

"Boycott Bud Light": An analysis of misinformation in online discussion during a brand controversy.

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Abstract

On 1st April 2023, social media personality Dylan Mulvaney uploaded a video on Instagram featuring herself carrying Bud Light cans to promote Bud Light's #EasyCarryContest during March Madness, where the contest winner would win \$15,000. This video also featured a promotional can that Bud Light had gifted Mulvaney to commemorate the one-year anniversary of her *Days of Girlhood* series. The post by Mulvaney gathered a significant amount of unfavourable reactions on social media from other influencers and social media users, adversely affecting Bud Light's sales (Oi, 2023).

In the digital era, misinformation has the potential to influence how consumers interact with a brand, affecting not only consumers' trust in brands but also consumer-brand relationships (Sharif et al., 2022). Consequently, this can lead to negative consumer behaviours where consumers may act in ways that criticise and potentially damage a brand's reputation and sales. The widespread use of social media means that misinformation can spread rapidly, emphasising the significance of understanding online discussions that facilitate misinformation. The study uses the Mulvaney and Bud Light controversy as a case study to address the research question: *How does misinformation manifest in online discussions during a brand controversy?*

The study uses Netnography (Kozinets, 2020) to understand complex online discussions, closely examining comments and responses captured in the feedback sections of relevant YouTube videos. Thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2022) is subsequently used to conduct a qualitative analysis of various interactions within the YouTube comments. Drawing on 1,298 comments from 13 YouTube videos, the study identifies several key themes, including: *Go woke, go broke, Misgendering, Criticism and accusations toward Bud Light, Consumer identity, and External commentators*. The findings underscore the complexity of identifying, defining and interpreting misinformation amidst a brand controversy. Furthermore, the study highlights motivations behind the spread of misinformation along with the presence of echo chambers, gendered misinformation and negative consumer behaviour that facilitate the spread of misinformation.

Keywords: Misinformation, Social Media, YouTube, Dylan Mulvaney, Bud Light, Brand Controversy, Boycott, Influencers, Transgender, Gendered Misinformation, Consumer Identity, Case Study, Netnography, Thematic Analysis

Attestation of authorship

“I hereby declare that this submission is my own work and that, to the best of my knowledge and belief, it contains no material previously published or written by another person (except where explicitly defined in the acknowledgements), nor used artificial intelligence tools or generative artificial intelligence tools (unless it is clearly stated, and referenced, along with the purpose of use), nor material which to a substantial extent has been submitted for the award of any other degree or diploma of a university or other institution of higher learning.”

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1. Introduction

As social media has become a primary source of information for many people, misinformation concerns have also been on the rise (Acemoglu et al., 2024). The ease and convenience of using social media narrow the gap between the online and offline worlds, where users often see online interactions as an extension of offline interactions, further stimulating the creation and spread of misinformation (Bolander & Locher, 2020; Wu et al., 2019). The quick spread of online misinformation, as discussed by Borges-Tiago et al. (2020), is facilitated by social media and the ease of sharing information, which can hurt a brand's reputation. Khaled (2024) adds that this misinformation can significantly alter consumer attitudes, priorities, and behaviours, thereby damaging the consumer-brand relationship. Similarly, Shin (2021) emphasizes that the viral nature of false information online can reshape how consumers perceive and interact with brands.

1.1 Sequence of events of the controversy

Dylan Mulvaney, a trans woman, comedian, and social media personality, came out in March 2022 and launched a TikTok series titled *Days of Girlhood*, documenting her gender transition. Mulvaney's content evoked mixed reactions, where supporters viewed it as a "positive step towards inclusivity," as noted by Lückerrath-Rovers (2024, p. 175), while critics, as highlighted by Wood and Allan (2024, p. 8), raised concerns about "potential mockery" and "representation issues" surrounding her gender identity. Despite the criticisms, Mulvaney gathered over "10.8 million followers on TikTok and 1.8 million on Instagram" and collaborated with several brands such as Olapex and Kate Spade, establishing herself as a social media figure (Wood & Allan, 2024). As a prominent influencer, Mulvaney presented the U.S. beer brand Bud Light with a strategic opportunity to engage a youthful and diverse audience (Mukherjee, 2024; Wood & Allan, 2024).

On 1st April 2023, in collaboration with Captiv8, a third-party advertising agency, Bud Light partnered with Mulvaney. In what followed, Mulvaney shared an Instagram video post in which she enthusiastically opened Bud Light cans, promoting the March Madness¹ contest the brand was running (Wood & Allan, 2024). The video also featured the personalised cans with Mulvaney's face printed on them, that Bud Light had gifted her to

¹ March Madness is a term for the yearly NCAA Division I men's basketball tournament (Wilco, 2025).

commemorate the anniversary of her gender transition (Sussman et al., 2024). The post read:

'Happy March Madness!! Just found out this had to do with sports and not just saying it's a crazy month! In celebration of this sports thing @budlight is giving you the chance to win \$15,000! Share a video with #EasyCarryContest for a chance to win!! Good luck! #budlightpartner'(Mulvaney,2023).



(Snapshots from the Instagram video posted by Mulvaney)

The original Instagram post got 193K likes, 12K comments and 44.4k shares on Instagram as of 25th January 2025. In this post, Mulvaney said the following -

"Hi, impressive carrying skills, right? I got some Bud Lights for us. So, I kept hearing about this thing called March Madness, and I thought we were all just having a hectic month, but, it turns out it has something to do with sports, and I'm not sure exactly which sport, but either way, it's a cause to celebrate. This month, I celebrated my day 365 of Womanhood, and Bud Light sent me possibly the best gift ever: a can with my face on it. Check out my Instagram story to see how you can enjoy March Madness with Bud Light and maybe win some money, too. Love ya, cheers, go team, whatever team you love, I love too, okay, love ya okay, break a leg." (Mulvaney, 2023)

The video gave rise to a backlash on social media, with some Twitter users describing the post as an ad campaign trying to spread gender propaganda and tweets, as well as assertions that "Brands have to stop listening to their woke creative teams and get in touch

with their consumer demographics" (Cardillo, 2023). By involving a transgender individual, some Twitter users expressed that the brand is involved in gender propaganda (Gordan, 2023); propaganda is also one of the forms of misinformation identified by Ekbal and Kumari (2024). Other tweets that suggested outrage claimed that Mulvaney is now the face of Bud Light and that the campaign celebrates the erasure of men and women along with sabotaging conservative values (Gordan, 2023). In a later interview with the Financial Times, Michel Doukeris, the CEO of Bud Light's parent company, blamed online misinformation for the Mulvaney and Bud Light controversy (Hamilton, 2023), citing a significant misunderstanding surrounding Mulvaney's post, particularly regarding the Bud Light can featuring her image, suggesting an attempt to counter misinformation about the promotional cans. Some bar and store owners erroneously believed the video was a TV commercial and that major retailers like Kroger were selling the cans with Mulvaney's face (Maloney, 2023). Confusion surrounding these events also highlights the overall political and cultural context underpinning the debate and discussion in the U.S. regarding transgender people (Maloney, 2023). Michel Doukeris, in his interview, highlighted that Bud Light's association with Mulvaney was merely a post, not a campaign or advertisement (Sugiura, 2023), suggesting an attempt to create some distance from the controversy.

The misleading narratives surrounding the disconnect and alienation of the brand's primary consumer base, the promotional cans gifted to Mulvaney, Mulvaney's gender identity, and the interpretation of the Instagram post as an advertisement fuelled the controversy (Gordan, 2023; Hamilton, 2023; Maloney, 2023; Sugiura, 2023). The sharers of this misleading information may or may not have intended to deceive, highlighting the complexity of misinformation in this controversy.

Subsequent reactions from celebrities like Kid Rock, Travis Tritt, Trae Wayne escalated the controversy, leading to a call for a boycott of Bud Light (BBC News, 2023; Zilber, 2023). In response, a spokesperson for Anheuser-Busch, the parent company of Bud Light, stated that the "Anheuser-Busch works with hundreds of influencers across our brands as one of many ways to authentically connect with audiences across various demographics" and this can was a gift and not for public sale (Flood & Kornick, 2023, para.4). However, the backlash contributed to Bud Light's sales declining by 23% compared to 2022 (Aratani, 2023). On 14th April, Brendan Whitworth, CEO of Anheuser-Busch InBev, released a press statement titled *Our responsibility to America*, stating: "We never intended to be part of a

discussion that divides people. We are in the business of bringing people together" (Anheuser-Busch, 2023). This statement was not only seen as a lack of support for Mulvaney and the LGBTQ + community but also as an absence of efforts to facilitate reconciliation (Sussman et al., 2024). On 22nd April, Anheuser-Busch put Alissa Heinerscheid and another marketing executive on leave (Dennis, 2023).

As the CEO of a company founded in America's heartland more than 165 years ago, I am responsible for ensuring every consumer feels proud of the beer we brew.

We're honored to be part of the fabric of this country. Anheuser-Busch employs more than 18,000 people and our independent distributors employ an additional 47,000 valued colleagues. We have thousands of partners, millions of fans and a proud history supporting our communities, military, first responders, sports fans and hard-working Americans everywhere.

We never intended to be part of a discussion that divides people. We are in the business of bringing people together over a beer.

My time serving this country taught me the importance of accountability and the values upon which America was founded: freedom, hard work and respect for one another. As CEO of Anheuser-Busch, I am focused on building and protecting our remarkable history and heritage.

I care deeply about this country, this company, our brands and our partners. I spend much of my time traveling across America, listening to and learning from our customers, distributors and others.

Moving forward, I will continue to work tirelessly to bring great beers to consumers across our nation.



Brendan Whitworth

CEO, Anheuser-Busch

(Snapshot of the Press Release by Brendan Whitworth, 2023)

The same month, Bud Light released a new advertising campaign that showed "Clydesdales galloping across all-American landscapes" with men grabbing cold Bud Lights together; this was looked upon as an attempt to 'ride out' the outrage caused by the collaboration with Mulvaney (Dennis, 2023, para.4).

Bud Light's website describes the product as "Easy to drink, Easy to Enjoy", emphasising the light and easy aspect of the beer which is easy to enjoy (Bud Light, n.d.). The messaging in Budweiser's ads is typically light-hearted and focuses on the fun aspects of drinking beer (AC/DC Beverage, 2022). Even though female consumers exist, traditional beer marketing has focused on male consumers (Kellershohn, 2017). However, Budweiser's advertising strategy is to target young adults using traditional and digital marketing channels (AC/DC Beverage, 2022). Additionally, Bud Light ensures that favoured sports like basketball are closely associated with the brand (Goldmann, 2019), thus introducing the #EasyCarryContest during March Madness – a yearly NCAA Division I men's basketball tournament (Wilco, 2025). To promote this contest and expand its audience, Bud Light collaborated with influencer Mulvaney. Peng (2023) states that influencer marketing allows brands to advertise to the exact group of people they want, unlike traditional marketing, where it is uncertain if it will reach the correct audience. With the rise in social platform users,

influencer marketing, estimated at over 21 billion U.S. dollars in 2023, has become an essential format of brand digital campaigns (Statista,2024). "Bud Light has had a nearly 30-year relationship with LGBTQ+ audiences since it began advertising to gay consumers in 1995" ; however, as this partnership occurred at a period of increased legislative activity targeting transgender individuals in the United States and Europe, this partnership not only outraged people against Bud Light but also Mulvaney and her gender identity (Lim & Ciszek, 2024, p.2).

According to Bolander and Locher (2020), users view online interactions as an extension of offline interactions, and misinformation online or offline threatens a business's reputation and bottom line, along with the erosion of the trust of consumers (Chen & Cheng, 2023). As presented before, following the post by Mulvaney on 1st April 2023, various misleading narratives exacerbated the brand controversy and call for a boycott of Bud Light.

