

Louvain School of Management

Brand Hijack: How do Belgian consumers perceive Fred Perry's association with extreme groups?

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INTRODUCTION

In marketing, we all learn how to determine our target group, even though in reality you cannot always choose your target. Actually, a lot of brands face the issue of being adopted by other targets. As we will see, some brands may want to distance themselves from certain groups of consumers. This is the case for Fred Perry, which has a rich story with musical subcultures, however, they also face unwanted brand appropriation by extreme groups.

To analyse this case we first introduce the research question: *How is the perception of Belgian Fred Perry consumers influenced by the unwanted brand hijacking of the brand?* As mentioned, extreme groups are appropriating the brand. As this is mostly the case abroad, we will study how Belgian customers of Fred Perry react and are influenced by this.

The structure of this thesis is as follows: to start with, important marketing terms that will be used through the thesis will be defined, such as brand image, public relations and brand hijacking. After this, an introduction to Fred Perry will be given, as this is important to understand the origins of the misappropriations. We will explain who this tennis player was, and then the path from the mods to the political skinheads. Later, we will talk about the incidents where Fred Perry has been mentioned and the reactions it invoked. Two main incidents will be discussed (1) the death of Clément Méric in Paris, and (2) the use of the brand by the extremist right, pro-Trump, hate group, the Proud Boys, that led to the removal of their polo shirts from the shelves in North America. A closer look will help to identify the hijackers. Towards the end of this part, we analyse previous brand hijacking cases and the possible steps to undertake suggested by the literature. The last part of the theory will be about extremism in Belgium.

In a second part, qualitative studies have been carried out to figure out how Belgian consumers perceive the unwanted brand hijacking and the influence it has had or will have. The interview was divided into four parts and each part of the interview will be discussed with quotes from the respondents. The responses have been analysed through Microsoft Excel and ATLAS.ti.

To end this thesis, the limitations will be brought up and a conclusion will be made. As in every project, some difficulties have been encountered, linked to the fact that the research

question is very precise, there are not a lot of research articles that deal with this subject. In addition, in the qualitative study that has been carried out, some complexities have been stumbled upon.

Let's figure out whether or not Belgian consumers are aware of these brand hijackings and if they are influencing them negatively in their purchasing decisions with regards to the Fred Perry brand.

PART 1: MARKETING CONCEPTS

As marketing has a specific professional jargon, it is important to define the concepts that will be used throughout this work. From the moment they are created, companies try to build high brand equity to be remembered positively by consumers. Brand equity can be defined as the value of the company taking into account the effect that marketing has on the perception of consumers to associate a brand with unique attributes, compared to competitors (Keller, 2013, p.57; Kotler & Armstrong, 2013). Figures for the year 2014 show that we were exposed to 5000 brand communications a day, which makes it a challenge for brands to stand out (Johnson, 2014).

Further, we have to distinguish between brand image and brand identity. **Brand image** of a brand, as defined by Kotler, Keller and Manceau (2015, p.338) is “the set of consumers' perceptions and beliefs about the brand, as they appear in mental associations stored in memory” (original: “l'ensemble des perceptions et des croyances des consommateurs à propos de la marque, telles qu'elles apparaissent dans les associations mentales stockées en mémoire”). This means brand image depends on the consumer's perception, it is external to the company, it is where the brand should stand out. Whereas **brand identity** is how the company wants to be perceived by the consumers, it tries to create a brand image that is the same as its brand identity (Aaker, 1996). As you can imagine, the brand image is rarely the same as the brand identity, due to misunderstanding or other reasons. Several gaps exist between those two concepts.

When talking about business in general, one of the first notions that has to be defined is **targeting**. Companies will decide which part (segment) of the consumers they will serve, the chosen segment will be their target (Kotler et al., 2015; Kotler & Armstrong, 2013). By defining a target, the company will be in a better position to understand and respond to the homogenous wants and needs of this more restricted group.

A further step is to decide how you want to be positioned on the market, by doing so you establish a brand image in the mind of your target. **Positioning** should help to make good decisions for the marketing mix, better known as the 4Ps. To do so, the enterprise has to choose some differential axes for the consumers and compare them to the competitors, to find a unique selling proposition (USP) for which they can have value in the market (Jupsin, 2015). Of course, sometimes the firm can see that the positioning that has been chosen is not relevant anymore and at a certain point must decide to find a new

differential axis, then it repositions itself. As mentioned before, positioning is linked to the marketing mix, so by repositioning a brand, the Product, Price, Promotion (marketing communication) and Place (4Ps) will also be impacted.

Public Relations

The communication that a company sets up is of major importance for the brand image. In a marketing communication mix, we find promotions, ads, personal sales, direct marketing and public relations (Kotler & Armstrong, 2013). Public relations is the one that attracts our attention here. So first of all, what is public relations (PR)? It means having a good relationship with all the stakeholders, this results in having a positive brand image, but also avoiding having negative rumours or stories. The difference with most communication tools is that PR doesn't have to be paid, a firm can easily communicate with its target market without spending money (Kotler & Armstrong, 2013).

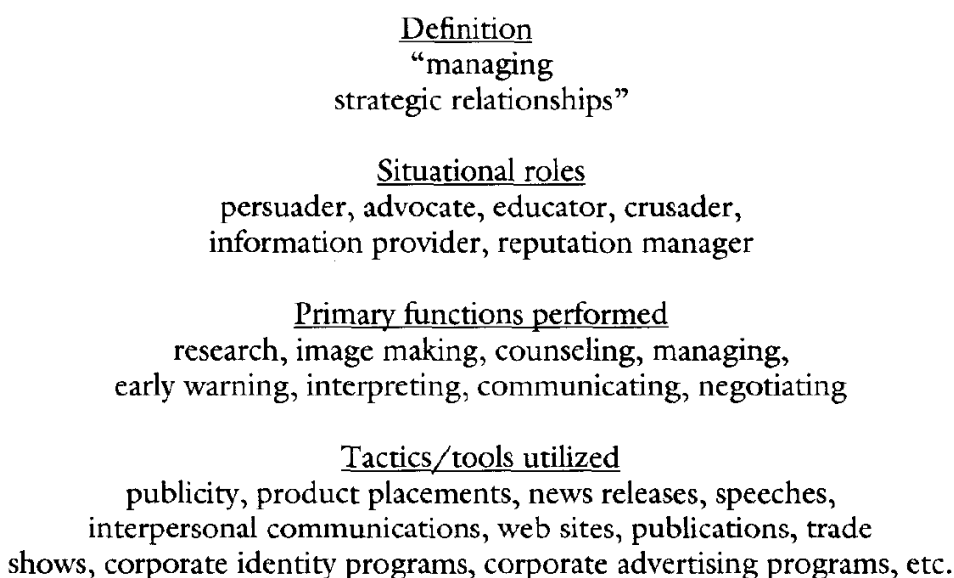
Back in 1999, the importance of PR was noticed by Hutton, he made a definition in the form of a framework that is represented in figure 1, and although it is now 2021, it is still appropriate. PR takes different situational roles, has several primary functions to perform, and has a range of tactics at its disposition. Indeed in marketing books, we find the same tools as in this representation, although more stress could have been put on relations with the press (Kotler et al., 2015). Nevertheless, in general, businesses are more trusted than media, NGOs, or governments (Edelman, 2021, p.6).

PR is underrepresented in a lot of companies according to Kotler and Armstrong (2013), although it can be very effective when used correctly and in combination with other tools. PR communications are not perceived as promotions or ads by consumers but more as news, which is credible (Ries & Ries, 2004), and the credibility of company information is the highest when government officials give it (Edelman, 2021, p.22). Every year, the Edelman Trust Barometer observes the trust and credibility that stakeholders accord to news information.

Even though there are a lot of positive aspects, PR is also criticized, this is developed in Coombs and Holladay's book. Indeed they bring to light several articles where PR is portrayed as negative because of the inaccurate way in which information is presented (2013).

As said before, when negative information or rumours are spread, PR can be used to defend the product in those times of crisis to reassure the public. This goes with prior established plans, defined objectives, chosen messages and supports, which are then put in place, and the procedure is evaluated afterwards (Kotler et al., 2015). When incorrectly implemented, PR communication can lead to a scandal, as experienced by BP with the oil spill, Nestlé with its KitKat bar, or the hacking of a Sony Pictures movie. What should be remembered from those scandals is that (1) the sooner you act, the better, (2) take responsibility, (3) don't delete opinions, (4) when apologizing you must be sincere, and (5) accept the event (Patel, 2017). It is important to give complete, timely and accurate information to the media professionals to share the crisis as the company intends to (Austin & Jin, 2015).

