

UNIVERSITY OF TAMPERE  
Faculty of Management

**CONCEPTIONS OF MORAL BRANDING  
A PHENOMENOGRAPHIC ANALYSIS AMONG MILLENNIALS**

Marketing  
Master's thesis  
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April 2018

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## **ABSTRACT**

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Author:                        MANNINEN, MARIANNE  
Title:                            Conceptions of moral branding  
                                      A phenomenographic analysis among millennials  
Master's thesis:              97 pages, 2 appendix pages  
Date:                            April 2018  
Keywords:                     moral branding, corporate branding, corporate citizenship  
                                      phenomenography, millennials

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During the last few years, a new phenomenon has emerged in marketing – the purpose of the brand. This shift towards corporate brands adopting a more active societal role has forced them to consider their values on an ever-deeper level. Consumers have become interested in the moral values of corporate brands. This shift has been fostered by a transformation in society caused by changes in traditional institutions. This research focuses on millennials because, in the light of earlier research on this generation, their conceptions of the changing role of corporate brands seemed fruitful and meaningful to study further.

The purpose herein is to build an understanding of moral branding, and to analyse the conceptions of millennials as consumers considering the moral role of brands in society. The method used to reveal these conceptions is phenomenography. As the research field of moral branding is relatively new, an abductive research logic was selected to investigate the phenomenon. The theoretical framework of this research was formed with the help of in-depth interviews with directors in charge of branding and corporate responsibility. The findings of the theoretical framework were complemented with conceptions millennials held of moral branding. This information was gathered through focus groups, in which 25 millennials participated.

The theoretical framework of this research consists of three fields of literature established as a result of the in-depth interviews. The first part focuses on companies' relationship with society and introduces literature on corporate citizenship. Second, corporate brands are presented as strategic and as relational sociocultural assets. The third part focuses on the earlier literature on moral branding, which is still rather scarce. The connection of corporate branding to morality is also explained in a chapter on the moral agent theory. The relationship of the research streams is then illustrated in a synthesis of the theoretical framework. Moral branding is shown to exist in different spheres, all of which have shared moral values at their core.

As a result of phenomenographic analysis, two conceptions to describe moral branding in a company sphere were found: corporate brand positioning and activities based on moral questions. To illustrate the effect of moral branding in society, three perspectives were discovered. According to this research, moral branding can be conceptualised as marketing enlightenment, as a threat increasing societal fragmentation, or as a sign of hypocrisy. The findings offer a new way to understand moral branding theoretically and from a consumer's point of view, which can help both academia and brand directors.

## TIIVISTELMÄ

Tampereen yliopisto	Johtamiskorkeakoulu, markkinointi
Tekijä:	MANNINEN, MARIANNE
Tutkielman nimi:	Conceptions of moral branding A phenomenographic analysis among millennials
Pro gradu –tutkielma:	97 sivua, 2 liitesivua
Aika:	Huhtikuu 2018
Avainsanat:	moraalinen brändäys, yritysbrändit, yrityskansalaisuus, fenomenografia, milleniaalit

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Brändien merkityksellisyys on noussut viimeisten vuosien aikana keskusteluun markkinoinnissa niin tutkijoiden kuin yritysten keskuudessa. Ilmiö on osoitus yritysbrändien entistä vahvemmassa yhteiskunnallisesta roolista, joka on pakottanut yritysbrändit miettimään arvojaan syvemmällä tasolla. Kuluttajat ovat kiinnostuneita yritysbrändien moraalista arvoista. Tämä tutkimus keskittyy milleniaaleihin, sillä aiempi tutkimustieto sukupolvesta on osoittanut heidän käsityksensä yritysbrändeistä ja niiden yhteiskunnallisesta roolista olevan antoisa tutkimuskohde.

Tutkimuksen tarkoitus on kasvattaa ymmärrystä moraalista brändäyksestä sekä analysoida milleniaalien käsityksiä brändien moraalista roolista. Tutkimuksen metodiksi valikoitui fenomenografia, jolla pyritään selvittämään käsityksiä eri ilmiöistä. Moraalinen brändäys on uusi tutkimuskenttä markkinoinnin alalla, joten tämä tutkimus lähestyy aihetta abduktiivisen tutkimusotteen avulla. Markkinointi- tai vastuullisuusjohtajien syvähaastattelut auttoivat rakentamaan teoreettisen viitekehyksen. Ymmärrystä täydennettiin fokusryhmätutkimuksella, jonka tarkoituksena oli selvittää milleniaalien käsityksiä moraalista brändäyksestä.

Yrityskansalaisuus, yritysbrändäys ja moraalinen rooli brändin rakentamisessa olivat teemat, jotka toistuivat eniten syvähaastatteluissa. Yritysten roolia osana yhteiskuntaa käsitellään teoreettisen viitekehyksen ensimmäisessä osassa. Yritysbrändejä lähestytään kahdesta näkökulmasta: sekä strategisena että sosiokulttuurisena vahvuutena. Moraalisen brändäyksen oma tutkimuskenttä on vasta kehittymässä. Olemassa olevaa tutkimusta aiheesta esitellään osana teorialukua. Tämän lisäksi teoriassa avataan myös moraalinen ja yritysbrändien yhteyttä moraalisen toimijuuden teorian kautta. Teoreettisen viitekehyksen synteesi sitoo yhteen kaikki kolme osaa ja kuvastaa niiden suhdetta toisiinsa. Kuvio osoittaa moraalisen brändäyksen ilmenevän samanaikaisesti niin kuluttajien, yrityksen kuin yhteiskunnan tasolla. Eri tasoja yhdistävät jaetut moraaliset arvot.

Fokusryhmiä seuranneen fenomenografisen analyysin perusteella löydettiin kaksi käsitystä kuvata moraalista brändäystä yritystasolla ja kolme käsitystä ilmiöstä yhteiskunnan tasolla. Yritystasolla moraalinen brändäys nähdään joko brändin positointina tai tiettyinä toimina. Yhteiskunnan tasolla ilmiö voi milleniaalien käsitysten mukaan johtaa markkinoinnin valaistumiseen, uhata yhteiskuntaa tai olla osoitus yritysbrändien tekopyhydestä. Tämä tutkimus auttaa ymmärtämään moraalista brändäystä niin teoreettisesti kuin kuluttajienkin näkökulmasta, ja näin ollen tarjoaa uusia näkemyksiä aiheeseen sekä tutkijoille että brändijohtajille.

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# 1 INTRODUCTION

## 1.1 It is the purpose that matters

*“A capitalistic company cannot have certain assumptions and behavioral rules, which concern good and bad, right and wrong, valuable and not, accepting and rejecting. A company is a movement of one subject. Its mission is to create as much wealth to its owners as possible.”*

*Björn Wahlroos 2008*

Both researchers and marketers have lately shown a rapidly growing interest in the role of moral and social purpose in business. Since the issue is emotionally laden, decisions regarding morally colored statements and actions by brands are risky. Thus, the need to understand customers' interpretations of moral branding and brands' actions towards societal issues is obvious. Academia has called for further research to discern, for example, whether companies are truly ethical in their business dealings, or are being merely mercenary in taking advantage of ethics and morality.

Various stakeholders in society and the marketplace now demand that companies consider ethics and socially responsible actions, as financial performance and profit are no longer the only areas of interest (Svensson et al. 2010, 342). Nevertheless, since the 1960s, the academic discipline of marketing has adopted a microeconomic view, and the focus has shifted away from macroeconomic interests (Webster & Lusch 2013, 390). Nowadays, this view can be seen as too narrow. Companies and society are profoundly attached, and we as consumers interact constantly with both of them. The interaction of these three actors has great potential to create synergy for the welfare of all (Webster & Lusch 2013, 393). Based on these thoughts, Webster and Lusch suggest that the concept of marketing should be elevated to a level in which marketing is responsible for societal welfare as well.

Consumers expect brands to have a social purpose – products or services and their features alone are no longer sufficient (Rodríguez Vilá & Bharadwaj 2017). Ethics, sustainability, and responsibility are the macrophenomena and megatrends of our time. They are concepts that can enable the life of future generations. Consumers are already aware that their consumption is causing threats to the future. In their article about the frontiers of the marketing paradigm in the third millennium, Archol and Kotler (2012, 44) call sustainable marketing the new superphenomenon of the field. They state that marketing is ultimately a higher level matter than the traditional marketing activities of companies per se, and it is now the marketers who are responsible for the functions and malfunctions of consumption.

In fact, the latest definition of marketing by the American Marketing Association (2012) declares: “Marketing is the activity, set of institutions, and processes for creating, communicating, delivering, and exchanging offerings that have value for customers, clients, partners, and society at large.” Interestingly, the AMA’s definition has changed over the years, with a growing focus on a holistic view of marketing and its impact on a societal level (Balmer 2001, 1332).

An increasing number of companies seem to choose a higher-level goal instead of financial return-on-investment (Dodd 2014). In other words, brands have taken initiatives to implement social and moral purposes at their core, by taking social stands in highly varying ways (Rodríguez Vilá & Bharadwaj 2017). In the best possible scenario, a brand’s adoption of a social purpose or a moral stand can create new value for a vast group of stakeholders, from customers, employees, and shareholders to society as a whole (Rodríguez Vilá & Bharadwaj 2017). However, this task is not an easy one for brands. It is a journey full of varying emotions, reactions, and risks – and, in the end, different assumptions on morality. Taking a societal or political stance may contain a risk of boycott from various groups of consumers whose values and opinions may be threatened.

At the same time, traditional political institutions suffer from an increasing loss of trust by citizens – which opens up a possibility for companies to strengthen their role as

societal actors (Biraghi et al. 2017, 210). Taking a quick look at the past, the role and the input of companies in society does not seem to be a particularly rare phenomenon. In the era of industrialism, including the birth of capitalism and a consumption-centred society, companies were actually the accelerators of societal well-being and development. Could this happen again in the field of business? Could companies and brands take part in enhancing the well-being of society?

The time has come for brands to think about their moral framework, which covers what the brand believes in, what it wants to fight for, and what kind of history it wants to make (DeWolf Swenson 2017). Morality is a theme that has interested people around the world, regardless of their culture, since ancient times. It can be seen as a foundation of Western society, because the law and preferred social behavior are most often based on moral questions. Some researchers in the business world have already begun discussing the issue (Hume 2010). In the future, companies could be seen as using their capacity to encourage consumers in behavior that creates social welfare.

## **1.2 Millennials as conscious and critical consumers**

Millennials (or Generation Y) consist of population born between late 70s and mid 90s (Sullivan & Heitmeyer 2008; Hume 2010). Different assumptions are held of the exact years of birth. According to the widest definitions, they were born between 1980 and 2000 (Gurau 2012; Young et al. 2012). A more significant criterion for defining a generation than years of birth are shared historical and cultural events and macro phenomena, which create generational experiences when experienced at the same life stage (Young et al. 2012, 146). A generation often shares similar consumption expenditures, attitudes towards the environment and experiences of technological developments at the same stage of life (Hume 2010, 387). Even though differences always exist among nations and cultures, millennials still represent globally the most homogenous generation of all time. Due to globalization, social media, the dominance of Western culture and the speed of change, millennials resemble each other, whether they live in the Western society or in developing countries (Stein 2013).

What makes millennials different as consumers in comparison to previous generations? One major factor is that they are the first generation to have grown up in a media-saturated environment and in a brand-conscious world (Smith 2012, 87). The new social media platforms, which are accessible for everyone, enable the possibility of creating individuality in a completely new way (Milár 2016, 10). These shared generational experiences create a view of the world, which has a crucial impact on values, beliefs, preferences, motivations and behavior (Young et al. 2012, 146). These assumptions form the consumption habits of a generation as well.

Millennials are currently the youngest of the generations who have control of their own finances and can therefore decide how to spend their incomes. By 2020, they will represent half of the employed population globally. They will be the ones who possess the income to consume (Neilson 2013). Their consumption power is remarkable, since the generation represents up to a quarter of the world's total population (Keeble 2013). As a generation, millennials are currently forming their lifelong purchasing preferences and patterns (Boston Consulting Group 2013), and they already are or are will be the parents of the children of tomorrow (Hume 2010, 387). It is extremely important for companies to gain insight into millennials, if they want to stay relevant in the lives of this young generation.

Millennials do not hesitate to engage supportively in a cause they care for (Paulin et al. 2014, 246). Millennials were selected for this study because they are recognised as the most consumption-oriented generation (Sullivan & Heitmeyer 2008), and because they want things to be done sustainably (Keeble 2013). Millennials can be defined as idealistic, socially conscious, individualistic, and anti-corporate (Sullivan & Heitmeyer 2008, 288). Millennials respect goodwill to the extent that in making purchase decisions they prefer companies that help people, communities, and the environment (Smith 2013, 87).

The values of Generation Y can be seen as somewhat paradoxical. Previous popular and academic research about millennials and their characteristics has pointed out a paradigm that is captured by the terms "Generation Me" and "Generation We" (Paulin et al. 2014, 336). In generational studies, they have even been named "the empathic generation"

(Arnett 2010). They care for ethical issues and want to contribute their part to community well-being and civic spirit (Gorman et al. 2004; Howe & Strauss 2000). They are also open to change and diversity (Young et al. 2012, 147). Being accustomed to environmental change from their early years of life has made this generation aware of ecological issues (Smith et al. 2012, 537). Millennials truly believe they own the key to changing the downward spiral of the environment, which makes them pragmatic about the environmental footprint of their consumption (Hwang & Griffiths 2017, 132).

As representatives of “Generation Me,” millennials are far less politically active and civically engaged compared to previous generations (Stein 2013). In a vast study about this generation, Twenge et al. (2012; 2006) found that money and materialism rule their world. Some even call this generation narcissistic: self-image, entitlements, and convenience are important for them, and they have little respect for authority (Stein 2013). Bucic et al. (2012, 127) researched ethical consumerism in millennials and verified Boulstridge’s and Carrigan’s (2000) findings that although they are willing to consume ethically, that is seldom the most important criteria in their decision-making.

The young consumers of Generation Y engage with brands even to a point at which brands are seen as extensions of their personal values and status (Boston Consulting Group 2013). Social image is extremely important for millennials and for them brands are a way to create their image (McCormick 2016, 40). They represent a generation of strong values, which are formed based on the above-mentioned mega trends. In order for a thought to be developed to a concrete action, the individual’s empathetic identification with the cause is pivotal (Paulin et al. 2004, 343). Companies should strive to create symbolic value for millennials (e.g., enhancing societal sustainability), since that has the capability to increase their level of empathy towards the product or service and, in the end, even lead to increased purchase intention (Hwang & Griffiths 2016, 141;142).

A study of millennials’ willingness to engage in charitable causes (Paulin et al. 2014, 344) found that in order to gain the attention of this challenging generation and please it, marketers should apply a “with” rather than a “to” mind-set. This approach creates both a new situation and additional possibilities for companies. The researchers of this

study also discovered that millennials responded to social cause campaigns on social media more positively if the campaign message supported the benefit of others rather than individual or personal benefits. These findings signal that millennials can be argued to be a “we” generation, which is active in the marketplace and society, not a passive, “me” generation.

### **1.3 Problem setting and research objectives**

Marketers are paying increasing attention to the role of social purpose in business and to the notion of morality in branding. They make headlines with their ambitions to fight against environmental change and inequality, and to support minority rights. Some have even stated that they aim to save the world or are willing to go to a jail for the sake of erasing problematic issues. A recent article by Rodríguez Vilá & Bharadwaj (2017) reported that brands increasingly aim to adopt a social purpose to guide their marketing communications, financial issues, or even product innovation.

The interest of the researcher in this study was to find out whether companies themselves regard their corporate brands as political actors manifesting their support for an issue – and how millennials perceive this issue. For example, in the light of recent events in marketing, it seems crucial to gain more information about the issue. Pepsi landed in a minefield in 2017 with one advertisement, which became known as the worst branding failure of the year (Monllos 2017). In the brand’s film, US celebrity Kendall Jenner joins a demonstration. She walks among demonstrators of different ethnic background who are protesting for love, unity, and equality. At the end of the advertisement, Jenner offers a police officer a can of Pepsi. With this brand film, Pepsi wanted to encourage people to “live bolder, live louder and live for now.” Despite their respectable intentions, the advertisement was experienced as insulting instead of encouraging. It was accused of transmitting a false image of a serious issue with the cheering demonstrators and smiling police officers. Its message was interpreted as assaulting the sacrifices demonstrators have historically made. (Victor 2017) This branding scandal was followed by apologies and the campaign’s removal, but long-standing effects of this failure are yet to be seen. The best way to avoid similar mistakes

for brands is to increase their knowledge of how consumers conceptualize branding acts, and they see a brand's position in society.

One fact that makes the millennials an especially interesting generation is that the majority of them are concerned with the current state of the world and believe it is their duty to change it (World Economic Forum: Engaging Tomorrow's customer 2015). Their attitude towards ethical issues has been found to be sympathetic, and they are a generation who believe that they are able to make a difference in the world. (Bucic et al. 2012, 115) This generation's demand for purpose in companies and brands is now becoming of interest to companies. The millennials want brands to care (Milár 2016).

The purpose of this research is to build an understanding of moral branding, and to analyse the conceptions of millennials as consumers who consider the moral role of brands in a society. To achieve the stated purpose, this research poses three research questions:

1. How do corporate brands perceive their role in society?
2. How do millennials conceptualise moral branding?
3. How do millennials conceptualise moral branding in relation to society?

While the first research question helped to form the theoretical framework, the second and third research question directed the empirical part, which focuses on millennials' conceptions of moral branding. A group of millennials participated in focus group discussions in which topics such as morality, societal climate, and the purpose of a company were discussed.

The structure of this thesis is based on an abductive research design. In such a design, the theoretical framework is not tested in the empirical part of the study. Actually, the empirical findings help to build theoretical framework for the phenomena of research interest. Therefore, the introduction is followed by a chapter of methodology. This chapter introduces both the philosophical assumptions of this study as well as the research process. In-depth interviews with directors in charge of branding and corporate

responsibility were utilized to build the theoretical framework. After this, a focus group study was conducted, to complement the theoretical framework formed with the help of the consumers' point of view.

Chapter three presents the theoretical framework, which is formed from three research streams – corporate citizenship, corporate branding, and moral branding. These were the topics mentioned most often in the in-depth interviews with company directors. A synthesis of the theoretical framework presents moral branding as a phenomenon that exists in different spheres – consumer, company, and society. All of the spheres have the same moral values at their core.

In the empirical part of this study, millennials were gathered to participate in focus groups. Millennials' conceptions of the topics discussed were then analysed according to the guidelines of phenomenography, which aims to discover different ways in which the world and phenomena are experienced (Sandberg & Schembri 2002, 197). As a result of data analysis, two conceptions of moral branding as a company sphere phenomenon were found, along with three conceptions of it as a society sphere phenomenon. In the end, this study is summarized and managerial implications as well as further research possibilities are introduced.

## **2 CONDUCTING THE STUDY**

### **2.1 Research philosophy**

Regardless of the science or topic, all research is based on philosophical foundations (Hunt & Hansen 2010, 111). The main philosophical assumptions are epistemology, ontology, and methodology, which together form the world view of the researcher. In other words, philosophical foundations have a significant effect throughout the research, from setting the problem to data analysis, as they originate in the mind of the researcher. This study sees reality through social constructionist lenses. A paradigm needs to be seen to be distinctively separated from a theory. Paradigms can be held as worldviews. For the followers of the social constructionist paradigm, reality exists locally, meaning that knowledge is community-formed (the epistemological assumption), but universal truth cannot exist because reality is seen as subjective (the ontological assumption). Constructionists understand reality as being subjective, in that it is built on experiences and perceptions. This is the ontological assumption of the paradigm. According to this concept, reality is not a stable construct; rather, it changes over time and context, as do individuals' thoughts (Eriksson & Kovalainen 2008, 14). Constructionists do not believe in the existence of an objective reality; rather, they see the world as a construct of multiple realities created by individuals (Guba & Lincoln 1989, 43).

The logical empiricist paradigm has been dominant in marketing research. This form of realism assumes the truth to be objective (ontological assumption) and knowledge to be built upon one truth that can be found (epistemological assumption). It trusts in the principles of rationality and experimental testing: quantitative research methods, deductive reasoning, objectivity, and verification (Tadajewski 204, 307). Paradigms based on a realistic perspective are better suited for theory testing (Peter 1992). Since this study focuses on increasing understanding of a rather new phenomenon, an opposite perspective to theory testing — a relativistic paradigm — serves it better. Relativistic philosophies hold that perceptions and sensations of the world are an inevitable part of the individual and that, in the context of research, the researcher always holds a

worldview encompassing previous beliefs, experiences, training, skills, and knowledge (Peter 1992, 74).

Social constructionism is a milder form of relativism. It assumes that the aim of research is to create new understanding, whereas naïve relativism argues that research is only studying knowledge and that all findings are equally good — in other words, there is no truth or reality to be found (Järvensivu & Törnroos 2008, 101). The latter paradigm views the world as multiply constructed and community bound, and the truth to be formed via the dialogue of a certain community. The idea of the community consists of both the research subjects and the researcher himself or herself (Järvensivu & Törnroos 2008, 101;102).

This study amplifies a phenomenographic research design. In phenomenography, ontology represents a non-dualist view, in which the person and the world are interrelated (Yates et al. 2012, 98). To draw the views of social constructivism and phenomenography together, it can be stated that this study sees knowledge as a sum of the thoughts of individuals, who are integrated in the world around them.

## **2.2 Abductive multi-method research**

A qualitative research methodology was chosen for this study, since its suitable for a researcher's need to create understanding of a complex reality, which consists of different parts with possibly synergistic effects (Gummesson 2005, 312). Two of the main characteristics of the methodology are simultaneous data generation, analysis, and interpretation. Through a constant comparison of the data, existing theory, and previous findings, the researcher makes sense of the research problem and constructs a concept, category, or even a theory (Gummesson 2005, 312).

