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Abstract

Purpose – Negativity towards a brand is typically conceived as a significant problem for brand managers. This paper aims to show that negativity towards a brand can represent an opportunity for companies when brand polarization occurs. To this end, the paper offers a new conception of the brand polarization phenomenon and reports exploratory findings on the benefits of consumers' negativity towards brands in the context of brand polarization.

Design/methodology/approach – To develop a conception of brand polarization, the paper builds on research on polarizing brands and extends it by integrating insights from systematic literature reviews in three bodies of literature: scholarship on brand rivalry and, separately, polarization in political science and social psychology. Using qualitative data from 22 semi-structured interviews, the paper explores possible advantages of brand polarization.

Findings – This paper defines the brand polarization phenomenon and identifies multiple perspectives on brand polarization. Specifically, the findings highlight three distinct parties that can benefit from brand polarization: the polarizing brand as an independent entity; the brand team behind the polarizing brand; and the passionate consumers involved with the polarizing brand. The data reveal specific advantages of brand polarization associated with the three parties involved.

Practical implications – Managers of brands with a polarizing nature could benefit from having identified a group of lovers and a group of haters, as this could allow them to improve their focus when developing and implementing the brands' strategies.

Originality/value – This exploratory study is the first explicitly focusing on the brand polarization phenomenon and approaches negativity towards brands as a potential opportunity.

Keywords Brand polarization, polarization, polarizing brands, brand rivalry, brand love, brand hate

Paper type Research paper

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1. Introduction

In a number of contexts, consumer brands are not simply tools that improve the recognisability of the offer and facilitate transactions, but have become relationship partners to which consumers are emotionally attached and try to develop bilateral, interpersonal-like connections (Fournier, 1998; Veloutsou, 2007). Recently, research has recognised that the relationships consumers develop with brands vary in terms of strength and valence, ranging from weak to strong and from positive to negative emotions (Alvarez & Fournier, 2016). Understanding the nature of consumer-brand relationships and their consequences for brands is of strategic importance for managers, as it is the new way that consumers and brands interact in the current environment (Veloutsou & Guzmán, 2017).

Existing research on consumer-brand relationships typically distinguishes between positive and negative relationships. Most research suggests that when customers share a common emotional disposition toward brands, positive with loved brands (e.g, Albert & Merunka, 2013; Carroll & Ahuvia, 2006) or negative with hated brands (e.g. Hegner, et al., 2017b; Zarantonello et al., 2016; Zarantonello et al., 2018), they engage differently depending on their brand feelings (Hollebeek & Chen, 2014). In principle, positive feelings towards brands are considered to be 'good' for the brand, because they facilitate positive word of mouth (WoM) (Albert & Merunka, 2013; Carroll & Ahuvia, 2006), make consumers more loyal (Carroll & Ahuvia, 2006; Veloutsou, 2015), are more willing to forgive a brand that misbehaves (Hegner et al., 2017a) and to pay a price premium (Albert & Merunka, 2013). Consumers' negative feelings towards brands are often thought of as 'bad' for the brand because they increase complaints (Zarantonello et al., 2016), negative WoM (Hegner et al., 2017b, Zarantonello et al., 2016), and protests (Zarantonello et al., 2016), reduce patronising (Zarantonello et al., 2016) and make consumers more likely to ask for revenge (Hegner et al., 2017b). Although most research focuses on the effects of consumer-brand relationships on brands, having strong relationships of a positive or negative nature is also good for consumers because it promotes their self-signalling (Alvarez & Fournier, 2016), increases self-esteem (Trudeau & Shobeiri, 2016), provides a sense of self-worth (Fournier, 1998) and allows them to self-express (Fournier, 1998; Trudeau & Shobeiri, 2016). Past research tends to suggest that brands should try to develop strong and positive relationships with their consumers (Veloutsou, 2015) and only a few studies have drawn attention to the fact that negativity

towards brands also needs to be managed (Veloutsou & Guzmán, 2017; Azer & Alexander, 2018).

Although nearly all of the existing research indicates that consumers form only, or primarily, a positive or negative relationship with a specific brand, the reality is somewhat different. Many brands simultaneously have a significant group of lovers and a substantial group of haters. Evidence of the phenomenon often comes from sectors where self-expression is important (Rozenkrants et al., 2017), like sports teams (Grohs et al., 2015; Lopez-Gonzalez et al., 2014), political candidates (Finneman, 2015), artists (Outram, 2016) and religious organizations (Sunstein, 2002b), but also other sectors such as food, petrochemicals and news media, where it is not expected. For instance, brands such as Trump Hotels, CNN and NBC News in the US (Armstrong, 2017) or McDonald's, Starbucks and BP (Luo et al., 2013a; Thompson et al., 2006) are reported to have large numbers of supporters and opposers. Other brands, such as Facebook, feature on most loved (Morning Consultant, 2017) and most hated brands lists (USA today, 2018). These brands, rated with a widely dispersed attitude ranging from bad to excellent or from love to hate are considered to be polarizing brands (Jayasimha & Billore, 2015). The increased number of reports on brand polarization imply that it is expanding (Morning Consultant, 2017).

Consumers, companies and various stakeholders are affected by brands or acknowledge the existence of polarization through their behaviour. Individuals demonstrate their polarizing feelings towards brands through positive and negative attitudes and behaviours, such as brand opposition or brand loyalty (Wolter et al., 2016; Kuo & Hou, 2017), generation of negative WoM (Luo et al., 2013b), willingness to harm a brand although others love it (Dalakas & Phillips-Melancon, 2012) and join groups which clearly separate them from others who have exactly the reverse feelings towards the same brand (Krishnamurthy and Kucuk, 2009; Popp et al., 2016). Polarizing brands themselves recognize that they have lovers and haters and try to control the damaging effects generated from the haters (Luo et al., 2013b) and boost the positive effects that the lovers bring (Mafael et al., 2016). Other stakeholders potentially affected by brand polarization include sponsors, who can be supported or boycotted by association (Davies et al., 2006; Dalakas & Phillips-Melancon, 2012), participants in some sort of brand alliance, who are also classified in accordance with the polarizing brand they associate with (Walsh, 2017; Armstrong, 2017), and even investors, since polarizing brands are associated with lower variation in stock price (Luo et al., 2013b).

Polarizing brands seem to have specific characteristics that could be of benefit for the companies behind them. Research suggests that such brands might be a resource in various

managerial tasks, including segmentation, differentiation and positioning (Luo et al., 2013a; 2013b) and in the planning and implementation of the communications strategy (Monahan, 2017; Monahan et al., 2017). A brand's polarizing nature could be also used to strengthen the bonds with its loyal passionate followers (Luo et al., 2013a).

Although important and applicable to the marketing and branding strategies, the concept of brand polarization is notoriously under-researched and its consequences are largely unknown. The academic research on the topic is scant and the existing academic literature has primarily focused and analysed the concept of *polarizing brands* (Luo et al., 2013a; 2013b; Jayasimha & Billore, 2015; Monahan, 2017; Monahan et al., 2017), or *polarizing products* (Rozenkrants et al, 2017). Polarizing products are seen as "*products that some people like a great deal and other people dislike a great deal*" (Rozenkrants et al., 2017, p. 759) and operationalized as products with "*bimodal rating distributions*" (Rozenkrants et al., 2017, p. 759). However, research provides very limited evidence on whether these products possess other properties except the bimodal ratings. Brand polarization as a concept is not clearly defined (Mafael et al., 2016).

To appreciate the potential of the simultaneous positivity and negativity expressed by consumers towards a specific brand, an enhanced understanding of the concept of brand polarization is necessary (Luo et al., 2013a; 2013b). Possible advantages for various parties associated with the polarizing brand also need to be better understood and organized, since there are anecdotal reports of benefits in the literature.

This paper extends the recent literature that suggests that the increased negativity towards brand needs to be further examined (Veloutsou & Guzmán, 2017) and that hate does not have to harm brands (Monahan et al., 2017). The study aims to explore more holistically the potential opportunities of negativity towards brands in the context of brand polarization for brands and individuals over and above the already noted segmentation, differentiation (Luo et al., 2013a; 2013b) and marketing communications choices (Monahan et al., 2017). It also identifies potential benefits and opportunities of brand polarization for the parties affected by the phenomenon. To this end, the paper summarizes the existing research on polarizing brands and enriches the understanding of the phenomenon through a more advanced conceptualization. Given the state of the conceptualization of brand polarization in the marketing and management literatures, the definition is developed based on three systematic literature reviews on brand rivalry and, separately, polarization in political science and social psychology. It also uses qualitative data collected through 22 interviews to identify its effects as expressed from consumers who engage with polarizing brands.