Figure 1 Definition framework of Public Relations (Hutton, 1999, p.211)



Note. Definition and framework suggest a hierarchy of PR roles, functions and tactics.

In reality, when a disaster takes place, people can lose the trust they have in a company or brand (Regester & Larkin, 2008). Mattila was wondering how trust could be repaired after a scandal in diverse types of crisis. His experimental study indicates that denials are ineffective, publicly apologizing could somehow soften the negative impact, and when the disaster has some intentional harm attributing a causal explanation is important (Mattila, 2009).

Another study focused on communication on Twitter after a crisis. It was found that using Twitter has a positive impact on the brand image when sympathy was present in the

message, meaning a lower level of responsibility for the crisis was attributed to the company (Xu & Wu, 2016).

Brand hijacking

The last concept that will be used often is hijacking. To better understand this phenomenon, we can refer to Siano, Confetto, Vollero, and Covucci (2020), who have analysed the different aspects of brand hijacking. By doing so, they found a general definition of brand hijacking:

Brand hijacking is an unauthorized use and/or a transformation of the brand that manifests itself in forms of non-collaborative brand co-creation. It can be induced by different motivations and intentions that lead to different possible actions: challenging, attacking, exploiting or reinterpreting the brand. (Siano et al., 2020, p.9)

Whereas Wipperfurth (2005), in its definition of brand hijacking, doesn't state it is necessarily a non-collaborative act, for him a brand hijack can come out of a marketing campaign. However the definition by Siano et al. (2020) looks more like the serendipitous hijack definition of Wipperfurth, it shows the same characteristics, but he stresses more the control that consumers take of the brand's ideology, persona and statement. Attention should be paid to this comparison, considering that the serendipitous hijack underlines more the negative aspects of brand hijacking, while Siano et al. look at the general brand hijacking definition (2020). Also, the purpose of their paper is to find a thorough definition based on the knowledge of professionals, they indeed state as keywords that brand hijacking comes out of "unauthorized use (66.7%)" and "appropriation (61.5%)" (Siano et al., 2020, p.6). More specifically, a brand hijack can be a hatejack, this is the case only when a brand is hijacked by a group of people that is a hate group or an extremist group (Benton & Peterka-Benton, 2020).

Nevertheless, the definitions allow the possibility of having some positive outcomes from brand hijacks, like finding new segments or reinterpreting the brand appointed by the hijackers (Siano et al., 2020). This is something that Wipperfurth stresses in his book but which would not otherwise immediately come to mind when thinking of brand hijacking (2005).

Another aspect that is cleared up by Wipperfurth (2005) is that we should look at 'tribes' rather than individuals, more precisely brand tribes, as they influence the behaviours of individuals. Brands can in those situations have more value in the process of defining their group identity for instance, so they can differentiate from others by signs or symbols. This requires a more anthropological approach to better understand the consumer.

In the same way, Marantz, who investigated hijackers such as online extremists, technoutopians, etc., finds that the instigators don't have a coherent view of society and don't seem to be interested in it (cited in Mohamed, 2020). Further in Mohamed's article, we can read that hate groups try to humanize and normalize their extreme ideas by hijacking brands, whether it is fashion, food, sports teams, and so on (2020). These days younger generations feel attracted to the extremes as they are open to them and these extremes present themselves with a more mainstream aesthetics compared to the past (Miller-Idriss, 2019).

Going back to hatejack, according to Benton and Peterka-Benton (2020), this happened surreptitiously and the fortuitous hatejack was not publicly known until recently. Now the extremist groups are often mediatized and so the linkage to the brand is more noticed. Note that PR is important in this case.

In the book *Brandjack*, Langley invokes the importance of the Internet, by this means videos or articles can attain a substantial audience in a relatively short period (2016). This is not just true for Facebook and Twitter, but also news websites such as ABC and NBC that publish new articles several times a day, which represents a colossal amount of information. In addition, globalization, merging technologies, lack of regulation (think of fake news), disintermediation, interactivity and so on, are features of the digital age that make brand hijacking more favourable (Langley, 2016).

PART 2: HIJACKING OF THE FRED PERRY BRAND

Chapter 2.1. Background

History

Most of you will know Fred Perry as a high-quality brand that sells polo shirts, but Fred Perry is more than just that. It is a brand with an interesting and long history which starts with Mr Fred Perry (1909-1995) a British tennis champion, see figure 2 (Jefferys, 2021).

So first of all, let us better understand this Mr Frederick John Perry (to be correct). As a teenager he was impressed by the cars that tennis players owned, this inspired him to become a tennis player as well (Lorenzo, 2013). Unfortunately at that moment, it was an elitist sport for public school-educated middle-class youth, and Fred wasn't part of this sector of society. His father was a cotton spinner and a socialist. None of these aspects demotivated Mr Perry and he became a talented tennis player, winning Wimbledon 3 consecutive times and multiple slam titles (Jefferys, 2021). Furthermore, he got married 4 times and met important people like the Queen of England and President John Kennedy. As well as tennis, he also played table tennis (Lorenzo, 2013).

Figure 2 Fred Perry (4 News, 2012)



Note. Fred Perry won different tournaments between 1933 and 1941.

After a successful career, he decided to retire in the '50s and to launch a brand in 1952. To do so he worked together with Tibby Wegner, who was a Jewish Austrian footballer. Together they created the sweatband and the knitted cotton pique polo shirt, which were a direct success (Golla, 2020; Lorenzo, 2013).

So we come to the famous Fred Perry brand with its recognisable laurel wreath, which symbolises the antique victories and Perry's Wimbledon triumphs (Lorenzo, 2013). In the beginning, the polo shirt was only available in white as it was the colour of tennis clothes (Thomazeau, 2009).

Subcultures taking the lead

Since its beginning, Fred Perry has been adopted by some subcultures like the British mods in 1960 (Lescop, 2013). The mods, whose name comes from the word 'modernist', are characterized by their music style, which is usually jazz and soul, and the way they look, a specific haircut, cigarette pants, Doc Martens shoes, and the Fred Perry polo shirt (Cassely, 2013; Golla, 2020; Lescop, 2013; Lochanski, 2013).

Afterwards, the skinheads appeared, in the beginning, they would look like mods. It was an underground movement, you couldn't read about it. They were proud to come from the working class and they also had a uniform which was composed of a mix of British middle class clothes, with braces, loafers, etc., and the pork pie hat and hitched up trousers of the right length, which came from Jamaica (The British subcultures, 2012). They listened to Jamaican music like ska and reggae (Lochanski, 2013). All of this brought black and white people together, they were not racist, they were cool, skinheads were about style at that moment. They would polish their shoes, have pressed trousers, etc. (The British subcultures, 2012).

Later, in the '70s, the haircut and uniform changed a bit more, they became more violent and this made them be mediatized, at that moment the skinhead became 'horrible' according to a real skinhead from the '60s, see figure 3 (The British subcultures, 2012).

At the same time in the 1970s, Fred Perry launched more colours for its polo shirts, this attracted a new group, the hooligans. They embraced the polos with the colours of their football team, which became their new uniform. This group was then called the hard mods (Lorenzo, 2013).

From the '80s onwards, we see that the skinhead movement became associated with political statements, first in Britain and then in the rest of Europe (Vecchione, 2008). Some became extreme right, some extreme left and some stayed non-political (Lescop, 2013). This is illustrated in the movie *This is England* (Meadows, 2006). To distinguish one

another they had micro signs, such as shoelaces or different coloured stripes on their Fred Perry polo shirts (Lescop, 2013).

Figure 3 Skinheads (Buckmaster, 2017)



Note. Skinheads are recognisable by their boots, skinny trousers, braces, polo shirts and bomber jackets.

In an interesting documentary named *ANTIFA "Chasseurs de Skins"* (Vecchione, 2008), we can see the history of skinheads in Paris and the Antifa until 1989. The micro signs are well explained and present, for instance, redskins, the libertarian extreme left (Cassely, 2013), would wear a beige with burgundy polo shirt, and the fascist skinhead would opt for black and navy blue (Lochanski, 2013). In the late 80s, *Ruddy Fox* was created, with a logo that had a Fred Perry laurel wreath on it, the group tracked skinheads at the Parc des Princes football stadiums (Vecchione, 2008).

A question that could remain is why do extreme-right supporters think that the Fred Perry polo shirt is something they can relate to, given that Fred Perry had a socialist father who was part of the working class? One article argues that by adopting the polo shirt the youth had a feeling that they were rising above their conditions (Thomazeau, 2009), that everything is possible, even a working-class guy can become a 3 times Wimbledon winner.