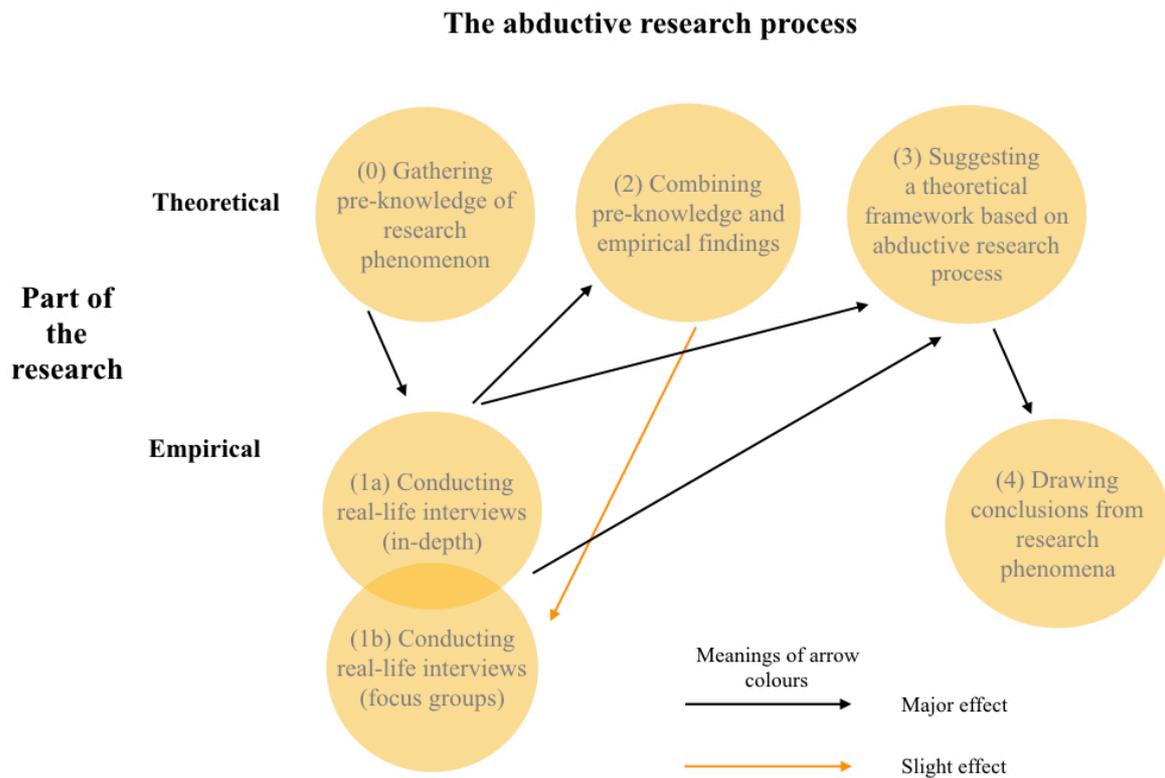


Figure 1. The abductive multi-method research process of the study (adapted from Kovacs, G. & Spens, K. 2005, 139; Gummesson E. 2014). Arrow colors symbolize the effect of one research step on the following step.

Instead of referring to a widely known concept of data collection, the researcher selected the term *data generation* to describe the empiric research of this study. The idea of data generation was introduced by well-known marketing researcher Evert Gummesson (2005). He argued that in a qualitative research process the researcher is always playing a major role when interacting with the people from whom the data will be collected. Since data is a construct of social reality, it cannot be collected similarly to objects, thus the term data generation is found more suitable. It also acknowledges the researcher's active role, meaning that the interpretation of the data is always a personal construct of the researcher (Gummesson 2005, 312).

### 2.2.1 Abductive research process

Deductive reasoning trusts in theoretical argumentation and testing the formed hypotheses, whereas in inductive reasoning single cases or experiences comprise the center of interest and the beginning of the research process (Järvensivu & Törnroos 2008, 102). Social constructionism often applies a research method from between the two, called abduction. The latter concept accepts that previous theory about phenomena can exist, which creates theoretical strength for research interests. Kovács and Spens (2005) cited Alvesson and Sköldberg (1994) in declaring that the objective of the abductive research process is to understand a new phenomenon. In other words, abduction is not an approach for hypothesis testing. In abduction, theory is created by data-driven theory generation combining elements from both inductive and deductive research processes (Järvensivu & Törnroos 2008, 102). It fits well into a research context where the objective is to generate new insights into an existing phenomenon by examining possible new perspectives and borrowing literature from other research fields.

Due to this ability, the abductive research process can be used to increase scientific knowledge of real-life phenomena about which academic research is scant (Kovács & Spens 2005, 138). The abductive research method was chosen for this research due to the relatively new nature of the theory. Järvensivu and Törnroos (2010, 102) argue abduction to be a suitable method for research adapting to the social constructionist paradigm, since it assumes knowledge to be built on empirical findings, not theory testing. The knowledge is seen to be formed in the data generated.

In order to form research questions and questions for the empirical part of the study, an exploration of the literature and previous research is inevitable. Applying an abductive research logic also means that the theoretical framework is built based on empirical findings (see figure 1). Abduction was developed by Charles Peirce. He described it as a method that begins from observation of an unknown topic and develops into a hypothesis explaining the observed topic (O'Shaughnessy 2011, 179). The process begins usually (and also in the case of this study) by gathering previous knowledge of research interest. This helps the researcher to find a focus for empirical research.

After conducting empirical research (see figure 1, step 1a), the researcher started to combine the findings with the gathered pre-knowledge. As a result of this process, which Dubois and Gadde (2002) named “theory matching” or “systematic combining”, the theoretical framework began to find its form. In this study, the empirical study is broken into two parts. Hence, the researcher returned to the empirical study (see figure 1, step 1b) after combining the empirical findings (step 1a) with pre-knowledge. The latter part of the empirical research (see figure 1, step 1b) was performed to draw conclusions from research phenomena, which in the context of this study was millennials’ perceptions of moral branding.

### **2.2.2 Multi-actor research**

The study was conducted through multi-method qualitative research, in which focus group research and in-depth interviews were combined (see figure 1, points 1a & b). Interviews represent the most typical method of phenomenography in data generation (Tight 2016, 324). Millennials took part in focus groups, whereas company directors were interviewed in personal, in-depth interviews. As both methods are based on generating data in an interview, they resemble each other a great deal. Still, there are multiple differences between the two methods, which will be discussed in more depth in the next subchapters.

A multi-actor study combines the realities and the views of multiple marketplace actors. It is most often used to complete consumer research. In a multi-actor study, the phenomenon of interest is examined from the viewpoint of different actors. By interviewing, for example, managers or experts, the researcher can gain a wider understanding of the phenomenon, which helps him or her to contextualise the data generated from the consumers (Arsel 2017). Arsel (2017) points out that another significant advantage of the wider perspective in data generation is triangulation, which is also one of the most crucial aspects in assessing the trustworthiness of the study. As Arsel (2017) recommends, different interview protocols were used in the consumer focus groups and managerial in-depth interviews. Of course, in multi-method research,

the method itself may require different questions and supporting materials, both of which can be found in the Appendices of this study.

### **2.2.3 In-depth interviews**

To understand the phenomenon of interest, the researcher found that information should be gathered from the ones creating the phenomenon – the brands that are acting morally. Directors in charge of branding and corporate responsibility from three Finnish companies were selected for interviews regarding companies' recent activities in taking a stand on societal issues.

Certain facts and benefits led to the choice of in-depth interviews to generate data on the research topic from company directors. Originally, the goal of the researcher was to gather a focus group of company advocates and to study the motives of corporate brands behind the phenomenon of moral branding. One of the main challenges of focus group research is gathering the participants. Since organising a focus group session consisting of management-level advocates would have been difficult, and possibly even impossible, the researcher chose in-depth interviews instead to generate data from the company side. Since company-bound information can also be regarded as confidential to some extent, the researcher found personal interviews to suit the purpose better. As Greenbaum (2010, 17) discloses, people are usually more willing to share more in a personal situation compared to a group situation. It has been also suggested that in-depth interviews allow the researcher (in most cases also the interviewer) to benefit more from some interviewing techniques (e.g., laddering) compared to focus groups (Greenbaum 2000, 17).

The in-depth discussions with directors in charge of branding and corporate responsibility were conducted as semi-structured interviews (see table 1; see the questions in Appendix 1). The interview protocol was formed in co-operation with a doctoral researcher, whose own study is linked to the interests of this one and who took part in the interviews as well. The purpose of these in-depth interviews (see figure 1, step 1a) with directors was to increase knowledge of the research phenomenon and also to enhance triangulation of this study. The findings from the in-depth interviews have a

major effect on the theoretical framework of this study, which is presented in chapter 3. The conclusions of this study were generated from both the theoretical framework (chapter 3) and findings (chapter 4), since the increased knowledge of the research phenomenon is created as a sum of these two. In sum, the findings from the in-depth interviews are meaningful for the conclusions of this study, as well as for the theoretical framework.

Table 1. The interviewees of the corporate brands.

<b>Industry</b>	<b>Duration of the interview</b>	<b>Position of the interviewee</b>	<b>Turnover (M€)</b>
<b>Jewellery</b>	53 minutes	Director Design Management	14 M€
<b>Retailing</b>	1 hour 8 minutes	VP Corporate responsibility	10 767 M€
<b>Retailing</b>	50 minutes	SVP Sustainability	11 300 M€

Conducted in the companies' own premises, the interviews lasted from 50 minutes to 1 hour and 8 minutes. The interviewees were selected based on their company's activities and interest shown towards the topic of this study (i.e., moral branding and company brands taking societal stands). All of the companies represent well-known Finnish B2C corporate brands in the jewellery and retailing industries. The company representatives were contacted through a mail enquiry or through personal contacts in the organisations.

#### **2.2.4 Focus group research**

A researcher can easily step into a trap by creating overly structured assumptions of the research topic and by leading the data generation herself. The strength of focus group research is in its social nature. In such research the generated data can even surprise the researcher, because the group conversation flows naturally and can therefore reveal unexpected interpretations and opinions (Malhotra & Birks 2007). According to this assumption, focus group research is a valid method in studies based on the social-

constructive paradigm, which argues that reality is a subjective and interrelational construct (Tadajewski 2016). Focus groups are also a valid method in phenomenographic research design (Edwards 2007), since the focus in phenomenography lies in the collective awareness and variation in the conceptions about the phenomenon studied (Yates et al. 2012).

When conducting focus groups the researcher should be conscious of his or her role, which is a moderator or an observant. In any case, they are meant to be a facilitator of fluent discussion and a guardian of constant interaction within the group, not an active participant (Hirsjärvi & Hurme 2000; Tadajewski 2016). The role of the moderator can be a participatory or relatively quiet. If the moderator is an active member of the group, the situation will be more structured. The moderator may also allow the participants to discuss the topic freely (Tadajewski 2016; Morgan 1996). However, it is always the responsibility of the moderator, who is most often the researcher, to control the discussion of the group in order to keep it on topic and balanced between members (Eriksson & Kovalainen 2008). In the focus groups conducted herein, the researcher adapted a less participatory role and focused on moderating the group discussion. It is important to bear in mind that focus groups are never the same; in fact, they can be seen as individual research processes (Greenbaum 2010, 13). In this study, the researcher's interest lies in the focus group members' substantive knowledge of the phenomenon — in this case, moral branding and brands' role in society. Due to this choice, the analysis of the data generated focuses on the discussion itself instead of on nonverbal communication.

A group interview has several advantages compared to personal interviews. When examining millennials, the researcher found this method to be suitable due to the following advantages. First, a more natural and social situation compared to personal, often structured interviews can generate more spontaneous (Hirsjärvi & Hurme 2000) and more critical thoughts than personal interviews (Eriksson & Kovalainen 2008). If the researched phenomenon is sensitive in nature, focus group research may not be the most suitable alternative to generate data (Eriksson & Kovalainen 2008; Alasuutari 2011) In this study, focus groups were asked to discuss their opinions, not sensitive,

personal issues. Thus, focus group research was considered a convenient method by the researcher.

In total, 25 millennials born between 1984 and 1994 were gathered for focus group discussions (see table 2). The suggested number of participants in phenomenographic research is around 20 participants (Sandberg 2000). One of the focus groups was originally intended to be a pilot group. Since the discussion was insightful, the researcher decided to retain it as one of the focus groups of the study. After the pilot, the supportive material was edited slightly. The researcher used social media channels to recruit a majority of the participants. Most of them were university students or graduates, most of whom had their educational background in business studies. Many of them had also studied marketing or are currently working in marketing. Thus, the study participants can be regarded as being enlightened on the issue. The focus group sessions were organised in public spaces, which were easily accessible and neutral for all participants. One group was organized in Helsinki and three in Tampere. The location should be comfortable for all participants. This is to help them concentrate on the discussion itself, instead of being aware that they are observed in a research situation (Malhotra & Birks, 2007).

Table 2. Focus groups of the study.

	<b>Focus group 1</b> <b>26.10.2017</b>	<b>Focus group 2</b> <b>7.11.2017</b>	<b>Focus group 3</b> <b>8.11.2017</b>	<b>Focus group 4</b> <b>9.11.2017</b>
<b>Number of participants</b>	5	8	7	5
<b>Participants years of birth</b>	1989-1994	1984-1993	1991-1994	1990-1994
<b>Duration</b>	1 h 5 min	1 h 33 min	1 h 17 min	1 h 24 min
<b>Location</b>	University of Tampere	Coffee shop in Helsinki	University of Tampere	University of Tampere
<b>Status (students/non-students)</b>	5/0	0/8	6/1	5/0

The phenomenographic research questions should be open-ended in order to give the recipients freedom to articulate and explain their conceptions (Schembri & Sandberg 2002, 199). A question formulated overly narrowly could restrict their thinking processes. Research questions can be found in the Appendix 2. Before being used in the focus groups the questions were also tested in several individual pilot interviews, which convinced the researcher of the benefits of the focus group method for the present study. Research questions were formed in a way that the first ones guide the participants into the topic. After the warm-up questions, the topic was easier to approach. The rest of the questions focused on different views of the research interest. In the end, supportive materials (mainly advertisements) were shown to the participants, and they were asked to share their opinions.

## **2.3 Phenomenography**

The purpose of this research is to build understanding of moral branding, and to analyse the conceptions of millennials as consumers considering the moral role of brands in a society. First introduced in the 1970s by Ference Marton at the University of Gothenburg, phenomenography aims to uncover conceptions of how different phenomena are experienced (Marton 1986). Originally the research design focused on studying the learning process and its outcomes in higher education (Richardson 1999). Phenomenography is most popular in social sciences, but it has been applied to a variety of other sciences as well (Tight 2016, 327). In marketing, Schembri and Sandberg (2002) exploited it to find out consumer service experiences in their study about service quality.

### **2.3.1 Phenomenographic research design**

The research design is closely related to philosophical assumptions. As described above, this research holds a worldview based on the social constructionist paradigm. The research process (see figure 2) and the methodological decisions are based on those assumptions. Phenomenography is a qualitative research design, which focuses on identifying ways in which people understand, perceive, experience, or conceptualise phenomena (Marton 1986, 31). The research design strives to create knowledge of “how people understand a particular phenomenon or an aspect of the world around them”

(Marton & Pong 2005, 335). In other words, experiences are seen as relational and born in interaction between individuals and the world around them (Yates et al. 2012, 100).

The results of a phenomenographic study reflect conceptions; in other words, “ways of seeing, understanding or experiencing” (Marton & Pong 2005, 336). Since its birth, there has been discussion on how it differs from phenomenology. According to Marton, the distinction is clear. In phenomenography, the interest lies in immediate experiences, but also in conceptual thoughts and physical behavior, whereas in phenomenology the focus is solely on immediate experiences (Richardson 1999). The research design allows a researcher to decide on the nature of interpretation, which as mentioned above, is a social constructionist view. It assumes that knowledge is a creation of social interaction – the collaboration and negotiation among the research subjects (Richardson 1999, 65).

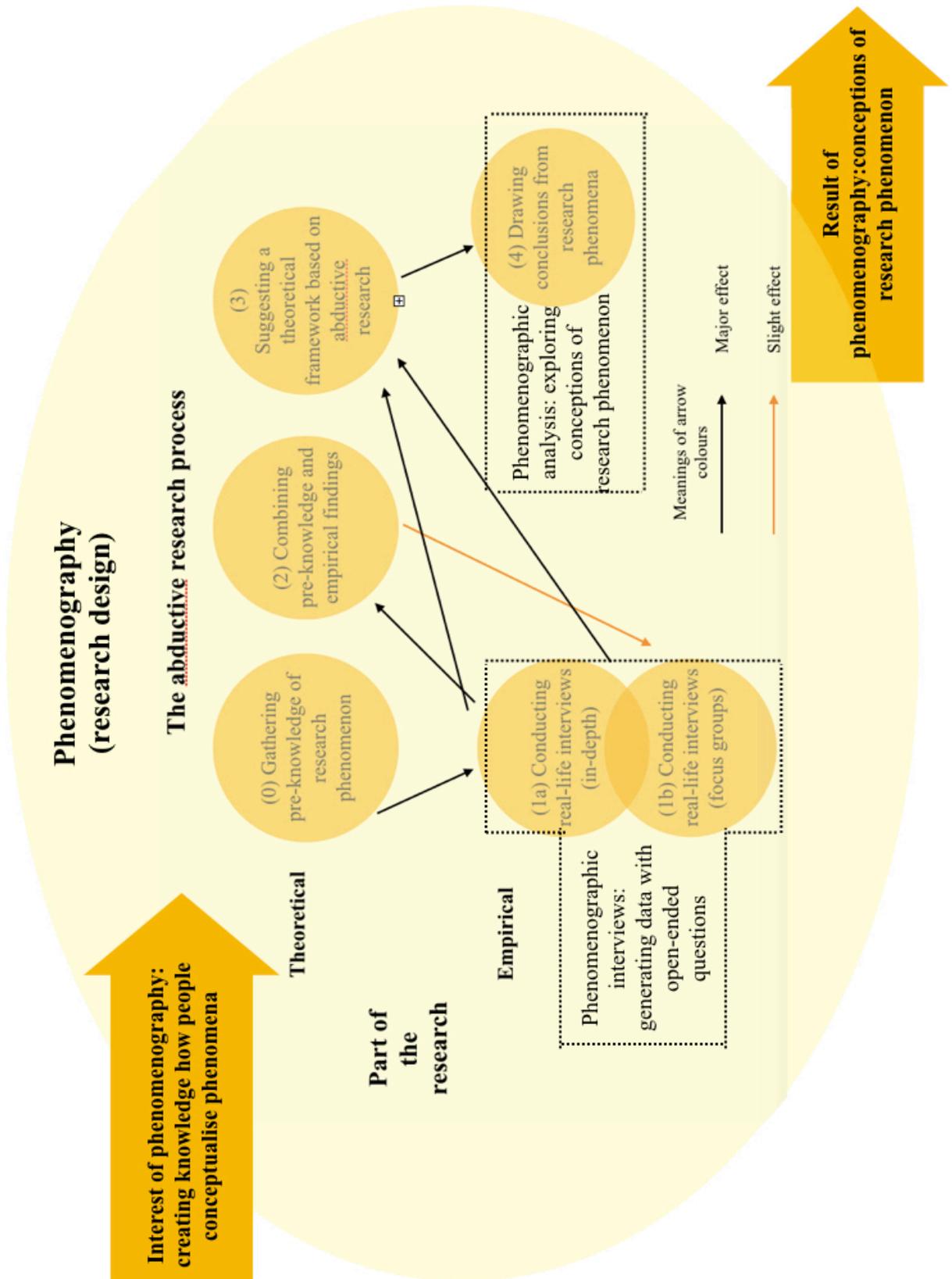


Figure 2. The abductive research process aligned with phenomenography in the context of this study (adapted from Kovacs, G. & Spens, K. 2005, 139; Gummesson E. 2014).

Phenomenographic research design has confronted some criticism, mainly because of the subjectivity of the research process and the significant role of the researcher's interpretation in the data analysis. The possibility of misinterpretation exists as well. A researcher's highly subjective role in the phenomenography is an identified risk in research using a constructive paradigm, which can be regarded as more as a characteristic of social constructionist research than a lack of trustworthiness. Nevertheless, with phenomenographic research, one has to bear in mind that he or she is not studying his or her own conceptions of the phenomenon of interest; hence, personal opinion should not be visible in the results of the study. In phenomenographic analysis, the data are not analysed on an individual level. This loss of the individual's voice has faced some criticism as well. However, in this study the data were gathered in focus groups, which is also a valid method in phenomenography. In the context of this study, the original interest is not to uncover individual conceptions; thus, the lack of individual-level understanding will not be a problem (Ryan 2000).

### **2.3.2 Phenomenographic data analysis**

According to the rules of phenomenography, the discussions in which the data was generated were recorded and transcribed. The transcripts allow the researcher to go through the data in an iterative and interactive manner, which enables her to identify its underlying categories (Richardson 1999, 70). The same method is utilised in research based on grounded theory. An important aspect in data analysis based on the thoughts of phenomenography is to interpret the data within the big picture, not on an individual level (Tight 2016, 320). The analysis aims to find variation in the conceptions about the studied phenomenon, which enables an explicit meaning structure to be created from them (Schembri & Sandberg 2002, 200).