The remainder of the paper is organized as follows. Firstly, the paper reports the systematic reviews on the mentioned literature. This leads to the development of an advanced definition of brand polarization. The focus of the study, the method used to collect and analyse the data and the findings are presented next and are followed by a section highlighting the contribution of this work to the literature of brand polarization and branding, the implications to management and limitations of this study as well as directions for future research.

2. The Nature of Brand Polarization: Towards a Conceptual Definition

2.1. Literature Search and Review

A clear understanding of what brand polarization entails may help our understanding of the nature of negativity towards brands that is associated with the phenomenon. However, there is no clear definition of brand polarization and available research on the topic is limited. Research using the term brand polarization does not clearly define it, and typical operationalization focuses on brand attitude (Mafael et al., 2016). This approach does not fully capture the complex nature of brand polarization. To conceptualize brand polarization, it is necessary to look how polarization has been approached in other disciplines.

Three strands of research seem pertinent to the development of the concept. Polarization has been extensively researched in the political science and social psychology disciplines in the last decades. Both fields have long traditions of examining antecedents and outcomes of polarization and offer potentially important insights into its definition and dimensions. Research on brand rivalry is also relevant to brand polarization because it centres on situations where similar brand outcomes (strong love and hate) coexist. Brand rivalry is therefore considered in this paper as a special form of polarization.

Table 1 below illustrates the approach to literature search adopted in this study. This includes a systematic literature review of polarization in political science and social psychology and of brand rivalry. Using appropriate inclusion and exclusion criteria that were determined after discussion with three academic experts in each one of the fields of political science, social psychology and marketing, a total of 37 articles on polarization in political science, 29 articles on polarization in social psychology and 18 articles on brand rivalry were identified and analysed.

2.2. Existing Conception of Polarization and Brand Rivalry

2.2.1. Polarization in political science

Polarization in political science is more frequently defined as strong or extreme ideological disagreement, difference or distance (Papageorgiou & Autto 2015; Lupu 2015; Rogowski & Sutherland 2016). This definition (PPS1 in table 2) views polarization as a rational process, in which the distance between two groups at opposite ends of the spectrum increase based on the difference or disagreement of ideas (Lee, 2015; Wronski, 2016). The ideological distance also alters the partisans feelings towards the opposing party and its candidates (Webster & Abramowitz, 2017). Partisans go through a process of self-categorization to define the ideology they identify with (Hoffarth & Hodson, 2016). As the distance between the groups becomes larger, partisans' identity grows stronger (Harrison, 2016) and attitudes become more internally consistent (Lelkes, 2016).

Another common definition of polarization in political science relates to Tajfel's (1974) social identity theory, and states that political polarization includes both positive evaluations of the own party and negative evaluations of the opposing party (PPS2 in table 2) (Iyengar & Westwood, 2015; Jordan & Bowling, 2016; Pildes, 2011). Having constructive appraisals of co-partisans and negative assessments and discrimination against opposing partisans is a common scenario in the political arena (Esteban & Schneider, 2008; Iyengar & Westwood, 2015). Polarization is determined by homogeneity within a group and heterogeneity among groups (Clark, 2009) and derives in strong feelings such as in-group favouritism and out-group hatred (Iyengar & Westwood, 2015).

A complementary and more behavioural political science definition, also related to social identity theory (Tajfel, 1974), affirms that polarization is the extent to which partisans develop a sense of belonging with other like-minded people while distancing themselves from the supporters of the opposing party, who are viewed as a disliked out-group (PPS3 in table 2) (LaMothe, 2012; Lau et al., 2017; Suhay, 2015). Political polarization leads to bias and can influence hostile behaviours and judgements against the out-group in non-political situations

(Lau et al., 2017). Self-categorization, or the incorporation into the individual's self-concept of the membership to a group, is observed in the polarization phenomenon (Suhay, 2015).

For other political science authors, polarization concerns simply moving from the centre toward the extremes of the ideological spectrum, or bimodality (PPS4 in table 2) (Fiorina & Abrams, 2008; Hetherington, 2009; Levendusky & Pope, 2011). This clustering of preferences near the poles might be caused by the salience of the issue (issues that generate passion), and can stimulate participation and engagement among partisans (Evans, 2003; Hetherington, 2009). Preference differences can also be a motive for polarization (Dixit & Weibull, 2007).

Mason (2013) provides a somewhat different political science approach and defines polarization as rising partisan strength, partisan bias, activism, and anger (PPS5 in table 2). This means a cognitive (partisan bias), affective (feelings of anger) and behavioural (activism) view of the phenomenon. While issue polarization is typified by an increased extremity of issue positions, behavioural polarization is characterized by a progressively biased, active, and angry electorate (Mason, 2013). The definitions of polarization in the political science discipline are shown in table 2.

Polarization scholarship in political science offers competing approaches for the dimensionality of the concept. For example, DiMaggio et al. (1996) and Evans (2003) agree on four dimensions of polarization: dispersion, bimodality, consolidation and opinion constraint. Webster & Abramowitz (2017) present another view regarding the dimensions of polarization. The authors state that polarization has two dimensions, affective and ideological. Affective polarization is closely related to group conflict theory and emphasizes the importance of group membership. Affective polarization is presented as the justification for in-group conformity and out-group hostility. Ideological polarization relates to the extent a party moves towards the ideological left or right (Webster & Abramowitz, 2017). In this same vein, Freire (2015) differentiates two dimensions of polarization: identification (with the in-group) and competition (against the out-group). The dimension of identification is linked to economic values orientations and non-economic values orientations (for example, religion vs social liberalism values or laissez-faire vs protection of the environment values). The dimension of competition structures the rivalry between parties and sets the basis for inter-group polarization.

2.2.2. Polarization in social psychology

Polarization has also been examined in social psychology. The most recurrent definition in the social psychology discipline describes the group polarization phenomenon as the tendency of individuals to become more extreme in the direction of the initial leanings after group discussion (PSP1 in table 2) (Krizan & Baron, 2007; Landemore & Mercier, 2012; Liu & Latane, 1998). This definition encompasses a rational element (points of view becoming more extreme) and a behavioural element (group discussion) (Burton et al., 2006; Flint et al., 2006; Wojcieszak, 2011). Social influences, or the desire to be favourably perceived by other group members, act as one of the main drivers of group polarization (Landemore & Mercier, 2012). Another determinant of the phenomenon is issue relevance (Krizan & Baron, 2007). Self-categorization and social differentiation also play important roles in the element development of polarization. To be more representative of the in-group, individuals try to be similar to in-group members and different from out-group members (Friedkin, 1999).

Research in social psychology offers four more definitions of polarization. Some suggest that polarization is the degree of opposition or conflict on a certain issue among the members of a population (PSP2 in table 2) (Dandekar et al., 2013; Edvardsson & Vegelius, 1975). When combined, opinion formation and higher interaction between similar minded individuals result in polarization (Dandekar et al., 2013). In a similar line, Baliga et al. (2013) also consider that polarization occurs when beliefs and/or actions go in opposite directions after observing the same evidence (PSP3 in table 2). Polarization is a response to ambiguity aversion (Baliga et al., 2013). Kalai & Kalai (2001) assert that polarization is observed when similarly-minded people tend to take opposite positions located at the extreme poles of distribution (PSP4 in table 2). According to the authors, in game theory, polarization happens when players choose drastically opposing strategies. The last definition in the social psychology discipline describes polarization as separate piles of opinions at the extreme poles of distribution (PSP5 in table 2) (Harton & Latané, 1997; Rohde, 1974). As involvement leads to polarization, additional information or thought on an issue might drive individuals with moderate attitudes to become more involved and more extreme (Harton & Latané, 1997).