Marketing mix

Like every brand, Fred Perry wants to have control over its consumers and where the brand is heading to. To make sure the consumers remember what Fred Perry stands for, it regularly has specific marketing campaigns related to its values and in line with the brand identity and positioning.

In part 1, it was mentioned that a brand first needs to define its target market and positioning. So let's first have a look at these two components. In terms of the target market, in the past, Fred Perry was targeting tennis players, but as time went by, the brand went to the high street, aiming at upper-middle-class men and women attracted by a clean and high-quality aesthetic (MBA Skool Team, 2020). As for positioning, the brand positions itself on specific values, (independent) music, tennis, and premium (Fred Perry, n.d.-a). As seen before the positioning impacts the marketing mix, which will be explored in more detail hereafter.

a) Communication

According to the company website, the Fred Perry brand's specific values are integrity, personality and individuality, and different actions are undertaken to support these values. For instance, the company donates money to an organization that wants to make society more inclusive (Fred Perry, n.d.-a). In more recent years, the brand has worked with designers to create real fashion clothes, it has collaborated with Raf Simons, and Rei Kawakubo. These partnerships show personality and individuality (Lorenzo, 2013; Thomazeau, 2009).

Fred Perry has also sponsored concerts such as ska and reggae concerts (Lorenzo, 2013). When British pop was breaking out internationally, Fred Perry made contracts with some groups like Blur, Oasis, Arctic Monkeys, etc. in 1990 (Lochanski, 2013; Lorenzo, 2013). Those partnerships reflect the company's positioning, and aim to convey the brand image that Fred Perry wishes to have.

In order to remain associated with music, Fred Perry has launched a project to explore music. This is the 'Fred Perry Subculture' and is based on different, mostly alternative English music scenes, by doing so the brand pays tribute to the rich underground culture (NSS staff, 2017). For a couple of years now, Fred Perry has also sponsored the Belgium Festival "Les Ardentes" (Les Ardentes, n.d.) to keep its positioning lively and consistent.

A new partnership was launched with Amy Winehouse, in 2011 (Cassely, 2013), to make a new Fred Perry collection and also to keep a positive brand image (Lochanski, 2013; Lorenzo, 2013). Fred Perry also supports the Amy Winehouse Foundation that helps prevent the misuse of alcohol and drugs by young people (Fred Perry, n.d.-a). This action of funding a purpose that is counter to hate groups, has been put forward as a first step in the right direction when hijacked by Miller-Idriss, who is a professor of sociology (2019).

Fred Perry continues to sponsor tennis players (Lochanski, 2013) but also kids from the working class (Chapman, 2011). The goal is to involve more kids in sports, as reported by Richard Martin, the brands marketing director, in 2011. At that time, the company organized many activities to encourage kids to move. For all of this, Fred Perry was investing a six-figure sum, according to an article in Campaign (Chapman, 2011).

Further, for their marketing communication, they also have a newsletter (3 emails a week), online advertising and social media accounts (Twitter, Facebook, Instagram, Spotify and YouTube). They do not mention the use of public relations, but we can assume they make use of it.

b) Products

Regarding the high-quality products that Fred Perry sells, it has everything from clothing to accessories, for men, women and also kids. The polo shirts have a flagship role in their range and are therefore put forward in their communication. The polo shirts are connected to the roots of the brand, tennis. Also, the logo, the laurel wreath, is a symbol of prospering for success and excellence (Fred Perry, n.d.-a).

c) Distribution

To purchase Fred Perry in Belgium, you can either go to their only physical store in Belgium which is situated in Antwerp, or on their website, or to a multi-brand shop where the brand is distributed. Abroad Fred Perry has more than 200 shops spread over different continents (Fred Perry, n.d.-c).

d) Price

Looking at the price of Fred Perry, it is positioned in a relatively high price range, with the standard (twin tipped) polo shirt price spanning from €90 to €130, and a bomber jacket

can reach €400. When looking for a collaboration item between Fred Perry and artists or designers the price is obviously higher (Fred Perry, n.d.-b). This reflects its positioning as premium.

Chapter 2.2. Two incidents where Fred Perry is named

What happened in Paris?

This incident goes back to 2013, but as seen in the previous chapter, Fred Perry clothing has been worn by groups with conflicting ideologies since the '60s. On a Wednesday in June, while doing some shopping in a private sale of different sportswear, such as Fred Perry, Ben Sherman, Barbour, etc., some young skinheads and Antifa crossed each other's paths. As you already know, Fred Perry is a brand that is worn by the extreme right and the extreme left, and both are violent groups, as a result when their paths cross it can lead to a confrontation. According to the *ANTIFA "Chasseurs de Skins"* documentary, Antifa started wearing the skinheads' uniform in 1989 to provoke the skinheads and show them that they had lost ground (Vecchione, 2008).

This Wednesday in 2013 was no different, they began a fight and at a certain point Clément Méric, aged 18, and part of an extreme left movement, was beaten to death by a prohibited weapon (Lochanski, 2013; Lorenzo, 2013). This prohibited weapon was brass knuckles, according to some, but this has not been confirmed in court (AFP, 2021).

Those responsible for the death were members of the Jeune Nationaliste Révolutionnaire (JNR), their leader was Serge Ayoub. They counter-reacted by saying that it was the Antifas that provoked the fight. Jeune Nationaliste Révolutionnaire was reactivated in 2010, it was composed of neo-Nazi skinheads, they were opposed to capitalism and communism, which is why they said they were part of the 'Troisième voie', the third path (le HuffPost, 2016).

Clément Méric was a brilliant young student who believed political change was possible. He believed in libertarian communism. Even before arriving in Paris, he was already engaged in politics, he was part of the redskins (Girard, 2013).

Reactions

Most of the reactions towards this incident came from the media or tributes. Those tributes were seen in a lot of different countries, such as France, Germany, Poland, Scotland and Belgium (Girard, 2013). Some young Belgians from the *Fédération Générale du Travail de Belgique* (FGTB) demonstrated some days after the death of Clément Méric to show condolence at the ULB in Brussels (Kadhem, 2013).

Fred Perry in itself did not react, but probably used PR to avoid being named in the debate.

What did the Proud boys do?

The Proud Boys is a group that was created in America by the former founder of Vice Media, Gavin McInnes, in 2016 (Cinone, 2020; Swenson, 2017). It is a far-right white supremacy group, the members must declare themselves to be Western chauvinists. In 2017, McInnes stated that the Proud Boys are a multi-racial group, “The only prerequisite is that you’re a dude—*born* a dude—and you accept the West is the Best”, he also noted that there are Jews, Muslims and homosexuals in the ‘mix’ (Coutts, 2017).

The Proud Boys incite violence during different protests around North America (Cinone, 2020), which is not surprising as the ex-Proud Boy Russell Schultz explains that most men join “just to fight” (Reeve, 2020), and in 2017 McInnes wrote on the *Proud Boy Magazine* site that they “don’t start fights but will finish them” (Coutts, 2017). The initial Facebook page of the Proud Boys stated the ideals of the group, in the meantime, the page has been taken down by Facebook, because of its identification as a hate group (Mosk & Osborne, 2020). The Proud Boys ideals, as noted on their initial Facebook page, are “minimal government, maximum freedom, anti-political correctness, anti-racial guilt, pro-gun rights, anti-Drug War, closed borders, anti-masturbation, venerating entrepreneurs, venerating housewives” (Spellings, 2017).

To become a member of the Proud Boys, there is a process. The first step is to announce you are a Proud Boy, make it public. The second step consists of being beaten by five other Proud Boys while naming five breakfast cereal brands, and giving up masturbation. The third degree is getting a “Proud Boy” tattoo. And the last level is to engage in a fight for the cause. As McInnes explains, “[you] get beat up, kick the crap out of an Antifa” (Swenson, 2017).

As mentioned before, the Proud Boys are identified as a hate group by Facebook, and the Southern Poverty Law Center (SPLC) has also listed them as a hate group. The SPLC is a non-profit organisation that fights hate, promotes learning and seeks justice (SPLC, n.d.). It is important to mention that a group is considered a hate group if some criminal acts have been carried out with the motive of hate (ADL, n.d.).

In addition, the FBI has also classified the organisation as an extremist group (Elan, 2020). This term, extremist, is more difficult to understand as literature uses a multitude of definitions, as seen in Mudde's work (1996). Arzheimer and Carter define it as a "combination of racism, xenophobia, nationalism, and a desire for a strong state and law and order" (2006). One day after the FBI named the group extremist, McInnes left the group, this was back in November 2018 (Fonrouge, 2018).