The phenomenographic analysis starts with the researcher's immersion in the data: reading and re-reading the transcripts until he or she can start to identify categories arising from it (Vermunt 2006). Some trends and patterns will stand out in the iterative process of going through the data (Prinsloo et al. 2011). Using selected quotes for the categories that answer the study's original research questions is recommended (Vermunt 2006). For the researcher, it is important to remember that the focus should

not be on individual statements. Instead, the interest should be on the meaning of statements and their relation to the context and the data as a whole (Schembri & Sandberg 2002).

These categories are then studied in further detail, focusing on similarities and differences arising from the data. The findings can be more accurately categorised than the first preliminary categories. The formulated categories can be compared with the original data to verify that the evolving analysis still describes the original data. (Vermunt 1996) The process is iterative and continues to the point at which the researcher is satisfied with the formulated categories. Based on these comparisons, some regrouping was done (Ryan 2000; Vermunt 1996). After a stable categorisation of the data was reached, the categories were described and quotations from the participants were selected (Prinsloo et al. 2011).

The founder of phenomenography, education researcher Marton, has proposed a four-stage approach to analysis. The analysis has been further developed with different variations. Some phenomenographic analysis can even consist of seven stages (Yates et al. 2012). Hence, there is no single formula for phenomenographic analysis (Yates et al. 2012, 2013). This study followed the principles of the original four-stage analysis, which was utilized, for example, by Marton et al. (1992). A four-stage analysis was found to fit the scope of this study. Table 3 presents the stages in the context of this study.

1. Identify data as relevant “pools of meaning”
2. Sort the data into “pools of meaning” based on similarity and exclusive reference to individual participants
3. Contrast the formulated groups of similar data and write a category description for each
4. Verify a portion of the data by engaging an independent judge to establish inter-judge reliability

Table 3. Four-stage phenomenographic analysis of this study.

1.	2.	3.	4.
<b>Identifying pools of meaning</b>	<b>Sorting pools of meaning</b>	<b>Formulating categories</b>	<b>Verifying the data</b>
Going through transcriptions several times	Collecting similar thoughts in mind maps	Comparing the discovered conceptions to alternative possible categorizations	Presenting the findings in the seminar
Going through transcriptions several times	Analysing similarities and differences of the data in detail	Forming category descriptions	
Recognising extremist differences in attitudes	Testing different versions of possible pools of meaning (categorizations)	Selecting the most descriptive quotes for each category	

In the context of this study, the analysis began by reading through transcriptions several times. During this phase, the researcher gained an idea of the possible pools of meaning. First, the researcher recognized a situation that millennials had both positive and negative conceptions about moral branding. In the second step of phenomenographic analysis, the researcher noticed differences among both positive and negative conceptions. While sorting the data into pools of meaning, a conception of *moral branding as a threat causing societal fragmentation* was being found. This conception is not purely positive or negative towards the phenomenon. After exploring the different categories, the researcher wrote a description for each category. These descriptions clarify the content of category and its special features. With the detailed information of different categories, the conceptions discovered could be compared to each other. This comparison provided a deeper understanding of their differences.

## 2.4 Assessing trustworthiness

Qualitative research differs from quantitative also when evaluating the quality of research. While the “goodness” of quantitative research derives from reliability, validity and generalizability, qualitative research focuses on assessing the trustworthiness of a study (Saunders et al. 2009 156–158).

The philosophical foundations of this study also form a framework for assessing the trustworthiness of the research. This study follows the principles of the social constructionist paradigm, which address the reality to be constructed through subjective experiences and in interaction. The truth is also assumed to exist locally, which means the world lacks universal truth, and assumptions of reality are experienced as evolving instead of stable constructs (Eriksson & Kovalainen 2008; Lincoln & Guba 1985). Due to its philosophical foundations, this study does not provide universal truths on how millennials conceptualize moral branding. Rather, it presents one possible way to view the evolving phenomenon of moral branding. The philosophical foundation of this study, as well as its relativist ontology and subjective epistemology led the researcher to assess its research quality with four measurements: *credibility*, *transferability*, *dependability* and *confirmability* (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Eriksson & Kovalainen 2008).

*Credibility* refers to the researcher’s familiarity with the research topic and the sufficiency of the data, which is not a stable construct (Eriksson & Kovalainen 2008). In this study, credibility was secured with the multi-actor approach, which ensured proper expertise on the part of the researcher. A saturation was achieved in both in-depth interviews and in focus groups, and the generated data offered a baseline for fruitful analysis. Another way to evaluate credibility is to let another researcher to interpret the data. Qualitative research can be assessed as meeting the standards for quality, if another researcher can uncover similar findings (Eriksson & Kovalainen 2008). This step of quality assessment could not be part of this study, since the thesis is an independent study by one researcher.

*Transferability* can be evaluated through the connectedness of the research to earlier research, in whole or in part (Eriksson & Kovalainen 2008). Since the research phenomenon is an emerging one among marketing literature, the transferability of this study is slightly challenging to assess. The theoretical framework of this study consists of multiple theories, which are combined. The multi-theoretical approach addresses the holistic, and thus transferable, nature of this study.

*Dependability* as measurement of research quality focuses on documenting the research process as transparently as possible for readers. To be pleasant for the reader to follow, research should be logical, traceable, and well documented (Eriksson & Kovalainen 2008). This study aims for good dependability with two aspects: the structure of the thesis and the many figures illustrating the research process. First, the structure of the thesis follows abductive research logic, in which previous knowledge and empirical findings form the theory. This assumption led the researcher to form a structure in which an introduction is followed by the methodology. The theoretical framework is presented after the introduction to the methodology and the research process. Due to the abductive research logic, the synthesis of the theoretical framework is not re-evaluated based on the findings. Instead it is reviewed from the consumers' point of view. So in chapter four, the synthesis of theoretical framework is broadened with millennials' conception of the research phenomenon, moral branding. Various figures illustrate the most significant issues throughout the study and also help the reader to understand the research process.

*Confirmability* is a step of assessing the trustworthiness of results. The findings and interpretation should be strongly linked to the data (Eriksson & Kovalainen 2008). In other words, confirmability ensures that the findings are not imagined. The documentation of the research process describes the data generated and its analysis carefully.

Some criticism can also be addressed to the decisions made in the research process. First, one step of phenomenographic data analysis is the verification of data by an independent judge. Since this study represents a thesis, which is an independent task by

one researcher, this step of phenomenography was performed in milder form than usually. Nevertheless, the thesis findings were discussed in seminar and with fellow students during the research process. Since they could be reviewed with fellow students, the verification of the data is not totally missing. Thus, this milder verification of data does not have an overly strong impact on the quality of this research.

Second, the focus group method was chosen to generate data among millennials, even though in-depth interviews are the most established method in phenomenography. Nevertheless, focus groups have been used earlier in some studies. Also, the focus group method had already proved its suitability during the research process; for example, in the empirical stage and in data analysis.

The third area open to criticism is the duration of the research, or the prolonged period of engagement (Lincoln & Guba 1985, 304). This study was conducted over seven months, which is a relatively short time for academic research (especially in a field not familiar to the researcher). Nevertheless, through focused immersion in the research phenomenon through the duration of research, it can be suggested that a comprehensive understanding of research phenomena was formed.

In addition to the four measurements used to analyse the trustworthiness of qualitative research and to critique the decisions in the research process, the quality of the research can also be evaluated through triangulation. The findings of the study are refined in the process of triangulation. Triangulation can exist in various forms, including *triangulation of methodologies; methods; data; theories; and researchers* (Eriksson & Kovalainen 2008). Three of the forms exist in this study. *Triangulation of methods* was applied by utilizing different techniques of analysis (i.e., a four-step analysis of phenomenography). The in-depth interviews with directors in charge of branding and corporate responsibility were also analysed to form the theoretical framework. The empirical process of this abductive study was two-fold. As mentioned, it consisted of in-depth interviews and focus groups. This process leads to *triangulation of data*. In addition, as the framework consists of literature from different fields of marketing and even sciences, this study offers *theoretical triangulation*.

## **3 CORPORATE BRANDS IMPLEMENTING MORAL PURPOSES**

### **3.1 Building the theoretical framework**

The theoretical framework of this study is built on three parts since the literature of the research topic has so far not been established as a coherent research field. Different activities seen in the marketplace, such as brand purpose, taking social stands, and reacting against the government, correspond to the concept of moral corporate branding. The academic research has not yet responded fully to this marketplace phenomenon. Therefore, several company representatives were interviewed who have been active in positioning their corporate brand as a moral agent in Finland. These interviews helped the researcher to understand how real actors in the marketplace see the phenomenon. It also helped her to confine the theoretical framework of this study to fit the scope of a thesis. In this chapter, a synthesis of the theoretical framework based on the aforementioned process is introduced and explained in more detail (see figures 3 & 5).

The chosen corporate brands represent significant, widely recognized companies, which are even seen as either cultural symbols due to their long history or as active corporate citizens due to their societally important business area. Directors from these companies in charge of branding and corporate responsibility were asked to participate in in-depth interviews. The objective of these interviews was to discover which fields of academic literature the directors in charge of moral branding associate with the actions of corporate brands.

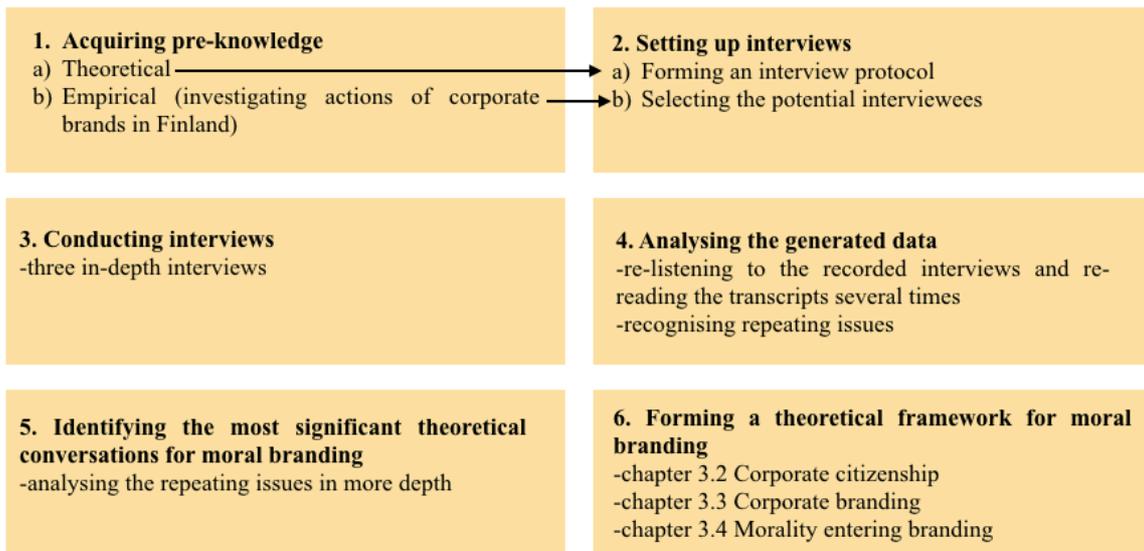


Figure 3. The process of building the theoretical framework of this study.

The interview questions focused on the companies' latest actions that could be regarded as moral branding, according to the previous knowledge of the researcher (see Appendix 1). The protocol was semi-structured, with an emphasis on spontaneous discussion and open-ended questions. With the latter, the researcher followed the rules of abduction and phenomenography (Schembri & Sandberg 2002). In the conversations, the interviewees described particular moral branding actions of their corporate brands. They also shared background on how the corporate brand they represent ended up taking a public stance (e.g., on a societal or environmental issue). From these conversations, three fields of academic literature emerged as offering theoretical understanding of interest to this research on moral branding. The topics of these conversations built the theoretical framework of this study.

#### *Toward a new view of society and the morality of societal actors*

In the traditional view of society, sectors such as private and public are often seen as separate entities (figure 4). This assumption is also deeply rooted in the minds of consumers. As can be seen from the figure, consumers, society, and companies are identified as separate entities, which interact with each other but are still seen as standing on their own. This way of thinking can limit the outlook of each entity.

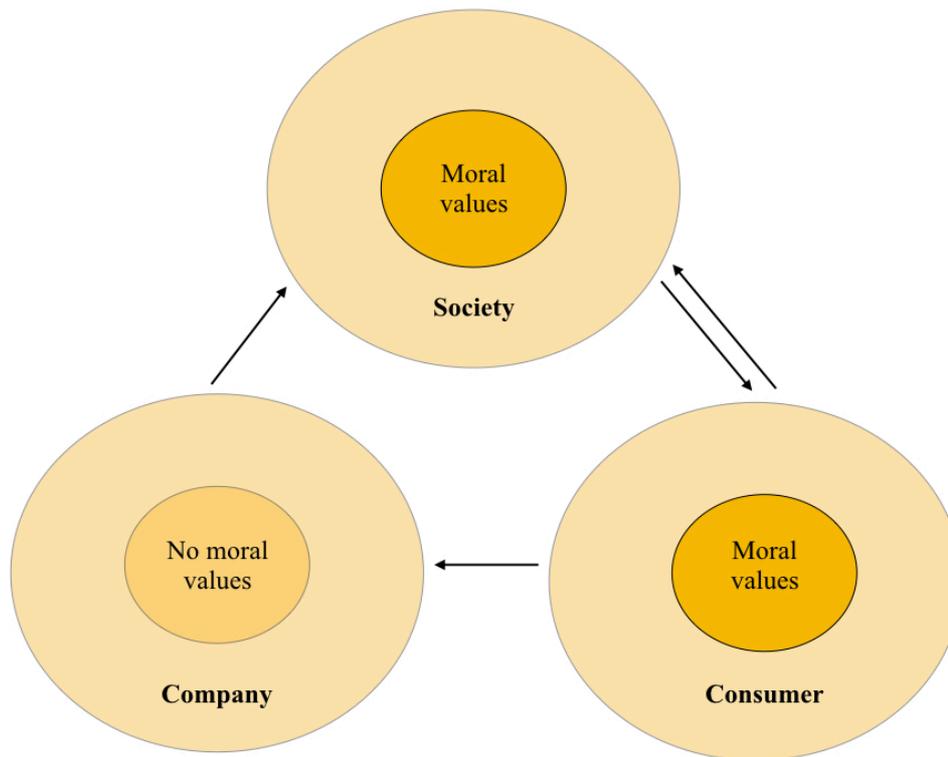


Figure 4. Traditional view of relationship between company, consumer, society, and the locus of moral values.

To understand the phenomenon of moral branding, a little-known area, it is important to investigate the different ways companies interact in society. Hence, the theory of corporate citizenship will be introduced in chapter 3.2. A review of the literature on corporate branding follows the first part of the theoretical framework. An overview of the topic is formed through conceptualising corporate citizenship and examining the elements seen to be crucial for corporations to act as citizens in society. The classic definition of the levels building the framework of corporate citizenship was given by Carroll in 1979: economic, legal, ethical, and discretionary. Matten and Crane (2005) presented an extended framework, in which they suggest companies can act in different roles in society in order to ensure civil, political, or social rights. This study attempts to find out whether the definitions of corporate citizenship support moral branding and the role of a moral corporate brand in society.

A corporate brand traditionally represents the face of the company for consumers (Balmer & Gray 2003). Chapter 3.3 introduces a wider perspective on this topic and presents two ways of understanding the importance of corporate brands from the perspective of moral branding. First, a corporate brand is investigated as a strategic asset for a company. It can be seen as an overarching umbrella, which guides the shaping and communication of the business model for both internal and external stakeholders (Biraghi & Gambetti 2015; Balmer & Gray 2003; Hatch and Schultz 2001). In the context of moral branding, this holistic aspect of corporate brand is essential. In order to be a reliable moral corporate brand, the morality needs to permeate the company and to guide all of its actions. Second, corporate brands' societal aspect is a matter of growing importance. As society is facing a transformation and its traditional actors are losing their power, corporate brands have a new arena ahead of them (Biraghi et al. 2017).

Even though the earlier research on moral branding is rather scarce, some studies of the concept are reviewed in chapter 3.4 of the theoretical framework. This study assumes moral branding to be actions of a corporate brand that communicate current moral or ethical issues of a society (Jeanes 2013, 163). A moral brand commits to do the right thing, and creates added value for various stakeholders (Alwi et al. 2017, 398). While morality represents one of the key issues in this study, it is also discussed in more detail in the theoretical framework. The chosen moral theory for this study is the moral-agent theory, which claims that different entities, e.g. states, unions, or corporates, can be assigned to and possess the same moral responsibility as human actors in their actions (Fleming 2009, 469).

The consumer point of view is the focus of chapter 4. As a result of empiric research, consumers' conceptions of moral branding are investigated, and the results are divided into two parts. In sub-chapter 4.1, their conceptions of moral branding in a company sphere are reviewed.

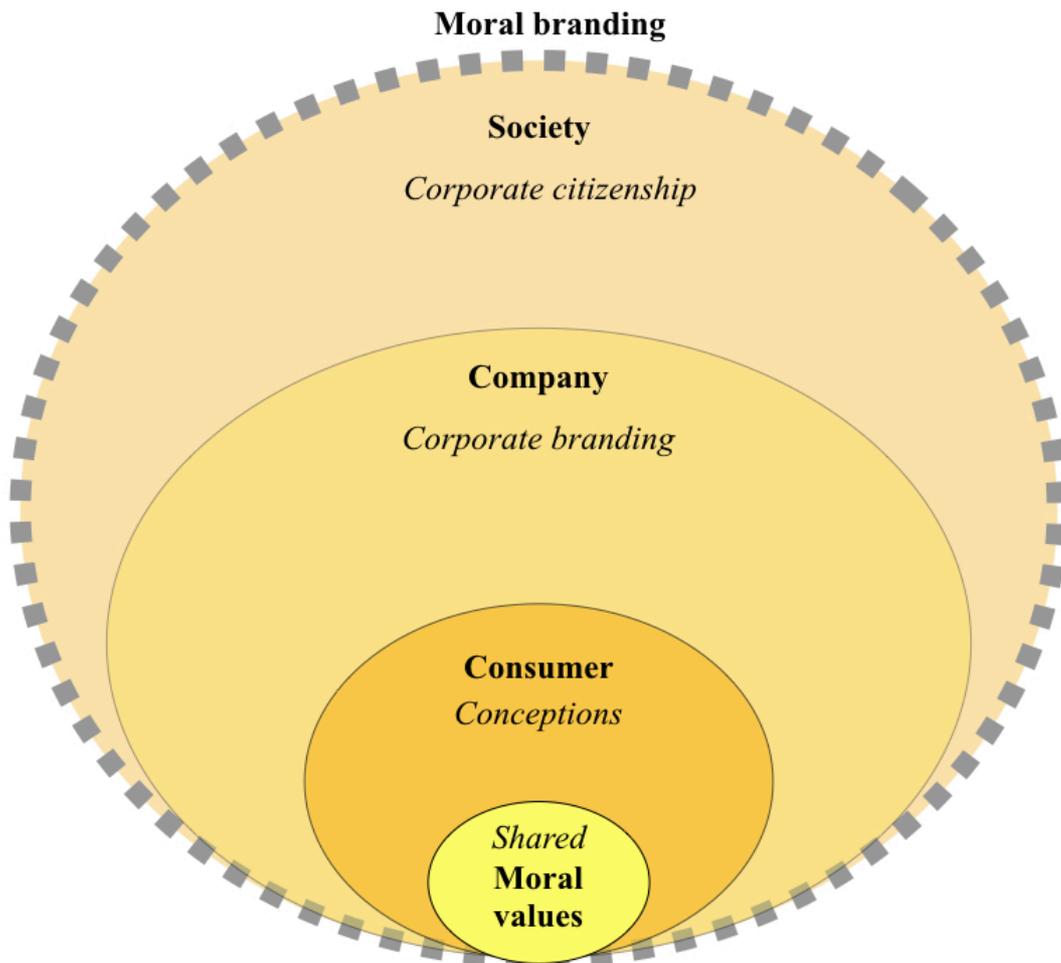


Figure 5. Synthesis of theoretical framework of this study.

In this synthesis, the relationship between society, the business sector, and consumers is revived through the notion of moral corporate branding. As the figure 5 suggests, such branding blurs the boundaries between these entities and links them closer to each other by creating, sustaining, and transmitting the moral values between different entities. According to Hatch and Schultz (2010), a corporate brand is possessed by society, not the company itself or its consumers. This synthesis of theoretical framework to moral branding assumes the thought of Hatch and Schultz. Therefore, the circle of moral branding is positioned in the external circle of the figure, which symbolizes that a moral brand is owned by a society and all of its actors, rather than an individual one such as the company or consumers. Moral branding becomes meaningful in the context in which companies and consumers interact with each other through their moral values. The shared moral values create trust and a feeling of togetherness. A public declaration

of one's moral values may trigger another actor to realise his or her own values. A corporate brand can intermediate the moral values of either society or individuals by supporting or defending them. Therefore, it can be argued that a moral corporate brand exists at a societal level through its moral values.

### **3.2 Corporate citizenship**

Companies have many responsibilities and commitments for both external and internal stakeholders in the marketplace and society (Svensson et al. 2010, 336). This statement is partially regulated by the law. It is stated that a purpose of a company is to generate profit to its owners. Recent views of companies' roles in society highlight the new demands in providing value for their external stakeholders. The value derived from the product or service is not enough for the consumers; they also demand that companies act in a sustainable and socially responsible manner (Svensson et al. 2010, 336). Thus, active citizenship on the part of companies is growing in importance in today's marketplace. While the power of national governments has gone through a major shift due to globalization, their weakened ability to provide or support the civil rights of individuals has opened up an arena for new actors, whether corporations want it or not (Matten & Crane 2005, 171).