2.2.3. Polarization and brand rivalry in marketing

Though scholarship in marketing has thus far largely overlooked polarization, some aspects of the phenomenon can be found in the concept of brand rivalry, which seems a special case of polarization. Brand rivalry relates to attitude polarization which occurs when the individual conforms to the perceived extreme group norm (intragroup identification) but simultaneously tends to distance herself from a disliked out-group norms (intergroup alienation) (Clark, 2009;

Mackie, 1986; Suhay, 2015). From the social identity theory perspective, polarization and brand rivalry occur when members exhibit in-group conformity in the direction of the majority and out-group separation, often showing signs of hostility and dislike towards out-group members (Havard et al., 2016; Lau et al., 2017; Suhay, 2015). Brand rivalry appears to be a case of brand polarization where two brands (the preferred and its main rival) are involved, and these confronted brands provoke strong feelings of love and hate among supporters and detractors. These feelings are reflected in acceptance and support towards other in-group members and negative stereotyping and rejection towards out-group members (Hickman & Ward, 2013). Cases of intense brand rivalry are documented in the literature, for example Apple versus Microsoft (Phillips-Melancon & Dalakas, 2014), Coke versus Pepsi (Muniz & Hamer, 2001), and Ford versus GM (Ewing et al., 2013). However, a stronger brand rivalry can be evidenced in the sports teams literature (e.g., Angell et al., 2016; Grohs et al., 2015; Wenger & Brown, 2014), as team identification causes sports fans to display vigorous positive and negative emotions and actions towards the favourite and rival teams (Luellen & Wann, 2010).

In the sports context, rivalry is often associated with an intense, variable and antagonistic relationship between two teams and/or their supporters (R1 in table 2) (Havard & Reams, 2016; Karanfil, 2016; Tyler & Cobbs, 2015). The focus of this conceptualization is the relationship between the two confronted brands (Benkwitz & Molnar, 2012; Havard et al., 2013b), where feelings of joy for the favourite team's success are salient (Havard et al., 2013a). A link with Tajfel's (1974) social identity theory is observed, as identification with the in-group (other supporters of the team) enhances the individual's self-esteem, and separation from the out-group (fans of rival team) helps to build stronger identification with the in-group (Havard & Reams 2016). The intensity of social identification with the brand and against the opposing brand leads to obscure behaviours like negative WoM and intergroup stereotyping (Ewing et al., 2013).

A more attitudinal conceptualization of rivalry assumes that it relates to strong, hostile attitudes and feelings towards the supported team's rivals, its supporters and/or its sponsors (R2 in table 2) (Angell et al. 2016; Dalakas et al. 2015; Havard et al. 2013b). Rivalry enhances the individual's self-expression and the perceptions of public collective self-esteem, in-group cohesion and in-group distinctiveness, as intergroup competition increases the salience of social identification (the "*us*" versus "*them*" phenomenon in the social categorization process) (Berendt & Uhrich, 2016; Grohs et al., 2015). The feelings of pleasure for the rival's misfortune are frequently observed when rivalry is strong (Dalakas et al., 2015). In a rivalry situation, the

sponsors of the involved teams can also be affected, as in certain situations the negative feelings fans have against the rival might transfer to its sponsor (Bergkvist, 2012).

Other authors emphasize that team rivalry could involve hostile feelings and/or behaviours towards the supported team's rivals, its supporters and/or its sponsors (R3 in table 2) (Kuo & Feng, 2013; Marticotte et al., 2016; Phillips-Melancon & Dalakas, 2014). Rivalry can lead to negative attitudes towards the opposing brand, such as feelings of pleasure for the rival's misfortune or *schadenfreude* (Phillips-Melancon & Dalakas, 2014) and desire to harm (Marticotte et al., 2016). It also can induce negative behaviours like trash-talking, or negative communication about a brand with which the individual does not have experience (Marticotte et al., 2016). Followers of a brand "*may intentionally degrade or ridicule the rival brands or challenge adopters or followers of these brands*" (Kuo & Feng 2013, p.952). In fact, Verboven (1999) defines brand rivalry as intense competition and a high degree of differentiation between two or more brands (R4 in table 2). The author states that if brand rivalry is sufficiently intense, premium products will have higher percentage mark-ups than base products when consumer information is limited (Verboven, 1999).

By contrast, Gius (1993) focuses on the competing aspect of rivalry, and defines the concept as a brand competing with other brands within the same product spectrum (R5 in table 2). In this work, brand rivalry is categorized in localized and generalized. Localized rivalry happens when the product competes only with close brands in the same product category. Generalized rivalry happens when the product competes with all brands in the product category (Gius, 1993).

2.3. An Enhanced Definition of Brand Polarization

The conception of polarization in the political science, social psychology, marketing and rivalry research shows significant overlaps. Table 2, below, provides a summary of the components of rivalry identified in the literature, clearly evidencing that there are profound commonalities in the definition and dimensions of polarization in the three analysed disciplines. For example, there seems to be a consensus that polarizing views require two different extremes to be present. These spring from feelings and ideological disagreements or opposing opinions of those involved (Webster & Abramowitz, 2017). The opposition evokes emotions, such as anger and other contrasting attitudes and feelings, such as love and hate (Marticotte et al., 2016; Kuo & Feng, 2013). The cognitive and emotional involvement with the brand and the issues associated with it will lead to actions that can take various forms, such as activism,

belonging to groups to further enhance the preferred view or competing (Baliga et al., 2013; Mason, 2013). These characteristics suggest that polarization is a complex phenomenon and incorporates a cognitive, emotional and behavioural component, although not all definitions embrace all three dimensions. When compared with the cognitive and emotional aspects, the behavioural aspects listed in table 2 are the least prominent. In this study they are approached as outcomes of brand polarization, rather that dimensions of the phenomenon. Because of the cognitive and emotional characteristics of brand polarization expressed in individual and group level, consumers engaged with the polarizing brands are willing to engage with specific behaviours.

Insert Table 2 here

Several elements of the polarization and brand rivalry literature can contribute to the enhancement of the definition and to the better understanding of brand polarization. While polarization can be described as moving from the centre to the extremes (Fiorina & Abrams, 2008), brand polarization means moving from moderate or neutral feelings to extreme feelings in the consumer-brand relationship valence (love-hate). Polarization happens when beliefs and/or actions go in opposite directions after observing the same evidence (Baliga et al., 2013). In the same vein, brand polarization is observed when a considerable group of people shows feelings of love and an ample group of people shows feelings of hate for the same brand. Having people who love and hate a brand at the same time is not surprising, since recent research suggests that love and hate have similar but opposite emotional components (Zarantonello et al., 2018). Brand rivalry can be considered a special type of brand polarization in which, instead of one brand, strong feelings of love and hate among supporters and detractors of two opposing brands are taken into consideration.

Evidence of the link between polarization and Tajfel's (1974) social identity theory was found in the analysis of the literature. Polarization is related to in-group norm conformity and out-group differentiation (Hogg et al., 1990). It leads to positive evaluations of the own 'party' (intragroup identification) while viewing the other 'party' as a disliked out-group (intergroup alienation) (Suhay, 2015). Brand polarization causes bimodality or clear separation between lovers and haters of a brand and it can be associated with the affective dimension of polarization presented by Webster & Abramowitz (2017). Affective polarization relates to social identity theory, and explains why consumers tend to identify with other supporters of the preferred brand while out-group members who have an opposite view are disliked and considered rivals (Webster & Abramowitz, 2017).

Building on previous research, this paper advances an enhanced definition of brand polarization. Accordingly, brand polarization is defined here as *an affective phenomenon where beliefs and emotions of a significant number of people induce a simultaneous move to the extremes involving passionate positive and negative feelings and convictions towards the brand, like-minded consumers, and opposite-minded consumers.* Rival brands tend to be polarizing, as they generate extreme and antagonistic feelings of love and hate among supporters and detractors.

3. Research focus

Some companies seem to believe that brand polarization may be valuable, as evidenced by the brand's tactical and strategic polarizing-enabling behaviour. For example, Miracle Whip, Marmite and Strongbow adopt an international polarization strategy as a segmentation and/or differentiation approach (Luo et al., 2013a). Brand managers rely on the unique characteristics of polarizing brands, strongly associated with the love and hate relationships with consumer segments, when making decisions for new products (Luo et al., 2013a). Brand polarization has applications in the marketing tactics, such as communication choices. Some brands use hate-acknowledging advertising to enhance the credibility to the communication claims, promote trust, positive brand feelings and positive WoM behaviour (Monahan, 2017; Monahan et al., 2017) among the lovers of a polarizing brand. Research also confirms that brand rivalry can have positive consequences for consumers, because it boosts the perceived distinctiveness of both brands involved from all consumer groups' perspectives (Berendt et al., 2018). Consequently, some researchers imply that brand polarization is a strategy associated with strong brands (Mafael et al., 2016), which could be another positive outcome of the phenomenon.