Figure 4 Proud Boys wearing Fred Perry polo shirts (Zhang, 2020)



Note. Proud Boys during a rally in Portland.

The uniform of the Proud Boys is a particular Fred Perry polo shirt (see figure 4), and McInnes has often been asked about the explanation behind this choice. For him, the Proud Boys want to equal themselves with the hard-working mods of the 1960s (Beery, 2017) and he also wrote that it is the perfect uniform to combat multiculturalism (Alexis, 2020). At the same time, in 2017, the Chairman of Fred Perry, John Flynn, reacted when questioned that "[it] is a shame that we have to even answer the question. No, we don't support the ideals or the group that you speak of. It is counter to our beliefs and the people we work with" (Fred Perry, 2020; Woolf, 2017).

When former US President Donald Trump showed support towards the Proud Boys in a presidential debate on the 29th September 2020, they made a new logo with a laurel wreath and the words of Trump, “Proud Boys, stand back and stand by” (PBS Newshour, 2020, 1h09). Even though the laurel wreath is not exactly the same as the Fred Perry logo, they do use the same colours as their polo shirt. The Proud Boys celebrated being mentioned by Trump on different social platforms, including Telegram, Parler and Twitter, as can be seen in figure 5 (McCann Ramirez, 2020).

Figure 5 New logo from the Proud Boys after the presidential debate (McCann Ramirez, 2020)



Note. Proud Boys shared the new logo on Twitter.

Reactions

To start with, the Proud Boys presence has led to several rallies and protests going wrong. As they are usually present with their (unofficial) uniform, the black and yellow Fred Perry polo shirt (Armstrong, 2019; Mohamed, 2020) among others, people have made a connection between the two.

Consumers are now more than ever present on the net and will not sit back to wait for justification from a brand, they will express their unhappiness about an event without any hesitation. This is exactly what happened indeed, a lot of social media posts illustrate how

incidents involving Proud Boys violence raised questions about Fred Perry, mostly on Twitter¹.

To put an end to this brand hijacking of Fred Perry by the Proud Boys, on 24th September 2020, Fred Perry released a statement on its website announcing that the polo shirt stopped being sold in September 2019 (Fred Perry, 2020). This was also shared on social media with Fred Perry's followers, a step which is often incorporated in PR crisis plans (Wigley & Zhang, 2011). Fred Perry clearly stated its point of view by taking a radical decision, they stopped selling the specific polo shirt in North America. Which event exactly made Fred Perry take such a decision is not clear, or recorded. As it goes back to 2019, we can think of the demonstration in Portland, Oregon (see figure 4), where they clashed with Antifas (Armstrong, 2019) or maybe the sum of all the protests like those in Charlottesville, and others (Miller-Idriss, 2019).

When Fred Perry decided to publicly inform everyone of the withdrawal of the black and yellow polo shirt from the shops, it raised reactions. This case has also been used among marketing consultants and professors. Professor Ritson, brand consultant and former professor of marketing, wrote his opinion in *Marketing Week*, for him no longer selling the polo shirt will only strengthen the bond with extremists, because it relates to the Forbidden Fruit effect (2020); when we say something is prohibited, we are more attracted to it (Exploring your mind, 2017).

This forecast was true, as the Proud Boys have affiliations in other countries, such as the Netherlands², the United Kingdom, etc. and their supporters there could help them to get the black and yellow polo shirt. For instance, the Proud Boys of the UK said “[we] are in process of buying all the black and yellow twin tipped Fred Perry polos we can find” (Jarvis, 2020). When the Proud Boys of the UK made an announcement about the shipped polo shirts in 2020, only a few days after the statement of the removal of the polo shirt (which took place in September of the year before), the magazine *Newsweek* reached out to Fred Perry for a reaction. Fred Perry only replied by referring back to the statement it had made about the Proud Boys before (Jarvis, 2020). We can imagine that there have

¹ Some reactions have been taken from Twitter, as an illustration, they can be easily found with the #ProudBoys, see appendix 1.

² In the Netherlands a group calls itself Proud Boys and shares information on Facebook as well, see appendix 2.

been more reactions to the Proud Boys, but they have perhaps not been publicly shared or have already been deleted.

A counter-reaction was present on Twitter on the side of the 'other' proud boys, the gay community. They took over the #ProudBoys so that it could no longer be used by the extremist group (Peat, 2020).

Furthermore, Riston also argues that Fred Perry should have made a big campaign to show the opposite ideology so that the Proud Boys see that the culture of Fred Perry is not in line with their vision (2020). Although this can of course be an option, the brand should make sure that if they do so they don't lose other consumers. Related to this, they disappointed some customers when several black models wearing Fred Perry clothing were posted on the brand's Instagram account in 2020, some racist customers threatened to boycott the brand (Davidson, 2020). However, in this case, Fred Perry would probably be better off without those racist customers, as they are not the target market of the brand, and the company also makes a point by showing black models.

In the research article *Hating in plain sight: The hatejacking of brands by extremist groups* Benton and Peterka-Benton (2020) evaluate the brand's communication after having been hijacked. Fred Perry is part of their case studies. They state that since the company was a victim of the hijack, and they have a weak attribution of responsibility, Fred Perry will suffer only a mild reputational threat when consumers look at the way they have communicated. This can also be related to a possible PR campaign with the ban of the polo shirt, and because of the advertising afterwards that reinforced the main idea and positioning of Fred Perry (Ries & Ries, 2004).

Chapter 2.3. Unwanted brand hijacking

Definition of hijacking

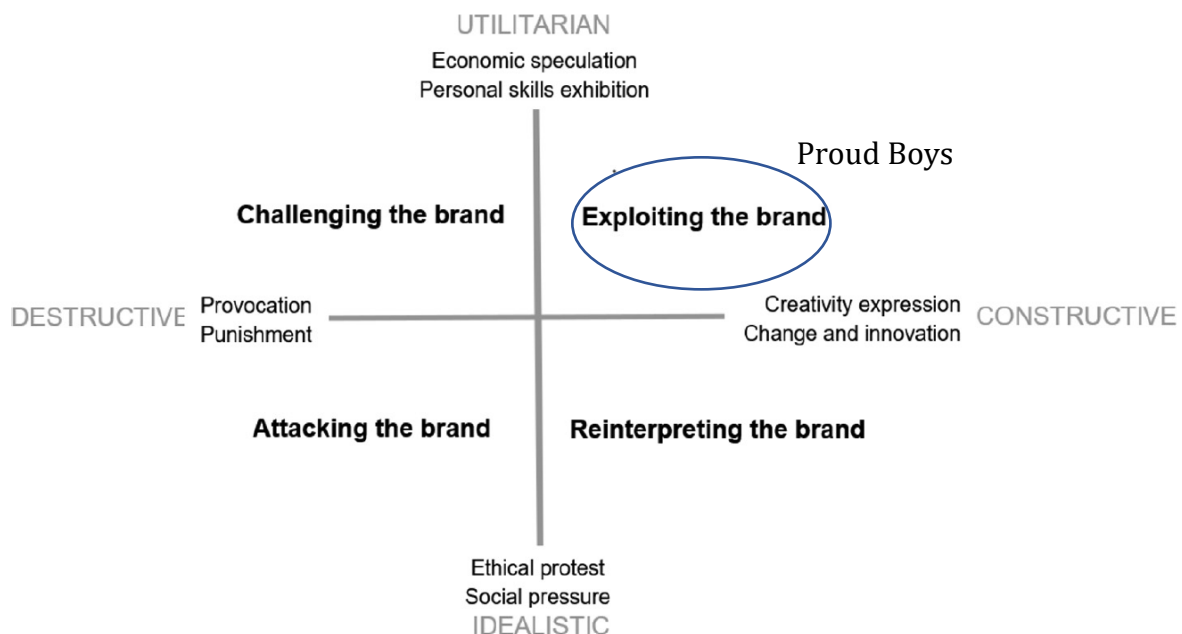
As seen in previous points, Fred Perry has been adopted by different subcultures or groups throughout all its years of existence. We have discussed some positive aspects on the one hand, such as the mods that listen to the kind of music Fred Perry wants to be associated with, but on the other hand, they have been hijacked by groups which they do not support at all. More details on the definition of brand hijacking and hatejacking have been given in Part 1 of this thesis.

As a reminder, brand hijacking is unauthorized exploitation and/or a transformation of the brand declared by forms of non-collaborative brand co-creation. It can be caused by different motivations and intentions.