The marketplace has come a long way from the times of Friedman (1962), when he stated in his legendary publication "Capitalism and Freedom" that the duty of a company is to be profitable and provide value for its shareholders. When rethinking the role of marketing, Lusch and Webster (2013, 395) pointed out that companies have to carry their own responsibility in informing and shaping beneficial attitudes and actions of consumers for marketing to be able to provide positive value for individuals and society. In order to be reliable, the action needs to be consistent with the mission and values of the company (Lusch & Webster 2013, 395).

### 3.2.1 Conceptualizing corporate citizenship

In addition to the ethical aspects of a company's activities, sustainable business practices play a key role in becoming a "good citizen" in the marketplace and society (Svensson et al. 2010, 342). Thoughts about sustainability and an extended role of companies entered the business world in the late 1980s, inspired by the report "Our common future" by the World Commission on Environment and Development (1987). The report explained sustainability as "development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs" (Linnenluecke & Griffiths 2010; WCED 1987, 43). Corporate sustainability, which combines the environmental, economic, and social responsibilities of a company, was established based on the emerging concern about the future of the world (Linnenluecke & Griffiths 2010, 358).

Corporate social responsibility (referred to later as CSR), business ethics, and corporate citizenship are concepts near to each other but still different in their nature. One suggestion is that in CSR, society and business are seen as separate entities (Biraghi et al. 2017, 206). The terms "CSR" and "business ethics" state that responsibility and ethics are not usually embedded in business, but are rather seen as additional features (Van Luijk 2001). The term "corporate citizenship" (referred later as CC) assumes instead that, like other political actors, a company is a part of society and highlights the social role of business (Matten et al. 2003, 111). The traditional view of corporate citizenship states that it is formed of three elements: support of a social cause, protection of the environment, and consumer perceptions of corporate social involvement (Maignan et al. 1999, 456). One indicator that has increased the discussion about CC has been a shift of power during the last decades. Companies have assumed political functions that traditionally belonged to the state (Matten et al. 2003, 109). In this changed societal situation, the traditional view of CC may no longer be sufficient.

The term "citizen" itself is rather a controversial one in a company context. Mackey (2014, 133) introduces one possibility of how the citizenship of companies or corporations could be interpreted. Mackey gives two alternatives to the question. First, a corporation can be seen as a legal person. This view means that a corporation and its

actions have the same financial and legal duties and consequences as an individual citizen, including paying taxes, handling money, and acting in court. It may be rather controversial to talk about citizenship in the context of the corporate world, because citizenship traditionally describes individuals' relationship with society and their rights to act in society. This contradiction has been noticed by Wood and Lodgson (2001), who propose that in the corporate context, the concept of "citizenship" actually means the responsibilities of a corporation to respect the rights of individuals, not the rights of a corporation.

This view of citizenship was refined by Matten and Crane (2005), who address the birth of the approach by admitting the similarity between CSR and CC. The researchers state that although the two concepts are closely related, they should be separated more clearly in order to avoid confusion. They suggest that CC should actually be understood as corporate administration of citizenship. Corporations seem to step into the traditional space of states and their governments in three situations (Matten & Crane 2005, 172). First, if a state cannot provide citizenship rights, corporates have in some cases proven their capacity to fulfill the role of the state. Another situation is if the state does not even confer citizenship rights. This is not the case in Western world, but it is a highly relevant issue in developing countries. Third, the corporation might extend their traditional role, since in the globalised world, their organisational structure settles the current international context better than strictly national states.



Figure 6. Extended framework of corporate citizenship (adapted from Matten & Crane 2005, 174).

To sum up, Matten and Crane (2005, 174) suggest an extended framework to CC, which should clarify its difference compared to CSR in a more accurate manner than the earlier conceptualisations. The researchers state that the current power shift between governments and commercial organisations has led to a situation, in which a company can have a role as either a provider of social rights, an enabler of civil rights, or a channel of political rights (see figure 6). In the area of social rights, the company may take the role of provider, if the state fails to secure them equally for all citizens (see figure 6). This situation appears most commonly in developing countries where the state may not necessarily have enough capacity and wealth to provide social services (e.g., education or nutritional guidance). The private sector's actors can even in some situations take the role of an enabler of civil rights (Figure 6). A company can, for example, use its voice to promote or even manifest a certain issue regarding civil rights, such as gender equality. In their discussion about a company as a channel for political rights, Matten and Crane (2005, 173) mention that large companies have started to take a more significant role in society through a privatization of traditionally societal services and organisations.

Sustainable business practices represent another alternative for companies to prove their “good citizenship” (Svensson et al. 2010, 342). The relation between good corporate citizenship and successful businesses exists also vice versa. Maignan et al. (1999) found good corporate citizenship to be an antecedent to ethical decision making. It enables the companies to utilise their resources better in promoting an innovative and productive atmosphere. Good corporate citizenship can also contribute to employees’ organizational commitment as well as customer loyalty (Wang 2014, 944) In sum, corporate citizenship has extensive effects for both the internal and external stakeholders of a company, and its strategic significance is developing due to a changing societal environment.

### **3.2.2 The elements of corporate citizenship**

Corporate citizenship consists of four elements (Figure 7): economic, legal, ethical, and discretionary (or philanthropic) responsibilities, with the latter two seen as voluntary (Maignan et al. 1999; Carroll 1979). Many researchers as well as practitioners, Carroll among them, tend to form a picture of “a good corporate citizen” based solely on corporate philanthropy (Matten & Crane 2005, 168). Nevertheless, it is important to understand the effect of all four identified elements of CC.

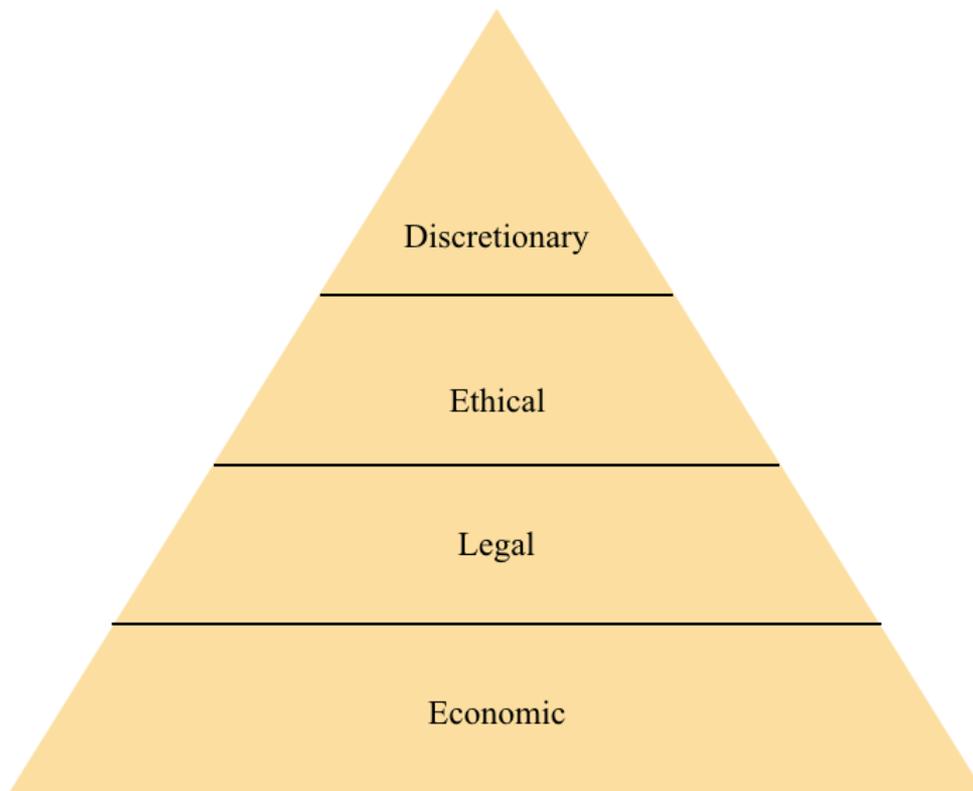


Figure 7. Four elements of corporate citizenship (Carroll 1979).

Economic responsibility refers to profitability, legal to following the law, ethical to morality in decision-making and actions, and discretionary to socially desired actions (voluntary actions, donations, and foundations etc.; Matten et al. 2003). The optional elements are not regulated by the law but are still expected policies. However, since the optional elements are not followed by all companies, they can offer a chance for differentiation (Matten et al. 2003, 110). Matten and Crane (2005, 169–170) criticise this 4-step view of CC (Figure 7), since it is almost identical to the definition of CSR consisting of the same four steps.

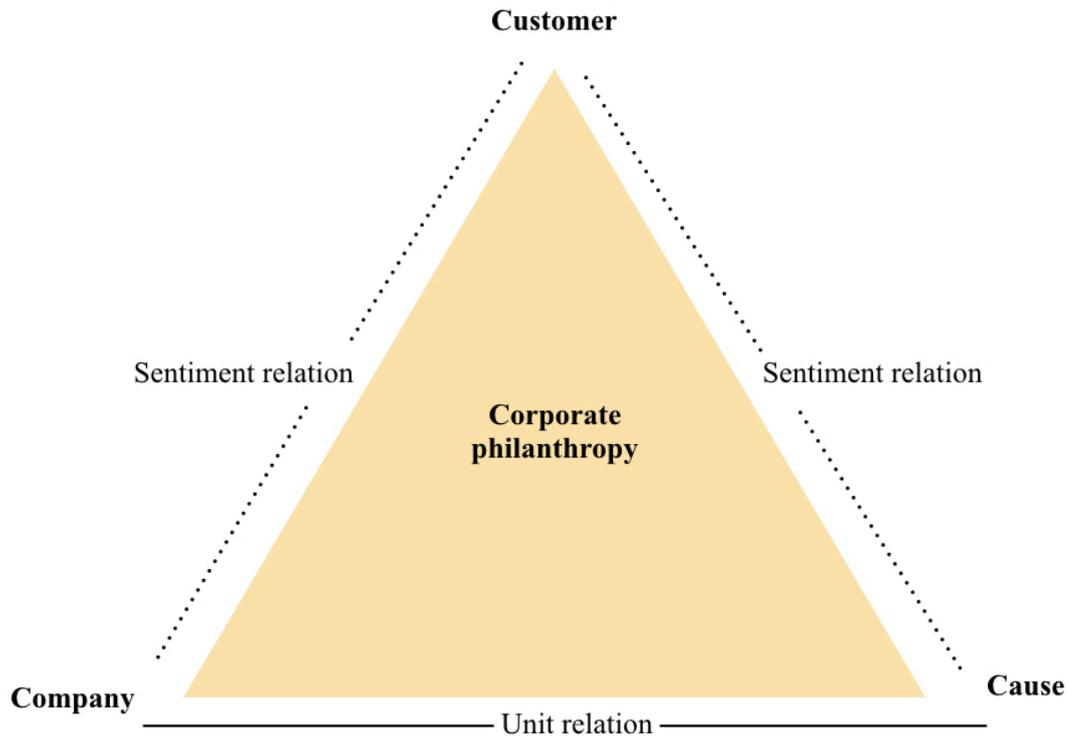


Figure 8. Relationship of company, cause, and customer in corporate philanthropy (adapted from Szöcs et al. 2016, 378).

The most visible element of CC, discretionary activities represent the actions that are not regulated or expected from businesses (Maignan et al. 1999). These activities usually consist of donations, setting up foundations, etc. The company shares its success with a wider public (Matten & Crane 2005, 168). On a deeper level, corporate philanthropy is a highly strategic issue, even if company's actions may sometimes seem tactical to consumers. Szöcs et al. (2016, 378) see corporate philanthropy as a triangular relationship, bundling together the company, the selected cause, and the customer. A unit relation is formed between company and cause when the customer perceives these two as belonging together. Sentiment relation can exist between company and customer or customer and cause and refers to customer's valuation of the company and or the supported cause. (Szöcz et al. 2016, 378). The relationship between these aspects has a major effect on consumers' perceptions of "the goodness" of corporate citizenship and corporate reputation (Szöcs et al. 2016; Sen & Bhattacharya 2001).

### 3.3 Corporate branding

Corporate brands were recognised in the branding literature in the mid-1990s (Balmer 2012, 1069). Until recently, this literature has focused on product branding (Fan 2005, 34). Still, corporate brands may be even more familiar for consumers than product brands. For companies, a corporate brand can have multiple functions and benefits. If it is recognised and strong, all of the individual product brands benefit from it (Balmer & Gray 2003). When showcasing the values of the company, the corporate brand has an essential role in creating the company reputation. Fan (2005) states that major difference between a corporate brand and product brand is the purpose. The purpose of a corporate brand is to reflect the values of the company, whereas product brands aim to increase sales and profitability.

Table 4. The characteristic differences between product and corporate brands (adapted from Balmer & Gray 2003, 976).

<b>Attributes</b>	<b>Product brand</b>	<b>Corporate brand</b>
<b>Purpose</b>	Increase sales and profitability; product differentiation	Reflect the company values; build the company reputation
<b>Character</b>	Dynamic	Stable
<b>Responsible actor</b>	Marketing/Brand manager	Executive level
<b>Main stakeholders</b>	Customers	Multiple
<b>Organizational interest</b>	Marketing	Total organization

Balmer and Gray (2003, 976) further clarified the difference between a product and a corporate brand. First, corporate brands' focus is on multiple stakeholders (e.g., the investors and society), whereas product brands usually have a consumer focus only. Second, the matter of a responsible actor differs the two levels of branding. In the case of a product brand, it is the brand manager, but a corporate brand is clearly a matter for the executive level. Third, the strategic relevance of a corporate brand is also significant. Fourth, corporate brands also tend to be stable constructions, while product brands confront brand revitalizations more often (Balmer & Gray 2003, 979). Finally,

corporate brand is also an interest of the organization as a whole, while a product brand is usually the responsibility of marketing (Balmer & Grey 2003, 976).

### **3.3.1 Corporate brand as a strategic asset**

Corporate brand is proposed to be one of the most valuable resources of a company (Biraghi & Gambetti 2015, 261). Its development should go hand in hand with the overarching corporate strategy (Gyrd-Jones et al. 2013, 573). Hatch and Schutz (2003) described corporate brand as an interplay between the strategic vision of the organization, its culture and values (internal dimension), and the corporate image (external dimension).

The foundation of corporate brand exists in the core values of a company. Corporate brand is thought to be intangible in nature, and some researchers describe it as “systems of meaning” (Balmer 2009, 556). Brand heritage can also contribute significantly to corporate brand if its history and traditions seems relevant for the company’s success. Brand heritage may also become meaningful when the corporate brand is under revitalisation, as the heritage can even block out some new directions (Gyrd-Jones et al. 2013, 586). In order to seem consistent in the eyes of the consumers, companies should pay attention to the relation between corporate and product brands (e.g., carefully managing the brand portfolio). Corporate brand can be either an independent and separate entity of the brand portfolio, or it can be integrated into the product brands of the company (Muzellec & Lambkin 2009).

Corporate brand can be seen as an overarching umbrella, which embodies brand identity, brand image, brand promise, brand personality, and brand communication (Biraghi & Gambetti 2015; Kitchen & Schultz 2001). Another entity close to corporate brand is corporate identity (Pillai 2012, 332). The main factor differentiating these two concepts is the stakeholder focus. In the case of corporate identity, the stakeholders are internal, whereas corporate brand focuses mainly on external ones (Balmer & Gray 2003, 981). Based on its extensive impact for the organization, a corporate brand is usually a matter for the executive level.

As a strategic asset, a corporate brand can create competitive advantage if it is

characterised by value, rarity, durability, imperfect imitability, and imperfect substitutability (Balmer & Gray 2003, 991). Since a corporate brand is relatively stable, it has the ability to offer sustainable value for the company. An established, strong corporate brand also protects the company by minimizing risks and long-term reputation losses in crisis situations (Greyser 1999).

To summarize, a corporate brand is regarded as a highly strategic, managerial asset, which has an important role in shaping and communicating the business model of the company for both internal and external stakeholders (Balmer & Gray 2003; Hatch and Schultz 2001). Biraghi and Gambetti (2015, 278) argue that a successful and meaningful corporate brand is holistic, dialogic, and interactive. Thus, a corporate brand can be seen as being more than only a face of the company for consumers.

### **3.3.2 Corporate brand as a relational sociocultural asset**

Recent research on corporate branding defines it as a relational, socially constructed entity, which is formed through the collaborative sense-making process of different participants (Biraghi & Gambetti 2015; Christensen and Cornelissen 2011). In other words, a corporate brand is not owned by the company and its customers; rather, it is a possession of multiple stakeholders (Biraghi & Gambetti 2015, 263). These thoughts have opened up an avenue for seeing companies as social and political actors in addition to their economic role (Bach & Allen, 2010).

At a philosophical level, this view of corporate brand as a relational sociocultural asset takes a step away from its roots in sales and marketing logic towards a societal process occurring between the company and its stakeholders (Biraghi et al. 2017, 209). A cultural perspective on corporate branding acknowledges corporate brands to be more than a management tool only; rather, they are seen as part of culture and as being constructed through interaction with consumers and society (Schroeder 2017, 1525). Seeing corporate brand as a societal actor reconstructs its purpose and character, as well as its value proposition. Aiming to offer increased welfare for all stakeholders, a company's renewed value proposition is a process of constant improvement and interaction (Biraghi et al. 2017, 210).

A fragmented society offers a new environment in which corporate brands can operate. They can even be seen as supporting consumers who are trying to understand and communicate their own values (Palazzo & Basu 2007, 227). While a corporate brand can be regarded as a generator of values and meaning, it can help consumers rethink their identities in times of a social change (Palazzo & Basu 2007, 337). Biraghi et al. (2017) represent a new concept of societal corporate branding, which can be interpreted as a merger of a corporate brand and corporate citizenship. A social corporate brand can be an active in cultural events that turn into shared experiences—in the end forming history. To connect with people, a brand has to understand communal concerns faced by consumers. In this way, societal corporate brands can even act as guarantors of human rights (e.g., civil, social, and political rights). Through branding activities, a societal corporate brand can assume the role of a socio-political citizen and contribute to the common good (Abländer & Curbach 2014).

In sum, corporate brands are not only mediators of cultural meanings: they have themselves become ideological referents that shape cultural rituals, economic activities, and social norms (Schroeder 2017, 1523). The strongest corporate brands can form corporate myths that become deeply rooted in consumers' lives; they can also turn consumption into a quasi-religious activity (Palazzo & Basu 2007, 337). Some researchers have acknowledged a shift from a focus on the brand–consumer dyad towards broader sociocultural concerns (Schroeder 2017; Biraghi et al. 2017). The rise of societal corporate brand thought may signal a shift of “putting the humanity” at the center of business decisions and branding (Biraghi et. al 2017, 2011). This has further allowed questions of morality to enter the field of branding.

### **3.4 Morality entering branding**

Today's consumers, especially the younger generations, are more demanding and critical toward corporate actions than the previous generations, and they demand more than product-centered features to find consumption activities satisfying and fulfilling. This shift has led to a change in branding strategies from product centrality to the growing popularity of corporate branding and value centrality (Palazzo & Basu 2007, 336). Consumers expect brands to have social purposes, although they can occur in a variety of ways (Rodríguez & Bharadwaj 2017). High-risk industries such as food

production, pharmaceuticals, chemicals, and tobacco can be regarded as pioneers in implementing ethical and moral questions in their brand strategies (Morsing, 2006). According to Fan (2005, 348), the remarkability and conspicuousness of a brand increases the pressure to consider moral questions, since the public has higher expectations toward the brand's actions. In academic literature, the theory explaining this phenomenon is called ethical (Fan 2005) or moral branding (Morsing 2006; Jeanes 2013). While both theories share the same underlying assumptions, this study adopts the concept of moral branding.

A moral brand can be classified as one that communicates current moral or ethical issues of society through its culture and the underlying discussions and concerns (Jeanes 2013, 163). Moral principles – in other words, the question of right and wrong in one's actions – guide the branding decisions (Fan 2005, 342). The aim of a 'moral brand' can be simplified as 'to do the right thing' (Fan 2005; Jeanes 2013) or as promoting the public good instead of harming it (Fan 2005, 343). Traditionally, morality has been regarded as a character shared by humans. Some new research streams (e.g., in philosophy) have initiated a discussion of whether some legal entities could also possess moral values through acting as moral agents (Fleming 2009). After an introduction to moral agent theory, the concept of moral corporate branding is investigated and further supported by recent research on brands taking social stands. As suggested in this literature (Fan 2005; Jeanes 2013; Morsing 2006), brands do not merely promote their goods or services in their moral branding declarations. Instead, they use their coverage to talk about societal questions and values, as a way of showing their morality.

### **3.4.1 Moral agent theory**

What do we, as humans, regard as good or bad and right or wrong? These questions have been at the center of humanity for centuries, beginning from ancient times. These are the questions of morality.

Morality is seen as a human character, but according to moral agent theory, certain entities can also be regarded as moral actors or, in other words, agents (Fleming 2009). Moral agent theory is based on an assumption that entities (e.g., states, unions or

corporations) can possess the same responsibility for their actions as people (Fleming 2009, 469). Moral agency exists as a result of two aspects: the qualities of an actor and the actions originating from these qualities. The qualities of a moral agent are motives, dispositions, and capacities. The actions of a moral agent can be evaluated based on these qualities (Cox 2006). This philosophical theory is a rather new one in its research field. It is considered as being mentioned for the first time in the late 1970s. The founder of agential theory is deemed to be the American philosopher French, who has focused on studying collective action and responsibility (Fleming 2009, 469).