Previous studies about the Mulvaney and Bud Light controversy have focused on the controversy as a form of brand activism and have studied the audience response to the brand activism (Sussman et al., 2024); the role of political ideology of conservatism (Nieminen, 2024); and the effects that perceived fit and authenticity had on the endorsement (Lim & Ciszek, 2024). Others have highlighted the controversy as a case study to understand better the challenges of brand activism and social media controversy (Lückerath-Rovers,2024; Mukherjee,2024; Wood & Allan, 2024). The indication of misleading narratives tends to show the presence of misinformation in the controversy. However, previous studies have only lightly explored misinformation specifically. This research aims to fill in the gap and explore misinformation surrounding this controversy to better understand the role it plays in online debate and discussion centred around a brand controversy.

1.2 Research Approach

Positioning Statement – This research focuses on the public narratives surrounding Mulvaney's gender identity in the context of her partnership with Bud Light. As recognized by international organizations like the United Nations (UN Human Rights, n.d.), transgender and non-binary identities are valid and protected under global human rights frameworks. Additionally, the American Psychological Association (APA, 2024) has reinforced its support for transgender and non-binary individuals, advocating for policies that protect their rights,

healthcare access, and dignity. This endorsement by two key global institutions further legitimizes the existence of more than two genders. In addition, Wickham et al. (2023) note that “the idea that gender is a binary construct is currently changing” and argue that the binary model can restrict individuals and compromise their well-being (p. 1074). These institutional and scholarly perspectives highlight a growing recognition that gender exists on a spectrum. The researcher acknowledges these institutional and scholarly perspectives and positions this study in alignment with the view that gender exists on a spectrum, and that the acceptance and support of gender diversity are essential to fostering equity and inclusion.

This thesis seeks to answer the research question – "How does Misinformation manifest in online discussion during a brand controversy?"

Using a qualitative approach, this research utilises mixed methods to collect the data, wherein the case of Bud Light and Mulvaney is chosen through the case study method, and Netnography is employed to guide data collection (Creswell, 2013; Kozinets, 2020)

This thesis answers this research question through thematic analysis by following the six phases proposed by Braun and Clarke (2022). By using open coding to identify common themes in the data, this study analyses online discussion centred around the call to "boycott Bud Light", as this statement was highly prominent in initial examinations of the case study. The data for the research is collected by identifying YouTube videos posted about the controversy using the search term "Boycott Bud Light." 13 videos were selected, and they were posted by verified YouTube accounts from 1st April to 30th April 2023. A total of 1298 comments from these videos are used as data for the research and will be analysed to answer the research question and draw conclusions.

1.3 Structure of Thesis

Following this introduction, Chapter Two provides a comprehensive review of existing literature and begins by defining misinformation in the context of this research. It then reviews existing literature regarding the types of misinformation, the psychology of misinformation, its presence on social media with a focus on YouTube and the impact of misinformation on brands that face the challenge of managing misinformation. The chapter highlights various motivations for spreading misinformation and explores negative consumer

behaviour in the context of misinformation. This chapter aims to provide existing theories and frameworks to guide the study better.

Chapter Three presents the research design. The chapter outlines the research question and the importance of the research. It then explains the research methods, namely the case study method, Netnography and thematic analysis, which are used in the data collection and data analysis process. The sampling framework constitutes of selecting the YouTube videos using the search term "Boycott Bud Light" that were posted in April 2023 by verified accounts. Followed by collecting the top 20 comments and their sub-comments to constitute for data for this research. Ethical considerations in relation to the anonymity and privacy of the data are considered.

Chapter Four presents an overview of the 13 videos selected using the sampling framework. The thirteen videos selected were posted from verified accounts by *The Young Turks*, *Daily Blast Live*, *ABC News*, *The Late Show with Stephen Colbert*, *Fox Business*, *Matt Walsh*, *ABC 7 Chicago*, *France 24 English*, *CNBC Television*, *The Ring of Fire*, *NewsNation*, and *NBC News*. The chapter aims to provide a detailed description of the contents of the video as this may have an influence on the comments.

Chapter Five presents the findings of the data analysis by illustrating the major themes that emerged. Out of the 1298 comments analysed, major themes of the study highlighted the strong reactions to the perception of the brand going "woke", attempts to misgender Mulvaney's gender identity, criticising and accusing Bud Light's decisions, leadership and product quality, the disconnect expressed by commenters in consumer identity and the role of external commentators in the controversy. The chapter also provides examples of comments from the data set to emphasise how these major themes are presented.

Chapter Six reflects again on the research question - "How does misinformation manifest in online discussions during a brand controversy?" by discussing the major themes present in the findings chapter and revisiting existing research discussed in Chapter Two. Key concepts that are discussed in greater detail includes the varying types of misinformation found in online discussion, as well as the relevancy of key concepts such as echo chambers and confirmation bias. The discussion also highlights the motivations and amplification of the controversy by external commentators, the distinct presence of gendered

misinformation, consumer identity and perceived entitlement and negative consumer behaviour.

Finally, chapter seven concludes the thesis with a summary of the findings, discussing the significance of the research and its implications on the communication activities of commercial brands. The chapter also recognises some of the limitations of the present study and considers opportunities for further research in this area.

2. Literature Review

The previous chapter discussed the post by Mulvaney in which she opens Bud Light cans promoting March Madness contest that sparked a backlash on social media. This controversy led to narratives such as the disconnect and alienation of the brand's primary consumer base. Reported tensions over the way that promotional cans were gifted to Mulvaney, whether they were available for sale to the public, Mulvaney's gender identity, and the commercial intention of social media posts, viewed as an advertisement, all indicate the presence of misinformation during this brand controversy. Thus, making it crucial to explore misinformation surrounding this controversy to better understand the role it plays in online debate and discussion centred around a brand controversy.

The purpose of this chapter is to define misinformation in the context of this research study and examine existing literature relating to the psychology of misinformation, the motivations behind spreading misinformation, the role of social media platforms in spreading misinformation and the impact of misinformation on brands.

2.1 Defining Misinformation

Previous research has described misinformation in various ways, including as a claim to "contradict or distort common understandings of verifiable facts" (Guess & Lyons, 2020, p.10), "information that is false, but not intended to cause harm" (Wardle, 2018, p.5), "false content but the person sharing doesn't realise that it is false or misleading" (Rubin, 2022, p.8), "inaccurate, false, or out-of-context information created or disseminated without deliberate intent to cause harm" (Ekbal & Kumari, 2024, p.4) and "fake or inaccurate information" where the information is unintentionally created to deceive (Wu et al., 2019, p.81). These definitions suggest that the fundamental elements of misinformation are inaccurate information and the lack of intent to mislead or cause harm. Previous research concerning social media misinformation (Wu et al., 2019) has acknowledged that, due to the affordances of social media platforms enabling users to publish almost anything, it can be difficult to determine the intention behind the creation of misinformation.

Wardle and Derakshan (2017, p.20) outline three types of information based on the criteria of harm and falseness- misinformation refers to "information that is false, but not created with the intention of causing harm", disinformation refers to "information that is false and deliberately created to harm a person, social group, organization or country" and mal-

information as "information that is based on reality, used to inflict harm on a person, organization or country." Adding to this, Rubin (2022) explains that "interpersonal psychology and communication studies distinguish disinformation from misinformation by the intent to deceive" (Rubin, 2022, p.7). Foster (2019) explores the concept of misinformation through a case study involving U.S. President Donald Trump during the COVID-19 pandemic. A claim rapidly circulated that Trump had encouraged Americans to drink bleach to prevent infection. This narrative gained momentum after Joe Biden publicly referenced the alleged statement, prompting widespread media and social media commentary suggesting that Trump had advocated ingesting bleach. However, this claim was later shown to be a misinterpretation of Trump's original remarks. According to Foster (2019), while Biden may have disseminated this inaccurate information—potentially with the intent to mislead—those who subsequently repeated the claim did so without deceptive intent, thereby acting as unintentional spreaders of misinformation. Wardle (2023) has further used the terms "misinformation, disinformation, and malinformation under the umbrella term information disorder" as she mentions that researchers are too focused on understanding the intent and accuracy of the information rather than understanding the narratives and why people are sharing the information (Wardle, 2023, p.38).

According to Baume et al. (2020), disinformation reflects intentional deceit: an individual circulates information they know to be false, resulting in misleading at least one person. Shushkova (2022) provides an example of such intentional deceit: a tweet from a verified fake Twitter account using the name and logo of Eli Lilly—the leading insulin producer—falsely claimed that the company was giving away free insulin. This tweet intentionally misled users and caused financial harm to Eli Lilly. Wardle and Derakshan (2017) mention that disinformation producers can potentially be politically motivated by discrediting political candidates and other attempts to influence public opinion, financially motivated by profiting through advertising, socially motivated by connecting online or offline with a specific group and psychologically motivated by seeking prestige or reinforcement of their views. Pérez-Escobar et al. (2023) describe disinformation as a fundamental attack on the integrity of knowledge, polluting the information environment. Further, as the cost and availability of tools for manipulating and amplifying content become cheap, it becomes simpler to turn users into unintentional disinformation agents (Wardle, 2019), alluding to the dangers of false information on social media platforms.

According to Baume et al. (2020), misinformation is fundamentally different from concepts such as "falsehood" and a "lie"; a falsehood is defined as any untrue statement, whilst a lie is an intentional falsehood made by someone aware of its inaccuracy and seeks to mislead others. However, misinformation cannot be neatly categorized as entirely true or false as there could be elements of truth in the information (Baume et al., 2020). For instance, according to Spencer (2019), during Covid-19, online claims were made that vitamin C can stop one from getting coronavirus. As Spencer (2020) further explains, although vitamin C may have a slight effect in preventing the common cold, there is no scientific proof that it can prevent or treat coronavirus.

Although the intent and accuracy of misinformation is ambiguous, according to Di Domenico and Ding (2023), misinformation can profoundly decrease consumer trust and legitimacy perceptions of the brand. This in turn can affect a consumer's decision-making process through mindset activation. Di Domenico and Ding (2023) explain further, two categories of direct misinformation and indirect misinformation: direct misinformation includes fake news that "mimics the format of legitimate news sources" (p.1) and fake reviews that hinder "consumer evaluations of products and brand evaluations" (p.2). In contrast, indirect misinformation may occur if a brand's advertisement appears on a dubious website, for example, leading to a spillover effect where the low credibility of the website affects the brand's trustworthiness (Di Domenico & Ding, 2023). Thus, indicating that fake news, fake reviews and association of the brand on dubious websites can impact the consumer's trust and legitimacy perception of the brand.

While Di Domencio and Ding (2023) broadly categorize misinformation as direct and indirect misinformation, however the research by Ekbal and Kumari (2024) further classifies various types of misinformation in social media: Misleading news is inconsistencies between a headline and its content, often including out-of-context information. Rumours are unverified claims circulated without confirmation of their validity. At the same time, propaganda comprises information that groups or governments circulate to sway public opinion, usually lacking full transparency. Satire utilizes humour and exaggeration to ridicule its subjects, frequently targeting public figures. Fake news consists of made-up stories without verifying the facts, while hoaxes are pranks designed to mislead or provoke social awareness. Bias consists of personal views swaying judgments that lead to unjust support or opposition toward specific ideologies or individuals. Clickbait features sensationalized

headlines that entice users to click links, sometimes prioritizing emotional appeal over factual content, and spam refers to unsolicited digital communication. (Ekbal & Kumari, 2024). The various types of misinformation in social media highlight the overarching complexity of identifying and therefore managing misinformation. It can be challenging to distinguish misinformation from other information, for instance, Wardle (2018) notes that the lines between advertising, publicity, and propaganda are also often blurred.