The hijackers

Siano et al. (2020) argue that brand hijackers can be mapped by the motivations and intentions that they have, as you can see on the map of Figure 6, and by doing so we can deduce the actions of the hijackers. A point of attention should be added when using the paper of Siano et al. (2020), as it is largely a panel of experts judging the negative side of brand hijacking, for them the hijackers are seldom brand fans. They consider that the main categories of people committing these acts are activists and opponents, both motivated by values, ethics or to cause damage. Meanwhile for Wipperfurth, the serendipitous hijack is practised by brand fanatics within subcultures.

Figure 6 Map of hijackers' motivations and intentions (Siano et al., 2020)



Note. Mapping of brand hijackers on the 4 motivations axes, with the expressions of their intentions, and in each quadrant an action.

We can map the Proud Boys on this map as a hijacker that is exploiting the brand, the 'constructive utilitarian'. They have constructive motivation because they appropriate elements of the brand, such as the polo shirt and the logo that they add to their bulletproof jackets, or the adaptation of the logo to add the words of Donald Trump. They are

utilitarian as they do a brand impersonation, counterfeiting, and are driven by public recognition. They exploit the brand but do not want to damage it, additionally, they want to add their personal contribution by making some changes (Siano et al., 2020). If the Proud Boys had expressed in any way that they wanted Fred Perry to stand for their values by wearing the brand with this intent, then it could have been the 'constructive idealistic' motivation.

The same exercise cannot be done for the incident in Paris, as there is a lack of information regarding the motivations and intentions of the hijackers.

In the Fred Perry case, we are usually facing violent groups or extremist groups of hijackers. So it can be interesting to see what can explain the adherence to such an extreme political ideology. As seen before, younger generations are more open to such ideologies, but there are also other reasons. Van Prooijen and Krouwel studied the psychological perspective of adherence, they propose four interrelated hypotheses (1) it is easier to adopt an extreme ideology when in psychological distress, (2) the ideas are relatively simple and perceived as black or white, (3) as it is simpleminded, the extremists are overconfident in their judgments, and (4) political extremists are less tolerant than other politicians (2019).

Chapter 2.4. How brands can react to unwanted brand hijacking

Fred Perry is still a brand that is worn by a lot of people, the brand has known lots of successes but with the repetition of linkages with extreme groups the brand value could be decreased or even destroyed (Hofman & Keates, 2013; Siano et al., 2020). For this reason, it is important that the brand reacts or takes the right actions. As stated by Benton and Peterka-Benton (2020), the way the company communicates about the incidents and the view of the company in this regard is important.

As some circumstances can have a huge impact on the business, we can look at the risk strategy the company pursues. The firm can have different ways of managing the situation depending on the risk strategy: aversion, avoidance, reduction, sharing, acceptance or pursuit (Hardies, 2020). When looking at Fred Perry for instance, in general, they do avoid the issues, this is named strategic silence by Harlow (cited in Benton & Peterka-Benton,

2020). We can observe this through the company's non-reaction, except in extreme situations; it did not undertake any specific action to reject those affiliations in the past.

In more recent incidents, with the Proud Boys, Fred Perry does reduce and pursue the risk. We can read this in its statement, on its website, where it says it took the polo shirt off the shelves, but also claims to pursue the unlawful use of the brand (Fred Perry, 2020). The legal countermeasures are also referred to by Siano et al., they are needed to keep the relationships you have with other consumers.

As in most cases, two response behaviours are possible, defensive or proactive. In the case of Fred Perry, the choice of a defensive strategy to reduce the reputational damage in the United States was a logical option to minimize the negative consequences. Maybe one day a proactive strategy would be possible, which would result in a favourable brand re-positioning, thanks to the brand hijack (Siano et al., 2020).

Innumerable brands have known the same kind of brand hijacking before Fred Perry, some brands will be discussed here with the action they took to distinguish themselves again from the adopters. In these cases too, we only see defensive responses as they mostly face hatejacking.

The first brand is Ben Sherman. It sold shirts that were adopted by skinheads in the 1970s, later it expanded its sales to France, Italy and Germany, by doing so it suffered from misappropriation by the neo-Nazis. Ben Sherman decided to put an **end to these markets** and also toned down the emphasis on being the skinheads' preferred shirt (Wipperfürth, 2005). By doing so, Ben Sherman has prevented recurrence and taken corrective action (Ferguson, Wallace, & Chandler, 2012).

Also, Lonsdale, a boxing brand, has been hijacked by the extreme right skinheads, because when a bomber jacket is not totally closed you only see the letters "NSDA" from the t-shirt underneath, which are the letters of the German Nazi party (Kantelberg, 2021). In some stores known to be associated with the far-right, Lonsdale banned its brand (Miller-Idriss, 2019). As a result of these unwanted associations and reactions, Lonsdale decided to make a **big ad campaign** to restore its positive image, named "Lonsdale loves all colours" (Lescop, 2013). Also, brands like New Balance have been associated with Nazi or Nationalist groups because of their letter 'N' (Benton & Peterka-Benton, 2020).

Looking at Burberry, it had a pattern that always came back and became their signature. This plaid pattern has been reproduced on a lot of items by imposters. However, the brand did not focus on those hijackers but **emphasized another pattern**, the stripe (Wipperfürth, 2005). So they attracted the attention to something else, this is something that Fred Perry does not do as one of the first polo shirts you can spot on its website in Europe is the black and yellow one.

Paradoxically, some brands worked the other way around. The brand Thor Steinar was founded for the extreme right market, it was coded and therefore seen as a Nazi brand that is still banned in different places in Germany today (Benton & Peterka-Benton, 2020).

From a more theoretical point of view, Wipperfürth (2005) writes in his book that a brand that is owned by subcultures should thrive in the mainstream. And if the brand has different meanings for groups, it should aim towards a simple and single-minded approach thanks to a campaign. As a general rule, Siano et al. (2020) found that to prevent or handle the phenomenon, organizations should listen and dialogue on social media and have a structured crisis plan. As seen in Part 1, crisis communication on Twitter can indeed be beneficial for the brand image (Xu & Wu, 2016).

As seen in the first part, an ad campaign should sometimes be replaced by a PR campaign. For instance, for Fred Perry, we notice that when the polo shirt stopped being sold in September 2019, according to the company statement (Fred Perry, 2020), the press did not talk about this. However, when the statement came out in September 2020, articles appeared in several newspapers, this could have been a part of a PR campaign to gain some third party endorsement and to be heard.

Even before this, we see that the chairman's words from 2017 have been reused often to express the feelings of Fred Perry. According to Ries and Ries (2004), selecting one person who becomes the voice of the brand is a technique to build a brand by employing PR. This has also been observed by the press, maybe intentionally as a PR action.

Chapter 2.5. Extremism in Belgium

Since Fred Perry is hijacked mainly by extreme groups, we found it interesting to see whether or not those groups are represented in Belgium. As previously seen, a definition of an extreme (political party) has been compiled and is a “combination of racism, xenophobia, nationalism, and a desire for a strong state and law and order” (Arzheimer & Carter, 2005). Another definition can be found in a chapter of the *International Encyclopaedia of Political Communication*: “Political extremism applies to those political groups that subscribe to a radically, antipluralist, homogeneous vision of the national community and reject the basic democratic values” (De Landtsheer, 2016).

Are such groups present in Belgium? Some will argue that Vlaams Blok was an extreme political party on the Flemish side, although they changed their name to Vlaams Belang to get rid of this connotation (De Waele, 2013). As a side note, we can observe that the colours of Vlaams Belang are black and yellow, like the colours of the Proud Boys. Tanné Bogaerts, born in 1994, explains in her recent book *Kind van extreemrechts* (Child of the extreme right) how it was to be a child of Vlaams Blok parents (Bogaerts, 2021). She mentions that the yellow and black flag was waving outside her home.

Another group is *Blood and Honour* (originating from England); its members committed some horrible acts from their appearance in Flanders in 2001 until 2011. They are a neo-Nazi, white power, extreme right group (De Waele, 2013). The Walloon section made its entrance in 2011, but they have not made it to the big press (Unia, 2011).

Recently, in 2021, the case of Jürgen Conings revived the idea that extreme right is present in Belgium. In a nutshell, Jürgen was a known far-right supporter and made violent threats in the past. In May, he left his army barrack with a lot of weapons and then vanished, a huge search with a lot of policemen took place (kma, 2021). Further, politicians and others have been associated with this case and the public prosecutor is still investigating the possible links with disseminating messages aimed to incite infractions linked to terrorism (Romans & Van de Velden, 2021).