An essential question in the context of this research is whether a corporate brand can even be a moral agent. The position against this view states that a company and its corporate brand represent the actions and values held by the employees. However, some moral agency theorists state that companies remain the same and their identities are relatively stable, even though employees come and go (French 1984, 30). According to this view, it can be argued that the morality of actions lies in the corporate brand itself and in its DNA. Hence it does not reflect only the morality of the decision-makers behind the corporate brand's actions. Erskine (2008, 2) opened up the agential theory with an example of a state. He argued that states can be moral agents just as individuals are, because their behavior is intentional. A state can be also seen as capable of embodying values, goals, and ends — as well as acting intentionally according to these values, goals, and ends (Goodin 1995, 35). Other suggested moral agents could be unions, intergovernmental organizations, rebel groups, and drug cartels (Fleming 2009, 470).

Therefore, this study adopts the idea that a conglomerate such as a corporate brand can be a moral agent; thus, moral agency is not reserved for individuals (French 1984, 29). Some modern researchers of philosophy (Erskine 2014; Fleming 2009, French 1979) have defined five principal ideas, which form the foundations for conglomerates acting as moral agents. These ideas are listed below.

1. An identity is more than the sum of the identities of its constitutive parts.
2. Decision-making structure is different compared to individual level.

3. There are some certain mechanisms in which the decisions can be realized.
4. The identity of the conglomerate stays relatively stable over time.
5. A moral agent can be externally described and seen as a clear entity.

### **3.4.2 Moral corporate brand**

In the context of moral branding, a relevant question to ask might then be whether a corporate brand is good or bad. However, according to previous research (Fan 2005, 348), instead of classifying a brand as good or bad, the question lies in the values the brand stands for and in the decisions made in the company. A moral brand acts morally, aims to fulfil its economic, social, and environmental responsibilities, commits to do the right thing, and creates added value for various stakeholders (Alwi et al. 2017, 398). Since the definition of moral branding is tightly connected to corporate-level branding, moral branding can be assumed to take place mainly on a corporate level; thus, it can be referred to as moral corporate branding. Some researchers propose that moral corporate branding unites CSR, and that branding has a great potential to provide value for all stakeholders of a company (Palazzo & Basu 2007, 343). Indeed, moral corporate brand can be a powerful and responsible actor in society, not an isolated entity of its own.

Moral branding can be seen as an antecedent for the holistic value proposition of a company, instead of a characteristic of singular actions. The values based on morality should become visible in all of the actions. Fan (2005, 347) stated that the attributes of “honesty, integrity, diversity, quality, respect, responsibility, and accountability” can be used to describe a moral corporate brand and its successful actions.

In a recent study, Alwi et al. (2017) present a four-step definition for a moral corporate brand (figure 9). First, morality has to become visible in its actions. Secondly, it must have economic, social, and environmental responsibilities. Thirdly, the moral corporate brand has a strong commitment to “doing the right thing” and is accountable for it. Furthermore, a moral corporate brand provides added value for stakeholders and the company itself. Thus, a moral corporate brand is a strategic asset that guides a company’s actions.



Figure 9. Four-step definition for a moral corporate brand (adapted from Alwi et al. 2017).

The moral corporate brand identity can become part of the corporation's DNA, guiding its marketing actions from corporate to product branding. The brand values, which in this case are based on morality, are a constant reminder of the true essence of the corporate brand and become visible in its marketing activities (Alwi et al. 2017, 394; Morsing, 2006) If the company brand is implementing moral values at its core, it becomes even more sensitive to an issue in the area of reputation management. In this case, the various stakeholders can be extremely alert regarding company behavior (Fan 2005, 347).

In the highly networked environment of business, the values of a corporate brand become more meaningful, since industrial buyers can protect their own reputations by choosing partners whose values they can share (Alwi et al. 2017). Any sort of unethical behavior may harm or even destroy the corporate brand in the eyes of the consumer, as was seen in the emissions scandal of Volkswagen (Hotten 2015) or in recent news of H&M burning tens of thousands of kilograms of unsold clothes (Hackwill 2017). If the company gets involved in similar irresponsible actions, it is a greater signal of the moral

values than any marketing activity that declares the importance of ethics and morality for the company.

As has become clear, the values of a moral corporate brand need to be present throughout the company's actions. Researchers argue that for it to be reliable and coherent, the role of employees in moral branding is essential (Morsing 2006; Jeanes 2013). They create the brand culture, which the consumers confront in various situations. This emerging trend also affects employees: due to its holistic nature, a moral corporate brand has to be fully embedded with the organisation, and its employees must stand behind the values of their employer (Morsing, 2006). Otherwise, consumers may feel cheated and possibly lose their trust in the brand. Thus, when acting ethically, a company has to ensure that the organization is ready to live the morality espoused by the brand.

However, the phenomenon of moral branding is regarded as highly controversial, since in addressing questions of right and wrong, the brand may polarize its stakeholders and alienate itself from certain groups of consumers (Fan 2005, 344). Consequently, it may even lose some of them by choosing to "stay to true its values." However, in the opposite case, the consumers live the values of the moral brand, and can classify and conceptualise their own morality with its help. In other words, if the character of a consumer corresponds with the identity of a corporate brand, the consumer may feel this as a form of self-realisation (Palazzo & Basu 2007, 337). In a consumption society, its importance is also central to the formation of identity (Palazzo & Basu 2007, 335). In the case of moral branding, the moral identity of a consumer can be explained as a mental schema containing a set of moral trait associations (He et al. 2016). To draw a conclusion on this rising topic in marketing, it can be assumed that a moral corporate brand can only exist if the consumer shares its moral values.

### **3.4.3 Moral corporate brand taking social stands**

Corporate brands taking stands on socio-political issues is a relatively new phenomenon. Sometimes similar to a declaration, taking a stand in this context can be described as an action that can be either proactive and planned, or reactive and

spontaneous (Dodd & Supa 2014, 2). In the literature, the activity is also called “corporate social advocacy” (Dodd & Supa 2015, 287). Depending on the company and the role and personas of its top executive team, the message can be brought up either by the corporate brand or the CEO.

It has been argued that the phenomenon of moral branding may have its roots in societal transformation (Palazzo & Basu 2007, 339). Today, we live in an era of complexities. Descriptions of our time include attributes such as fragmentation, digitalization, polarization, globalization, and popularization. Together these macro phenomena have led to a loss of trust in traditional institutions, which seem to affect their status, respect, and in the end their power. In the era of societal transformation, people often engage with large (especially multinational) corporations instead of with national political systems (Palazzo & Basu 2011, 338). Even though corporate brands have taken stances earlier, the election of Trump to the presidency of the United States encouraged them to more and braver actions. The results of this turning point can be seen in the actions of famous, established global brands that originated in the US, such as Patagonia, AirBnB, and Nike (Klara, 2017). In telling the public their stance, these companies have witnessed a loss of fear towards controversial opinions and boycotts. The variety of the business fields proves that the possibility of taking a stance on an issue is not restricted to the nature of the business.

Dodd and Supa (2014) suggest that taking social stands is not compulsory for corporate brands, especially on controversial issues, but they should be aware of the phenomenon. The societal or political stands and actions of companies can be addressed to a wider crowd compared to normal marketing activities. They have the potential to have an impact on forming or changing public dynamics (Dodd & Supa 2014, 3).

While we, as consumers, are living in an era of consumption societies, our consumption activities can be seen as votes of sorts, instead of pure purchases (Will 1989). Consumers have been led to think that they can “shop for a better world” (Palazzo & Basu 2007, 339). As citizens of this consumption society, individuals can call themselves “consumer citizens.” Their consumption (or non-consumption) activities

becomes a means of expressing personal moral and political statements (Palazzo & Basu 2007, 339). As shown within branding research (Solomon 2003), consumers use brands as generators of their personal values, and they imbue them with a variety of meanings. This assumption, together with the notion of corporate brands replacing traditional political and societal institutions, therefore suggests that brand narratives can provide consumers a way to reconstruct their identities in times of societal transformation (Palazzo & Basu 2011, 337).

## 4 CONCEPTIONS OF MORAL BRANDING

### 4.1 Millennials' conceptions of moral branding

This study indicates that to conceptualise a corporate brand as a *moral corporate brand*, millennials evaluated two aspects of the corporate brand: positioning and activities. The first of these concentrates on brand attributes, which help the millennials differentiate moral corporate brands from mere corporate brands. In turn, corporate brand activities focus on concrete actions that communicate its moral values.

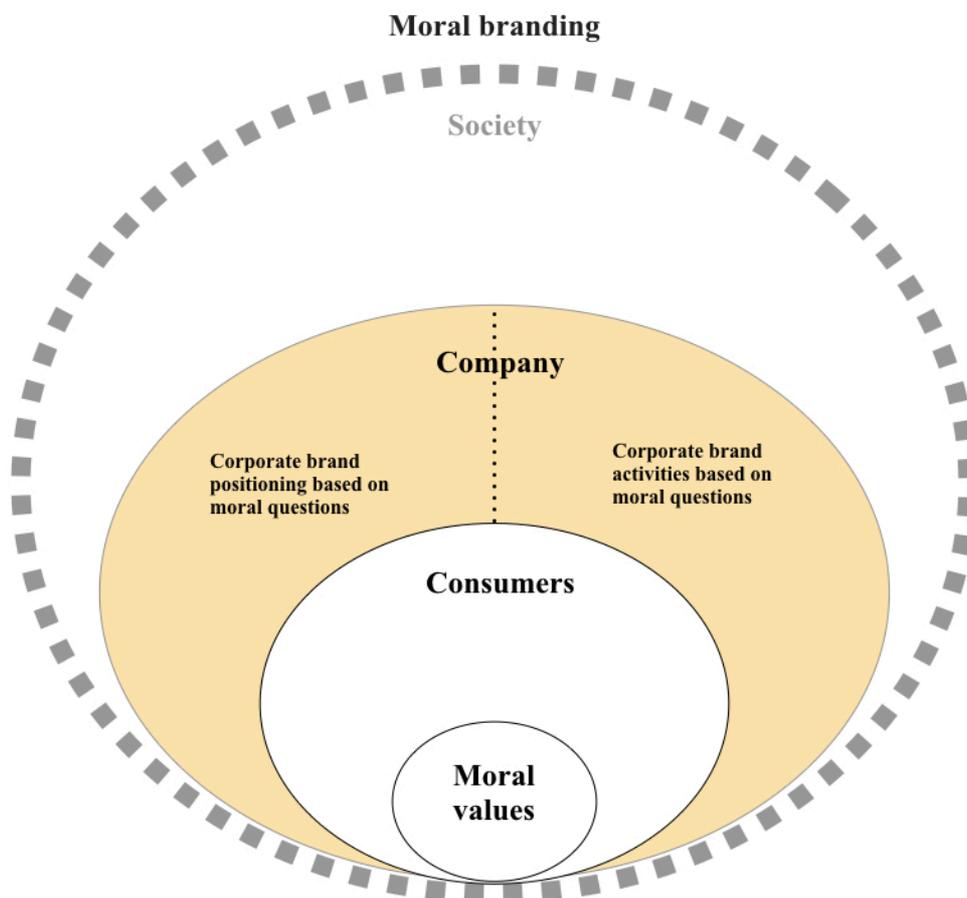


Figure 10. Conceptions of moral branding in company sphere.

This chapter focuses on the company sphere of moral branding. This sphere introduces its effects on the company level. A corporate brand can control this sphere, since it can position itself as a moral corporate brand, or perform activities that may provoke

consumers to conceptualise it as such. Figure 10 illustrates the focus and content of this chapter.

#### 4.1.1 Corporate brand positioning based on moral questions

During the focus groups, certain expressions such as interactive, youthful, sincere, sustainable, and controversial were frequently mentioned by the millennials. The first four were experienced as positive positioning strategies for a corporate brand, whereas the fifth one caused worry among them. All of these possibilities to position a corporate brand based on moral questions drew the attention of millennials and generated discussion among them.

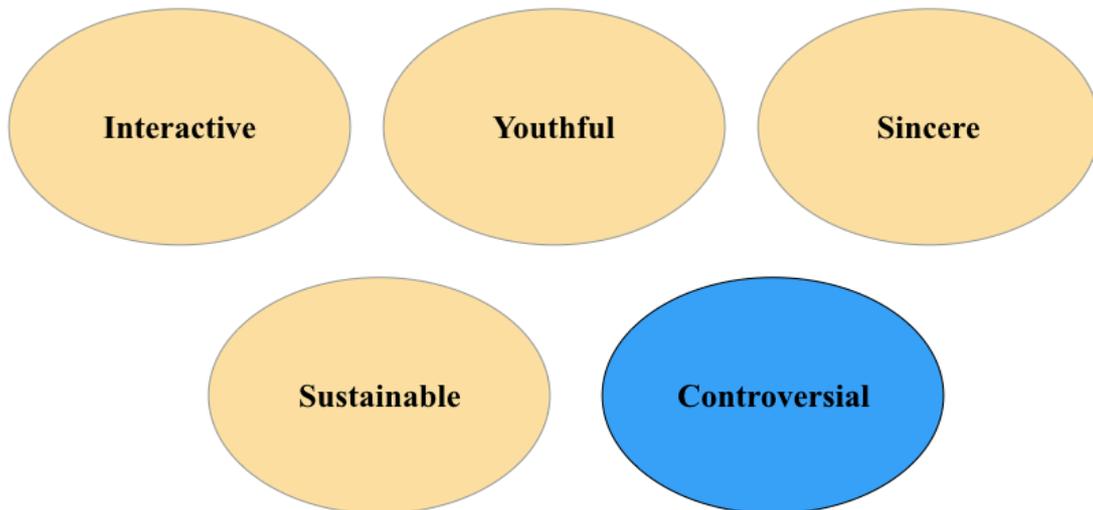


Figure 11. Millennials' conceptions of positioning strategies for a moral corporate brand.

##### *Interactive moral corporate brand*

The focus groups revealed that a declaration of a company's wider purpose, which is usually communicated through its corporate brand, can even be demanded from the consumers' side. The millennials want to hear the opinions of a corporate brand, and they seem to value corporate brands that interact with the public more highly. The brand's declarations are experienced as dialogue with society and consumers. Thus,

they can offer a corporate brand the opportunity to position itself as an interactive actor. An active role in society is held as an act of caring by millennials – in this way a company is able to demonstrate interests other than financial. It was found that millennials wanted values communicated to them not only via marketing communications but through a variety of different touchpoints (e.g., retail environment, packages, events, or PR).

*Nowadays consumers may also challenge companies and ask their opinion of an issue. As consumers, we demand real answers, not only words. (Focus group 4)*

*A company is allowed to have an opinion and maybe even forced to have one. I find that everyone is at the moment eager to hear “what is your opinion about this issue?” – and if it is aligned with one’s own thoughts, then it feels really meaningful. (Focus group 3)*

#### *Youthful moral corporate brand*

The millennials who participated in this study were asked to describe their observations and opinions of current society. The issues which interested them and were important for them were sustainability, equality, liberty to be whoever you want to be, a decrease of taboos, and individualism (but, reciprocally, an increased need for communality). As the millennials are currently in their 20s or early 30s, they regarded their values as being “youthful” and descriptive of today. They perceived corporate brands being seen to act morally as modern and following their time.

*I find that sort of action is actually extremely calculative and successful, especially of Finlayson, since they are certainly striving to be an ethical actor and by doing that to awake a sort of youthfulness into their brand. (Focus group 2)*

*I feel that we are moving into a stronger need for communities, and that we want our belonging to that certain group to be public. So we tend to find ourselves in different groups that have an opinion of something. I see this in a way that it we are still strongly individuals but we are searching for communities, because in the end we don’t want to admit the loneliness. (Focus group 1)*

*Maybe this company wanted to be relevant and thought that many Finns find it positive that they (as a company) break boundaries, and in that way point out that they are following their time. (Focus group 3)*

### *Sincere moral corporate brand*

An assumption arose that corporate brands' active communication and actions linked to societal issues were interpreted positively, since the corporate brand itself desires to put its values and actions in the front line. This is usually regarded as sincere action, because the millennials found that it would be extremely irrational and inconsistent if a corporate brand acted contrary to the company's business actions. The conception was shared that sooner or later the reality behind the curtains would be revealed. The millennials found that, as consumers, nothing can be hidden from them in the long run. The desire for authenticity and transparency makes the situation harder for large companies, since their scale of action and revenue do not meet the millennials' views of sincere behavior – millennials seem to trust and sympathise with small companies.

*I think these company declarations also create pressure for transparency. In today's environment, brands may be caught in action if they create illusions only instead of changing their behavior. (Focus group 2)*

*Our expectations as consumers will be higher when companies raise their own demands. (Focus group 4)*

### *Sustainable moral corporate brand*

Another finding linked to corporate brand positioning was as follows. If a corporate brand attempts to position itself based on moral questions, it was conceptualised as a sign of ethical and sustainable business (in other words, a corporate brand wants to position itself as a moral actor). On a generic level, any behavior related to these activities was received positively as to the bigger picture. When it came to a specific corporate brand's behavior, the attitudes changed to a negative direction. This finding can be understood to signal that the overall impressions about moral corporate branding are positive, but the current thoughts and earlier experiences about companies' role in society are rather more negative than positive. Indeed, it seemed that a dominant view of companies, especially of the larger ones, was that they are still regarded as deprivers. Although they may act sustainably, in reality they take advantage of consumers, who value sustainability.

*If the issue, a corporate brand is talking about is closely related to the business itself, it of course raises our expectations toward the sustainability of business. In a situation, a company opens up a discussion independently and we as consumers also become more curious about the sustainability in other sectors of the company. (Focus group 1)*

#### *Controversial moral corporate brand*

The millennials who participated in the focus groups were unanimous on the issues and opinions they regard as “morally right.” They also acknowledged that controversial opinions on socio-political issues, which they regard as “morally wrong,” are possible. A shared opinion was that the issues companies have brought up so far have been positive in their point of view, and the corporate brands who have acted morally have been standing for such things as equality. The millennials started to worry, however, about whether a corporate brand could position itself, for example, through approving far-right thoughts, gender or racial inequality, or disclaiming environmental change. These concerns are introduced in more detail in chapter 4.2.2.

*In my opinion, this company is acting as an advocate and acceptor – not as an opponent. But it is certain that someone is going to be provoked by this. (Focus group 4)*

*I began to think about freedom of speech. If everything is allowed, can it happen that some would use that to spread racist thoughts? (Focus group 4)*

#### **4.1.2 Corporate brand activities based on moral questions**

Corporate brand activities such as doing good, disseminating information, sending out marketing communications, and philanthropy were also mentioned frequently in the focus groups. Each of these activities are presented in this subchapter. In a situation in which a corporate brand is communicating or making declarations on a social issue with roots in moral questions, millennials do not accept the message as such. As critical consumers, they evaluate and compare the message with their knowledge about the company and even search for more information about it. If they encounter the issue promoted amongst other activities, the company’s stand can be interpreted as credible.

As a result of the activities presented in this subchapter, the millennials questioned experienced a corporate brand as a more credible moral actor.



Figure 12. Millennials' conceptions of moral corporate based activities based on moral questions.

### *Doing good*

While the focus group participants also had positive thoughts about moral branding, their ideal concept would be for the business model of the company itself to be based on “doing good.” By this they mean that the business should not harm the environment, undermine physical or mental health, or encourage overconsumption. Millennials valued corporate brands that communicate the company’s authentic actions.

*They are utilising the societal contribution of a company. It is still a production company of textiles, but they are making it in clever way. They are harnessing that into ethical behavior by making something out of jeans in a way none one of us could do. (Focus group 1)*

*It is the action that counts, not the words. (Focus group 2)*

*In this post, they just say something, but in this post (in social media), it’s about actually doing something. (Focus group 3)*

*Unethical companies will die in this marketplace. (Focus group 4)*

*Instead of advertising "we are an ethical company", I value it higher when the actual business of a company is based on ethical and sustainable principles. For example, to not buy loads of cheap junk may be produced by child labor or without giving any thought to the environmental consequences. (Focus group 1)*

### *Information*

The millennials mentioned that they feel they receive added value if the company gives tips for recycling or advises them on such things as how to consume more sustainably. The companies' active role in enabling conscious consumption was regarded as highly positive. It was also pointed out as enhancing the brand image and the reputation of the company positively. These actions were described as "real morality" according to the participants of this study. Millennials appreciated communication about recycled materials in products and knowledge of the origin of raw materials. Millennials reported that this kind of information creates additional value for them, which makes them feel more positive about the company. They related that with new information, they are even able to reconsider their consumption habits.

*In my opinion, it's great that things are made easier for us, for example how our choices affect others. I find this to be a way of adding an awareness of sustainable consumption to everyday life. (Focus group 2)*

### *Marketing communications*

In some cases, the participants said that marketing communications have succeeded in touching them or affecting their reasoning, even though they had not purchased anything from the companies in question. This incident highlights the effect of the phenomenon of moral branding clearly. The actions of a corporate brand may even be meaningful for a wider crowd of consumers, not only for its loyal customer base. This was conceptualized as morally good behavior, since it shows that the company acknowledges the world behind its organizational boundaries and seems to care about the life of the consumers as individuals, not only as potential buyers.

*Well, I have one example that raised up some thoughts. It's one clothing boutique, which has a slogan "slow fashion." They basically fight against H&M and others' ideas of bringing out a new collection every two months. They have this idea that they sell only classical pieces, and they change their collection maybe once in a year. When I heard of this, it made me think, do I really need new clothes for every party and season? Or could I just have a selection of classic clothes and not buy new things so often. It's a funny fact that I haven't even bought anything from there, but it still changed my attitude about consumption. (Focus group 1)*

### *Philanthropy*

Some thoughts about philanthropic activities were also mentioned. A conception emerged then that it would be the best and the most natural way for companies to act in society, if they want to "do good" and communicate their values. Philanthropic activities are one of the most traditional ways for corporate brands to make their values visible. Conceptions similar to the model of Szöcz et al. (2016) arose from the millennials' conversation regarding corporate moral branding. Szöcz (2016) describes the relations between customer, company, and cause. Usually the corporate brand positions itself by committing to certain causes that can represent the brand purpose. The close relatedness of the committed cause to the business area and model of the company was regarded among the millennials both positively and negatively. One conception was that the company should stand for issues that are related somehow to its business: for example, textile producers to textile recycling. According to another conception, the interrelatedness of cause and business led to a more positive perception if the supported cause did not have a clear link to the product or service of the company. It was seen positively, as unpredictable behavior for commercial entities.