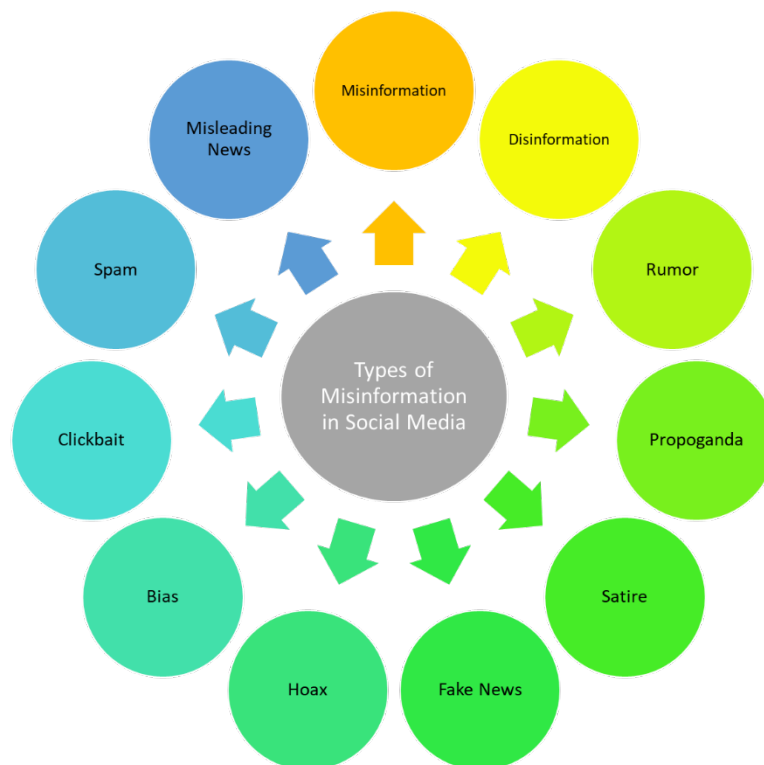


Figure 1 -Types of misinformation in social media by Ekbal and Kumari (2024)

2.2 Psychology of Misinformation

According to Ecker (2017), people want to understand what is happening around them, and when there is no reasonable explanation, they accept unreliable or incomplete information to achieve this sense of completeness. Identity-based motivation theory suggests that "people prefer to make sense of situations" in ways that align with their "important social and personal identities" (p.81); associated with one's affiliation to various groups, such as being patriotic, male, a parent, or a taxpayer. In contrast, personal identities encompass feelings of pride and loyalty, among other attributes. (Greifeneder et al., 2021).

With the overload of information, it becomes harder for people to process all of the information adequately, interrupting the process of objectively and thoroughly evaluating the evidence, which causes people to turn to heuristics that often involves assessing how new information aligns with existing beliefs, personal knowledge, or what trusted others believe (Ecker, 2017). This can create a problem if the beliefs are based on false information, opening one to biases, such as confirmation bias (Ecker, 2017). Because people use heuristics to assess credibility, Wardle (2019) suggests repetition and familiarity are two of the most effective ways to sow misleading narratives.

Lewandowsky et al. (2012) state that by drawing on one's knowledge or by relying on feelings of familiarity and fluency, factors that influence whether a person believes in the information are the information's internal coherence, the credibility of the source, compatibility with preexisting beliefs, and general acceptability of the information. According to O'Connor and Weatherall (2019), beliefs exist on a spectrum that indicates how probable we consider something true. The evidence we collect impacts these levels of belief, with the nature of that evidence affecting the confidence in its validity. O'Connor and Weatherall (2019) further argue that humans are inherently susceptible to information that aligns with their beliefs or societal values, which can trigger confirmation bias, a psychological tendency to selectively focus on information supporting preexisting views while disregarding contradictory evidence (Shin, 2024). Additionally, the information source offers significant social cues that impact the formation of beliefs (Ecker et al., 2022). Additionally, Social Judgment Theory suggests that consumers are more likely to accept new information if it aligns with their existing views, in which they tend to embrace news that closely matches their preferred stance and are more inclined to believe rumours that reinforce their biases about an entity rather than information that contradicts those views (Mookherjee, 2019).

According to O'Connor and Weatherall (2019), confirmation bias demonstrates that individuals frequently prioritize social agreement over objective truth. Confirmation bias causes individuals to selectively interpret evidence that aligns with their existing beliefs (Rubin, 2022). O'Connor and Weatherall (2019) mention the phenomenon through Solomon Asch's 1951 conformity experiment wherein Asch asked participants to identify the line matching a reference line in length, placing them in groups where seven individuals purposefully gave incorrect answers—further observing that despite clear evidence, over a third of the participants chose to confirm with the incorrect response of the other participants

by choosing the wrong line emphasising the role of social conformity in making decisions or shaping beliefs. Within social networks, leaning towards prioritizing agreement can weaken critical thinking and spread misinformation (O'Connor & Weatherall, 2019). As O'Connor and Weatherall (2019) explain further, in these social networks, dissenting opinions often protect tightly knit social groups, where internal influences counteract external evidence. Therefore, conformity can seclude the group from information that contradicts their false beliefs and even if some members encounter this evidence, they may hesitate to share it due to fear of social backlash, further continuing the cycle of misinformation (O'Connor & Weatherall, 2019).

Rubin (2022) highlights several psychological biases and traits that make individuals susceptible to misinformation. She further notes that people generally struggle to detect lies and often exhibit a "truth bias" leading them to assume that most information is reliable. This cognitive vulnerability can be adaptive and requires less cognitive effort making our thinking susceptible to misinformation (Rubin, 2022; Shin, 2024). The illusory truth effect is a widely acknowledged phenomenon that occurs when individuals rely on peripheral cues, such as their familiarity with a concept, idea, or object, to improve their cognitive processing of that information; processing fluency, which refers to the ease we experience when mentally processing a statement; and cohesion as signals for truth (Ecker et al., 2022; Rubin, 2022). Fluency reflects how quickly and effortlessly our minds can process information once it reaches our senses and how easily we can retrieve it from memory (Rubin, 2022). Rubin (2022) also highlights that repeated exposure to information can enhance this fluency and increase its perceived validity and credibility, irrespective of its accuracy. According to Shin (2024), repeated exposure to information, regardless of accuracy, makes it feel more familiar and less controversial. This phenomenon, known as the popularity cue, leads people to accept widely circulated news as accurate, like the bandwagon effect, where the popularity of an idea influences our support for it (Shin, 2024). For online misinformation, the popularity cue may arise from the number of shares or tweets rather than the content itself. Individuals tend to see what they want or expect to see, filtering out information that contradicts their beliefs instead of critically evaluating all aspects of the information presented (Shin, 2024).

According to Mishra et al. (2024), different demographic groups respond to misinformation in varied ways, influenced by psychological factors and existing biases. Consumers act both as receivers and propagators of misinformation (Di Domencio & Ding,

2023). As receivers, regardless of whether they believe in the misinformation, it influences the consumer's attention to a product or a brand and affects their considerations and attitudes thus influencing their decision-making processes (Di Domencio & Ding, 2023). Psychological motivations for spreading misinformation include altruism, where individuals share misleading information to raise awareness and personal signalling and share information to showcase their interests and enhance their social acceptance (Mishra et al., 2024). Ecker et al. (2022) state that emotions can also be persuasive because they divert individuals from potential diagnostic cues like the source's reliability; additionally, one's emotional state also influences the conclusions drawn from the information. Furthermore, encouraging people to rely on their emotions makes them more prone to misinformation (Ecker et al., 2022). Ekbal and Kumari (2024) also suggest that some reasons for the fast dissemination of misinformation include low literacy levels, lower attention span, emotional appeals, and less knowledge of fact-checking methods. Apart from these reasons, at times individuals purposefully engage in misinformation causing what Munyaka et al. (2022) describe as the misinformation paradox phenomenon, where individuals engage, accept, and share false information even though they are aware of the harmful effects of misinformation. Individuals might publicly criticize misinformation, yet their behaviour often reveals a tendency to consume, reproduce, and share it (Shin, 2024). Munyaka et al. (2022) further suggest that digital literacy, and challenges with social change are some reasons for individuals to engage in misinformation paradox.

Along with the motivations for spreading misinformation, Gurgun et al. (2023) state that not challenging misinformation, which is also the phenomenon of online silence, further complicates the issue. Reasons for this behaviour include fear of backlash and the perceived ineffectiveness of challenging false information. The framework by Gurgun et al. (2023) suggests that individual characteristics, technical factors, content-oriented reasons, self-oriented, relationship-oriented, and others-oriented reasons can characterize reasons for not challenging misinformation.

Rubin (2022) suggests teaching trust judgments as part of information literacy. Further, she suggests that when digital media users recognize that an online source is not credible, they tend to dismiss it as misinformation or disinformation. Reciprocally, a lack of information literacy skills impedes the critical evaluation of news, making individuals even more susceptible to misinterpretation. However, one significant challenge in countering

false beliefs is the *continued influence effect*, which refers to the persistence of misinformation in individuals' reasoning even after corrective information has been presented (Swire-Thompson & Ecker, 2018; Grady et al., 2021).

2.3 Misinformation and Social Media

While traditional media communication (radio, television, newspapers, magazines) provides communication primarily characterized by one-way linear interactions, "to say or make things; to share those things with others; and to have that saying, making or sharing made visible to still others" (Langmia & Tyree, 2016; Miekle, 2016, p.4). According to O'Brien (2024), a brand operates as a publisher in traditional media, while social media empowers users to also become publishers, allowing them to have a voice and actively participate in content creation and dissemination. O'Brien (2024) further highlights that while social media can be biased and influential, it also provides a space for a broader audience to engage in dialogue and validate each other's perspectives.

According to Wardle (2019), online misinformation has been present since the mid-1990s and due to its viral nature, research indicates that social media often plays an important role in spreading misinformation (Mishra et al., 2024). Shin (2021) argues that while misinformation is not a new concept, the widespread use of social media and the ease of sharing content has amplified its harmful effects. Additionally, algorithms that prioritize engagement—like, retweets, and clicks—can result in perceiving "popular" content as credible, often without a critical assessment of its accuracy (Shin, 2021). Additionally, research by Rubin (2022), indicates that emotional appeals are more likely to be shared than straightforward descriptive information. According to Hilary and Dumebi (2021), misinformation has thrived on social media through clickbait, misleading titles, propaganda using emotional appeals, partial truth, and testimonials in their research. The spread of misleading information is often dynamic, and various types of information disorders exist online designed to manipulate genuine content (Wardle,2019). Shu et al. (2020) noted that "social media has become a popular means for information seeking and news consumption" (Shu et al., 2020, p.2). Due to its low barriers to entry, it is quick and easy to share news, leading to the widespread creation of disinformation, including fake news—articles that intentionally contain false information produced for reasons like financial and political gains (Shu et al., 2020). While young people increasingly rely on social media for news,

misinformation and disinformation can adversely impact consumer trust in this media (Di Domenico & Ding, 2023; Suciu, 2022).

O'Connor and Weatherall (2019) mention that some individuals may share misinformation because they find these stories humorous or absurd, while others may share them ironically. Additionally, some might share such information because it aligns with their sentiments on specific issues (O'Connor & Weatherall, 2019). Although some individuals may engage with fake news this way, a segment of the population accepts these false narratives as truth (O'Connor & Weatherall, 2019). Irrespective of the reasons for sharing misinformation, this online misinformation poses a significant challenge when it goes viral; the virality of content refers to its receiving engagement that exceeds typical levels and also refers to how rapidly and extensively digital content—a video, image, tweet, post, article, or news—can circulate among internet users (Omeregic & Ryall, 2023; Rubin, 2022). This virality benefits from misinformation's advantage of being perceived as novel. Thus, making it more likely to be retweeted and shared, resulting in its spread being more broadly than factual content (Shin, 2024). According to Giansiracusa (2021) network characteristics and user behaviour influence virality of information, and algorithm-driven systems encourage the sharing of attention-grabbing content without critical evaluation. Research by Shin (2024) suggests that as the motivations and habits of users play an important role in spreading misinformation, there lies a need for social media platforms to implement structural changes that discourage its spread rather than merely monitoring content.