Apparently, the extreme right is rising and is more present in the north of the country and Brussels. There are three main extreme right movements in Belgium, (1) neo-Nazi, (2) Islamophobia and xenophobia, and (3) identity-based movements. All of these have at least one group in Flanders and some have groups in Wallonia. The groups have a weak

structure and temporary existence. They are mostly present on social media and are not violent (Watrín, 2021).

In another part of the article of De Waele (2013), we can find possible explanations why in the north side of the country there is more extremism than in the south side. After World War II, the collaboration with the Germans was more a political debate on the Flemish side, whereas on the Walloon side it was seen more as snitching. A second argument that is raised is the presence of monuments such as memorials to the 'heroes' of SS, which are more present in Flanders, and the last claim is that Vlaams Blok, as an extreme right party, experienced a huge electoral breakthrough in 2004, which has never been the case in Wallonia for the Front National. Another article also argues that the Flemish are more influenced by Anglo-Saxon countries, and Wallonia by France and Quebec (Watrín, 2021). This also shows the different perspectives that are present in the north and south of our small country Belgium.

We can deduce that extremism is present in small amounts and not really organized. Also, extremist groups are present on the right side of the spectrum, and essentially in Flanders.

PART 3: REACTION IN BELGIUM TOWARDS FRED PERRY

Now that we have seen what the literature and the Internet have given us as elements to answer the research question, we will share the knowledge that came out of 12 in-depth interviews with Belgian Fred Perry customers from different age categories and regions. As a reminder, we seek to find response elements for the next research question “How is the perception of Belgian Fred Perry customers influenced by the unwanted brand hijacking of the brand?”

First of all, the methodology of the qualitative research will be defined and afterwards, the interviewees’ responses will be studied and interpreted.

Chapter 3.1. Methodology

For this sort of research, it makes more sense to have a qualitative study (Giannelloni & Vernet, 2001; Miles & Huberman, 1994; Vandercammen & Gauthy-Sinéchal, 2014). As seen in the research question, we are wondering how Belgian Fred Perry customers are influenced. For this kind of question we need to analyse more in-depth what the customers think, that is why we interviewed them one by one.

Sampling

To achieve representative results for the qualitative study, the sample size is a meaningful aspect. As stated by Marshall (1996, p.523), “an appropriate sample size (...) is one that adequately answers the research question”. In this case, 12 respondents were interviewed and indeed with this number we can argue that different elements have been raised to answer the research question. It is also essential that new emerging data would be very limited if more interviews had been conducted, and we consider that in point of fact we came to a state of data saturation, although this cannot be certain.

In practice, one-to-one, in-depth semi-structured interviews were conducted through video call, anonymity was guaranteed and the names of the subjects were not used, indeed the pseudo abbreviations are not those of their real names. The interviewees could choose when and where they were during the video call, which was scheduled in advance. It happened that some were at work or home but during work hours, nevertheless, none of them showed any sign of stress or pressure.

Only participants that know and wear the brand Fred Perry were selected, furthermore the recruitment was done through word of mouth and snowballing (snowball sample, (Marshall, 1996)). The interviews were conducted in different languages at the interviewees' best convenience, either in Dutch or French.

The total sample size is 12, as mentioned before, and is composed of 11 male respondents and only 1 female respondent, all of whom are familiar with the brand (see table 1). There is not a male-female parity, but this is also due to the fact that Fred Perry is worn more by men than women. There are two different age categories in the sample, the first one is younger people between 21 and 26 years old, and the second group is a bit older, aged between 40 and 50. We emphasize those groups as they have significantly different points of view on the topic in general.

Table 1 Overview of the respondents

Pseudo	Age	Gender	Region	Student/work	Language
B.M.	21	Male	Namur	Student	French
Q.E.	22	Male	Walloon Brabant	Student	French
S.U.	24	Male	Namur	Work	French
N.G.	24	Male	Antwerp	Student	Dutch
C.U.	24	Male	Walloon Brabant	Work	French
S.E.	24	Male	Flemish Brabant	Work	Dutch
T.M.	50	Male	not mentioned	Work	French
K.X.	26	Male	Walloon Brabant	Work	French
O.T.	50	Male	Namur	Work	French
D.U.	40	Female	not mentioned	Work	French
D.T.	49	Male	Namur	Work	French
T.E.	49	Male	Flemish Brabant	Work	Dutch

In-depth interview

As mentioned, the interviews were semi-structured, in-depth and based on an interview guide that is displayed in appendix 3. The guide follows a funnel approach, as Giannelloni and Vernet (cited in Vandercammen & Gauthy-Sinéchal, 2014) explain in their book *Market Study*. The guide helped ensure that the interviews were both flexible and similar

for all subjects. The interview was divided into four parts, (I) to start the interview and let the interviewees feel at ease, they were asked some general semi-structured questions related to the Fred Perry brand. (II) Then respondents were asked about their perception, image and involvement with Fred Perry. (III) The interview then focused on the events that happened where Fred Perry is unintentionally present. The participants were given one article about each event and they were asked to react and discuss it. (IV) The interview ended with a conclusion phase, where they were thanked and a summary of the aspects covered was made.

All the subjects were audio-recorded and transcribed in order to prepare the analysis. The interviews lasted between 35 minutes to 1 hour. As they were done by video call, we used Microsoft Teams.

Qualitative individual in-depth studies have different advantages. First of all, in general the qualitative study has been used to identify the behaviour of the subjects, this is something that cannot be analysed in a questionnaire. Secondly, by being interviewed individually, interviewees did not have to face social pressures related to other participants. A third point is that thanks to the individual in-depth interview we could dig into some aspects to better understand the customer. Being able to acquire deeper knowledge led to a more focused exploration of the behaviour. Another advantage is that the subject would have been difficult to bring up in a group, for some of the respondents, as it deals with strong social norms, cause we talk about behavioural change as a result of incidents and politics (Vandercammen & Gauthy-Sinéchal, 2014).

Method of analysis

Some analysis took place during the transcriptions of the interviews. In every interview, colour codes were used and keywords for each code were noted in Microsoft Excel to make some horizontal and vertical analyses. The colours were related to the parts of the interview guide, so yellow was for the first part, lilac for the second, green for the third, and one additional colour, turquoise, for a posteriori coding. ATLAS.ti was also used for more in-depth analysis. The information that we wanted to find in the interviews, a priori coding, were linked to most of the questions that emerged from the literature review, they

are also the ones examined henceforth. The codes that were added a posteriori are specifically mentioned in the analysis of the interviews, these were limited.

Chapter 3.2. Results/Analyses

To start with, we can see that the answers in both age categories, 21-26 and 40-51, are often different, for this reason, they will sometimes be split apart and analysed distinctly. The distinction between male and female, or region is not made, as these factors did not impact the replies a lot.

Warm-up

To make sure all respondents had in mind what, how and when they are in contact with the brand Fred Perry several introductory questions were asked. One of those questions was about which kind of Fred Perry clothing they have. We notice that Fred Perry stays most known for its polo shirts, although some only have shoes. The majority of the interviewees haven't been in a Fred Perry shop (8 out of 12), and those that did usually went to those abroad (England, Germany or Portugal). This can also be explained by the fact that in Belgium there is only one Fred Perry shop, which is situated in Antwerp (Fred Perry, n.d.). What is surprising is that the Fred Perry e-commerce shop, which does deliveries to Belgium, is not often used, only one interviewee mentions it (and he, D.T., also specifies that he goes on the website thanks to the newsletter).

Eleven out of twelve participants were aged between 14 and 25 years old when they discovered and wore the brand for the first time. The most common reasons for how they discovered the brand are friends and family (6), music (4), and inside multi-brand stores (those 4 people have shoes mostly).

When looking at the price, different elements come to light. First of all, in general, the price is justified (9), and for 6 of them that is because of the quality, only two of the respondents find the price too high (one didn't know what the price is). Several did not buy the items at full price, but enjoyed outlet prices (1) and/or the sales periods, 6 respondents referenced this favourable price discount to buy the brand rather than another one. Further, the shoes have more a 'normal' price compared to the market average than the polo shirts. As D.U. states, "in general it is very expensive [...] what always has been quite

striking, for me, is that anything like a bag or shoes is not expensive at all compared to a polo shirt” (original: “de façon générale c’est très cher [...], ce qui a toujours été assez frappant, pour moi, c’est que tout ce qui est sac, chaussures c’est pas du tout, du tout cher par rapport à un polo” p.165, 7min). The polo shirts are expensive and are therefore sometimes compared to brands like Ralph Lauren, which is more known to be an expensive brand (S.E.), whereas Fred Perry’s polo shirts are a similar price but less known.