*I would see that if a company starts to act in a similar way in that they had established a charity organisation, then the action itself is basically ethical but it will be carried out with a marketing touch. In this situation, we have to think about the best ways of being ethical. I find that a better way would be to donate money, for example for World Vision. (Focus group 1)*

## 4.2 Millennials' conceptions of moral branding in relation to society

In this chapter, the conceptions of moral branding in relation to society will be introduced (see figure 13). The conceptions the participants held of the corporate brands' role as an actor in society varied. The categories identified include attitudes towards the phenomenon of moral branding and thoughts about the significance of the role of corporate brands in society. The three findings *a) moral branding as marketing enlightenment; b) moral branding as a threat increasing societal fragmentation; and c) moral branding as a sign of hypocrisy*, will be introduced more thoroughly in the following subchapters.

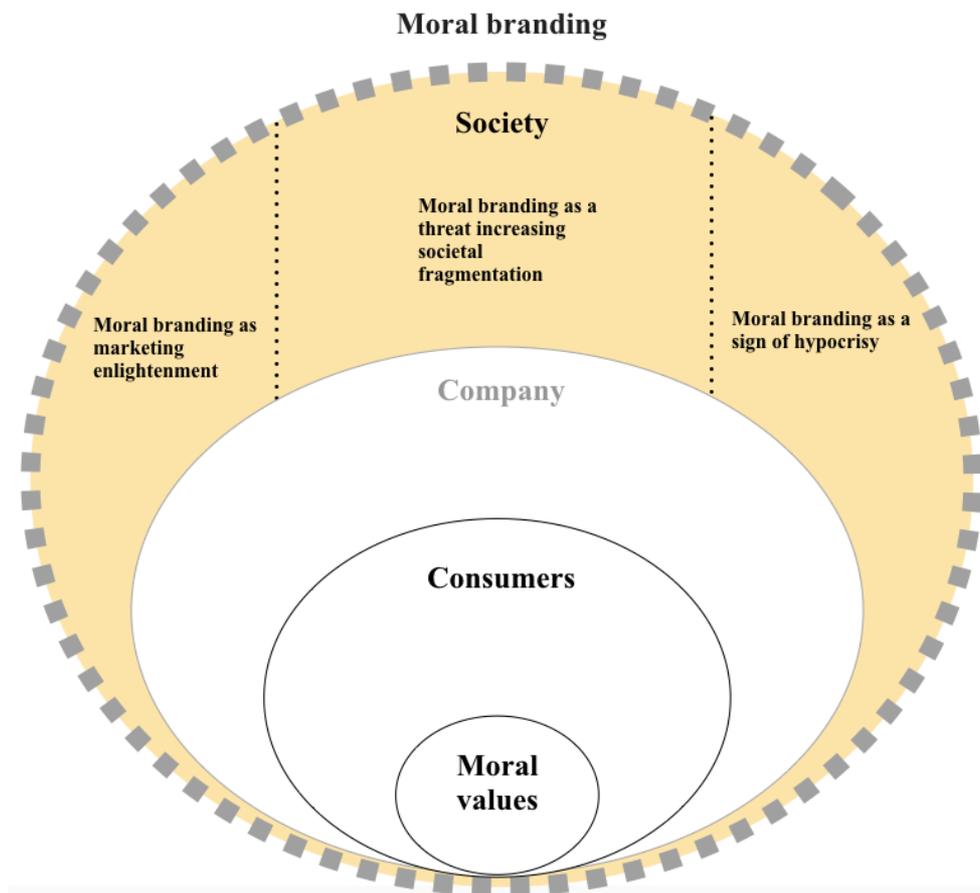


Figure 13. Conceptions of moral branding in society sphere.

During the focus groups, it became evident that millennials are worried about society and its current situation. The words they chose to describe the atmosphere were mostly

negative and cynical. Terms such as “distrust”, “fragmentation”, and “incoherence” were mentioned. They felt worried about environmental change, overconsumption, the political environment, safety issues, the increase of extremist groups, and changes in tolerance. Especially experienced as threats were the election of Trump as President of the US and the rise of extreme right groups against ethnic diversity in Finland.

The millennials shared the idea that they live in a time of continuous change and major shifts. Political activeness, such as belonging to a party, was not brought up. Even though political opinions, values, and moral perceptions were discussed in the focus groups, the atmosphere remained peaceful. Instead of having critical and contradictory responses, the participants seemed mostly interested in the opinions of others. This could have arisen partially from the similarity of the participants’ demographic backgrounds in terms of their age, education, and place of residence. It also indicates the low significance that political parties have for self-identity among this generation (Stein 2013). Issues that matter for millennials are values and the purposes of actions (Paulin et al. 2014).

#### **4.2.1 Moral branding as marketing enlightenment**

The first of the conceptions in regard to marketing enlightenment addresses the idea that a corporate brand’s activities in taking a more active role in society can have the power to contribute to creating collective well-being in a society. Moral branding is experienced among millennials as a shift toward marketing that benefits the well-being of consumers. These benefits might include increasing knowledge of certain issues, awakening consumers to think about deeper thoughts or societal questions, having a closer relationship with the brand, overcoming taboos, raising interest towards sustainability issues, and rethinking one’s consumption habits. The phenomenon was experienced positively, since the actions and messages of the corporate brands were regarded as positive and beneficial for the greater well-being.

*I think they are in some way something more than just a sheet factory. (Focus group 1)*

*Even though it doesn't directly affect me, I have somehow responded quite strongly to all these actions against Trump in the US. I have actively followed how companies act and noticed that they can even be rather rough in their opinions and actions. It seems like it's allowed to be against the state and the president, which I found very positive. I remember when Apple and McDonalds were against the state during a crisis on immigration. I got a positive feeling of their reaction and of the company, and I do believe that at some point, it may also affect my consumption. I'm not walking straight to McDonalds right now, but I believe that this will leave some kind of a mark in my mind. (Focus group 1)*

The presumption of the corporate brands' high significance as societal actors is visible in all of these ways of clarifying moral corporate branding. Another shared idea is the overall optimistic view. Together the participants form a conception that moral corporate branding can make a positive change. Due to the high subjectivity of moral issues, several interpretations appeared of how corporate moral branding could enlighten marketing from its current state.

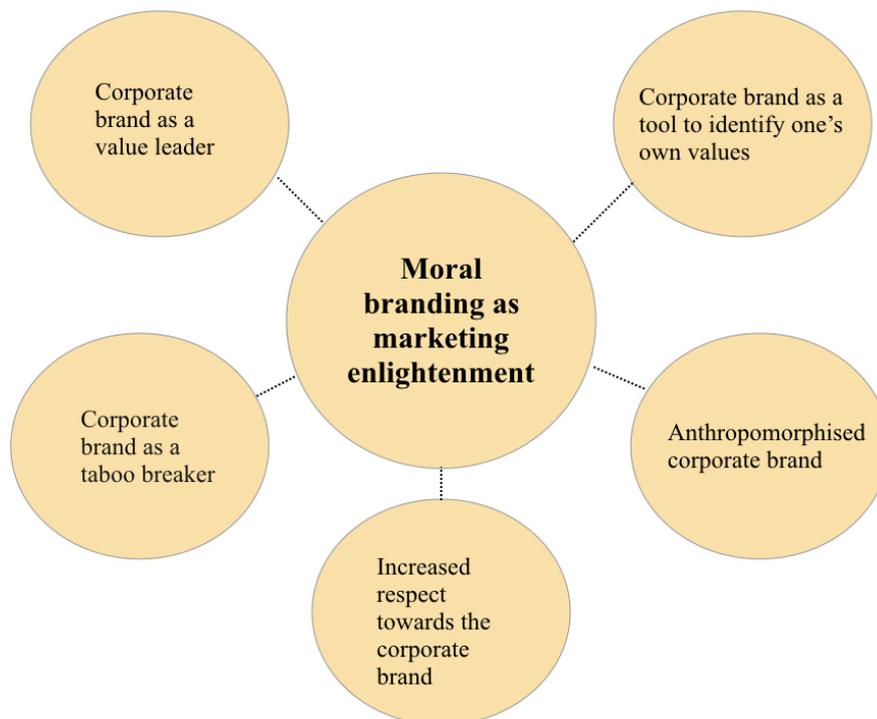


Figure 14. Millennials' conceptions of moral branding in societal sphere as marketing enlightenment.

Each of the different interpretations also had similarities with the rest. They all focused on the humane, soft values that take over product-centric consumption stimulation. The

millennials confessed that corporate brands affect their behavior, and not only in consumption situations. Together with earlier literature on millennials (Paulin et al. 2014; Milár 2016), it can be argued that marketing has a powerful role in their lives, on both micro and macro levels. Consumers who believe this statement and possess an optimistic attitude towards change find that marketing can create a positive shift in the current state of society and in the lives of individuals. The optimistic results of moral branding identified in relation to society were a) *corporate brand as a value leader*, b) *corporate brand as a tool to identify one's own values*, c) *corporate brand as a taboo breaker*, d) *increased respect towards the corporate brand*, and e) *anthropomorphised corporate brand*.

#### *Corporate brand as a value leader*

Among millennials, a thought arose that in the consumption-centered society of the Western world, companies and their corporate brands have a significant role in various ways, since they are embedded in the everyday lives of consumers. These corporate brands are seen as powerful, due to their wealth and their presence in various media channels, which are part of millennials' everyday life. At the same time, their trust in the political system is crumbling, and political opinions are losing their meaning as cornerstones of an individual's identity. In a situation in which individuals feel distanced from political activity and show their personality through their consumption activities, a natural path is to apply consumption as a sign of their values, including the moral ones (Paulin et al. 2014, Rodríguez Vilá & Bharadwaj 2017). In a situation in which the political system is not an inseparable part of individuals lives, it seems to be losing its position as the value leader. A finding of this study suggests that given their increased societal power and strengthened place in the lives of individuals, company brands could step in and start to take the place of political institutions as value leaders.

*I believe that companies can take a role of some kind of a value leader, when our political system is starting to break up. (Focus group 2)*

*I find that this is the right way of catching people's attention. It's done through the right issues. In my opinion, it is cool how the 1% is acting, while the other 99% are staying silent. (Focus group 2)*

*I'd say that if some feminist group strongly declares their issues, these remain their issues. But if a company whose main goal is to be profitable raises a similar issue, the visibility is on a whole different level. Who else could raise a topic and get the same level of attention? A president? (Focus group 1)*

*If you think of the scale and visibility of these companies, I find that words do matter a lot. (Focus group 2)*

#### *Corporate brand as a tool to identify one's own values*

As has become clear, society is going through a change, as well as life at the individual level. Although the millennials find many changes frightening and even threatening, some also generate optimism, such as an increase in the popularity of sustainability and the breaking of taboos. Societal topics were often counted as moral questions since they covered questions about right and wrong. The millennials admitted that they seldom think about their own values in their everyday life. They felt that values become an issue if someone contests them. Nevertheless, they still reported that they liked advertisements that made them think about their own values. At the same time, the nature of the high subjectivity of moral questions also emerged in the focus groups. An issue that others experienced as a moral question was not so at all to some of the participants. This finding can be clarified with a theoretical view of moral awareness and its subjectivity. The variation in moral awareness can be explained by a logic that sees it as an encoding process. In the context of moral awareness, a person processes the incoming information and recognizes it as a moral issue or not (Ishak et al. 2013, 82). To sum it up, one reason why millennials conceptualize moral corporate branding as marketing enlightenment is that they experience it as a tool to identify their own values.

*Everyone can choose their own battles, and this company clearly elected to stand for this issue. (Focus group 1)*

*The brand could have a role that they symbolize certain ideologies or values, which a consumer can then possess as his or her own. (Focus group 4)*

### *Corporate brand as a taboo breaker*

Another positive finding was the moral corporate brands' ability to break taboos through their actions. The millennials found that this can occur through many forms of marketing, for example in marketing communication or product design, packaging, and pricing. A shared opinion was that companies have a significant influence on both societal and individual levels. The corporate brands are, to some extent, also seen as influencers, since they have the power and skills to highlight topics with their financial status. Discussion arose about a corporate brand disclosing something about an issue that has been taboo, and it was said that the publicity can lead to acceptance. The millennials found that in this area, corporate brands can even bear a significant responsibility. It is not irrelevant which prints, text, colors, and symbols one has in a product, or which models one selects for a brand's film or advertisements.

*Still today, the imagery of women is so narrow and one-sided in the way that a woman is either a housewife, a vulnerable girl or a sex bomb. In my opinion, this film that we just saw wanted to break the hegemony of that imagery and stand for diversity. (Focus group 2)*

*I think it is ok to take stands and bring up taboos, and for a company to use that in their marketing. I find it quite suitable. (Focus group 1)*

*I find that this is suitable action, especially if your opinion is that everyone should have equal possibility to be who they are. (Focus group 3)*

*And in a way, the more you make noise about these kinds of taboo topics, the more normal they will end up. (Focus group 3)*

### *Increased respect towards the corporate brand*

Another positive reaction mentioned among millennials was the increase of respect towards corporate brands. Brave stands, especially in the case of taboos, generated responses such as "intelligent", "genius", "wonderful", and "cool". The millennials

were impressed by the companies' fast reactions in presenting or transmitting societal or even political themes. It was interpreted as a sign of their interest in the world around them. This was one aspect that made a company seem more humane and closer to the individual than large, impersonal corporations.

*In any case, I don't see this as bad thing. (Focus group 1)*

*That's wonderful! (Focus group 1)*

#### *Anthropomorphised corporate brand*

The corporate brand action of taking stands also made the millennials think about the nature of a company and its corporate brand. Expressing one's opinion has traditionally been an action of an individual (Fleming 2009). Recent activities of corporate brands actively taking stands on societal issues and problems evoked thoughts of whether a company could be thought of as parallel to a human being as a societal actor. In academic literature, this phenomenon is known as brand anthropomorphization. Consumers humanize brands in their minds by adding human-like features, minds, and personalities to a brand (MacInnis & Folkes 2017, 370). The researchers suggest that humanization of a brand can occur in two other ways. Second, a consumer perceives a brand either as similar or connected to him or herself. Third, a brand may be perceived as a partner in a relationship formed between consumer and brand. Experiencing a brand as a human-like actor also changes the moral expectations towards it. If a brand is regarded as similar to a human in being a moral actor, it may receive moral expectations similar to those of human beings.

*Maybe it is most important to act in a way which feels universally right. I also started to think, could a company verge on human? I mean that companies should act "right", in a similar way to how we do. And companies also should not harm anyone. (Focus group 4)*

#### 4.2.2 Moral branding as a threat increasing societal fragmentation

Moral corporate brands can also be perceived to have negative end results or side effects. A conception formed among the millennials that moral branding could cause a threat to society, even though the original purpose of the company would actually have been “to do good”. The possible negative consequences of the actions of moral corporate brands and their public stands caused worry among the millennials. This view was built upon the fact that corporate brands taking societal stands can have a significant effect on societal climate, due to their high visibility throughout many medias and other touchpoints. Academia has discussed worries similar to those of the study participants. As well-known researchers of corporate citizenship, Matten and Crane (2005, 175) have expressed a slight fear about the increasing significance of companies in society. They doubt whether the phenomenon is solely positive by reasoning a possible situation in which a company decides to abandon its initiatives and actions regarding its role in society. Their concerns about moral branding in relation to society were as follows: *a) increased confrontation, b) misuse of freedom of speech, c) competition based on subjective values, and d) misuse of power.*

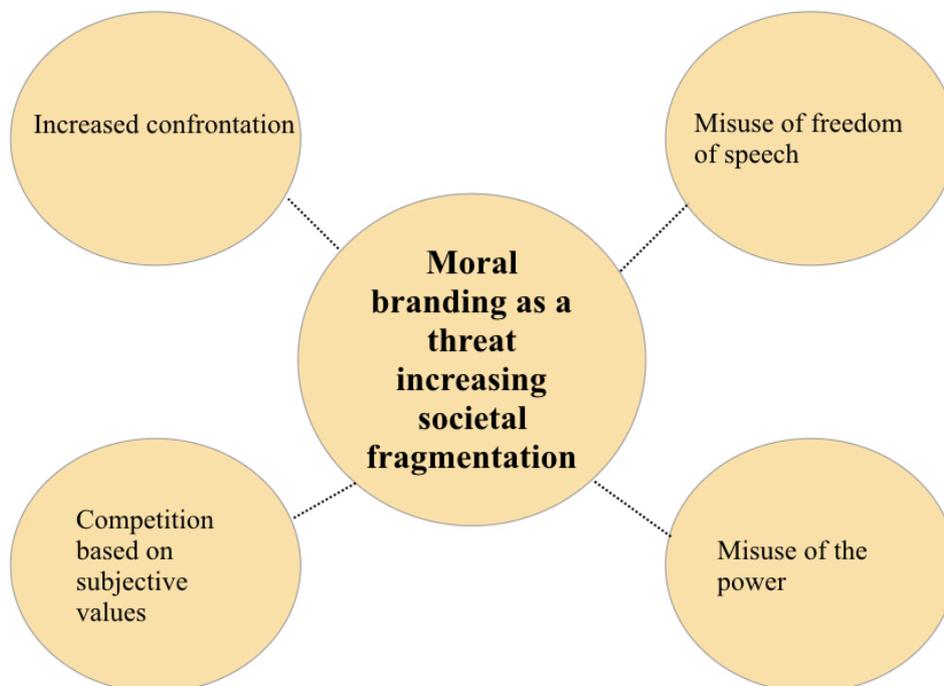


Figure 15. Millennials’ conceptions of moral branding in societal sphere as a threat increasing societal fragmentation.

### *Increased confrontation*

Millennials brought up their anxiety about the current status of society. Nearly all of the participants of the focus groups admitted that they are worried about some specific societal phenomena, for example polarisation and fragmentation. These macro-level societal issues and questions are, according to millennials, highly connected with moral questions, since the nature of these issues is often based on a moral question. Millennials shared a view that digitalisation has changed the world and enabled smaller groups to unify effectively through social media and other digital channels, no matter their geographical distance or difference in demographics. Increased fragmentation was explained to be a result of individualistic cultures. The millennials felt fragmentation to be both a positive and a negative phenomenon. The positive aspect included the breaking of former taboos, such as sexual orientation, since in the fragmented society “normality” is losing its meaning (see 4.2.1). However, millennials were also afraid about different groups being in opposition. A common view was that these changes have the power to move society in a direction that worried millennials.

*I feel that values are built upon some rule and the values actually divide instead of unifying people. (Focus group 4)*

*I got stuck in the point that, if a company takes a certain position and represents some specific moral thought with all its values, norms, and virtues, does it actually take the position of political parties? Maybe not here in Finland, but at least in the United States there are terrible fights between the political parties every now and then. If the companies step into this arena and start to represent values that communicate something, they probably think that they attract people, but by acting in this way they might even actually separate people from each other. (Focus group 4)*

*Maybe the opposition will culminate even more, and that doesn't sound so good to me. (Focus group 4)*

*If you start to fight on moral question, you'll end up in a battle in which both sides feel that they have it right, because who can say what is right and what is wrong? (Focus group 4)*

### *Misuse of freedom of speech*

Certain threats were pointed out by millennials most often. These were the misuse of freedom of speech, the charade of consumers, exaggeration, and competition based on personal values. Equal freedom of speech and its possible misuse was a significant worry of the participants of this study. Discussion arose on whether some companies could actually stand for racism, inequality, or disinterest in climate change.

*I'm just thinking that if companies have too much freedom... Like if some company starts suddenly acting in a racist way. (Focus group 3)*

### *Competition based on subjective values*

Millennials also pondered if positioning a corporate brand based on values is good behavior at all. They were thinking that both individuals and companies as well as other institutions should pay attention to this and at least consider the possible negative consequences of differentiation based on values. One finding indicates that promoting one's values loudly can also be interpreted as an expression of disrespect, since it communicates one's opinion of an issue or value as being "the right one." Millennials find it worrying that one value would be preferred and promoted by a powerful actor, such as a corporate brand, because they feel values are a subjective issue.

*I'm thinking about the future and how this situation will evolve. The private sector is already big and powerful in Finland, and now companies enter yet another field – competing on values. Will the companies soon define our values or decide in general what values are "the good and bad" in our society? (Focus group 4)*

### *Misuse of power*

The possibility of companies misusing their power frightened the millennials. They found it hard to learn about the true motives for companies acting in a societally active manner, which has traditionally been performed only by citizen actors. This ignorance regarding motives leads millennials to worry about the behavior of companies. Millennials were sceptical of the possibility of pure altruism, stating that they could not be sure whether the companies' true interest would be to provide positive value for

society or only gain attention. The possibility of companies' purely pursuing publicity was experienced as a fear that came out similar times. This fear sank the overall attitude towards corporate actions, although the content (the issue raised) was often experienced positively.

*It's a pity if this is only a marketing trick, because this at least gained a lot of attention. (Focus group 2)*

*Of course, there is a possibility for problems. Companies have the power and capabilities to use different kinds of mechanics to influence people, similar to politics. If the fragmentation in our society continues, I'm afraid we will soon be in the middle of the struggle for power between companies. (Focus group 4)*

#### **4.2.3 Moral branding as a sign of hypocrisy**

Even though moral corporate branding has been suggested to be “the new black,” this study finds that a vast variety of conceptions of it exist among millennials (e.g., Rodríguez Vilá & Bharadwaj 2017). The previous two conceptions were based on the thinking that millennials see marketing actions as being effective on a societal macro-level. According to the third conception millennials held on moral branding, companies and their corporate brands should not try to be anything more than commercial actors in the marketplace.