This can be further complicated by the emergence of Artificial Intelligence which has contributed to a surge of misinformation, disseminating fake news more quickly, widely, and extensively than accurate information (Shin, 2024). The difference between misinformation and truth is increasingly blurred and deliberately obscured with the rise of AI, fundamentally changing the landscape of information dissemination (Shin, 2024). This "efficient and quick information generation by AI could have wide-ranging implications for the diffusion of misinformation online" as they become beliefs that are embedded in people's cognition (Shin, 2024, p.202).

2.4 Misinformation on YouTube

As Hussein et al. (2020) explains, search engines serve as the main entry points for information on the internet, but they often overlook the credibility of their search. Even

though YouTube is usually viewed as a video sharing platform that is not traditionally associated with news, its popularity as a news source is increasing (de Nadal, 2024). According to Hussein et al. (2020, p. 48), there is an increasing concern that YouTube, the second top rated search engine worldwide, after Google², and the most widely used video-sharing platform, "the most popular video-sharing platform, has been promoting and recommending misinformative content", keeping users within echo chambers and exposed to biased environments and repetitive content that reinforces prejudices and misconceptions (Ahmed & Gil-Lopez, 2024; Ertemel & Ammoura, 2021; Hussein et al., 2020). Cinelli et al. (2021) broadly define echo chambers as "environments in which the opinion, political leaning, or belief of users about a topic gets reinforced due to repeated interactions with peers or sources having similar tendencies and attitudes" (p.1). The algorithmic personalization on platforms like YouTube is further amplified by hypertextuality, where users who interact with one type of content are continuously recommended similar material. This process can inadvertently lead users into more extreme content streams, even if they did not actively seek them out (Kuncoro & Hasanah, 2024).

Similarly, Ledwich & Zaitsev (2020) explain that the structure of platforms like YouTube often promotes radical ideologies by grouping users with similar beliefs and trapping them in insular online environments known as filter bubbles. The term "filter bubble," coined by Pariser, refers to the growing trend of online personalization that isolates individuals and groups within specific information circles; the filter bubble restricts access to diverse information by customizing search results, advertisements, and website content—often without users' awareness (Rowland, 2011). According to Figà and Arfini (2022), the terms *filter bubble* and *echo chamber* differ in key ways. First, filter bubbles are exclusively caused by algorithms, while echo chambers are enacted by users. Second, filter bubbles occur at the individual level, whereas echo chambers arise within a "social network," forming when users choose to connect with like-minded individuals, thereby "shaping up a group and excluding others" (Figà & Arfini, 2022, p. 7). Features such as likes, comments, and shares on platforms like YouTube encourage users to actively shape their own information environments. Instead of passively consuming content, users engage with both the material

² Google and YouTube are owned by Alphabet Inc (GB Times,2024).

and other users, reinforcing existing beliefs and helping circulate ideas within their social networks, which can contribute to ideological polarization (Kuncoro & Hasanah, 2024).

Research by Ribeiro et al. (2020) highlights YouTube's role in radicalizing users through exposure to far-right ideologies, with individuals often moving from moderate extreme content to more fringe viewpoints. Further supporting critiques that label YouTube as a radicalization engine illustrate how a network of content creators—from mainstream conservatism to overt extremism—amplify each other's narratives (Tufekci, 2018). Whittaker et al. (2021) found that users who engage with far-right content tend to become isolated in ideological chambers lacking opposing viewpoints. Ribeiro et al. (2020) further indicated that YouTube's recommendation algorithm favours far-right material, driving users deeper into radical communities and creating a radicalization loop exacerbated by the autoplay feature that encourages a continuous consumption of increasingly extreme content.

2.5 Impact on Brands

Users are constantly exposed to new brand-related information gathered from various sources, such as other customers, brands, and unaffiliated websites and social media platforms when they conduct online brand and product research, which shapes their behaviour and perceptions of the brand (Borges-Tiago et al., 2020). According to Mookherjee (2019), misinformation affects all aspects of consumer's decision-making process, impacting consumers' emotions, cognition, and behaviours. Huang (2017) mentions that perceived brand trust significantly influences consumer behaviours and intentions toward a specific brand. Perceived brand trust is characterized by an individual's confidence in a brand, deriving from its authenticity and commitment to safeguarding public welfare (Huang, 2017). Additionally, research by Zhang et al. (2022) into the competitive advantages of social media adoption indicates that both informational and institutional interactivity on these platforms can indirectly affect brand trust. This influence occurs through enjoyment, shared connectivity, and social positioning, directly contributing to establishing brand trust (Zhang et al., 2022). This suggests that user's trust in a brand can be impacted by the content they encounter online and therefore misinformation can disrupt their perceived brand trust. Furthermore, misinformation about brands often spreads rapidly online due to the absence of standards on social media, gatekeepers, peer reviews, or lack

of regulations, enabling individuals to share any information they wish (Hollebeek et al.,2024).

A concern with misinformation is the speed at which it spreads online and the immediate and long-term impacts it can have on brands. Chen and Cheng (2023) argue that this mainly occurs through the spread of product-harm misinformation, which involves untrue claims about a company's products being defective or dangerous. For instance, Chen and Cheng (2023) discuss the product-harm misinformation in the case of Coca Cola's Dasani water products where it was alleged to have a mass recall due to clear parasites in the product. In this case, misinformation was first spread on a website which was later shared on social media. This example shows how misinformation can lead to decreased consumer trust in the brand's ability to produce quality products. The higher the consumers' belief in the misinformation, the more likely they are to incorporate it into their judgments, leading to negative word of mouth and further spreading of misinformation (Chen & Cheng, 2023).

Misinformation and negative consumer behaviour both can cause harm to the brand's image and consumer's trust in the brand. Furthermore, Hawkins (2019) argues that negative consumer behaviour is crucial as it involves actions that can harm a brand's image and financial stability. According to Kähr et al. (2016), negative consumer behaviours include negative word of mouth, customer retaliation, consumer boycotts, and consumer brand sabotage. Negative word of mouth involves consumers sharing unfavourable evaluations of products and services with others, while customer retaliation occurs when a consumer feels wronged by a brand and seeks to get even (Kähr et al., 2016, Zaraket, 2020). A consumer boycott happens when individuals stop purchasing from a brand to achieve goals such as restoring equity or expressing negative emotions. Kähr et al. (2016) also explains the concept of consumer brand sabotage, which refers to intentional, hostile actions by consumers aimed at damaging a brand. Similarly, for Kucuk (2019), consumer-generated anti-branding responses can be categorized into three types: (1) activities aimed at "informing" other consumers about the brand's negatives, (2) efforts to persuade others to stop purchasing the disliked brand, thereby "redirecting consumption," and (3) actions focused on directly attacking the brand with the intent to harm or destroy it. The negative word of mouth when shared on social networking platforms presents a challenge to brands as these platforms can amplify the speed and reach of the negative word of mouth. According to Zaraket (2020), while a single negative comment may not immediately affect a

company's sales, the escalation and repetition of such negative remarks can lead to more severe and challenging issues, such as online firestorms, boycotts, or brand sabotage.

Further, Costa and Azevedo (2023) suggest that cancel culture has also evolved from the "notions of brand boycotts", "anti-branding consumer movements", and "other related topics such as brand hate, or brand retaliation" motivated by ideological incompatibilities (Costa & Azevedo, 2023, p.289). As they explain further, cancel culture has emerged as the practice or tendency to "participate in mass cancellation to express disapproval and exert social pressure", often amplified through an online firestorm (Costa & Azevedo, 2023, p.289). Pfeffer et al. (2013) define an online firestorm as "the sudden discharge of large quantities of messages containing negative word of mouth and complaint behaviour against a person, company, or group in social media networks" (p. 118). As an example of a social media firestorm, in November 2018, Dolce and Gabbana released a video on Weibo, this video showed a young Chinese model attempting to eat Italian dishes like pizza, spaghetti, and cannoli with chopsticks, set to traditional Chinese music, while a male narrator offered instructions in Chinese. The video quickly triggered a large social media response accusing the brand of racism, sexism, cultural insensitivity, and trivializing Chinese culture. Even though the video was taken down from Weibo within 24 hours, it was shared on other social media platforms amplifying its spread (Wekwerth, 2019). Firestorm information can, in other words, spread on social media and affect brand perceptions and memory regardless of where it originated (Hansen et al., 2018). As Hansen et al. (2018) explains, if social media users react strongly, traditional media will notice and repeat the topic, and if traditional media covers the controversy and sparks some interest, consumers will notice and respond by talking about it on social media

2.6 Misinformation Management

Some studies have considered how misinformation in this sense can be managed, particularly for brands. For instance, Borges-Tiago et al. (2020) emphasise the critical role of social networks in disseminating information, particularly regarding fake news. They cite Vargo et al. (2018), who assert that information cascades occur on these platforms due to the real-time sharing of user-generated content without formal oversight, potentially allowing it to reach vast audiences. This context underscores the importance of examining fake news from a brand management perspective for two primary reasons. The growing trend of

content personalization has obscured the distinction between user-generated content and marketing materials. Additionally, the Internet, particularly social media, serves as a publishing platform that allows for the extensive access, sharing, modification, and discussion of both accurate and misleading information regarding brands by a vast number of users.

In explorative research conducted by Fong et al. (2023) through online surveys and having control ads for misinformation, they found that misinformation impacts preferences by creating misbeliefs, and even though debunking is shown to be effective on average, during policy evaluation, it is essential to consider its impact on different consumers. Effective management of misinformation involves strategies companies can use to counteract false information and the role of fact-checking organisations in reducing its spread. Consumers can act as gatekeepers and detectors of misinformation, influencing others through their social ties and engagement on social media (Di Domenico & Ding, 2023). It is critical for brands to know how misinformation can change their consumers' demeanours and practices, and which components assist them in lessening this effect (Halazoich & Nel, 2017). It is seen that trusted brands have the lesser impact of fake news, get a smaller plunge in their deals, and hold their position rapidly compared to brands that have put in lesser endeavours to have a significant encounter and build up belief with the buyer (Halazoich & Nel, 2017).

2.7 Summary

Existing research and literature has described misinformation as a claim constituting to "contradict or distort common understandings of verifiable facts" (Guess & Lyons, 2020, p.10), "information that is false, but not intended to cause harm" (Wardle, 2018, p.5), "false content but the person sharing doesn't realise that it is false or misleading" (Rubin, 2022, p.8), "inaccurate, false, or out-of-context information created or disseminated without deliberate intent to cause harm" (Ekbal & Kumari, 2024, p.4), and is also referred to "fake or inaccurate information" where the information is unintentionally created to deceive (Wu et al., 2019, p.81). This suggests that the fundamental elements of misinformation are inaccurate information, but also the lack of intent to mislead or cause harm. Previous research concerning social media misinformation (Wu et al., 2019) has acknowledged that due to the social media platform affordances allowing users to publish anything, it can be

challenging to determine the intention behind the creation of misinformation. Thus, in the context of this research, misinformation is considered as that which is inaccurate or false, without the clear intent to mislead.

People want to make sense of things around them and tend to accept information that align with existing beliefs, societal values, social and personal identities. To assess the credibility of the information, they often rely on repetition and familiarity irrespective of the accuracy of information, easily leading to acceptance of inaccurate information. Truth bias and popularity cues along with repeated exposure affect the acceptance of the information in question. The motivation behind sharing inaccurate information could be altruistic motives where individuals share information to raise awareness, personal signalling where individuals share information to showcase their interests or even sharing for social acceptance (Mishra et al., 2024). Along with psychological motivations, other factors responsible for fast spread of misinformation include low literacy levels, lower attention span, emotional appeals and less knowledge of fact checking methods. The chapter also mentions the role of social media in the spread of misinformation, especially YouTube wherein the algorithms often entrap users in an echo chamber or filter bubbles affecting the exposure of the information to the users. The use of social media has amplified the harmful effects of misinformation (Shin, 2021), and the resulting echo-chambers can contribute to the widespread effects on consumers and even brands. The nature of social media makes online controversies emerge and evolve quickly (Jang & Allan, 2018). Even though a controversy is frequently unanticipated and unplanned, it can cause long-term damage to the company and its brand by reducing sales and market share or by extensive negative publicity (Banerjee, 2017). It is critical for brands to know how misinformation can change their consumers' demeanours and practices, and which components assist them in lessening this effect (Halazoich & Nel, 2017).