Image and involvement

The majority of the respondents do not feel like they are involved with the brand (8); the others feel a bit involved thanks to the newsletter, the music, or the ‘way of life’. As T.E. expresses, “Yes, it is a part of me, it is a way of... *a way of life*, it is a lifestyle, you know” (original “ja het hoort bij mijzelf, het is een manier van... een way of life, het is een lifestyle allé weet je”, p.191, 14min). When it comes to music, we have seen before that there have been partnerships with Blur and Oasis, and here we can see that this collaboration has had a positive impact, as the respondents mentioned those two bands and Manchester pop in general (O.T. and T.E.).

To explore involvement in more depth, we asked if the participants had ever gone to a store knowing they wanted to buy Fred Perry, and nine replied positively to this question. The other three admitted that once they are in the store and see a Fred Perry item, it has a positive impact on their purchase intention towards the brand, but as mentioned before, the price also plays a role, in other words, if there is a discount or not.

When asked about the brand image, which is the set of brand associations, as seen in Part 1, some indications came back quite often. For this list we also took into account other terms that were used during the interview but were mentioned at least once as a brand image element. These terms included quality (9), expensive (7), British (6), young (5), sporty (5), music or English pop (5), discreet (4), fashion (4), casual (4), rebel or wannabe (4), classy (3), classic (3), football (3), and uniform (3). What is remarkable is that words such as ‘music’, ‘football’, or even ‘uniform’ are only mentioned by the 40-50 age category, and ‘British’ was only linked to Fred Perry by one participant from the younger age group, the 5 others were in the other age category. In contrast, the term ‘discreet’ was used more

by the younger people (3). The words show an overall positive view of the brand image, and 11 of the 12 respondents confirmed that they do have a positive image of Fred Perry.

Despite this fact, the link with unwanted groups and hooligans was also raised at this point. A priori we knew that music and skinheads or mods would be mentioned, but a posteriori we noticed that football has also always been really important in Belgium, illustrated here with the mention of hooligans as well. Interviewees warned that we would meet hooligans for sure if more interviews were carried out about Fred Perry. Some respondents aged over 40 could even tell the skinhead story and that the political orientation started after the financial crisis in England (O.T. and D.U.).

An important topic that was addressed here as well is whether or not the participants knew the history of the brand. As seen during the first part of this thesis, Fred Perry has an interesting past, as a person but also how the brand has been hijacked by some groups. On the one hand, for the younger subjects, the history was little (2 out of 7) or not known (5 out of 7). Furthermore, the knowledge they shared was that Fred Perry was a tennis player and was British, otherwise when guessing they would say golf and Italian as well. A bit of background information was then shared, as can be seen in the interview guide. In addition, some said they understood the brand better once that they knew its history and may have more affinity with it in the future. On the other hand, the 40-50 year old subjects all knew the history thanks to movies/a documentary, music and articles. The origin of Fred Perry's father was on the contrary not specifically something they would know.

Reaction to the presence of Fred Perry in unwanted incidents

a) Political point of view

To have a better insight into the political point of view of Fred Perry as perceived by consumers, we asked the respondents to link the brand to a political party or say if it is more left or right-wing. As previously seen, the two incidents were caused by political groups. What we can see in the replies for the political standpoint is that younger people base their answer more on an aspect like capitalism, tennis being an elitist sport, and the brand being macho, whereas the older group was more inclined to say that the brand is

not politicized (2 out of 5), or/and that it was linked to extreme groups (2) or had the same political view as they have (2).

To have a better understanding of consumers' perception about the link between clothing and politics, the participants were also asked if the clothes that people wear can show their political point of view. Most of the subjects disagreed with this statement in general (11), the exceptions are when people wear brands or suits (4), or in extreme cases such as skinheads, or very eco-friendly people (2). However most mentioned that they are influenced by clichés and stereotypes, so even in those cases the political point of view cannot really be defined based on clothing alone. As seen before, indeed skinheads for instance can be from the extreme right, extreme left or even apolitical.

b) Confrontation in Paris

Next, the participants were asked if they remembered any event that took place that was related to Fred Perry in France or the USA. So first of all, let's analyse the reactions towards the accident in France (broadly discussed in point 2.2.). Four interviewees out of 12 vaguely remembered it but did not know the link with Fred Perry. This could be the work of PR or something they forgot as time passed by. For the other eight, it was new information. As seen before, the 40-50 age group has more knowledge on the background of Fred Perry and this clearly influenced their first impression, as none of them was shocked or surprised (5 out of 5). They know incident happens, cause of violent Fred Perry consumers, and find it a sad coincidence, but one which they don't want to be related to. Looking at the younger generation, the reactions were surprise, shock, incomprehension, etc. for most of them (6 out of 7). Only S.E., aged 24, did not have this opinion as he already had this kind of image of Fred Perry, because he has seen tussles when out at night. Furthermore, only 2 out of the 12 interviewees affirmed that they felt concerned about this, some others indicated that they felt a bit concerned as they wear clothes made by this brand. As a good illustration, K.X. expressed it like this, "it is said that people who drive an Audi or BMW, well let's say that these people are not very respectful on the road (...), for example I like this brand and (...) I don't want to drive faster or whatever" (original: "on dit que les gens qui conduisent en Audi ou en BM bon on va dire ce ne sont des personnes pas très respectueuses sur la route (...), par exemple moi j'aime bien cette marque là et (...) j'ai pas envie de rouler plus vite ou quoi que ce soit." K.X., p.142, 42min).

c) Proud Boys

Secondly, we have the misfortune of the Proud Boys taking the black and yellow polo shirt as their uniform, which led to the withdrawal of this polo shirt. Even people that did know about the Proud Boys had not noticed before that they wore Fred Perry polo shirts. The brand is clearly seen as a victim here and interviewees express their relief about the action of Fred Perry, except for one, who thought that the withdrawal of the polo shirt should have been expanded to the whole world, as this polo shirt will continue to stand for the extreme right (D.U.). This is in line with what Professor Ritson said (2020). As a reminder, Ritson states that taking the polo shirt off the shelves will only strengthen the bond with extremists, because of the Forbidden Fruit effect. To clarify her point of view the aforementioned participant added that she will not even give away a polo shirt with colours of the right, it goes to the trash bin, to avoid spreading such a message (“des polos de la droite (...) ils vont aller à la poubelle ça c’est sur (...) [et] je ne vais même pas les donner parce que je ne veux pas répandre ça !” D.U., p.172, 37min). From another point of view, the supporters of the football club UR Namur (T.M. and D.T.) are glad that the polo shirt is still sold in Belgium as black and yellow are the colours of their club. Another respondent, T.E., drew attention to the fact that in Flanders it could already have been linked to Vlaams Belang or NVA, as they use the same colours and are both on the right side of the political spectrum. In this case, three respondents felt concerned about the incident, others cited that it is only clothes or that it was too far away.

d) Impact

So in general none of the 12 interviewees had a change of perception of the brand Fred Perry, because of the distance and the little knowledge they had about the incidents. An illustration given by one of the respondents was “Ben & Jerry’s has rather left-wing communication, they slam far-right people on Twitter and, well, I just eat the ice-cream because I like it, so there you go” (original: “Ben & Jerry’s ils ont une communication plutôt de gauche, ils clachent un peu les gens d’extrême droite sur Twitter et voilà, ben moi je mange juste la glace parce que je l’aime bien, donc voilà” K.X., p.145, 53min). This shows the point of view of several respondents, they still feel comfortable wearing Fred Perry clothes because they are just clothes.

As the distance between Belgium and the movements is mentioned several times, we asked if the participants would react differently if the incidents had taken place closer to

home. In this case, 2 said it would depend on mediatisation, as one states: “Unless the headlines claim, “If you wear Fred Perry than you are that”, I don’t think so” (original “Tenzij dat de headlines zeggen van ja “Als je Fred Perry draagt dan ben je dat”, denk ik het eigenlijk niet” S.E., p.115, 35min). Some others (3) said it would depend on the intensity and frequency of the incidents, others would stop wearing the black/yellow polo shirt (2), or would have a feeling of fear (1). For S.U., it is a bit of both, he would not wear a polo shirt if there was a risk of being beaten up, but concerning the clothes, in themselves, it would depend on whether it was the brand or one specific polo shirt that was under fire, “For me really if it were the brand, it would have a smaller impact, but if it were one item, then I wouldn’t wear it anymore” (original: “Pour moi vraiment si c’était la marque, ça aurait un impact moindre mais si c’est vraiment un modèle, alors je ne le porterais plus” p.81, 26min). Also, the fact that some participants only wear Fred Perry shoes makes them feel less impacted, as these are not linked with extremist groups in the articles (C.U. and K.X.).