Brand polarization can also be a useful relationship marketing tool for building stronger links with brand followers. Luo et al. (2013a) assert that brand polarization facilitates the identification of brand lovers in order to enhance their relationship with the brand and respond more efficiently to the actions of brand detractors. The authors explain that teasing the haters, or deliberately antagonizing the haters of the brand to strengthen the connection with brand lovers, could be a useful path in developing strong links with the lovers' segment. Therefore, brand polarization can lead to exclusive brand loyalty (Wolter et al., 2016), even when new products are introduced (Luo et al., 2013a)

There are some very sporadic mentions that brand polarization could have benefits for consumers with a passion for a polarizing brand. The definition of polarization implies that consumers could be looking to express their identity as group members (Hogg et al., 1990; Webster & Abramowitz, 2017) and possibly as individuals through their following of polarizing brands. There is, indeed, some evidence supporting that consumers involved with rival brands build a positive self-concept and enhance their identities (Berendt & Uhrich, 2016). *Schadenfreude*, or feelings of pleasure at the adversity of the rival brand, its followers and/or its sponsors, is well documented in politics (Ouwerkerk et al. 2018) and sports (Dalakas & Phillips-Melancon, 2012; Dalakas et al., 2015; Popp et al., 2016), but also exists in other product categories such as mobile phones (Ouwerkerk et al. 2018), electronics (Marticotte, et al., 2016; Japutra et al., 2018), cars, food and beverages, fashion retailers and airlines (Japutra et al., 2018). *Schadenfreude* is considered to be one of the negative consequences of rivalry for the brands and the people that follow the rival brand (Dalakas et al., 2015), but it may be advantageous to consumers because of the pleasure involved (Ouwerkerk et al. 2018) and the desire developed to join groups of other like-minded individuals (Berendt et al., 2018). This includes joining anti-brand communities (Popp et al., 2016), and the willingness to share news (Ouwerkerk et al. 2018). It also brings group benefits because it promotes the distinctiveness of these groups due to their association with the polarizing brand's positioning (Berendt et al., 2018).

Despite the existence of anecdotal reports, the advantages of brand polarization to various parties are so far almost entirely unexplored. The very limited research only reports opportunities associated with specific narrow areas and entities, such as advertising (Monahan, 2017; Monahan et al., 2017) or investors' actions (Luo et al., 2013b). However, there is lack of empirical evidence supporting favourable outcomes company executives claim to achieve using such tactics (Monahan, 2017). The potential advantages of negativity in brand polarization is not clearly mapped or systematically approached in the literature, while the parties that can benefit from it are not clearly identified. Therefore, this exploratory study adopts a more systematic approach aiming to investigate the usefulness of brand polarization and negativity towards brands in this context for various parties involved, as reported from consumers engaged with polarizing brands.

4. Methodology

Given the limited availability of research on the potential benefits of brand polarization and negativity in this context and to various parties involved, this study adopts an exploratory approach. Aiming to collect qualitative data in a flexible manner through interviews and give interviewees the ability to better explain or build on their responses, semi-structured interviews were conducted to grasp a clearer understanding of brand polarization and negativity towards polarizing brands (Saunders et al., 2016).

A semi-structured interview protocol was developed to guide the data collection, and was adjusted during the interview to enhance the flow of the conversation when needed. Before the interview, participants were informed that the study was about brands that they are passionate about and the approximate duration of the interview. They were also advised that their anonymity would be maintained.

Participants were recruited using purposive and snowball techniques. Interviewees were consumers who admitted to having strong feelings towards at least one polarizing brand, were willing to disclose the brands and discuss them. In order to reduce bias, the principal aim of the study, which is the identification benefits of brand polarization to any party involved, was not shared with the informant. The interviewees were encouraged to share their views, sentiments and experiences with the polarizing brands. The flow of the conversation was predominantly driven by the exploratory nature of the study, where participants were invited to clarify and deepen their views and experiences with the brands and other consumers.

Following common advice, respondents were sampled until reaching saturation point (Fusch & Ness, 2015). Aiming to collect information from UK residents with diverse background and depending on the proximity and the informant's preference, 22 semi-structured interviews lasting between 16 and 65 minutes were conducted face-to-face or over Skype (Table 3). Informants indicated and provided information on 27 loved and 28 hated polarizing brands from a wide range of sectors.

Insert table 3

The transcribed audio-recorded interviews produced between 1,385 and 6,402 words each and a total of 68,925 words (table 3). Thematic analysis was used to systematically identify, analyse and interpret patterns of ideas and meaning (common points or 'themes') of distinguishable benefits of brand polarization for brands in the data (Vaismoradi et al., 2013; Clarke & Braun, 2017).

5. Findings

Analysis of the interview data revealed that brand polarization can offer certain advantages in more parties than only the brand. Three key identified beneficiaries from brand polarization identified are: (1) the company and the brand team behind the polarizing brand, (2) the brand itself as an independent entity, and (3) the consumers who engage with a polarizing brand and develop strong feelings towards it. Figure 1 summarizes the key findings of this inquiry and will be further elaborated in the following sections.

Insert Figure 1

5.1. The Brand Management Team

Informants clearly referred to the people behind the brand. The dominant view is that the brand polarization phenomenon can provide insights to the management team to improve the polarizing brand. The polarizing nature of the brand should be able to keep the signalling of the identity items to build brand reputation consistently over time. Participants describe the polarizing nature as a core characteristic of the brand, meaning that it should guide the brand management team in strategic and tactical decision-making.

5.1.1. Brand Polarization as a tool of constant improvement

A new insight from the study is the widely supported view that having lovers and haters can improve brands. The first element of the suggested improvement due to the existence of detractors was the belief that brand management teams will take into account the views of haters and, therefore, will make appropriate adjustments to the brand to improve it. This is evident from views such as:

"*Sometimes having haters can help brands understand what is wrong, so they may change it towards a positive thing*" (F2, 26).

More specifically, some participants feel that haters can make the brand team accountable and guide the brand-related decisions. Brand polarization and haters are expected to be able

to push the brand management team to re-consider choices and change things to improve the overall brand rating and the overall reputation of the brand:

"*I think they're* [detractors of the brand] *good because they hold Apple accountable… so I think they're so vocal about their issue with Apple that Apple takes into consideration kind of… I certainly think that they make Apple reconsider their product offerings*" (F6, 23).

In the situation of rivalry, this is even more profound. Consumers consider that the competition from rivals is expected to drive managers to make changes and facilitate their loved polarizing brand to become better. In this case, it is not simply the fact that the brand has, simultaneously, people in the two extremes of the relationship valence, but that there is a strong opponent who adds further complexity to the decision-making and should also be considered and further drive the brand management team of the polarizing brand to act. This was expressed mainly in the context of football brands in views such as:

"*...obviously they are competitors, but at the same time I think they do help each other. Because when these teams are performing well, obviously Real Madrid needs to compete as well and to become better as well to be able to defeat them*" (M11, 25).

5.1.2. Brand polarization as a focus enabling mechanism for the brand management team

Consistent with existing discussion (Luo et al., 2013a; 2013b), participants appreciated that polarization helps the brand management team to make decisions that will help the brand to stay focused in their segmentation, targeting and positioning. It was appreciated that rather than trying to satisfy all segments, the brand team is expected to target the followers and make decisions primarily based on this group's preferences. This understanding was expressed as:

"*They don't make compromises, they continue to do what they think works and it gives them a big following. But also has, you know, the people that really do like that idea and some others just don't like that idea*" (M8, 21).

The support of brand polarization in practice is expected to go over and above an attempt to generate positive WoM, as some previous research also implies (Monahan et al., 2017). Several informants hinted that the brand management teams support their differentiation through the tasks they adopt for their polarizing brands. Participants reported that:

"*...*[brands] *might have advertising that is not satisfying everybody, so maybe there is something that they communicate because you know we are all different… maybe their advertising is not that attractive to some people*" (F1, 28).