3. Methodology & Method

The previous chapter has defined misinformation as information that is false or inaccurate without the clear intent to deceive (Wardle, 2018; Rubin, 2022; Ekbal & Kumari, 2024). Thus, in the context of this research, misinformation has been defined as

misinformation that is false or inaccurate disseminated without an intent to deceive. Research suggests that people want to make sense of things around them and tend to accept information that align with existing beliefs, societal values, social and personal identities, even when it is false or misleading (Ecker,2017). To find credibility in shared information, individuals often rely on repetition and familiarity irrespective of the accuracy of information, leading to acceptance of inaccurate information. Truth bias and popularity cues along with repeated exposure ultimately affect the acceptance of information as truth or fact (Rubin,2022; Shin,2024). The motivation behind sharing information that may be classified as misinformation can still be altruistic, personal signalling or sharing for social acceptance are also potential motives (Mishra et al.,2024). Along with psychological motivations, other factors responsible for fast spread of misinformation include low literacy levels, lower attention span, emotional appeals and less knowledge of fact checking methods (Ekbal &Kumari,2024). Misinformation can have short-term and long-term effects on the brand, and the higher the belief the more consumers engage in negative consumer behaviour including negative word of mouth, customer retaliation, consumer boycotts, consumer brand sabotage and anti-brand activities.

The purpose of this chapter is to discuss the research design of this study. The chapter will begin by describing the research design with an overview of both the quantitative and qualitative methodologies, a description of the case study method and the use of Netnography to collect the data. The chapter then discusses thematic analysis as the data analysis method for this research. Additionally, this chapter also describes the sampling framework used and the ethical considerations of the data.

Users view online interactions as an extension of offline interactions, and misinformation online or offline is known to have immediate and long-term impacts on the brands (Bolander& Locher,2020; Chen & Cheng, 2023). As presented before, following the post by Mulvaney on 1st April 2023, various misleading narratives contributed to the brand controversy and call for a boycott of Bud Light. Hence, it this study seeks to understand how misinformation is manifested in online discussions during this brand controversy.

The research uses a qualitative methodology consisting of case study method, Netnography, and thematic analysis to collect and analyse the data. The research uses the YouTube comment sections of relevant videos as the online discussion platform to understand how misinformation appeared during the Mulvaney and Bud Light controversy.

These choices aim to explore findings and insights to answer the research question and to contribute to the literature on digital misinformation and its implications on brands and the people associated with them.

Lewandowsky et al. (2017) argues that we live in a post-truth world that empowers people to choose their own reality in which existing beliefs and prejudices overpower facts and factual evidence. Thus, in this world where misinformation has become a pervasive part of daily life, understanding its implications for brands and consumers is important, particularly regarding how both direct and indirect misinformation erode trust and influence how consumers interpret brand-related information, ultimately affecting their purchasing behaviours both online and offline (Di Domenico & Ding, 2023). Understanding misinformation in this context and how it manifests itself would help to understand how misinformation can be managed effectively in the event of a brand controversy to minimize harm to the brand's reputation. Further, it would help navigate relevant strategies for not only the brand but also the other parties, which in this controversy is Mulvaney. This study aims to elucidate the themes that emerge from YouTube comment discussions by analysing their content and providing valuable insights to navigate through similar controversies for all the parties involved in the controversy.

3.1 Research Design

Swanson and Holton III (2005) suggest that research enables better understanding of a phenomenon and an opportunity to make inferences about the larger issues and implications beyond those studied. Research methods refer to the specific tools employed for data collection in studies, while methodologies encompass the broader designs and frameworks utilized in research investigations (Lapan et al., 2012). Silverman and Marvasti (2008) state that methodology involves key decisions regarding case selection, data gathering techniques, and data analysis approaches when planning and conducting a research study, whereas methods refer to specific research techniques. A method refers to a systematic process or tool employed in research, typically for data collection or analysis while methodology comprises a broader framework that includes theories, methods, and various design elements utilized in the research process (Braun & Clarke, 2022). According to Yin (2009), the choice of a particular research method is influenced by three factors: (i) the nature of the "research question", (ii) "the extent of control an investigator has over actual

behavioural events", and (iii) the emphasis on "contemporary" versus "historical events" (Yin, 2009, p.8).

For this particular study, a mixed methods approach was utilised by combining case study and Netnography methodologies. The research question aims to explore 'how' misinformation manifests, thus indicating the nature of the research question as explorative, suggesting for a qualitative research methodology.

3.1a Quantitative Research Methodology

Orcher (2005) describes quantitative research as a method that conveys findings through numerical data, often represented as scores or frequency counts, which can be examined using statistical techniques. A quantitative research approach may also be described as objective while qualitative research emphasises subjective interpretations and experiences (Ahmad et al.,2019). Quantitative researchers are often interested in how a phenomenon can be generalized to a larger population and at times this approach to research is also considered as rigid; deviations from established plans may not be allowed because they interfere with standardization (Allen et al., 2008; Orcher, 2005). Generally, personalized interactions with participants are not allowed because these might disrupt the standardization, causing different interactions with different participants, this characterizing quantitative research as being distant and impersonal (Orcher, 2005).

Researchers like Tanțău. et al. (2019) have used quantitative research methodologies and a survey approach to analyse the probability of spreading fake news among both younger and older demographics. Research by Chen and Cheng (2020), investigated consumer responses on social media to fake news about Coca-Cola's alleged recall of Dasani water. They utilized a quantitative approach and conducted an online survey through Qualtrics to assess how various factors, including self-efficacy, media trust, persuasion and knowledge, influences brand trust. One of the key findings indicated that higher levels of self-efficacy and media trust significantly improved consumers' ability to identify fake news, reducing its adverse effects on brand trust. Although the study centred on Coca-Cola, it recognized that many other brands encounter similar challenges. For this research project, quantitative approach is used to analyse the mechanism of how consumers process and respond to fake news of Dasani water.

3.1b Qualitative Research Methodology

Qualitative researchers generally hold one of two perspectives: interpretive or critical (Lapan et al., 2012) and qualitative studies possess unique characteristics: interpretive, experiential, situational, and personalistic (Stake 2010). In qualitative research, more emphasis is placed on studying the phenomenon from an insider perspective where researcher often serves as the primary research instrument (Lapan et al., 2012; Stake, 2010). As Orcher (2005) argues if the research question aims to explore "What" or "How," qualitative research is most suitable because this approach seeks to identify social processes rather than generalize findings to a larger population (Orcher, 2005). One of the major strengths is the flexibility in qualitative research; this allows researchers to adjust questions and explore unanticipated insights as they emerge during a data gathering phase of the research (Mwita, 2022). Qualitative research is often criticized for subjectivity, as the researcher's interpretations can introduce bias (Mwita, 2022). Qualitative research also has limited generalizable value, as small sample sizes and context-specific findings make it difficult to apply the results broadly (Mwita, 2022). Furthermore, there is a great challenge when replicating results in qualitative studies, and the data analysis process can be complex and time-consuming (Mwita, 2022). Researchers like Vivion et al. (2024) have used qualitative research methodologies, specifically semi-structured interviews to explore the effects of misinformation and information overload for older adults. Tanțău. et al. (2019) and Vivion et al. (2024) have their studies around misinformation among demographics; however, research by Tanțău. et al. (2019) uses the quantitative approach to analyse probability of spreading fake news among the young and older demographics while the research by Vivion et al. (2024) uses qualitative approach explores the effects of misinformation and information overload for older adults.

Similarly, this research uses qualitative research methodology to understand the ways that misinformation manifests in online discussions surrounding a brand controversy. This approach allows for flexibility and an in-depth examination of both YouTube comments and sub-comments to identify different themes in relation to the topics that drive misinformation. This approach aims to achieve a richer understanding of the kinds of conversations that took place online during the controversy.

3.2 Data Collection Methods

The Mulvaney and Bud Light controversy was selected as a case study through an initial survey of brand controversies that appeared to feature clearly false information.

Another case study that was considered was a disingenuous association between Corona Beer and the Corona Virus that emerged online during the Covid-19 pandemic (Zheng et al., 2022). Whilst the latter example highlighted clearly false information, it did not generate clear and substantive online discussion for analysis. The chosen case study, however, did provide effective access to online discussion during the controversy on social media platforms. In addition to the case study approach, Netnography (Kozinets, 2020) was chosen to facilitate an understanding of large and complex online discussions.

The primary data is collected in the form of YouTube comments. Chen and Feng (2024) view the YouTube comment section as a public sphere community through which the platform offers a space to voice different viewpoints, grow public discussion, and exchange various outlooks. They also emphasise the need to analyse popular comment-and-reply units to thoroughly understand user engagement on the platform. Therefore, the comments analysed will represent popular opinion and discussion within the comment sections. Using the top comments shows what viewers likely value and interact with, allowing insight into the popular opinion within the comment section (Google, n.d.).

3.2 a Case Study Method

Case study research is a qualitative method that explores a particular case within its real-life context (Silverman, 2007; Yin, 2009). Case studies contribute significantly to qualitative research by seeking to understand a unique situation, develop a theory, or provide comprehensive descriptions (Silverman, 2017). The purpose behind conducting a case study is key, guiding the researcher's approach and objectives throughout the study (Creswell, 2013). This study adopts a qualitative case study approach to investigate the misinformation surrounding the Bud Light and Mulvaney controversy. Silverman (2017) classifies case studies into intrinsic, instrumental, and collective types. The first type focuses on understanding the unique aspects of the case without attempting to generalize findings beyond the case. Instrumental case studies examine a case to provide insight into a broader issue or to refine a generalization. The focus is on an issue or phenomenon, using the case to understand it better, and collective case studies, as the name suggests, involve studying multiple cases to investigate a general phenomenon (Silverman, 2017).

As per Creswell (2013), a well-executed qualitative case study aims to provide a thorough understanding of the case at hand through detailed descriptions and exploring key

themes, issues, or specific situations related to the case. Ultimately, case studies culminate in the researcher drawing conclusions that synthesize the findings into broader meanings, offering insights and interpretations that contribute to understanding the phenomenon under investigation. A limitation surrounding the generalizability of qualitative data arises because such data typically comes from a limited number of cases. Silverman (2017) mentions that cases are often chosen for ease of access rather than representativeness. However, using the case study method and purposive sampling, the case of Mulvaney and Bud Light is chosen for ease of access to information available on social media platforms facilitating an in-depth investigation of the misinformation relating to the brand controversy due to the collaboration.

3.2 b Netnography

Netnography is a qualitative research method aimed at understanding the cultural experiences nested in social media artifacts, behaviours, connections, and structures (Kozinets, 2020). As Kozinets (2002) explains, Netnography can be understood as ethnography adapted to the study of online communities. Owa (2023) suggests that some of the advantages of Netnography as a method are its cost-effectiveness, ability to explore sensitive topics, in-depth understanding of communities, and real-time data, whilst some of the challenges are that it does have legal/ethical issues and cannot be easy to validate the data and its reliability (Owa,2023).

Kozinets (2020) advocates for a structured approach to Netnography, that serves as a precise and methodical guide for researchers, ensuring research integrity and facilitating result comparisons. Like ethnography, Netnography adheres to methodological connections and principles that guide how its practice relates to perspectives on the world, methods of studying and understanding it, and priorities for determining what is significant within it and its approaches and practices are fundamentally centred on human experience and cultural understanding. This approach is fundamentally grounded in a recognition of the context of daily existence and seeks to investigate social systems characterized by shared meanings, guided by a level of self-awareness from both the researcher and the cultural participants (Kozinets, 2020).

