apparent when Nike is seeking more intimate relations and as participants start perceiving Nike as closing in on their private spheres of consumption. The background for this reaction may possibly be found in how a consumer ideal based on rationality and sensibleness clearly guided participants’ understanding of themselves as consumers. Accordingly, personal sovereignty based on the ability to see through market structures was seen as a significant issue in participants’ general interaction with the marketplace e.g. in how they described themselves as fully aware of the mechanisms behind marketing allure and thus how they would act towards it accordingly.

As such, the accounts of Rasmus and Matias in section 4.3 point to an unexpected reaction in the domain of brand relationships, namely that consumers may feel their sovereignty threatened in the new consumption scenario Nike has introduced with the Nike+ concept. Due to the concept’s interactional character and its many interrelated features, use of the tracking system is actually difficult to separate from its commercial facilitator, i.e. Nike. In other words, Nike is playing an active part in the consumption of Nike+ offerings. This aspect seems to be pivotal in the change of attitudes and feelings Matias and Rasmus have experienced during the course of using Nike+. While Matias is
less explicit than Rasmus, they share the basic motive of sustaining personal sovereignty in their use of Nike+. In this light, Nike is not just culturally pervasive but is suddenly described as a ‘greedy mastodon’ attempting to exploit the common consumer as a Nike ‘foot soldier’ within the ‘totalitarian universe’ of Nike+ (Rasmus’s version) or a commercial intruder that has ‘infiltrated’ an unknowing running group and now seeks to control group dynamics for its own benefit (Matias’s version), and responses are shaped accordingly: Rasmus keeps his use of Nike+ basic while getting back at Nike through his own exploitative tactics, and Matias have become attentive to keep things apart so that his genuine feelings related to running and to community and friendship are not contaminated by an insincere brand driven by self-interest maximizing behaviours.

While Rasmus and Matias’ responses are reminiscent of antagonistic consumer behaviour described in consumer resistance literature (e.g. Cherrier 2009; Firat & Venkatesh 1997; Holt 2002), it is noteworthy though, how Rasmus and Matias have not terminated their use of Nike+ and thereby explicitly rejected Nike. On the contrary, both explicitly state that they will continue their use of Nike+ because it serves their particular needs in a way they find superior to other tracking systems, and both also affiliate with running groups that developed in relation to Nike promotional activities, namely the TakeCPH campaign. As such, Nike has actually obtained the roles as a relationship partner and a social intermediary, but Matias and Rasmus are both very troubled in accepting Nike as such. As seen, the result is some kind of power play with Nike or what we with reference to Luedicke and Gielser (2008) might refer to as contested consumption. However, where Luedicke and Gielser saw contested consumption as playing out in between consumers who explicitly challenged and critiqued each other’s consumption choices (Luedicke & Giesler 2008: 812 – see also Luedicke et al. 2010), the contestation of brand affiliation is here an issue for the individual consumer vis-à-vis his ideological convictions and his self-image as a consumer. As such, Rasmus and Matias’ responses represent previously unreported brand relationship attitudes and behaviour, namely antagonistic attitudes and behaviours within the relationship, where the enactment of critical consumer ideology does not necessarily cause consumers to reject a brand or a company altogether but rather to be cautious towards their own behaviour and the level of their involvement with a brand.
While Rasmus and Matias may feel their sovereignty threatened by Nike due to the brand’s particularly brash status in consumer culture, it may also be suggested that the proactive character of Nike’s new marketing approach is the very factor triggering their adverse response simply because they do not feel able to control the pace in intensifying interaction. Algesheimer et al.’s (2005) findings concerning consumer experiences of normative community pressure in facilitated brand communities are interesting in this regard as it points to a similar mechanism. Here the consumers who were less attached to the brand in question were more likely to experience their affiliation with the brand community as subject to a normative pressure to abide by certain community norms, which again caused them to react with reactance in an attempt to regain ‘lost freedom’ (Algesheimer et al. 2005: 22) from community restraints. Although their study did not explicitly look into the company’s role in facilitating brand community (in this case company-sponsored car clubs), the authors suggest that this aspect may be critical in understanding consumers’ negative reactions, i.e. that the proactive marketers’ attempt to facilitate consumer interaction with and around the brand may be perceived by consumers as structuring their behaviour.

Further research would most likely benefit from exploring such mechanisms further e.g. in connection with relationship trajectory, which is another neglected area with brand relationship literature (Fournier 2009).
6. CONCLUSION

The present study took its outset in the growing attention within marketing literature and practice to the prospects of proactively building relationships with consumers – a marketing strategy in this context referred to as proactive relational marketing. Pointing to the growing reflexivity among consumers towards consumption and the marketplace and related tensions in consumer culture concerning the ideological aspects of consumption, attention was brought to a fundamental question neglected in brand relationship literature: Will consumers embrace just any brand that proposes it self as a relationship partner and a social intermediary?

Guided by this basic curiosity, the study took its outset in the Nike+ tracking concept chosen to illustrate a proactive relational marketing strategy launched by a particularly debated brand, namely the American sports brand Nike, and set out on an explorative journey concerned with consumers’ responses to such a marketing approach with a focus on individual consumers’ sense making in this new consumption scenario related to their assessment of Nike as a relationship partner and a social intermediary.