5.2.2. Brand polarization and respect for the brand management team

Informants seemed to accept the choices of the brand management team. They expressed respect for these choices and actions to support the brand polarization positioning. Participants reported that:

"*...they know they can't make everybody happy*" (M3, 27).

"*So Classic FM is a radio station but at the same time it means there is something behind it. The people behind it, 20 or so years ago, decided to take something which was boring, you know, classic music, and make it mainstream, make it popular. And I think I respect them for that, because I think they have done it in an elegant way, in the sense that, you know, it's a brand, they offered CDs and I bought CDs for my children when they were not even born of Classic FM*" (M10, 42).

5.2. The Polarizing Brand Itself

Without being a surprise, the brand was described as an independent entity from its management during the interviews. Informants clearly identified two advantages for the polarizing brands, the first related to the distinctiveness in their positioning and the second to their overall strength.

5.2.2. Brand polarization and brand positioning effects

Given the previous insights on the benefits of brand polarization for the brand teams, it was not surprising that the data provide some insights into the distinctiveness of polarizing brands. Polarization enhances the uniqueness of the brand and it further pushes strong points of difference in the minds of lovers and haters, supporting a unique selling proposition, consistent with reports from the literature (Berendt et al., 2018). The analysis suggests that brand uniqueness is illustrated through the brand behaviour and it was reported that:

"*...that main thing, is that particular way of doing things, particular approach... that make you quite unique*" (F2, 26).

"*They are differentiated... when you choose your area and stick to it, there are some people who agree and some people who disagree*" (F10, 32).

The brands' polarizing nature seem to be partly derived from distinct human-like characteristics associated with it, like personality and nationality, which evoke strong feelings.

This is consistent with some literature acknowledging that strong brand personalities concurrently fascinate and repel different segments of consumers (Wolter et al., 2016). When asked to explain why the chosen brands were polarizing and reflect on what was discussed earlier during interview, some participants expressed that:

> "*I think when you have a brand which has a* [strong and unique] *personality maybe* [a lot of people like them, while others hate them]" (M10, 42).

> "...[some attributes are] *personality related, because I like different styles and different things. And I also like... well, Scottish culture and colourful things, and this is what this brand actually represents*" (F3, 26).

Brand polarization gives substance to brand uniqueness and supports the brand personality. It is also implied from the data that polarization provides evidence of authenticity, as suggested by one interviewee:

> "*...that uniqueness, that authenticity that he has and the way he does things can seem controversial to some people like me, but some people absolutely love it*" (F2, 26).

5.2.2. Brand strength and brand polarization

Analysis of the data seems to suggest that brand polarization is more likely to occur with strong brands. Polarizing brands enjoy high brand awareness and recognition and clear and well-established brand associations. Such characteristics, according to the literature, denote brand strength (Wolter et al., 2016). The analysis of the data confirmed that the passion towards the brand is such that a large number of consumers that feel positively and another large number of consumers with negative feelings about the brand coexist. Strong brands also have high following, and noticeable characteristics of polarizing brands since:

> "*Haters enhance the lovers, in the sense that usually the more haters they have, the more lovers they have to support the brand… So the exact same reasons for what there are lovers, there are haters of the brand*" (F2, 26).

Polarizing brands are noticeable and are able to generate vigorous emotional and behavioural reactions from the side of the consumers, as strong brands are expected to do (Veloutsou, 2007; Alvarez & Fournier, 2016). Followers or opponents of a brand are involved with and express their passion towards these brands very strongly and they want to support or avert them (Dalakas & Phillips-Melancon, 2012). Indications of this were also found in the data:

> "*If you are a football club brand, then the more people that hate you, the stronger you are as a brand. Because you have a community, which is not the totality of the population, but the community is kind of strong together by the fact they have many enemies. In football, in fact, this happens with Juventus*

in Italy. They are Italy's number one team, and they have a lot of supporters but they have a lot of haters" (M10, 42).

The ability of polarizing brands to evoke strong feelings is further supported from the reaction to the rival and hated brand. Informants reported that the rival's misperformance generates stronger feelings for the loved brand:

"[If the hated brand does not perform well] *you feel very strong, very passionate about your own brand. Gives you even more support than before*" (M8, 21).

5.3. The Consumers

The data clearly demonstrated that brand polarization provides enjoyment to the passionate consumers both in terms of enhancing their affective engagement with the brand and in terms of assessing the brand-related information. Brand polarization also contributes to the expression of consumers both as individuals and as members of groups.

5.3.1. Brand polarization and enjoyment

Participants expressed a feeling of satisfaction, pleasure and happiness derived from interaction with the polarizing brand. The analysis of the data reveals that enjoyment is fuelled by intensive passion for the polarizing brands and derives from various sources, both from loved and hated brands.

Brand-related enjoyment is known as relevant to positive consumer-brand relationships and brand love (Hollebeek & Chen, 2014; Dessart et al., 2015). Consumers feel joy simply because they are supporting a particular polarizing brand and they are engaged with it, as F9 explained:

"*So I'm a seasonal ticket holder, and I also, and this is quite funny, I have shares in the club, I'm a shareholder, small.*" (F9, 49).

Several interviewees revealed that their identification and passion towards their loved polarizing brand makes them feel proud. This is another source of happiness and enjoyment that the polarizing brand can bring into their lives. They express the perceived achievement, satisfaction and pleasure because of their personal association with the brand as:

"*I do strongly associate with [Celtic] as a brand… I'm very proud of being a Celtic fan, I feel a lot of pride from following a football team that has been successful over the years*" (F9, 49).

The feeling of joy is not only experiences for loved polarizing brands. Consistent with what the literature suggests (Dalakas & Phillips-Melancon, 2012), there is evidence of experiencing enjoyment, or malicious pleasure, when people involved with the polarizing brand learn news about the brand of their desired valence. The joy is particularly evident when hated and rival brands do not perform well or experience misfortune (*schadenfreude*). This is articulated in statements such as:

> "*I would feel like satisfied* [if hated brand misperforms], *because it would give me some relief in my pain or something like that*" (M4, 28).

> "[If the hated football brand does not perform well she feels] *Overjoyed, of course, because every time they lose, they're losing three points, so there's less chance for them*" (F8, 68).

There is also a fun aspect of rivalry, and consumers have a good time and feel joy when their hated brand underperforms. This feeling of joy can be so strong that they may also want to share their thrill with other consumers that feel similarly towards the polarizing brand and thus get value by enjoying the brand both privately and publicly (Richins, 1994). During the interviews, M9 clearly expressed this feeling:

> "*And I think that's fun, people like the rivalry, people like to see their team do well, people then also like to see in some sense the competition. If their team don't do well, there is a sporting and a fun dimension to the rivalry that I think people get into*" (M9, 39).

> "*It's not just that I root for the Redskins, it's that I will actively root against the Dallas Cowboys… maybe in online, if I'm online, in like a chat group or sort of, you know, kind of a Redskins fan section I might express displeasure or say negative things about the Cowboys and their performance or some of their players*" (M9, 39).

5.3.2. Brand polarization and consumer expression

Similar to polarizing products (Rozenkrants et al., 2017), polarizing brands can be used as a vehicle of self-expression by individuals. Loved polarizing brands are clearly associated with consumers' self-identity and this is expressed through the self-brand congruity. Participants repeatedly emphasized the role of the brands in their perceptions about themselves and compared themselves with the polarizing brands, expressing their brand personality congruity (Sirgy et al., 1997). The self-brand association was sometimes going to the extreme that they were classifying the polarizing brand as a part of their real self. They reported that:

> "*So I find the designs, the colours, the ranges of things that they provide, even the accessories I like the style much more, it's more me rather than the British brands*" (F2, 26).

21

"*Roma is important in the sense that for me it's kind of part of me, you know, because I have chosen this brand many years ago... I'm engaged with them, it's like I know them... you kind of feel you're like, if you like, part of their family*" (M10, 42).

During the discussions informants expressed the view that polarizing brands helped to express themselves not as they really are (real self) but as they would like to be (ideal self):

"*I think it's because I kind of want to be successful myself. And I think it kind of sets an example on how to do that, which I think resonates with me in terms of, you know, working hard for your success, but at the same time not being afraid to sacrifice a lot*" (M11, 28).