Several researchers have used Netnography in similar studies; for instance, Kozinets and Seraj-Aksit (2024) utilized Netnography to understand how online interactions lead to

digital consumer movement. They used the Netnography data collection wherein beginning in January 2021, they regularly visited, read through, reflected upon, and saved data from the WallStreetBets financial investing subreddit group and chose to capture data that was relevant to our research questions and possessed richly detailed, descriptive, and emotional content. These included different forms of online traces, including many memes, texts, comments, and replies. For analysis and interpretation, they used ChatGPT 4.0, which also suggested interesting categorizations and novel connections. The study found that culture, collective identification, and shared experiences create a sense of coherence and commitment within the community, leading to digital activism (Kozinets & Seraj-Aksit, 2024). The study shares similarities with my research in terms of using Netnography to scrutinize the audience's patterns, which in this case leads to digital activism, while in mine, Netnography would help to understand how misinformation manifests itself during brand controversy.

A notable study by Ozdemir (2021), investigated misinformation during the Covid-19 pandemic through a netnographic study of the Turkish Facebook group "Corona Gerçeği (Corona Truth)". In this case, Netnography was employed for its effectiveness in exploring online communities by observing user-generated content, posts, and discussions in their natural context as research data. The study identified nine primary themes through thematic coding based on user interactions: "Precautions, Emotions, Government/Governance, Medicine/Science, Conspiracy Theories, Media, Risk, Business/Money, and Ideology/Religion" (Ozdemir, 2021, p.145). Ozdemir (2021) mentioned that a primary limitation was its focus on a single Facebook site, which restricted the study's ability to generalize the findings to broader populations. Ozdemir (2021) has used qualitative Netnography to explore the effects of misinformation and explore the themes in the discussions in their natural context providing for richer understanding of the misinformation.

Another similar study was by De Souza-Leão et al. (2024), who used Netnography to explore the virtual consumption experiences of Brazilian NBA fans. Data was collected from Twitter, where fans shared their NBA-related experiences and interactions. In the initial netnographic stage, they chose the community based on its relevance, interactions, and accessibility; along with the community choice, they selected the hashtag #NBAnaESPN on Twitter to further find the community. Following the initial stage, the researchers were naturally immersed in the culture of this community since the researchers had been NBA

Brazilian fans since 2012, and two of them interacted with the league broadcast and fans through Twitter – i.e., the community chosen. The next stage was data collection, wherein they used Buzz Monitor software, which allowed them to observe interaction peaks in temporal extracts on its platform. Consequently, they analysed data over 15 months by data debugging, which was performed through common themes; then, these themes were used to guide the denomination used in the coding process; the third round allowed them to be arranged in groups. Such code arrangements produced insights for the fourth analytical round: the proposition of categories. Finally, the denomination and definition of the categories were refined through an abstraction to cover the context of the investigated phenomenon and allude to previously established concepts in the literature. The findings revealed that fans actively co-create extraordinary experiences around NBA games, engage in presumption by contributing content and discussions, and reflect broader cultural dynamics in sports consumption in the digital age. This research highlights the importance of social media in shaping modern sports fandom and how Brazilian NBA fans navigate their identities and experiences in a virtual environment. These studies have used Netnography to study social media and its impact on the customers/audience.

The studies discussed have described the more immersive use of Netnography, however the choice of Netnography in this research is limited due to the scope of this study. Netnography has provided inspiration and guidance for trying to understand a large number of comments and their relationship with one another within a very specific context and at a very specific time.

3.3 Sampling

The data for this research is collected by first identifying YouTube videos posted about the controversy. During the initial analysis of the case study, the words "Boycott Bud Light" were discussed often, and since the intention is to understand misinformation in the context of a brand controversy, this phrase was used as a specific search term to identify relevant data. Thirteen videos posted by verified YouTube accounts from April 1 to April 30, 2023, were selected, and the top 20 comments and their sub-comments from each of these videos provided the data for this research. The selection of videos by verified accounts and the time frame is a feasibility choice to accommodate the limited scope of this research project. Using the top comments shows what viewers likely value and interact with, allowing insight into the popular opinion within the comment section (Google, n.d.), and the selection

of the top 20 comments aims to represent the popular opinion in the online discussions in the comment section for each video. Since the data is collected from YouTube comments, this study is limited to commenters' opinions expressed via social media. Furthermore, some comments were excluded from the data analysis, such as those that only used emojis, as the meanings behind such communication can be ambiguous.

3.4 Data Analysis Method

Thematic analysis focuses on identifying, analysing, and interpreting patterns within qualitative data that involves systematically coding data to develop themes (Braun & Clarke, 2022). Thematic analysis can be used to look for patterns within personal or social meaning around a topic (Clarke & Braun, 2016). This study employs thematic analysis according to the six-phase process outlined by Braun and Clarke (2022). The first phase involves becoming familiar with the data, where the researcher engages deeply with the dataset through extensive reading to achieve a thorough understanding. This familiarization process includes three practices: immersion, critical engagement, and notetaking. In the second phase, initial codes are generated by systematically highlighting and tagging relevant features in the dataset that relate to the research questions. Coding is an analytical technique that compresses segments of qualitative data into simplified formats to facilitate the detection of patterns and the development of various analytical results, including categories, concepts, assertions, and themes (Wolgemuth et al., 2024). A code signifies an analytically relevant idea or concept linked to specific data segments. This coding process is organic, dynamic, and subjective. Semantic codes capture explicit meanings closely aligned with participants' language, while latent codes explore deeper, implicit levels of meaning. (Braun & Clarke, 2022).

The third phase involves searching for themes, where the researcher organises the codes into potential themes by grouping related codes to form preliminary patterns. Thematic maps visually represent potential themes and their interrelationships. Subthemes share a central concept with the overarching theme. In the fourth phase, reviewing themes, the researcher refines them by comparing them against the dataset to ensure coherence and accuracy, which may require removing or combining themes as necessary. The next phase involves defining and naming themes, leading to clarifying the scope and meaning of each theme, followed by the report production phase; in this, the researcher presents a

detailed account of the themes, supported by relevant data excerpts highlighting the key findings. This process is iterative, allowing for ongoing refinement of themes throughout the analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2022).

How each phase is applied to this research:

Phase 1: Familiarizing oneself with the data

Reading through the 1298 comments collected and establishing familiarity with content and tone of each comment. The comments are also viewed in the context of YouTube videos to further familiarize with the data.

Phase 2: Generation of initial codes

Creation of broad codes based on the content or tone of comments, such as accusations or boycott comments. Noting which video the comment was posted on.

Phase 3: Searching of codes or themes

Establishing the key theme that is present in each comment, based on the tone or content it contains, for example mentioning outrage.

Phase 4: Reviewing of themes

Ensuring that each comment is in the most appropriate category and referring to how these comments altogether make sense when combined under the themes.

Phase 5: Definition and naming of themes

Establishing what each theme and sub theme concerns and naming each theme accordingly. For example, 'Misgendering' that covers misgendering Mulvaney by using wrong pronouns, undermining her gender identity, delegitimizing of her being a real woman.

Phase 6: Producing the findings

Creating a comparison of categories and outlining what makes each category unique based on what each comments said.

I am using thematic analysis as it offers the possibility of an inductively oriented experiential analysis that focuses on patterned meaning. This research will draw on the 1298 comments that represent the deeper discussion and engagement during the controversy. As a result, employing thematic analysis will enable each comment to be coded according to themes, with codes then used to demonstrate relationships between themes.

The steps taken in this research are detailed below:

Step 1: Identifying YouTube videos posted about the controversy

Several videos were found after using the search term "Boycott Bud Light" by both verified and unverified accounts on YouTube.

Step 2: Sample Selected – 13 YouTube videos during the duration of 1st April to 30th April, 2023

YouTube videos are selected from verified accounts during the duration of 1st April to 30th April, 2023, the month following the initial response of the release of the video posted by Mulvaney on 1st April, 2023.

Step 3: Data will be the top 20 comment posts and the sub-comments at the time of data collection from each of these YouTube videos

Before categorization, comments were copied from the YouTube video comment section, with the comments organization set to "Top Comments," and then pasted into a separate document and numbered to preserve the comments and any associated comment threads for deeper analysis.

Step 4: Thematic analysis

Comments are coded into themes. The themes are based on the content of comment posts and what is being said. A minimum of 260 comment posts will form this data, as the top twenty comments from thirteen videos will be studied, along with comment replies.

Step 5: Findings

Commonalities and disparities across themes are explored based on content.

3.5 Ethical Considerations

The data at the centre of this study is YouTube comments. YouTube comments are publicly available and therefore formal consent to include them in a study of this nature is not required. However, analysing YouTube comments does still prompt some ethical considerations about anonymity, privacy, and potential harm (Franzke et al., 2020). According to the guidelines on Internet research ethics, it is important to maintain the anonymity of commenters to protect their identities and ensure the confidentiality and security of their data; researchers should also be mindful of the context of comments, the implications of their findings, and the possibility of harm to individuals or communities (Forskningsetikk, n.d.). Franzke et al. (2020) argue that as a result, it is possible to ethically work with information from public profiles without informed consent, provided that participants' are ensured total anonymity and privacy. During my data analysis, whilst I am not obliged to protect the anonymity of the online users that I am drawing data from, I will be mindful of the potential impact these comments can have if used out of the context that they were posted. Thus, I will not be recording the usernames of the commenters to ensure anonymity and privacy.

4. Data Overview

The previous chapter examined the different research approaches - quantitative and qualitative and laid down qualitative research methodology to answer the research question. This approach allows for flexibility and an in-depth examination of the data to answer the research question. As part of the qualitative methodology, case study method, Netnography and thematic analysis are used to collect and analyse the data. The chapter used the case study method to select the Mulvaney and Bud Light controversy based on the ease of access to information on social media platforms, thus facilitating an in-depth investigation of the misinformation relating to the brand controversy. The Netnography method is also applied as it enables researchers' experiences and perspectives in studying online communities and consumer behaviour. Further on, for the data analysis, thematic analysis will be used to provide deeper insights into the data collected using the sampling framework.

This chapter provides a brief overview of the 13 videos selected for the data collection. As mentioned earlier, the data for this research is collected by first identifying YouTube videos posted about the controversy. During the initial analysis of the case study, the words "Boycott Bud Light" were discussed often, and since I am looking to understand misinformation in the context of a brand controversy, I have used the search term "Boycott Bud Light". Thirteen videos posted by verified YouTube accounts from April 1 to April 30, 2023, were selected, and the top 20 comments and their sub-comments from each of these videos provided the data for this research. The selection of videos by verified accounts and the time frame is a feasibility choice to accommodate the limited time to conduct this research. Using the top comments shows what viewers likely value and interact with, allowing insight into the popular opinion within the comment section (Google, n.d.), and the selection of the top 20 comments aims to represent the popular opinion in the online discussions in the comment section.

The videos selected were by *The Young Turks*, *Daily Blast Live*, *ABC News*, *The Late Show with Stephen Colbert*, *Fox Business*, *Matt Walsh*, *ABC 7 Chicago*, *France 24 English*, *CNBC Television*, *The Ring of Fire*, *NewsNation*, and *NBC News*. The videos selected were a mix of left, centre, and right-leaning accounts; for instance - The Young Turks claim to be politically left, ABC News claims to be politically left centre, CNBC leans towards the centre,

Fox Business claims to be centre-right and Matt Walsh claims to be leaning right (AllSides, 2024).