As part of the theoretical foundation for the study, it was argued that the view on consumer sense making in brand relationship and brand community literature was too narrowly conceptualised, as the dominant postmodern perspectives on consumer sense making did not account for the socio-cultural context of such brand relationship phenomena. Turning to consumer culture theory, a post-structuralist view on consumer sense making was introduced to the domain of brand relationships suggesting that cultural sources of meaning is equally influential on sense making as psychological and social sources of meaning. Consumer culture was argued to be a particular influential source of meaning on both consumer identity projects and brand meaning. Moreover, by reference to a series of empirical consumption studies it was further illustrated how consumer culture during the past decade has become pervaded by ideological consumer discourses that influence the way ‘ordinary’ consumers make sense of consumption, brands, other consumer, and not least themselves as consumers.

A qualitative interview study of six Danish Nike+ users’ experiences with Nike+ and Nike confirmed the relevance of viewing consumer sense making in a broader socio-cultural perspective as promoted by consumer culture theory (Arnould & Thompson 2005)
suggesting that a comprehensive understanding of relational phenomena in the marketplace such as consumer-brand relationships and brand communities necessarily includes an understanding of the broader relationships between the brand and consumers respectively and the socio-cultural context in which both parties are embedded.

More specifically, the study found that although psychological identity issues were salient in participants’ approach to running and for their liking of socialization related to running exercise, such identity issues did not influence on participants’ assessment of Nike as a relationship partner. Thus, although the Nike+ tracking system actually delivered on central identity concerns and resulted in behavioural dependency, this dependency was not related to the Nike brand, and participants generally felt ambivalent towards the close interaction with a brand they did not consider appropriate as a relationship partner. Similarly, participants were reluctant if not openly hostile towards letting Nike act as a social intermediary through the Nike+ concept, and in the instances were participants felt consciousness of kind (Muñiz & O’Guinn 2001), they did not readily ascribe these feelings to Nike but rather to other social entities. Instead, the assessment of Nike as a relationship partner and a social intermediary was largely characterised by socio-culturally forged meanings related to consumer ideology and the politicization of brands due to which Nike was not considered authentic in relational roles.

As such, the present study indicates that issues of authenticity related to the perceived quality of the brand sponsor is of greater importance in the relational domain than it has previously been considered in brand relationship literature. This has consequences for the growing interest in proactive facilitation of brand community and suggests that building brand community is more than a ‘how-to’ question of facilitating interaction and social practices and that the issue of brand authenticity has been underestimated in this regard. Moreover, the study points to how the very proactive character of new relational marketing approaches may clash with consumers’ sense of personal sovereignty and prevent them from fully embracing relational concepts such as the Nike+ tracking system. The study advises further research into this issue.
7. MANAGERIAL IMPLICATIONS

Basically, this study supports the previously suggested importance for brand managers to be aware of and understand both cultural sentiments and brand associations distributed in consumer culture (Holt 2002, 2004; Thompson et al. 2006) and further points to the specific urgency of understanding such meanings and their influence on consumer sense making when embarking on a proactive relational approach. This urgency relates to the prevalent tendency of transnational corporations to be ascribed with interests and motives that are perceived as incompatible with relationships of a more personal nature cf. the distinction between exchange and communal brand relationships (Aggarwal 2004, 2009). As such, a brand may be accepted under certain conditions, but rejected when the context for interaction changes as it does when a brand pursues a proactive relational marketing strategy.

Thus, if choosing to proactively engage in a relational approach to consumers, humbleness seems to be the overarching keyword as illustrated by the following comment from Rasmus given in a discussion of how Nike ought to go about the execution of the Nike+ concept:

Rasmus: [Nike+ should be] a universe where they didn’t make running synonymous with being a Nike man or a Nike fan for that matter (...) But well, were more humble and presented their things as a tool and not the key to running success or to well-being or whatever... happiness for that matter

As such, the advice would be to emphasis functionality rather than brand imagery and further make room for consumers to adapt and appropriate online features to fit evolving needs and provide users with a feeling of sovereignty. As regards the aspect of community, consumer socialization, i.e. linking value, can be supported, but the marketer should be careful with the role of the brand in such endeavours. Based on the findings in the present study, the advice would be to facilitate brand socialization in a ‘brand neutral’ milieu and emphasise links to other social entities as in the TakeCPH campaign with its interlocking of neighbourhood communities and personal networks.
7.1 ATTENTION TO THE INFERRED MEANINGS OF ONLINE INTERFACES

Both brand relationship theory and community theory build on upon the recognition of consumers as active co-creators of meaning, who negotiate and appropriate brand meaning to fit their life projects, concerns, and tasks (Fournier 2009). Yet, the new context in which this study is set opens up for a new possibly problematic issue in that the most intense part of interaction (between consumer and brand as well as among consumers) now takes place within online structures and platforms that are created and controlled by the brand – in this case the Nike+ forum at nikeplus.com. Strictly speaking, consumers do not have much of a say in how interaction proceeds here, as they have no influence on the underlying structures for interaction. This of course is basically a technical problem related to the flexibility of interfaces and platforms, but it is an issue that should none the less be prioritised in the marketing domain, as consumer-brand dialogue now primarily takes place through these channels. With these new means of interacting, the strength of a system representing the brand lies in how it continuously can be modified and developed to fit personal circumstances and evolving needs.

In the context of the present study, it is clear that participants cope just fine with Nike’s traditional mass-communications; advertising is seen as a source of inspiration to which the participant largely controls exposure – at least that is the general perception. On the contrary, the new way of interacting is perceived as something impertinent and potentially structuring, which is why interfaces and platforms for brand-consumer and inter-consumer interaction must be as democratic, transparent, and adaptable as possible in order not to cause consumers to feel their personal sovereignty threatened.
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