There were informants who recognized the role of the brand management team in signalling associations that, in turn, allows them to develop their personal association with the brand. In this process, the data support that all three parties involved with the polarizing brand interchange, the brand management team, the brand and the consumer. For example, one interviewee notes that:

"*...they* [the brand management team] *have worked strong on developing a brand that people can identify with… if you can identify yourself with the brand or you can't identify yourself with the brand you will create these strong positive or negative feelings towards this brand… it's a matter of identification and not only with the brand as just the logo or something like that but also the history, the story that is behind that brand*" (M4, 28).

5.3.3. Brand polarization and consumer belonging

Participants expressed their social identity through the polarizing brands they felt were bringing them together. In line with recent research (Badrinarayanan & Sierra, 2018), the data suggest that various drivers bring people together around polarizing brands, including alignment with brand values, their need to find likeminded individuals, their desire to belong to groups and their willingness to engage publicly with the polarizing brand.

A main reason that individuals want to interact with others that follow the brand is the collective alignment with the brand values. Giving a more formal substance to their interactions with others, participants used the term "community" to describe the group of passionate people involved with a polarizing brand as they interact with it. Supporting research indicates that the participants' own identity, the identity of the group formed around the polarizing brand, and the decoded brand meaning have significant overlapping and common beliefs (Black & Veloutsou, 2017). The polarizing brand's distinctiveness also promotes the particularity of the

consumer group formed around it (Berendt et al., 2018). Statements that demonstrate this view include:

"*I guess most of the reason that they are part of one community is the team… it's the team, the way they play, fair play, the values that they share, this is what has brought them together*" (F2, 26).

"*…a lot of people who are Roma fans feel strongly positive about it, because it kind of represents a community. A community of people who share some things… So there is a community with a certain degree of identity and shared values*" (M10, 42).

A further indication that people with similar disposition towards a polarizing brand form a brand community is the appreciation of the formation of a group with likeminded people, as the literature on brand communities proposes (Dessart et al., 2015; Relling et al., 2016). Connecting with likeminded individuals is presented as a strong motive to join the group and engage in group behaviour, as participants suggested:

"*...when you see someone else who has these positive feelings for that brand is pretty amazing because you feel like you're not alone… It's kind of like if I know that you're a follower of that brand, I kind of feel that you are my friend*" (M4, 28).

"*In both cases I feel similar to them* [people who support the brand]*, I feel I'm a bit like them. So there is a degree of similarity, and therefore I feel, you know, kind of they are like me, you know… I feel that they are people who look for my kind of things*" (M10, 42).

Consistent with social identity theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1986) and the literature on brand communities (Black & Velousou, 2017), the sense of belonging and projecting a social identity was a strong motive for the participants' willingness to engage with others in issues related to the polarizing brand. As a result of the common beliefs and of their personal alliance with the polarizing brand, the group develops coherence:

"*Yes certainly that there's a camaraderie and a togetherness. And you know, I feel that certainly like me, they're, we're holding on to hope together, hope that things can turn around for the team, hope that our hopes will be vindicated. So there's a unity I think of mutual respect*" (M9, 39).

"*...everyone is unified by the team and so there's a sense of community… There's a sense of community, everyone is getting unified and excited around the team*" (M9, 39).

The behavioural engagement with likeminded individuals happens because the polarizing brand becomes a strong motive to involve in social interaction, an important component of engagement in brand communities (Dessart et al., 2015). This was expressed as:

"*Try, you know, start a conversation with people. You know it's one of those things that you bring up with people, you know, who they support, you know, you find someone saying, you can kind of connect with them*" (M8, 21).

"*I always like seeing someone that supports the same team as me or has the same views as me in this, you know, if you have a wee bit of a connection if you have the same views it's easier to get along with them. You always have something to talk about*" (M7, 22).

6. Discussion

6.1. Theoretical contribution

The conceptualization of brand polarization presented in this paper offers an initial step in the process of developing a better understanding of the phenomenon and identify possible positive effects of brand negativity and hate. Brand polarization relates to extremely passionate positive and negative feelings and convictions towards a specific brand. A brand with a polarizing nature simultaneously has considerable numbers of lovers and haters (Luo et al., 2013a). Brand rivalry is seen as a special type of brand polarization, in which the mentioned manifestations of love and hate are directed towards two brands that are competing with each other, instead of one brand.

The study primarily aims to provide a more systematic account of the potential advantages of brand polarization and, in particular, consumer negativity in this context. The findings of this study identify three parties that profit from brand polarization: the brand management team, the brand as an entity, and the engaged consumers. This new approach in the literature implies that the brand acts as an anchor linking the three parties together and helping them benefit. Both the brand management team and the passionate consumers feel that through their engagement with the polarizing brand, value will derive for their own enhancement. Thus, value is co-created for all parties involved. To some extent, the findings of this study extend recent research that acknowledges that the identity of the individuals, the brand and the brand community around a brand have constant exchanges that form their identities (Black & Veloutsou, 2017). This study re-enforces these findings and suggests that the brand management team is also a player in the process of developing brand meaning.

The study tentatively suggests that brand polarization inspires the expression of distinctiveness (Luo et al., 2013a; 2013b). The findings also extent existing knowledge by pointing out that distinctiveness is often expressed in terms of characteristics of the brand as a person, such as brand personality. Another new finding that supports an already noted but not empirically studied view (Mafael et al., 2016) is that polarizing brands themselves tend to

be strong brands. Polarizing brands enjoy high levels of awareness and recognition and have well-established and clear brand associations (Wolter et al., 2016). Consumers are not indifferent to polarizing brands. They know what these brands stand for and they either put them in their lives or decide to keep them far from them. The results of this study also support that polarizing brands have the ability to evoke strong emotions, high levels of passion and customers' strong positive and negative engagement, further increasing brand popularity and strength. Having critics is not random, but a sign of being strong. Most brands featuring in the top positions of the most-hated brands' lists are highly successful, clearly indicating that they are polarizing brands.

From the brand teams' perspective, acknowledging the affective nature of brand polarization and embracing it can be favourable for a better understanding of consumers' perceptions and actions in their relationships with brands. The results seem to support the benefits of brand polarization reported in the literature in terms of helping the brand management team to have a better focus. Brand polarization also provides direction for the segmentation and differentiation strategies (Luo et al., 2013a) and for routine tactical positioning decisions, such as advertising (Monahan, 2017; Monahan et al., 2017). The findings highlight that consumers strongly believe that negativity in brand polarization can help managers of the disliked brands to improve their offering. This is an insight not extensively suggested in the existing literature.

From the side of passionate consumers, the findings of the study add to knowledge by revealing that brand polarization provides three of the values associated with brand consumption (Richins, 1994), enjoyment, identity self-expression and representation of interpersonal ties, but not utilitarian value. The interaction with polarizing brands brings joy in the lives of passionate consumers, both for hated and loved brands. Data adds to the existing literature introducing the pride for the achievements of the polarizing brand as a source of enjoyment. Self-categorization plays an important role in the development of brand polarization, as it increases the tendency consumers have to value in-group similarity and out-group differentiation (Van Knippenberg, De Vries, & Van Knippenberg, 1990). Self-brand identification might lead to solidarity and conformity with other lovers and to differentiation and distancing from haters of the brand. Brand polarization is more likely to develop when brands are integrated into the consumers' self-concept. Brand polarization is closely linked with Tajfel's (1974) social identity theory, as followers and detractors of a polarizing brand will tend to identify with other customers who share their emotions, considering them as belonging to their own group (intragroup identification) while simultaneously viewing customers with opposite emotions as a disliked out-group (intergroup alienation). Although research on polarizing products suggests that they have a stronger effect when expressing group-level

identity, rather than self-identity (Rozenkrants et al., 2017), the results in the analysis for brand polarization and polarizing brands are rather different. The connections of social identity and self-categorization with brand polarization suppose an affective nature of the phenomenon, explaining the reasons for disliking out-group members who have a contrary perception about the brand and considering them, to some extent, as rivals. The diversity of the types of value that brand polarization provides for consumers were not reported in the literature in an organized way before and further support the claim that it can be beneficial for all parties involved.