In this conception, society, companies, and consumers were experienced as separate entities. If the societal and corporate spheres are not held as being interrelated, the potential in the overlapping roles of different actors and possible benefits cannot be understood. Companies represent commercial actors, whose societal concerns do not feel reliable. The reasons for negative interpretations of corporate brands' active role in society varied. The pessimistic results of moral branding in relation to society were identified as follows: *a) pessimistic attitude toward companies and marketing, b) crossing boundaries, c) the issue itself is not personally relevant.*

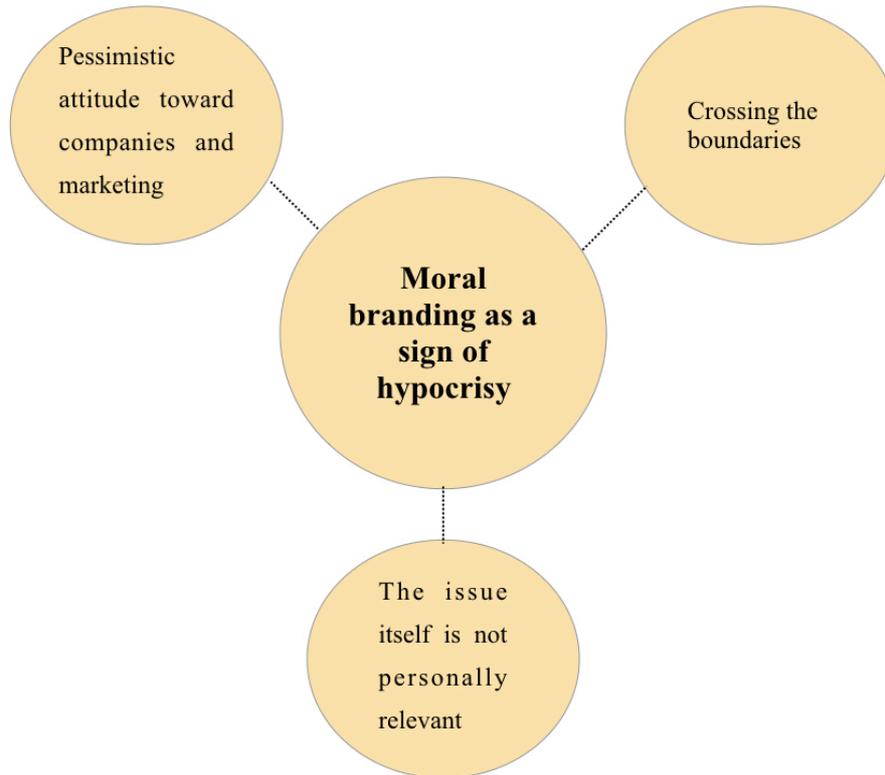


Figure 16. Millennials' conceptions of moral branding in societal sphere as a sign of hypocrisy.

*Pessimistic attitude toward companies and marketing*

A pessimistic attitude towards the corporate world emerged among the millennials who participated this study. A thought that companies take advantage of consumers often emerged. For some, this behavior represented the normal activity of a company. Due to a general lack of trust in companies, the societal actions and stands of corporate brands were also conceptualised negatively. Another possibility behind this pessimistic conception was that the overall attitudes toward marketing were also pessimistic, or even negative. Marketing was said to resemble acting or histrionic behavior. It was thought that by taking stands for mercenary reasons only, companies could exploit a situation in which consumers show interest and even willingness to pay extra for sustainability or matching values. This behavior was interpreted as something that could be expected from the companies.

The pessimistic conception can be seen to originate from the interpretation that companies and society exist in separate spheres and/or the pessimistic attitude toward marketing. The moral agent theory can help to explain these thoughts (Fleming 2009; Erskine 2014). It seems that the pessimistic attitude among millennials was a result of a contradictory interpretation of corporate brands as moral agents. Their responsibility as actors is seen as purely commercial, with the sole aim of maximizing profit. According to this view, it is challenging to believe a corporate brand would have an interest in promoting an issue if the main outcome is to benefit society, not to gain profit.

*Personally, I found communication focusing on ethics very irritating. I don't like it at all. The campaigns that do that are so stupid and clumsy. (Focus group 1)*

*In my opinion, it's okay that a company pays attention to societal issues and acts ethically, but I don't like that it's the core marketing message. (Focus group 1)*

*Isn't this just shouting "look at us and what we have done"? (Focus group 1)*

#### *Crossing boundaries is not a favorable action*

A thought that a commercial actor cannot communicate societal topics credibly – particularly not moral or ethical issues – emerged among millennials. This view was justified with the legal definition of a company, which states that the reason for its existence is to yield profits for its owners. The definition was understood literally, and it clearly restrained the possibility to sense companies and their corporate brands as societal actors besides their commercial activity. Therefore, these two activities were interpreted to exclude one another. If a corporate brand declares to either support or defend a societal issue, according to this conception, the action is similar to hypocrisy or cheating the consumers. It was mentioned that traditional societal actors, such as NGOs and foundations, should have the role of supporters or defenders of societal issues. If companies want to extend their role, it could be accomplished by donating. In other words, philanthropy would be the best practice to act in society, since it is not interpreted as conflicting with companies' aim to gain profit.

*In my opinion, it is so clumsy that a company takes so much responsibility for societal problems or that a company takes a stand on immigration and the*

*questions related to it. I think it's not at all under a company's responsibility to act like that. I feel it's just calculated marketing communications. (Focus group 1)*

*I do think a lot that the goal of companies is actually to look good in others' eyes, just because they have realized it's one trick to gain more money. (Focus group 3)*

*I would have said if that [one of the supporting materials of the focus group discussion] was made by a company, it would have been extremely irritating and calculative. But if it had been an advertisement of some organization, it would have been cool. (Focus group 1)*

*The good things should come with certain limits also. Companies should be aware of not crossing their borders, since they are just companies and there are also other actors around them. A company can bring some things to the public's awareness, but afterwards the responsibility should lie on the shoulders of those actors who can really act. (Focus group 1)*

*The issue itself is not personally relevant*

Another possibility for the pessimistic attitude toward the phenomenon of moral branding, was that the nature of the issues highlighted and promoted by corporate brands were not experienced as interesting or personally influential. In other words, the problem was that neither the issue or question itself. Also, a fact that a certain issue was being highlighted by a corporate brand, which changed the context of the issue, changed the interpretation of an issue. Different reactions can once again be explained with the theory of moral subjectivity (Ishak et al. 2014). While according to another conception (*moral branding as marketing enlightenment*) the promoted issues were experienced positively, according to this conception the same issues are perceived as hypocritical, ridiculous, confusing, or irritating. If the issue itself did not feel personally relevant, the overview of moral branding was often pessimistic. This finding highlights the difficulty of moral branding: in order to matter, the societal action or stand of a corporate brand has to be able to touch consumers on an individual level.

*It didn't arouse any feelings in me, even though I could have had many opinions about this issue. (Focus group 3)*

### **4.3 Comparison of millennials' conceptions of moral branding**

This chapter focuses on the differences between the conceptions of moral branding discovered. As stated earlier, the three different viewpoints vary from each other: *a) as marketing enlightenment; b) as a threat increasing societal fragmentation; and c) as a sign of hypocrisy*. One step in phenomenographic analysis is category descriptions (Marton et al. 1992; Yates et al. 2012). These descriptions point out the main characteristics of each conception (table 5). Thus, they offer a suitable basis for comparison of categories.

Table 5. Category descriptions of the conceptions of this study.

Conception of moral branding	Category description
As marketing enlightenment	This conception regards moral branding as an honorable action that a corporate brand preferably performs. In other words, the phenomenon is seen optimistically. A feeling of hopefulness is attached to moral branding, since the effect of corporate brands in society is experienced as significant, and the attitude towards their implementing moral values is positive.
As a threat increasing societal fragmentation	This conception regards corporate moral branding as voluntary. Due to the possibility of unplanned negative consequences, however, it ought to consider its actions extremely carefully. In other words, the phenomenon is seen from a perspective of concern. A feeling of worry is attached to it, since the effect of corporate brands in society is experienced as significant, and the attitude towards them implementing moral values is critical.
As a sign of hypocrisy	This conception regards moral branding as a voluntary action, not a duty. Other societal actors are regarded as better able to interact in society. In other words, the phenomenon is viewed critically. A feeling of cynicism is attached to moral branding, since the effect of corporate brands in society is experienced as low, and the attitude towards their implementing moral values is negative.

When the researcher studied each of the discovered conceptions more deeply, and analysed the major differences between the three findings, it became clear that the conceptions differ from each other in two ways. Based on this finding, a figure was formed to illustrate the positions of the conceptions in relation to each other. This step of between-group comparison can be a part of the phenomenographic analysis.

Sandberg and Schembri (2002, 200) recommend comparison, since cross-checking is a good method to verify the stability and clarity of individual conceptions.

The researcher found out that one major question behind each conception was the attitude toward corporate brands implementing moral values. The attitudes varied between optimism and pessimism. This dimension was placed on the horizontal axis of the figure. The other dimension describes millennials' impression of the overall effect of corporate brands in society. On one end of the vertical axis is "low significance" and on the other "high significance." If the significance was experienced as high for society, the companies were conceptualised as intertwined systems.

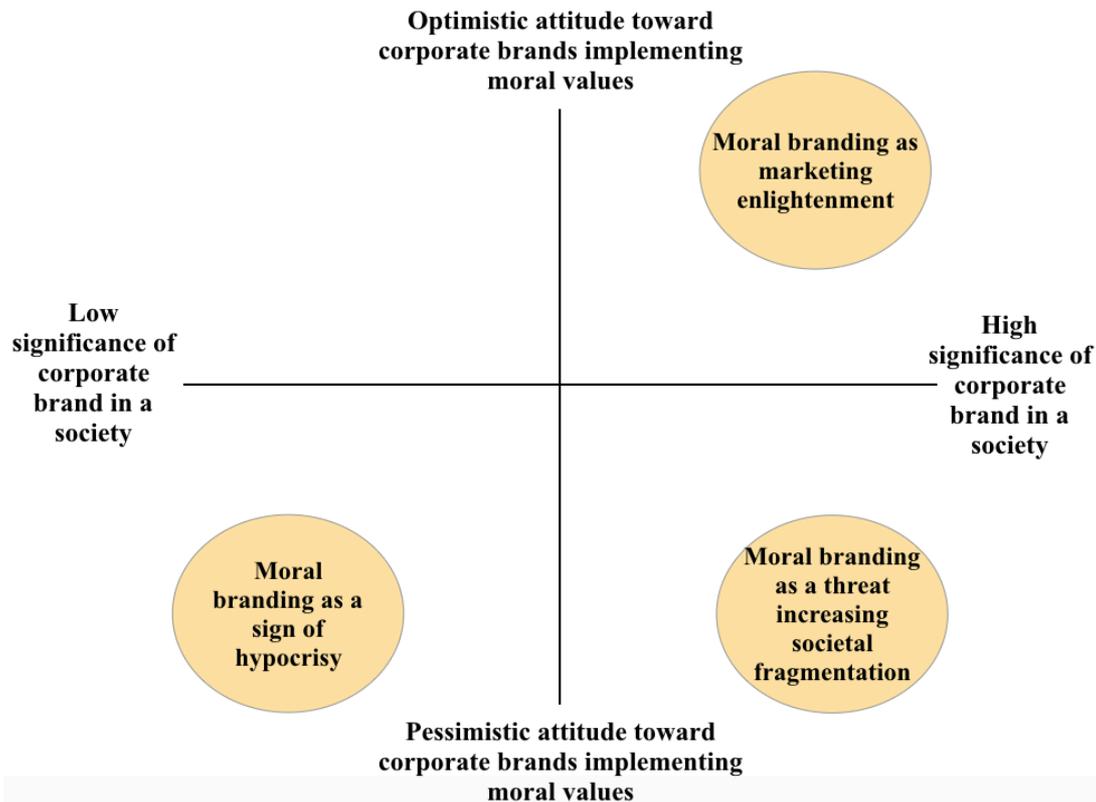


Figure 17. Comparison of millennials' conceptions of moral branding in society sphere.

Looking at the figure 17, it is rather simple to recognise the major difference between the different conceptions which were discovered in this study. The conception of *moral branding as marketing enlightenment* can be found in the upper right corner of the figure. The characterisations of this conception are an optimistic, or even idealistic,

attitude toward the phenomena of this study, and an opinion that corporate brands have a high significance in society. A feeling of hopefulness was attached this conception, which was the most optimistic toward moral branding.

One of the conceptions shared the thought about the high significance of corporate brands in society. Nevertheless, under the conception of *moral branding as a threat increasing societal fragmentation*, the attitude towards the phenomenon was slightly pessimistic. The name of the conception explains the nature of the pessimistic attitude. While a feeling of hopefulness was associated with conception of *moral branding as marketing enlightenment*, in this latter conception worry about possible negative consequences, which were experienced as unplanned and challenging to predict, overtook the possibility for positive consequences.

Of the conceptions discovered, the most critical to moral branding was the one described as *moral branding as a sign of hypocrisy*. This conception implied that companies and society exist in separate spheres and have their own responsibilities. As a result of this thought, both of them have their own clear roles and guidelines for action. This view leads to a pessimistic attitude toward moral branding, since moral values and questions are deeply rooted in societal questions, whereas a company is not experienced as a credible societal actor. In other words, a corporate brand cannot step into the sphere of society. Because companies and their corporate brands are seen as purely commercial, they are not credible or even capable actors in developing or changing society.

#### **4.4 Conclusions of the study**

In the synthesis of the theoretical framework, a figure was formed to illustrate the relationship between company, consumers, and society in the formation of moral branding. The understanding of moral branding was developed further with the help of a focus group study among millennials. The findings of the latter as presented in chapter 4 also helped to finalize and verify the theoretical framework of moral branding. Since this study follows an abductive research logic, this dialogue between theory and empirical study is possible. The conversation about the role of the different actors and

of the phenomenon itself was vivid in the focus groups. The millennials were asked to share their thoughts on a specific question, but they also presented their views of the phenomenon spontaneously. During the focus groups and as a result of phenomenographic analysis of the data, the researcher noticed the crucial points and activities for a moral corporate brand to exist.

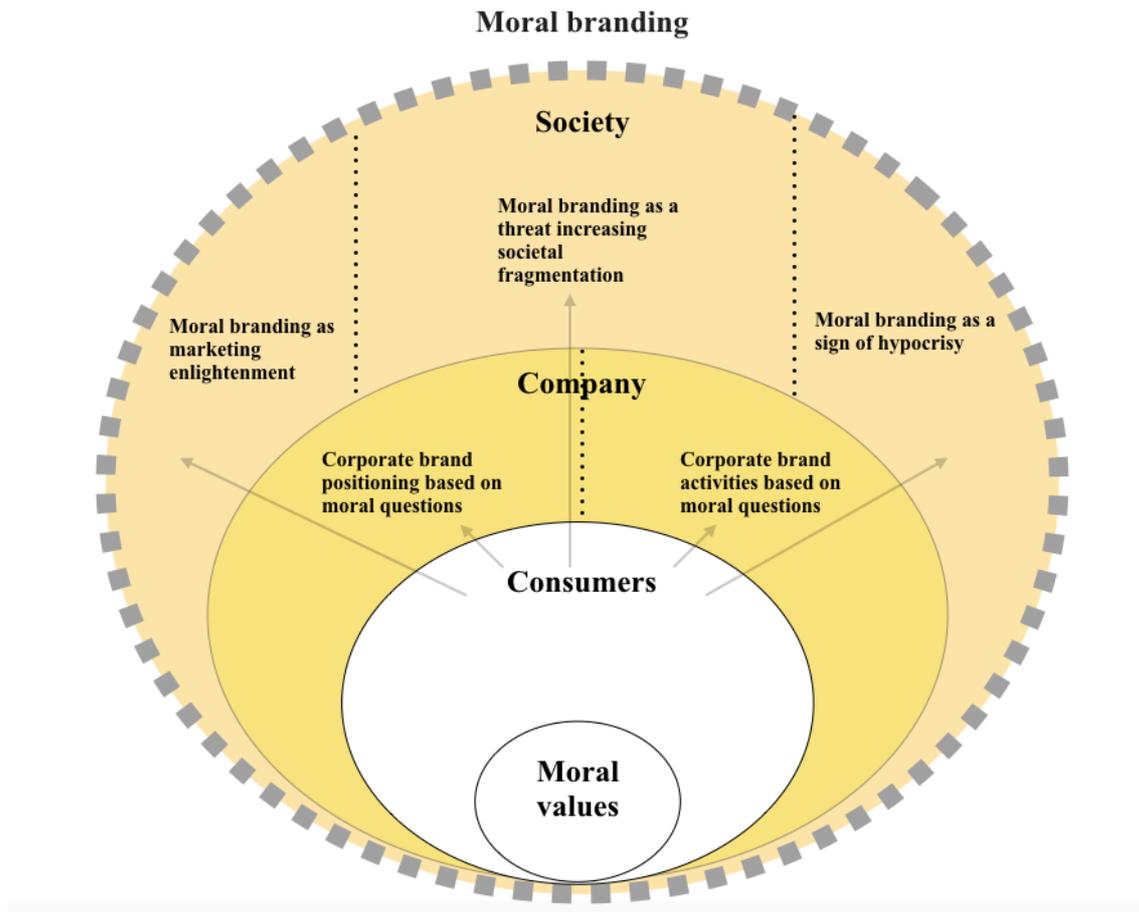


Figure 18. Synthesis of the findings of the study.

#### *Company sphere*

The phenomenographic analysis of the data revealed that the conception of moral branding in a company sphere is twofold. Moral branding can be conceptualized either as brand positioning, which in this context is based on moral questions, or as brand activities based on moral questions.

Corporate brand positioning in the context of moral branding can be grounded on attributes such as being interactive, youthful, sincere, sustainable, and controversial.

These were the attributes the millennials mentioned most often when they described their understanding of the nature of moral corporate brands.

According to millennials, a moral corporate brand results from a spectrum of branding activities. This study identified four of them, which are doing good, information, marketing communications, and philanthropy.

### *Societal sphere*

Chapter 4.2 uncovered conceptions of moral branding in relation to society. This examination was experienced inevitably, since it offers a way to understand the phenomenon as consumers see it as a part of society (in the context of this study the millennial generation). The moral actions of a corporate brand become meaningful when their existence and effects are examined in the societal sphere.

As became clear in the previous chapters, an optimistic attitude toward the research phenomenon of this study emerged in the conception of *moral branding as marketing enlightenment*. Also, the idea of the corporate brands' high significance in society was shared. In this conception, marketing was experienced as going through a positive shift as a result of moral branding. This conception, as well as the two others, raised additional demands, responsibilities, and expectancies for a moral corporate brand. Five aspects leading to an optimistic view of moral branding in relation to society are a) *corporate brand as a value leader*, b) *corporate brand as a tool to identify one's own values*, c) *corporate brand as a taboo breaker*, d) *increased respect towards the corporate brand*, and e) *anthropomorphised corporate brand*.

Some crucial points to which companies should pay attention were found from the conception of moral branding being seen as a *threat increasing societal fragmentation*. As the findings from this perception have not been discussed much before, they offer new insights into this phenomenon. The main factors causing a possible threat for society are a) *increased confrontation*, b) *misuse of freedom of speech*, c) *competition based on subjective values*, and d) *misuse of the power*.

The third conception is *moral branding as a sign of hypocrisy*. The most critical toward moral branding, it does not experience a societal role of corporate brands as necessary.

It addresses a view that corporate brands should rather leave such matters to the traditional actors in society. The aspects forming this conception are *a) pessimistic attitude toward companies and marketing, b) crossing boundaries, and c) the issue itself is not personally relevant.*

The most critical thoughts and experiences combined with optimistic and concerned ones have the ability to build a coherent gestalt of how millennials can conceptualize moral branding. To understand the results of this study, is important to realise that an individual consumer is not locked into seeing the phenomenon of moral branding through only one of the conceptions. It is possible for an individual to have different conceptions of moral branding in different contexts.

As a result of this study, some demands and expectancies for moral corporate brands can be clarified. The demands and expectancies toward moral corporate brands have an effect both on the company and society spheres of moral branding (figure 18). *The demands* that a moral branding sets up for companies and their corporate brands are an increased demand for transparency, pressure for consistent behavior, consistent dialogue with other societal actors, and humanity in business activities. For *expectancies*, a genuine interest in societal issues was experienced as honorable and desirable, as it can affect consumers' lives and behavior by breaking taboos and adding tolerance. Companies were even compared to presidents in their capability to catch the attention of a wide public and bring questions to the forefront of public conversation.

At the same time, companies should be aware of the varying *consequences* of moral branding. Corporate brands' activities in relation to society may be interpreted as pure attention-seeking behavior or hypocrisy, which can easily decrease the brand image and reputation and cause societal problems. This means that the possible negative consequences of moral branding can be experienced in the company sphere as well as in the societal sphere (figure 18). Recent branding crises, as in the case of Pepsi, also show clearly the reputational risks of moral corporate branding, especially when taking public stances (Monllos 2017). Thus, the negative consequences for society are more serious an issue than reputation scandals. The findings of this study address the possibility that in the worst case scenario, moral branding can even increase societal fragmentation.