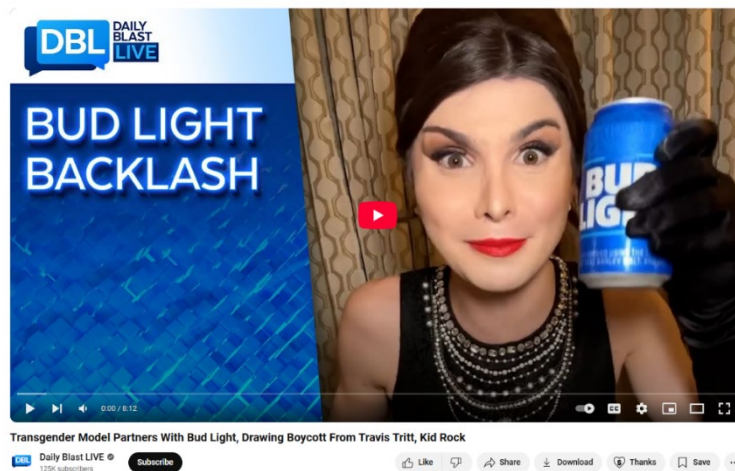
- Video 1 - “Bud Light Triggers Right-Wingers with Mulvaney Ad”



(Snapshot of Video 1)

This YouTube video titled “*Bud Light Triggers Right-Wingers with Dylan Mulvaney Ad*” was posted by The Young Turks which gathered around 400,885 views, 6.6K likes, and 14,986 comments as of January 6, 2025. This video starts with reproducing the original Instagram video by Mulvaney in the video followed by the anchor stating that this video caused a “Hissy fit on the right” as seen by the “tantrums” of celebrities like Kid Rock. Then showing the reaction of Kid Rock to Mulvaney’s post by shooting the cans. The anchor called it an “unhinged reaction” and stated that Kid Rock brought the beer to shoot the beer and the other person in the video accused the right of violence against transgender people. The video further discusses that Bud Light is not taking a strong stand but rather just wants to sell more, and since Mulvaney’s audience is young it is a smart move to market to them. The video tends to demean the product quality of Bud Light but supports the gender identity of Mulvaney. However, through the data collected from the comment section, it is observed that the commenter’s views did not always align with the views of the video especially in relation to Mulvaney’s gender identity.

- Video 2 - “Transgender Model Partners With Bud Light, Drawing Boycott From Travis Tritt, Kid Rock”



(Snapshot of Video 2)

This YouTube video titled “*Transgender Model Partners With Bud Light, Drawing Boycott From Travis Tritt, Kid Rock*” was posted by Daily Blast Live which gathered around 95,520 views and 730 comments as of January 6, 2025. The video includes a discussion on the backlash caused by Mulvaney's partnership with Bud Light and references Mulvaney's partnership with Nike. It covers the reactions from various influencers, including Travis Tritt and Kid Rock, who publicly opposed the collaboration. The view also mentions Anheuser-Busch's response that they work with hundreds of influencers. The video further conducts a poll to ask the audience if they thought the partnership is a good idea or a bad idea. This is followed by a debate discussing the backlash and the comments on the backlash. Further the host reinstates that he does not understand the “outrage” The comments under this video showed mistrust in the news media by comments like “*That's how they try to sway public opinion*” (Comment 21e), “*Clueless news anchors*” (Comment 38) and “*Just let the mainstream media tell you what to think.. HELL NO!*” (Comment 31)

- Video 3 - “New Details on Bud Light Backlash”



(Snapshot of Video 3)

This YouTube video titled “New Details on Bud Light Backlash” was posted by ABC News which gathered around 452,127 views as of January 6, 2025. The video provides an update on the negative reactions to Bud Light's partnership with a transgender influencer. It discusses how the influencer's personalized cans connected her transgender identity with the traditionally male-dominated brand, sparking the #GoWokeGoBroke trend. The video also includes a statement from ABInBev clarifying that the cans were not for public sale and highlights a recent podcast clip where from an interview Bud Light's VP in Make Yourself at home, where she mentions that Bud Light had been a brand of “fratty” and “out of touch humor” and mentioned that Bud Light has been in decline and if they do not attract younger drinkers, there will be no future for Bud Light. She also mentions shifting the tone and the anchors indicate the marketing chief's emphasis on targeting both men and women. The podcast video in Make Yourself at home was posted on 23rd March, 2023 and the collaboration took with Mulvaney was on 1st April,2023. However, because of the sequence of events, this video caused the commenters to view this as an attempt by Bud Light to target younger generations and shift their demographic focus.

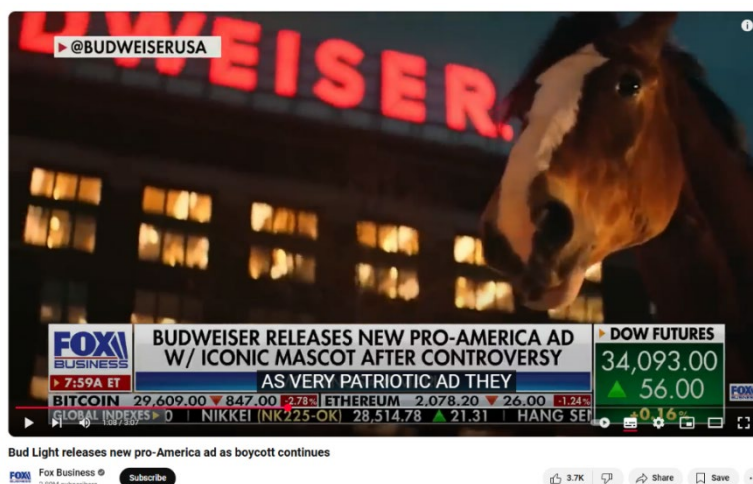
- Video 4 - 'Boycotting Bud Light? Reach For Shaft Beer'



(Snapshot of Video 4)

This YouTube video titled “Boycotting Bud Light? Reach For Shaft Beer” was posted by The Late Show with Stephen Colbert which gathered around 234,201 views, 5.1K likes, and 1,405 comments as of January 6, 2025. This video is a comedic spoof that humorously promotes "Shaft Beer" as an alternative to Bud Light. Portraying shaft beer as the beer you were assigned at birth targeting a male-dominated audience and uses sarcasm to mock the situation. This spoof tries to copy advertisements by beer brand showing men drinking beer in different settings.

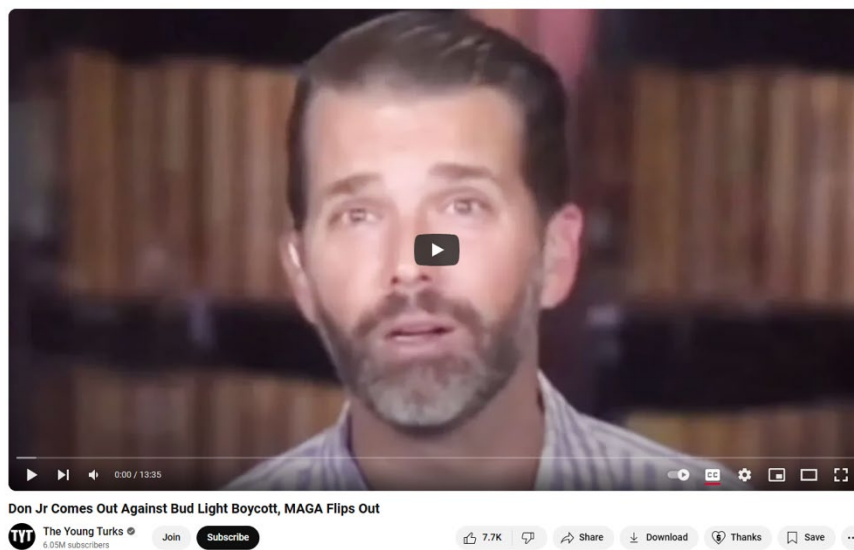
- Video 5 - 'Bud Light Releases New Pro-America Ad as Boycott Continues'



(Snapshot of Video 5)

This YouTube video titled *Bud Light Releases New Pro-America Ad as Boycott Continues* was posted by *Fox Business* which gathered around *225,026 views, 3.7K likes, and 2,841 comments* as of January 6, 2025. This video includes a discussion on the sales decline Bud Light faced after its partnership with Mulvaney, comparing it to rivals like Coors and Miller. The video covers how Budweiser responded by launching a new pro-America ad featuring its iconic mascot in an attempt to recover from the controversy.

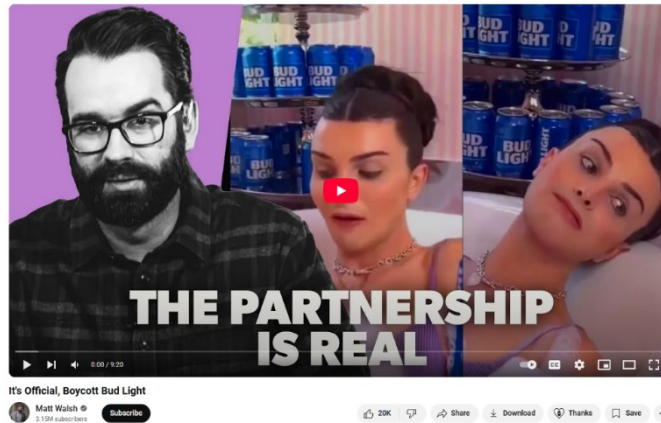
- Video 6 - 'Don Jr. Comes Out Against Bud Light Boycott, MAGA Flips Out'



(Snapshot of Video 6)

This YouTube video titled *Don Jr. Comes Out Against Bud Light Boycott, MAGA Flips Out* was posted by *The Young Turks* which gathered around *207,193 views, 7.7K likes, and 2,955 comments* as of January 6, 2025. This video features Don Jr. speaking out against the Bud Light boycott, emphasising their support for Republicans. It discusses the backlash from the MAGA community and the political implications surrounding the boycott.

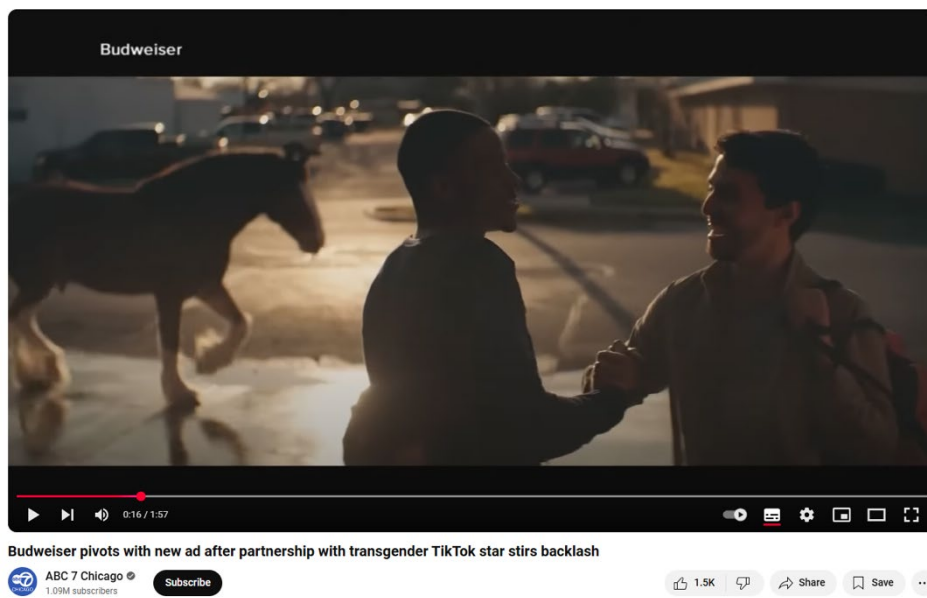
- Video 7 - “It's Official, Boycott Bud Light”



(Snapshot of Video 7)

This YouTube video titled It's Official, Boycott Bud Light was posted by Matt Walsh which gathered around 541,195 views, 20K likes, and 5,558 comments as of January 6, 2025. This is where in Matt announces a formal boycott of Bud Light, expressing strong opposition to the brand's recent partnership with a transgender influencer. The content encourages viewers to join the boycott and outlines the reasons behind the disapproval.