The data also suggest that people's passion towards polarizing brands drives them to form community-like bonds. Given that, often, brand communities are initiated from companies as a marketing tool, this finding provides some interesting insights. Without the intention and support of the polarizing brands' management teams, individuals express conscious belonging to informal groups of likeminded individuals formed around such brands. This organic brand community formation is an interesting phenomenon that has not been reported extensively in the literature of brand communities.

6.2. Managerial Implications

Brand polarization can harm but may also benefit companies. Brand polarization can bring negative consequences like making enemies and creating tension, as observed for political candidates (Rogowski & Sutherland, 2016) and football teams (Lopez-Gonzalez et al., 2014). Research suggests that the negative views for a popular brand can be used to diagnose emerging cultural changes and gain insights into how to avoid undesired outcomes (Thompson et al., 2006). However, brand polarization can also convey advantages. Brands could benefit from having an identified group of lovers and an identified group of haters, as it would allow them to have a better focus when developing and implementing the brand's marketing strategies and tactics.

Polarization is sometimes used intentionally in the development of profitable and productive brand differentiation and brand positioning strategies, as in the case of Marmite and Strongbow (Luo et al., 2013a). International brand strategies relying on polarization opportunistically exploit clear identity concerning when, where, why, and what the brand stands for. Such strategies identify the traits and the best content that their preferred target market values, and others find odd, uninteresting or even repelling, and make them their defining brand element as points of difference of the brand. Polarizing brands are not afraid to

cause controversy and do not try to appeal to everyone. Their stand helps them position themselves to attract their target market and make an impact. On certain occasions, they are even willing to potentially lose sales to stay true to their cause. The fact that they are distinct can help them develop a very strong emotional branding strategy and convince consumers that the brand plays a proactive role in their lives (Thompson et al., 2006). This allows them to grow, diversify and expand into new markets. However, polarization must be used carefully. When polarization goes too far or provokes bad taste it is likely to offend people and may put brands a step back by losing brand loyalty.

Brand polarization can be advantageous in the design and application of more effective marketing campaigns of the brand with its followers. Knowing that not everybody will like a brand allows managers to undertake more adventurous marketing communication decisions that might take the form of openly acknowledging the coexistence of lovers and haters of the brand (Monahan et al., 2017). Cultivating the polarizing nature of the brand can extend beyond marketing communications. Managers should also focus on the points of difference and support them when making any brand-related decisions, knowing that these exact points will evoke in different consumers positive and negative sentiments. Having a group of declared haters can be useful to strengthen the bonds with the group of lovers, as the existence of an out-group would be a unifying factor of the supporters of the brand. This is the case for Coke and Pepsi, the two most popular cola brands (Muñiz & Hamer, 2001). Brand polarization is also a very relevant base for the development of relationship marketing campaigns.

In an era of social networking, where interaction between consumers through WoM and belonging to brand communities is more spread than ever, brand polarization helps brands to gain attention. People are not passive about polarizing brands. These brands reach into the lovers and haters' intellect and emotions and develop sustained engagement of a different nature. Because of the passion related to the brand, both haters and lovers feel a need to express their thoughts and feelings, as in the case of Wal-Mart's pro and anti-brand communities (Hollenbeck & Zinkham, 2010). If, indeed, any publicity is good publicity, then polarizing brands gain a clear advantage from their positioning both in terms of reaching individual consumers and groups of consumers.

The polarizing nature of brands can also influence other stakeholders and indirect actors. Decisions to align with a polarizing brand through sponsorship, endorsing or co-branding should not be taken lightly from any kind of alliance partner, including human brands. Due to the meaning transfer that is expected to be an outcome of the alliance, attributes, thoughts, beliefs, feelings and attitudes associated with the polarizing brand are expected to hand over

the alliance partner. During this process, the alliance partner is likely to inherit a group of fanatic followers, but also a group of opposers because of the alliance. The alliance partner needs to be prepared for the new attributes that will alter its positioning in the consumers' minds and have the willingness and the strength to confront the wave of haters. In the past, large companies have decided to withdraw from alliances with polarizing brands because of the negativity that some consumers developed towards them, as the example of the communications company NTL, which was sponsoring two arch-rival football teams (Davies et al., 2006) as well as later sponsors of these teams.

Managers of polarizing brands have the responsibility to clearly support the brand's devoted consumers. The strong base of opposers is always there, ready to criticize them. If they do not deliver to the expectations of the supporters in any front, then it is likely to see negative ratings start to emerge from all the consumer base. The need for consistency and the support of the relevance of the brand's positioning from the followers is key for securing the strength and the further growth of the polarizing brand. Haters push the management team to keep constantly improving to satisfy the group of lovers. In a world of clutter, consumers are not likely to pay attention to things that are ordinary and indifferent. The last effect a brand can afford to create is indifference and, therefore, marketers must try to avoid having brands that are not memorable. Instead, the creation of great brands that make segments of people delighted should be the goal of any marketer. The fact that polarizing brands make other segments unhappy should not be a primary concern for marketers. The worst case is to incite no passionate reactions at all, and that happens when companies try to make everyone happy.

6.3. Limitations and direction for future research

This study attempted to better conceptualise brand polarization and explore the positive outcomes of brand polarization for three different entities: the management team, the brand, and the consumers. The results uncover only positive outcomes of brand polarization as expressed from the consumer perspective in one country. Much more needs to be learned to help our understanding and the effects of brand polarization.

To move the empirical research forward, the concept of brand polarization requires a robust operationalization and validation of its dimensionality. In addition, its conceptual boundaries and the potential conceptual overlaps with brand love and brand hate need further examination. The conditions that foster brand polarization and the effects of being a polarizing brand is another area that calls for more research.

Although polarization implies that there are two groups of consumers, one that sees the brand positively and one that sees the brand negatively, the limited existing research focuses on ways that companies can develop polarization-based strategies and tactics. There is a need to see how these large consumer groups are formed, the degree that they, indeed, have all the brand community characteristics, the reasons that individual consumers choose to become opposers and if polarizations really fosters group behaviour and collective actions. This context could also be used for developing our understanding in organic development of brand and anti-brand communities initiated from individuals with positive and negative brand passion.

Future research should examine the perceptions of different actors and actors with different profiles towards brand polarization. Most existing research approaches polarization from the consumer perspective. The managerial perspective, the reasons behind the choice to adopt such a positioning strategy or to work around the unintentional brand polarization phenomenon is largely missing. Given that polarization has effects in other associated entities, such as sponsors, more research is needed on the effect of polarization on such entities. Since competition and conflict are acceptable to a different extent from specific cultures, examining the brand polarization phenomenon from the consumer perspective in different cultural groups could provide useful insights.

Lastly, future research could investigate the drivers and outcomes of brand polarization. To extend the comprehension of the phenomenon, it may be useful to know how companies can foster polarization and what the positive and negative consequences they may encounter are. Such antecedents and outcomes must be initially defined and further validated through conclusive research.

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Figure 1. Benefits of brand polarizations for the parties involved
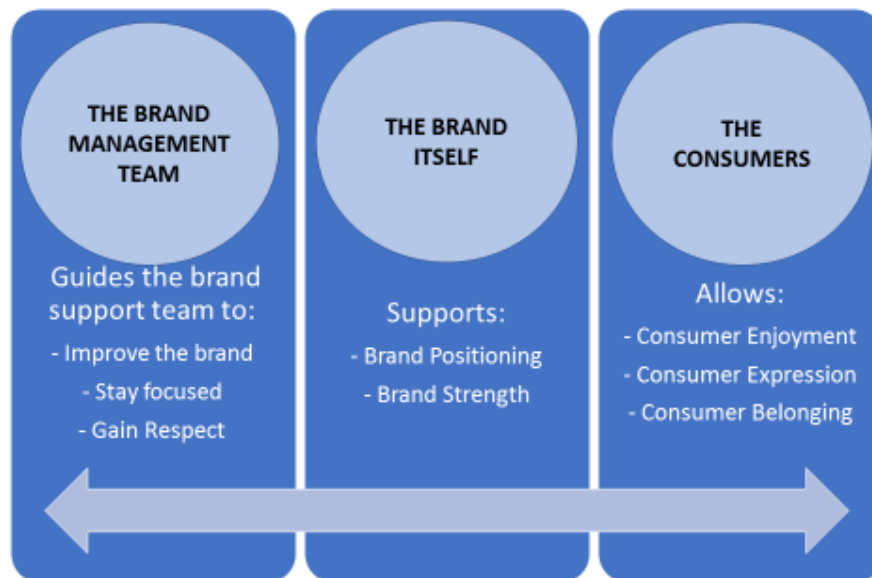
Table 1 – Search process and inclusion criteria