Nevertheless, positive consequences for moral branding were also found. According to the millennials, it can make corporate brands more honest, transparent, and interactive. On a societal level, moral branding can lead to a more tolerant societal environment and offer tools for sustainable consumption. To summarize, a corporate brand has the possibility of being a moral agent. It has been argued in the philosophic literature that moral agency can appear at different levels simultaneously (Erskine 2010, 266). This statement can be understood to mean that each moral agent (e.g., the government, an individual, or a corporate brand) has its own personality, intentionality, and responsibilities (Fleming 2009, 472). For a corporate brand, these responsibilities are defined through moral branding.

## 5 SUMMARY

### 5.1 Summary of the research

The purpose of this research was to build understanding of moral branding, and to analyse the conceptions of millennials as consumers considering the moral role of brands in society. To achieve this purpose, three research questions were formed.

1. How do corporate brands perceive their role in society?
2. How do millennials conceptualise moral branding?
3. How do millennials conceptualise moral branding in relation to society?

Moral questions are an extremely subjective topic, since they touch the core of human conceptions about what it means to be either good or bad. Thus, it is quite clear that the nature of its study is social constructive. The research paradigm and other philosophical assumptions of this study were introduced in chapter 2. Phenomenography, which aims to discover different conceptions held by individuals on a certain phenomenon, was chosen as its research design. Due to its being a relatively new topic in marketing literature, the researcher chose to follow an abductive research logic, which means that the theoretical framework is based on pre-knowledge and empirical findings. The theoretical framework of this study was constructed through in-depth interviews with three directors in charge of branding and corporate responsibility. Based on these interviews and earlier research from closely related research fields, it became clear that moral branding is a phenomenon of corporate branding, not product branding. This finding helped the researcher to design the final form of the research questions presented above.

The theoretical framework was built to answer the first research question, “*How do corporate brands perceive their role in society?*”. As the introduction of this study revealed, the role of corporate brands is changing. This may not be the case for all corporate brands in the marketplace, but for the ones who hear the winds of change, this situation may be crucial for the future of the corporate brand. The theoretical framework of this study was built on three theories which were found to be essential antecedents to

moral branding. These themes were corporate citizenship, corporate branding, and moral branding (to the extent it has been researched so far).

Moral branding blurs the boundaries between individual consumers, companies, and society and further links them closer to each other by creating, sustaining, and transmitting the moral values between different entities. This is an underlying assumption of this study – that a moral brand is owned by society and all of its actors, rather than an individual actor such as the company or consumers (Hatch & Schultz 2010). A moral corporate brand intermediates moral values of either society or the individual by supporting or defending them. In other words, it exists as a result of interaction between individuals, company, and society.

As stated in the first part of the theoretical framework, corporate citizenship has similarities to CSR. This was also found in the empirical part of this study. Both of the concepts have the same elements established by Carroll (1979), which are presented in the form of a triangle. Starting from the bottom level, the elements are economic, legal, ethical, and discretionary. The research on corporate citizenship has stated that sustainable business practices represent another alternative for companies to prove their “good citizenship” (Svensson et al. 2010, 342). In the context of this study, this statement was studied further to find out if the activities in taking stands on societal issues could also be a way for companies to prove their ‘good citizenship’. So, in this study the focus was on how moral branding affects corporate citizenship.

The second part of the theoretical framework investigates corporate branding. The phenomenon of growing interest among marketing research was studied from two directions, which were found to be the most inevitable in the interests of this study: corporate brand as both a strategic and a socio-cultural asset. This study sees corporate brand in the way conceptualized by Hatch and Schultz (2010), as a belonging of society instead of a possession of a company or consumers. Although the stakeholders of a corporate brand are mainly external (Balmer & Gray 2003, 981), it is formed by the company. Corporate brand is usually a long-lasting entity, and thus its values are also stable. In addition to its stable character, corporate brand has a wide effect throughout

the company, which increases its significance. Corporate brand has often been described as an umbrella: it covers everything from brand identity and image to brand personality, promise, and communication. While a corporate brand guides many actions and decisions, it can be regarded as a highly strategic asset of a company (Biraghi & Gambetti 2015; Kitchen & Schultz 2001). In the context of this research, this assumption is essential. In order to be a credible societal actor, a moral corporate brand need to be systematically moral in all aspects of branding.

After diving into the foundations of moral branding, the phenomenon itself was opened up to the extent it has been studied so far. Moral agency is a philosophical theory stating that different institutions, for example states or corporates, can be seen as moral agents (Fleming 2009, 469). The arguments forming this statement are that the action of institutions is as intentional as the actions of the traditional, unquestionable moral agent, the individual (Erskine 2008, 2). From these foundations, a corporate brand, as an intentional agent, can be regarded as a moral agent in this study.

As a company-level issue, moral branding can be naturally linked to corporate branding, since it is a strategic question. In the best possible scenario, this asset can benefit both the stakeholder network and the company itself, by setting guidelines “to do the right thing” in regard to many responsibilities and actions (Alwi et al. 2017). Moral corporate brands have been featured on the front pages of newspapers during recent years, not as ads but as news topics. Some corporate brands have turned into evangelists committed to their topic, usually a societal issue or problem. Since in the end societal questions are most often moral questions, corporate brands have driven themselves into a situation in which they need to consider their own morality. What kind of a topic a corporate brand chooses to stand for is not an easy decision; rather it is a significant strategic decision. The decision can have long-lasting consequences for the company, moving from the corporate brand’s actions to all business operations.

To extend the understanding of the phenomenon, millennials’ conceptions of moral branding were investigated in focus groups. As was stated earlier, this study slightly represents a multi-actor study, since in-depth interviews of directors in charge of

branding and corporate responsibility were used to help build its theoretical framework. The main empirical part consisted of a focus group study. Altogether, 25 millennials were gathered to discuss their thoughts about the morality of companies' role in society. They also analysed the societal stances some Finnish corporate brands have lately taken. Supporting materials, consisting of Finnish companies' branding activities from the last few years, were used to concretize the manifestations of moral branding for participants.

The answer to the second research question, "*How do millennials conceptualise moral branding?*," was found as a result of phenomenographic analysis. It was revealed that millennials have different conceptions of moral branding in company sphere. According to one conception, the question was related closely to brand positioning, while the other focused on branding activities. Together they help to illustrate the essence of moral branding inside the company and for the formation of (moral) corporate brand. Corporate brand positioning and activities are decisions the company decides for itself, although they become meaningful only in interaction with consumers.

To answer the third research question, "*How do millennials conceptualise moral branding in relation to society?*," three conceptions were formed as a result of phenomenographic analysis. These conceptions shed light on how moral branding is perceived in relation to the surrounding society. In other words, the findings of the second research question ("*How do millennials conceptualise moral corporate branding?*") are reviewed against societal context – since the issues at the core of moral branding are societal, this seemed inevitable in order to understand the responses to the phenomenon. The focus groups revealed that the conceptions of moral branding identified – *as marketing enlightenment, as a threat increasing societal fragmentation, and as a sign of hypocrisy* – differ from each other significantly.

In this study, it became evident that millennials react differently to branding that communicates societal or moral messages. Feelings describing the conceptions discovered would be hopefulness, worry, and cynicism. When the conceptions were compared, two dimensions to describe the similarities and the differences were found. The first was the attitude towards corporate brands implementing moral values. The

other dimension focused on describing the millennials' impression of the overall effect of corporate brands in society. Even though contrasting conceptions appeared, the majority of millennials found that corporate brands have the authority to express their opinions and begin public conversations. Millennials mostly shared the view that corporate brands, especially the well-known ones, have a significant role. They are even seen as institutions – sort of societal actors. Therefore, companies need to understand their position and role in the changing society.

Based on the findings from both the theoretical framework and the focus group, this study suggests that in future companies cannot regard themselves solely as legal citizens whose mission is defined through company law. Moral branding offers a framework to understand a wider societal role of companies and their corporate brands. Moral corporate brands communicate societal and moral questions, since they cannot afford to stay silent. Otherwise they are not relevant for society and in the lives of consumers. Even though a company might want to remain a purely commercial entity, consumers may suddenly want to know its stand on an issue. Therefore, it can be recommended that companies and the responsible actors of the corporate brand think about what the brand regards as right and wrong behavior.

## **5.2 Contributions of the study**

Research can provide contributions in different ways. Usually the domains are divided into theoretical, methodological, and contextual contributions. Contributions can also exist on different levels, beginning from a replication of an old study to a theory that predicts a new phenomenon (Ladik & Stewart, 2008). The contribution of this study for academia can be placed in *step three*, which states that it is an extension of a new theory or method in a new area. A study placed in steps two and three of the continuum has succeeded in increase the understanding of the phenomenon of interest and providing more insight on the topic (Ladik & Stewart 2008, 163). The contribution domains of this study are presented below.

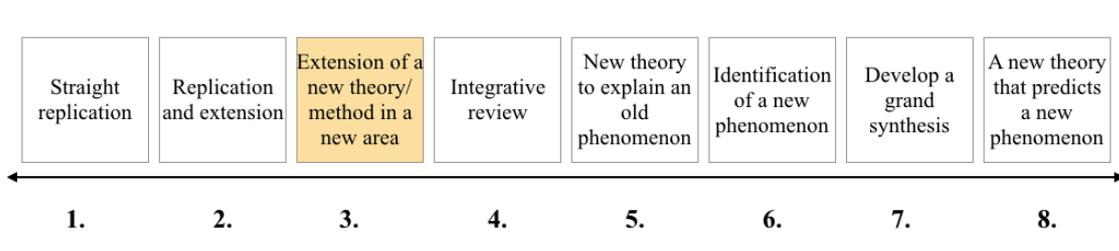


Figure 19. Contribution continuum (adapted from Ladik & Stewart 2008, 163).

The theoretical framework of this study combines the literature of corporate citizenship, corporate branding, and moral branding. Since a question of morality is central to this study, a theory of moral agency is combined with marketing research in the chapter on moral branding. This rather new aggregation can provide interesting possibilities for further research. Another theoretical contribution is the system logic, which is presented in figures to illustrate the synthesis of the theoretical framework and the study's findings. The findings of earlier research and of this study prove that a logic envisioning companies and society as interrelated entities benefits both of them.

The methodology of this study represents an approach seldom used in marketing research. Phenomenography originates from the educational sciences, but it can be beneficial in other areas. The interest of this study was to increase the macro-level understanding of how millennials interpret moral corporate branding on the societal level. Phenomenography fit this goal well, since it is based on investigating different conceptions of a specific phenomenon. Compared to the closely related research approach of phenomenology, which aims to undercover conscious experiences, phenomenography has not been as popular among marketing researchers (Goulding 2005, 301). This study proves that examining different conceptions of a phenomenon can be usefully applied in marketing research, since consumers rarely conceptualize even the exactly same message the same way. The research method used most often in phenomenography is in-depth interviews. In this study, a focus group study was chosen to study millennials. This method proved its suitability for marketing research, since different conceptions of the research topic of this study could be found with this method. The research method of this study was abductive. Part of the abduction was the in-depth interviews, which were performed to help the researcher form the theoretical

framework. This decision ensured that the first research question – “*How do corporate brands perceive their role in society?*” – was answered.

The phenomenon of moral branding has not been studied in Finland. While the topic is societally and culturally bound, the study focused on Finnish corporate brands. Ladik and Stewart (2008, 157) have stated that contribution is created in a situation in which the study adds, embellishes, or creates a view that is not known earlier. Since individuals carry their cultural heritage with them, it is easier to evaluate marketing activities targeted to one’s own culture. Therefore, contextual contribution is made as a result of this study, since it is one of the first studies in Finland of moral branding. The societal approach is also a rather new one in the research field of corporate branding. To summarize, this study expands the knowledge of the role played by corporate brands in society today, and it provides insights into how it could change in the near future.

### **5.3 Managerial implications**

Both the theoretical framework and findings of this study offer the business sector insightful information and point out some crucial questions that corporate brands should consider regarding moral branding. In this subchapter, the most significant managerial implications from the theoretical framework and findings are presented in more detail (table 6).

Table 6. Illustration of some of the managerial implications and their effects.

Possible managerial implications of moral branding	External effect	Internal effect
<b>Changing societal role of corporate brands</b>	X	X
<b>Understanding millennials</b>	X	
<b>New role of values in corporate branding</b>	X	
<b>Gaining attention and benefitting society</b>	X	
<b>Brand revitalization</b>	X	X

#### *Changing societal role of corporate brands*

The main finding of this study is the changing role of corporate brands. This is a phenomenon that companies should recognize and carefully consider whether it influences their business. Since corporate brand can be regarded as a matter for the entire company and its directors, including the CEO, moral branding is not only the responsibility of the marketing department (Balmer & Gray 2003; Gyrd-Jones et al. 2013). Thus, it can be suggested that moral branding is an executive-level matter, because it should be at the core of a company's strategy. Moral values should be the baseline for other brand values. In the era of a consumption society, brands have a significant role in consumers' lives, on both individual and societal levels. One finding of this study suggests that corporate brands have the potential to be value leaders on the societal level, either unifying or separating individuals. This increases the responsibility of corporate brands significantly.

A conception emerged in the focus groups that a strong cultural status of a corporate brand can be seen as an antecedent for moral branding. The millennials found that it is

somehow more legitimate for iconic corporate brands to engage in moral branding. A conception was shared that if a corporate brand is regarded as a cultural symbol anyway, its active role in society feels more natural.

### *Cultural effect of moral branding*

Local culture and its current trends have a significant influence on moral branding, since culturally formed societal and moral values are in the core of moral branding. A majority of earlier research has been done in the United States, where society and the current political situation differ greatly from Finland. The election of Trump as President can be seen as a global turning point in corporate brands' activity to take a political stance (Global Strategy Group 2014). Nevertheless, even though the phenomenon originates from the United States, it has spread globally. No matter the country, corporate brands' stances should be relevant and personally meaningful in order to matter for the public. The results of this study provide insight for companies into the minds of Finnish millennials, since its findings report on moral branding in the context of Finnish society. This result may be a challenge for globally managed brands, since the same values, messages, and actions may not work in all markets.

### *Understanding millennials*

This study was limited to one generation, millennials. Therefore, its results offer corporate brands a chance to increase their understanding of this young generation. It is essential for companies to know and understand the values of a new generation, because as consumers, they also represent the future of the company's existence. If a corporate brand wants to matter at a societal level and to be conceptualized as being moral, it has to be present in the everyday life of consumers outside of consumption situations as well.

This study proved that millennials are critical consumers. They know that almost full transparency of a company's actions is possible due to digitalization. Since this generation has grown up in a consumption society and are used to reading news of

company misbehavior, transparency is the way to create trust among them. Corporate brands should understand that words are just words for millennials, it is actualization that matters.

Millennials are more or less suspicious towards business and corporate brands, but signals similar to ones in earlier research were also found in this study: i.e., millennials demand a deeper meaning. They have new demands for companies and their corporate brands that go beyond exceptional consumption experiences and new ways to create value. Corporate brands should also recognize the tendency of consumers to link the stances of corporate brands to sustainability and CSR. This finding is something that obliges companies to rethink the relationship of sustainability and marketing. In the case of a moral corporate brand, its societally active role could possibly be stated in the CSR actions.

The millennials in the study mentioned several societal issues they find important and meaningful for both the present and future societal climate in Finland. It became clear that they are slightly worried about the future. They related that they are experiencing signals of change in various fields. Societal fragmentation/polarization and the rise of extremist movements were the issues that concerned them the most. The questions about equality and changes in working life were also seen significant. The millennials felt that the mega-trend of globalization and changes originating from it need to be taken into account by corporate brands. They felt that corporate brands have the ability and power to break taboos and normalize former exceptions. Showing diversity and supporting a permissive atmosphere were even mentioned as duties for well-known and iconic corporate brands.

#### *New role of values in corporate branding*

What inevitably became clear in the context of this research was that culturally iconic brands in particular should consider the phenomenon of moral branding as a strategically important one, and thus investigate the expectations of their core customer groups about morality in the corporate brand. However, as one of the findings revealed,

a strong focus on moral and/or societal values in branding can be interpreted as a threat. A thought arose from the group of millennials that communicating values, which are highly personal and subjective, can cause negative consequences on a societal level. Therefore, companies should consider the effect of their actions in this domain carefully.

#### *Gaining attention and benefitting society*

As the findings of this study prove, the phenomenon of moral branding raises up opinions and emotions, from positive to negative and from optimistic to cynical. Thus, it can be stated that moral corporate branding is a phenomenon that attracts attention and generates conversation. In our era of information overload, this is something companies could benefit from. A win-win situation could be created in which both the societal issue and the corporate brand gain attention. To accomplish this rare feat, the corporate brand has to be open to dialogue with consumers and other stakeholders. A corporate brand's commitment on a societal issue is a quite new phenomenon, so it is no wonder that the consumer might be surprised or confused by it.

#### *Brand revitalization*

In brand revitalization, the path of moral corporate branding can work efficiently. This study establishes 1) that the generation of millennials find it modern and interesting and 2) compared to traditional advertisements, more attention is often gained through public discussion and earned media. If a company wants to enhance its activeness as a corporate citizen and discovers a meaningful societal phenomenon, the path of moral branding might also work as brand revitalization.

To summarize, strategic advances can only be achieved, if "moral behavior" is a fundamental purpose of the company and its corporate brand. It can be argued that if a corporate brand is not committed to certain values leading its actions, it should stay silent instead of affecting public opinions by actively taking social stances or using moral issues as themes in its marketing communications. If a corporate brand wants to

act as a moral corporate brand, its behavior and actions need to be consistent and honest. Otherwise, consumers do not accept the corporate brand as standing for issues other than sales promotion.

#### **5.4 Further research possibilities**

As stated in this study and in earlier research on moral branding, little is known about this rapidly growing phenomenon. Hence, this area is a potentially fruitful one for further research. Although the focus here was on the millennial generation, they obviously are not the only generation whose opinions matter. Therefore, the study of other generations and their conceptions in this context would be worthwhile. Interesting findings would surely be found as a result of a comparative study between different generations. Due to its limitations, this study focuses on one generation, which seemed the most fruitful on the basis of earlier studies of millennials' values (Young et al. 2012).

The millennial generation (and rising generations as well) have been reported to put a high emphasis on the purpose of corporate brands, and they value the brands that take social stands. In order to understand their values, attitudes, and consumer behavior it would be fruitful to dive deeper and research their motivations to demand these actions. Both this study and earlier research on the topic indicate that societal change and megatrends – together with the highly involved role of the brands – have evoked a fusion of citizen/consumer identities. Consumers see themselves as “consumer citizens,” since the boundaries between companies and society have blurred.

It would also be insightful to research the phenomenon as a company-focused case study. This study aims to increase the knowledge of moral corporate branding on the macro level. For example, a micro-level study would provide information about how a company's reputation might change as a result of moral corporate branding. A research combining moral branding and corporate reputation would be highly beneficial for academics as well as practitioners in branding and marketing, since corporate reputation is often listed as one of the most valuable assets of a company. Several real-life examples from the last few years have already proven the riskiness of the phenomenon.

Therefore, it would be useful to analyse unsuccessful acts (e.g., advertisements) that corporate brands have performed. Also important, both for both academia and a wider audience, would be to study the real motives behind corporate brands acting morally, for example, taking stands. This area was also found to be interesting to the millennials in this study. The focus group participants often brought up that they would really want to know whether a corporate brand truly has an opinion or is concerned with a topic they have taken a stand on.

The relationship between sustainability and corporate brands' active role in society is little understood. Since increased research on both of the topics signals their growing importance, further related studies should be on the agenda of academia. This study has already revealed that consumers are confused about the differences between CSR, corporate citizenship, and branding. The participants of this study had also different understandings of CSR and corporate citizenship. For them, many marketing actions were acts of sustainability and, for some, CSR is strictly focused on a production perspective. Hence, for future study it would be beneficial to examine the relationship of CSR and marketing. This study suggests that moral corporate branding could possibly bring these two areas together. The academy confesses the need for a wider perspective in marketing research. Webster and Lusch argued in their paper (2013) that marketing and its research should aim to manage consumers' welfare on a scale far beyond customer satisfaction, and be able to help consumers keep up or increase their standard of living. These guidelines set by academics can help companies exploit the potential of their business and marketing endeavors for the benefit of all.

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## **APPENDICES**

### **APPENDIX 1 INTERVIEW QUESTIONS (IN-DEPTH INTERVIEWS)**

1. Could you tell about the brand values of your company?
2. How have they been formed?
3. How do the values lead the corporate brands' actions?
4. How would you describe the role of your corporate brand in Finnish society?
5. How would you like to see the role of companies in society?
6. What is the role of marketing in your company?
7. What does moral mean to you personally? Do you see brand as a moral actor?
8. You have taken stand to issue X. Could you tell how did you end up focusing on this issue and why?
9. Would you regard this as moral action?
10. How about the societal meaning of this action? Do you see your action has had societal impact?
11. Which risks do you think are connected to taking stands? Did you think about the risks when taking stand?
12. Do you feel your company is responsible for the societal climate?
13. Which brands do you personally admire and why?
14. If you could decide a metaphor for your corporate brand, what would it be?

**APPENDIX 2 INTERVIEW QUESTIONS (FOCUS GROUPS)**

1. Which values in life are important for you?
2. How would you define the term "moral"?
3. What kind of societal issues catch your attention? Which of these matter for you on a personal level?
4. Where have you heard about these issues? What kind of actors get your attention?
5. What kind of thoughts and feeling does this comment by Björn Wahlroos raise in your minds?  
*"A capitalistic company cannot have certain assumptions and behavioral rules, which concern good and bad, right and wrong, valuable and not, accepting and rejecting. A company is a movement of one subject. Its mission is to create as much wealth to its owners as possible."*
6. What does corporate sustainability mean for you?
7. What business sector has the greatest effect on the society and why?
8. Have you seen these advertisements? What do they talk about? How do you find them?
9. Is a corporate brand allowed to take stands or does it cross its limits? What is your opinion about marketing which takes societal stands?