Nevertheless, some participants admitted that if this brand hijacking continues in the future (abroad or in Belgium), it could be an argument to maybe stop buying the brand. Perhaps currently, they would be more inclined, when hesitating whether to buy Fred Perry, to say ‘I’ll buy it, because I know it is a good brand’, while in the future if incidents with the brand continue to occur, it could shift the balance to a no-go for the sale. As S.U. explains, “imagine I’m really in doubt, should I buy it, should I not buy it, maybe it could rather point me towards a “no”, whereas originally, I was more going for a “yes” generally” (original: “imagine je suis vraiment dans le doute, je l’achète, je ne l’achète pas, peut-être que ça pourrait plutôt me diriger vers un « non », alors que de base j’allais plutôt vers un « oui » généralement.” S.U., p.82, 27min).

Concluding part

At the end of the interviews, respondents could add something else they wanted to share. They added that the boycott of brands is something they do think will occur more often (K.X.) and also that these boycotts will recurrently be incidents linked to the extreme right (D.U.). This may indeed be the case because as seen in 2.5., extremism in Belgium is rising. These reactions are very relevant as they support the findings of researchers Moss and O’Connor (2020), who suggest that we can observe a shift from a moderate political

attitude to more extreme attitudes in the US. If indeed the extreme right rises and takes more place in the future, they may claim a uniform like the Proud Boys, and if boycotts will happen more frequently, this work has an even more important role for the future so that companies know which actions they can undertake.

One of the respondents wondered if maybe Fred Perry opposed himself against his father and wanted to be part of the elite (T.E.), which is usually more seen as right-wing. If this were the case, the argument that the brand has been popular with the extreme left because Fred Perry's father was a socialist wouldn't stand up to scrutiny anymore. Nevertheless, as seen in part 2, one article argued that it is more the idea of 'everything is possible', that makes the laurel wreath logo popular among extremist groups, and for McInnes it is a desire to be equated with the hard-working mods.

A more positive reaction that emerged is that one participant was reassured that Fred Perry counter-reacted with a positive message. In this case, it was music, with Blur and Oasis back in the '90s, as seen in part 2, instead of spreading the message that Fred Perry does not support the associations with skinheads by a statement or ads (O.T.).

LIMITATIONS

In the literature review, a lot of sources did not come from academic journals, this is due to the fact that the research question is specific and that it has not been specifically studied until now. Also, the incidents are mentioned more on the news and other websites than in research papers. Further, as we are particularly looking at Belgium, the qualitative study was the one that gave the answers.

For the qualitative study, the sample was merely based on the convenience sample approach, as Marshall (1996) names it. This may have an impact on the quality of data and could lead to a lack of intellectual credibility. Indeed one could argue that as there are two categories of age, there should have been a bigger sample of both groups to make sure no new information could be added and confirm data saturation. Furthermore, the Flemish part of Belgium was underrepresented in the qualitative study. Another point that can be questioned is that the method used, a snowball sample, can provide people that have equivalent opinions on the brand.

A crucial point that has to be brought up here is the false information that was shared with the subjects during the interview. Due to an error of interpretation, the withdrawal of the Fred Perry polo shirt was linked to the mediatisation of the Proud Boys when they attacked the Capitol, although it was some months before the event that Fred Perry made the statement about the polo shirt being taken off the shelves the year before. This is at the end of the interview and did not have a direct impact on the results of the study, but some of the questions are therefore not analysed in the core text of this work (such as “Is there one of those incidents that you take more seriously? Which one?”, as we noticed an impact of the mention of the attack on the Capitol).

CONCLUSION

First and foremost, let's go back to the essence, the research question of this thesis: *How is the perception of Belgian Fred Perry customers influenced by the unwanted brand hijacking of the brand?*

Thanks to the literature review, we know the context and all the elements related to the brand Fred Perry and we understand better why the brand has been hijacked. Indeed the brand has been adopted by extreme groups that have been defined as violent and triggered by hate. Both incidents studied here were covered by media channels in Belgium, nevertheless, the awareness among consumers is quite low.

Further, we can state that consumers are not surprised that the brand has been hijacked. First of all, because it is simple and a look that is easy to adopt. Secondly, as said by some respondents of the study, the brand is worn by wannabes and hooligans in Belgium.

We can affirm that the incidents studied did not have any impact on consumption patterns. None of the interviewees had changed their buying behaviour for any reason related to the topic, before the interview. We can also argue that the perception of the brand did not change. This is of major importance for the thesis, actually, it says that the brand hijack did not impact consumers' perception.

Nevertheless, when digging a bit further, some participants did suggest that if those unwanted associations continue in the future, this could have a negative impact. We cannot predict how big this impact would be, because most of the Fred Perry clothes owners are very pleased with the brand for its quality and youthful style, even though they know about the unpleasant associations.

Another reason why we cannot anticipate the negative impact the brand could suffer, perception-wise, is that we would need more insights on how such an incident is mediatized and to what extent Fred Perry is put in the spotlight. As seen in the literature and interviews, the media did not always mention the brand. For the Proud Boys incident, we can even interpret that the media did not mention Fred Perry until the release of the statement that the polo shirt had been taken off the shelves a year before.

A further hypothesis was whether or not the distance between the location of the events and the location of the study participants had an impact. So the subjects were asked about

their reaction and the impact it would have if such a misappropriation happened in Belgium, with media coverage. In this case, clearly, it could have a bigger impact, although even here some 'conditions' would need to be evaluated at that moment. On the one hand, it would depend on what exactly had been hijacked, whether it was a specific item or polo shirt like for the Proud Boys, or the brand in general, such as in Paris. This would impact the reaction as a single item doesn't have the same importance as the whole brand (this is even more true for the participants that only have Fred Perry shoes for instance). We can add that if a particular polo shirt were hijacked, it would not be worn anymore by mainstream consumers, except if it had another value as well, such as football colours for instance. On the other hand, the way the issue was mediated would also have repercussions on the reactions. If the brand were presented as being 'a bad thing', associated with only bad people, then it would influence consumers more than if the media didn't especially link an incident to the brand. Here again, the PR reaction of Fred Perry would be important. In addition to these elements, the frequency of incidents could also have some importance.

To continue, although extremist groups exist in Belgium, they are rare, and this makes it less probable that the brand would be openly hijacked by a group here. Nevertheless, these groups are getting bigger. In addition, it is meaningful to mention that, as said by some interviewees, hooligans are a group where brands such as Fred Perry are already present. We could wonder if one day the media will point this out, or if PR is closely connected to the media to avoid such bad press.

From all the collected information, we could ask ourselves how Fred Perry might react. As seen in point 2.4., several possibilities exist. The complexity of this brand is that it has different target groups: English pop music fans, young people looking for stylish clothes, sporty people, etc., this should be taken into account. By taking one action, Fred Perry has to make sure it doesn't fail the other consumers. In general, a first action that could be considered is to tone down the emphasis on the hijacked clothing piece in their communication, if one is specifically targeted like a polo shirt for instance. A second is an ad campaign that shows that the viewpoint of hijackers is not correct, and in which the main values of the brand stay at the centre of all communication. A last and more radical decision that the brand could choose to make is to withdraw the piece that has been

hijacked, eventually worldwide, exactly what has been done in the USA. In this case, however, attention should be paid to avoid the Forbidden Fruit effect.

Before taking any of these important decisions, the brand has to look at risk management and act in line with its strategy. Also, the analysis of the impact on the markets and the target groups is crucial, as stated before. Otherwise, trust could be broken. And it should not be forgotten that Public Relations has a major role to play, this is even more true for Fred Perry because, as we have seen, they have tried to have one message to respond to the hijack. This message was first the words of the Chairman and is now the *Proud Boys statement*. It represents a consistent voice of the brand. As seen, those messages can be shared on Twitter or other social media channels to maintain a positive image during a crisis.

While we hope that this misfortune of brand appropriation will not occur in Belgium, we have some participants in the interviews, and some authors in the literature, who believe that this will happen more often in the future. As a result of this study, we can say that even if brand hijacking does happen, it will have a limited impact on the brand's image, though it depends on the brand's (re)actions.

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Abstract:

This thesis seeks to find the impact that a brand hijack by extremist groups can have on the image of a brand, focusing on Fred Perry, which has been hijacked by extreme left and extreme right groups (such as the Proud Boys). In the second part, the focus will be on how Belgian Fred Perry customers react towards the associations with these extremist groups. Overall the impact remains limited, but the brand should always pay attention to the way it communicates with its target market and make sure it doesn't lose consumers by focusing on hijackers.

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