	Political science	Social psychology	Brand rivalry
Inclusion criterion #1 Database(s)	Worldwide Political Science	EBSCO's Psychology and Behavioral Sciences collection	EBSCO & Emeraldinsight
Inclusion criterion #2 Search term(s)	"Polarization"	"Polarization"	"Brand rivalry", "team rivalry" and "rivalry"
Inclusion criterion #3 Document type	Peer-reviewed journal articles	Peer-reviewed journal articles	Peer-reviewed journal articles
Inclusion criterion #4 Language	English	English	English
Inclusion criterion #5 Time period	1967 - 2017	1967 - 2017	1987 - 2017
Initial number of identified articles (inclusion criteria)	1.977	998	1.370
Exclusion criterion # 1	Articles about polarization in areas different than political science	Articles about polarization in areas different than social psychology	Articles about rivalry outside the scope of the branding/marketing areas
Excluded	1.542	818	1.172
Survived	435	180	198
Exclusion criterion # 2	Editorials, duplicated articles and articles having polarization as a peripheral theme	Editorials, duplicated articles and articles having polarization as a peripheral theme	Editorials, duplicated articles and articles having brand rivalry as a peripheral theme
Excluded	335	134	152
Survived	100	46	46
Exclusion criterion # 3	Articles that did not present a definition of polarization	Articles that did not present a definition of polarization	Articles that did not present a definition of brand rivalry/team rivalry
Excluded	63	17	28
Final sample	37	29	18

Table 2 – Definitions of polarization and brand/team rivalry

Def.	Evidence of strong/ extreme ends	Thinking	Feeling	Action	References
PPS1	✓	Ideological disagreement Ideological difference Ideological distance Self-categorization			Webster & Abramowitz (2017); Harrison (2016); Hoffarth & Hodson (2016); Lelkes (2016); Rogowski & Sutherland (2016); Wronski (2016); Farina (2015); Lee (2015); Lupu (2015); Papageorgiou & Autto (2015); Ezrow et al. (2014); Wang (2014); Dettrey & Campbell (2013); Tepe (2013); Ura & Ellis (2012); Brown et al. (2011); Rehm & Reilly (2010); Fiorina et al. (2008); Layman et al. (2006); DiMaggio et al. (1996)
PPS2		Positive evaluation of the in-group and negative evaluation of the out-group	In-group favouritism and out-group hatred		Jordan & Bowling (2016); Iyengar & Westwood (2015); Pildes (2011); Clark (2009); Esteban & Schneider (2008).
PPS3		Self-categorization	Sense of belonging to a group of followers Sense of distancing from the group of supporters of the rival		Lau et al. (2017); Suhay (2015); LaMothe (2012).
PPS4	✓				Levendusky & Pope (2011); Hetherington (2009); Levendusky (2009); Berrebi & Klor (2008); Fiorina & Abrams (2008); Dixit & Weibull (2007); Evans (2003); Kuhn & Lao (1996).
PPS5	✓	Partisan bias	Anger	Activism	Mason (2013).
PSP1	✓	Becoming more extreme in the views Self-categorization		Joint discussion	Landemore & Mercier (2012); Wojcieszak (2011); Krizan & Baron (2007); Lee (2007); Burton et al. (2006); Flint et al. (2006); Sunstein (2002a); Sunstein (2002b); Mendelberg (2002); Friedkin (1999); Liu & Latane (1998); Chandrashekaran et al. (1996); Williams & Taormina (1993); Rao & Steckel (1991); Abrams et al. (1990); Hogg et al. (1990); Nowak et al. (1990); Turner et al. (1989); Isenberg (1986); Mackie (1986), Hinsz & Davis (1984); Myers (1978); Myers & Lamm (1976).
PSP2	✓	Opposition or conflict			Dandekar et al. (2013); Edvardsson & Vegelius (1975).
PSP3	✓	Opposing beliefs		Opposing actions	Baliga et al. (2013).
PSP4	✓	Opposite positions			Kalai & Kalai (2001).
PSP5	✓	Opposing opinions			Harton & Latané (1997); Rohde (1974).
R1	✓		Antagonistic relationship Pleasure for the favourite brand's success		Havard & Reams (2016); Karanfil (2016); Tyler & Cobbs (2015); Ewing et al. (2013); Havard et al. (2013a); Benkwitz & Molnar (2012).
R2		Self-expression	Hostile attitudes & feelings Pleasure for the rival's misfortune		Angell et al. (2016); Berendt & Uhrich (2016); Dalakas et al. (2015); Grohs et al. (2015); Havard et al. (2013b); Bergkvist (2012).
R3			Hostile attitudes & feelings Pleasure for the rival's misfortune	Hostile behaviours	Marticotte et al. (2016); Phillips-Melancon & Dalakas (2014); Kuo & Feng (2013); Thompson & Sinha (2008).
R4	✓		Opposing brand preference	Competing	Verboven (1999)
R5				Competing	Gius (1993)

PPS: Polarization in Politica Science, PSP: Polarization in Socia Psychology, R: Rivalry

Table 3 Interviewees' information

Name	Gender	Age group	Nationality	Occupation	Loved brand(s)	Hated brand(s)	Way of contact	Number of words (transcript)	Interview duration (minutes)
F1	Female	26-35	Ukraine	Working part-time	EasyJet	Pepsi, Ryanair	Face-to face	5.169	50
F2	Female	26-35	Iran	Student	Mango, Zara	Mourinho, Primark	Face-to face	6.422	65
M1	Male	26-35	Pakistan	Student	Hassan Nisar (Pakistani journalist)	Nawaz Sharif (former Prime Minister of Pakistan)	Skype	3.252	32
F3	Female	26-35	Slovenia	Student	Fat Face	Pizza Hut	Face-to face	2.865	32
M2	Male	26-35	China	Student	Liverpool Football Club	Manchester United	Face-to face	1.385	16
M3	Male	26-35	Italy	Student	Apple, Waitrose	Samsung, Iceland	Face-to face	2.783	39
M4	Male	26-35	Colombia	Working full-time	Harry Potter	Samsung	Face-to face	3.864	35
M5	Male	36-45	Colombia	Working full-time	Coca-Cola	Claro (Colombian telecommunications brand)	Face-to face	3.238	32
M6	Male	56-65	UK	Working full-time	Royal Mail	Ryanair	Face-to face	2.067	20
F4	Female	26-35	UK	Working full-time	ASDA	Pepsi	Face-to face	1.700	17
F5	Female	26-35	UK	Working full-time	McDonald's	Nestlé	Face-to face	1.725	17
M7	Male	18-25	UK	Student	Rangers FC, Nike	Starbucks, Apple	Face-to face	3.795	30
M8	Male	18-25	UK	Working part-time	Arsenal FC	Tottenham FC	Face-to face	2.719	30
M9	Male	36-45	USA	Working full-time	Washington Redskins	Dallas Cowboys	Face-to face	3.522	37
F6	Female	18-25	USA	Student	Apple	Lululemon	Face-to face	2.780	25
M10	Male	36-45	Malta	Working full-time	Classic FM (radio station), Roma FC	Starbucks, Facebook	Skype	4.374	42
M11	Male	18-25	Romania	Working full-time	Real Madrid	McDonald's	Face-to face	2.963	28
F7	Female	66-75	UK	Retired	Scottish Power, Frasers	Tesco, PC World	Face-to face	3.590	31
F8	Female	66-75	UK	Retired	Rangers FC	Celtic FC	Face-to face	2.617	51
F9	Female	46-55	UK	Working full-time	Celtic FC	Rangers FC	Face-to face	2.974	27
M12	Male	26-35	UK	Working full-time	Nike	BP	Face-to face	2.975	25
F10	Female	26-35	Egypt	Student	Underground music group in Egypt	Nike	Face-to face	2.146	21