- Video 8 - “Budweiser Pivots with New Ad After Partnership with Transgender TikTok Star Stirs Backlash”



(Snapshot of Video 8)

This YouTube video titled *Budweiser Pivots with New Ad After Partnership with Transgender TikTok Star Stirs Backlash* was posted by ABC 7 Chicago which gathered around 920,778 views, 1.5K likes, and 1,494 comments as of January 6, 2025, This video covers Budweiser's response to criticism following its partnership with a transgender TikTok influencer. It highlights the release of a new advertisement aimed at addressing the negative backlash and restoring the brand's image.

- Video 9 - "Bud Light Boycott: What's Real, What's Fake"



(Snapshot of Video 9)

This YouTube video titled *Bud Light Boycott: What's Real, What's Fake* was posted by FRANCE 24 English which gathered around 21,046 views, 136 likes, and 218 comments as of January 6, 2025. The video talks about misinformation and distinguishes between real and fake claims, showcasing footage of individuals destroying cans, including a road roller incident, and a photoshopped image of a politician holding a Bud Light can with Mulvaney's face.

- Video 10 - “Bud Light Boycott: What Triggered the Backlash?”



(Snapshot of Video 10)

This YouTube video titled *Bud Light Boycott: What Triggered the Backlash?* was posted by *CNBC Television* which gathered around *92,176 views*, *325 likes*, and *675 comments* as of January 6, 2025. It discusses the importance of understanding customer expectations and brand identity. It emphasises that a brand should remain authentic and avoid associating with controversial figures, like Mulvaney, as this can alienate its core audience

- Video 11 - “Ron DeSantis Joins Bud Light Boycott After”



(Snapshot of Video 11)

This YouTube video titled *Ron DeSantis Joins Bud Light Boycott After Admitting He Doesn't Drink It* was posted by *The Ring of Fire* which gathered around *71,071 views, 4.3K likes, and 648 comments* as of January 6, 2025. This video covers Florida Governor Ron DeSantis' involvement in the Bud Light controversy. He announces that Bud Light has lost a customer; despite admitting he never drank the beer in the first place.

- Video 12 - “What Can Bud Light Do to Bounce Back After Controversy?”



(Snapshot of Video 12)

This YouTube video titled *What Can Bud Light Do to Bounce Back After Controversy?* was posted by *NewsNation* which gathered around *6,899 views, 54 likes, and 187 comments* as of January 6, 2025. This video includes a discussion on the fallout from the brand's partnership with Mulvaney. It highlights the response to the backlash, including two Bud Light executives being placed on leave. The video also features Rick House, an online advertising expert, who offers insights into how the brand could recover from the controversy.

- Video 13- “Bud Light Fallout Intensifies Over Trans Partnership”



(Snapshot of Video 13)

A YouTube video titled *Bud Light Fallout Intensifies Over Trans Partnership*, posted by NBC News, had approximately 734,504 views, 4.9K likes, and 4,790 comments as of January 6, 2025. This video addresses the issue of the public backlash against Bud Light following its collaboration with a transgender influencer. It highlights consumer-led boycotts, the spread of misinformation—including viral footage of individuals destroying Bud Light cans—and political reactions both in support of and against the brand. Additionally, the video reports a 17% decline in Bud Light’s sales.

5. Findings

The previous chapter provided a brief overview of the 13 YouTube videos to provide an understanding of the videos and the interactions they gathered.

The purpose of this chapter is to introduce the main themes and sub-themes identified through thematic analysis. The chapter aims to present these themes through comments in the data set and identify patterns and similarities in the analysis.

This chapter conducts a thematic analysis of YouTube comments surrounding the Bud Light and Mulvaney controversy. Using the Braun and Clarke (2022) six-phase model, comments were categorized according to the dominant theme(s) that emerged in each comment. Every comment, including comment replies on comment threads, was coded and subsequently categorized based on the themes within the comments. A total of 1298 comments were collected using the sampling framework.

Following this analysis, the data was placed into the following themes:

Major Themes	Total Comments
Go Woke, Go Broke	217
Misgendering	192
Criticisms & Accusations at Bud Light	179
Consumer Identity	159
External Commentators	34
Total Comments	781

Table 1 – Major themes and their corresponding number of comments.

The theme 'Go woke. Go broke' includes the comments talking about the action of boycotting Bud Light especially by refusing to buy Bud Light, switching to other alternatives, engaging in negative word of mouth about Bud Light or its parent company ABInBev, accusing the brand of going woke and scepticisms of the boycott. For instance, comments like *"This woke BS is getting out of hand and needs to be STOPPED!"* (Comment 94)

The theme 'Misgendering' covers the comments where Mulvaney is misgendered by using wrong pronouns, invalidating her gender identity, accusing her of not being a real

woman, and other comments that stood up against this misgendering. For instance, comments like "It's a he not she" (Comment 50n)

The theme 'criticisms and accusations at Bud Light' covers the anti-brand rhetoric comments such as those accusing the brand for taking a political stand, its quality, leadership and other accusations. For example, *"Using your brand to make a political statement is lunacy. Even the Clydesdales can't save them now."* (Comment 191)

The theme 'Consumer Identity' includes comments that express the disconnect in consumer identity through narratives about the brand alienating the primary consumer base and proclaiming to understand the motivations of the collaboration. For instance, *"Unbelievable they didn't know their consumer."* (Comment 222)

The theme 'external commentators' cover the comments about external influencers that affected the controversy. For example, *"Kid Rock and Travis Tritt is just being honest to themselves and the world. They are not going along with this madness, just like the majority of society. No agenda intended."* (Comment 23)

5.1 Go Woke, Go Broke

The most significant number of comments within a single theme is named "Go Woke, Go Broke" (n= 217 comments). The phrase "go woke, go broke" is often used to criticize and boycott businesses for adopting diversity, equity and inclusion values. The post led to online misinformation that caused the controversy and outrage, calling for a boycott of Bud Light (Hamilton, 2023). This theme covers the comments in relation to boycotting Bud Light as means of punishing the brand for "going woke", boycotting by refusing to buy Bud Light or ABinBev products, switching to another brand, engaging in negative word of mouth, and skepticism about the effectiveness of the boycott.

Compared to other videos, Matt Walsh's video received 80 comments regarding this theme; the video by Matt Walsh explicitly called for a boycott and expressed strong opposition to the brand's partnership with Mulvaney. The comments under this video expressed strong views leaning towards boycott. For instance, *"You don't just boycott Bud Light. You boycott all of Anheuser Busch products."* (Comment 125), *"This is taking "go woke, go broke" to a monumental level."* (Comment 131). Out of the top twenty main comments, 12 comments talked about boycotting Bud Light including negative word of mouth and 8 comments attacking Mulvaney's gender identity. The video by Fox Business

with the headline 'Bud Light releases new pro-America ad as boycott continues' that talked about the subsequent advertisement released by Bud Light after the controversy received 39 comments in relation to boycotting Bud Light and Consumer Identity. The comments under this video mainly surround the betrayal and anger expressed due to the new pro-America advert. For instance, *"CEO said that they're for American values, what they did went totally against American values!"* (Comment 82), *"They can have their ads. We now know where the company really wants to be going!"* (Comment 81) and *"That ad is insulting. These people have no self-awareness. They need to come back with a strong anti woke message for the future"* (Comment 87) express these views. The theme 'Go woke, go broke' appears in different ways across the two videos, for instance in the video by Matt Walsh, the call for a boycott is used to punish Bud Light for going woke, whilst in the video by Fox news, the misalignment in values lead to wanting the company to go broke.

It was found that commenters expressed views of boycotting Bud Light to punish the brand for "going woke" by collaborating with a trans influencer. For instance, one commenter remarked, *"....So when a corporation takes a bite of the woke pie, people will chose if they want to support that company or not. AB learned that the hard way and it cost them a lot "* (Comment 66). This perspective casts the commenter's response as a form of teaching the company and AB (Anheuser-Busch, the parent company of Bud Light) a lesson, with one commenter claiming, *"Let this be a lesson for big corporates to think hard before they promote or hire a woke executive"* (Comment 190). This reinforces the views by scholars such as Albrecht et al. (2013) who suggest that a boycott is associated with "punishing of a company by consumers whose value system was infringed upon through expression of an aversion to objects due to inappropriate behaviors or activities" (Albrecht et al., 2013, p 183).

Amidst these polarized perspectives, a sense of frustration with corporate 'wokeness' is found, statements like *"Go woke, Get Broke!"* (Comment 172), *"I want a beer not a beer and a shot of wokeness"* (Comment 223c), *"This woke BS is getting out of hand and needs to be STOPPED!"* (Comment 94), *"It doesn't trigger anybody. People are sick of the woke garbage period and Budweiser is going to suffer for it"* (Comment 13) expressed this frustration.

The commenters expressed their views on not only boycotting Bud Light, but also the other brands owned by ABinBev and the distributors. This can be seen below, along with commenters advocating to boycott all the brands under ABinBev-

"Don't just boycott Bud Light boycott Anheuser Busch" (Comment 122), "Anheuser Bush owns many many beer brands. Look at the labels you'll see. So it's better to patronize your local beer brewery. Their beer is better anyway. Corporate beer is skunky." (Comment 122h) and "Boycott business that distributes their products also" (Comment 122p)

It was also found that commenters did not want any association with the brand and their loyalty to the brand was compromised because of this collaboration, some commenters suggested switching to other brands. For instance, *"Don't boycott, just switch beers. And never switch back" (Comment 189b) and "Support your local private breweries. They probably make better beer than bud light anyway" (Comment 125h) .*

The data analyses also found commenters engaged in negative word of mouth by sharing past experiences and current experiences adding in to the pre-existing misleading narratives or creating narratives of their own -

"Just left my local shop and the shelves are completely filled with Bud light. The clerk said they're fully stocked off the shelves in the back as well" (Comment 58).

"I'm in the UK and didn't even realise Bud Light was sold here, but I was in the store yesterday and they had a boxes of bottles (20 x 300ml) for £9.99, which is about \$12. Nobody had bought any as the display was full. A few friends of mine have mentioned the whole DM controversy and refuse to drink it, so it's definitely reached UK shores" (Comment 185).

"My husband and I run a restaurant where Bud Light sold the most. Since this controversy has arisen we have not had one request for any Budweiser products. People are tired of having this gender-confused movement pushed on us. Budweiser wanted to see hard far they could push the limit and they didn't have to wait long for an answer" (Comment 46).

"I use to work at AB. They were takenover by InBev in 2008. They fired all of their midwestern marketing experts and moved corporate to NYC. They became super woke. They had rainbow flag pride beer that upset a lot of their Midwestern customers. They swore they would boycott and never buy their products ever again" (Comment 139).

It was found that some commenters wanted to disassociate themselves from the brand because the collaboration conflicted with their personal values and moral standards-

"...I don't support a company supporting a grown man that thinks he's 12 years old, dresses like a girl literally. That is sick and disturbing." (Comment 95)

Some commenters expressed that Bud Light is not an American brand anymore justifying the call for a boycott on patriotic grounds. For instance, *"Not an American company anymore, the boycott is NOT a mistake."* (Comment 91), *"Should've been boycotted years ago when it was no longer an America company."* (Comment 122q) and *"CEO said that they're for American values, what they did went totally against American values!"* (Comment 82); this comment references the press statement released by Brendan Whitworth, CEO of Anheuser-Busch InBev; it suggests that ABinBev's strategy to counteract the misinformation backfired because people did not trust the brand's intentions.

When conflicted with cultural values, the following comment emphasises on familial and generational brand loyalty being compromised: *"Idiots forgot that people often stick to brands that their parents drink. I drank bud light because my dad always had Budweiser. My son will now never see any Budweiser products in my house"* (Comment 182c). This aligns with the research by Albrecht et al. (2013) where they noted that consumers are motivated to participate in boycotts when they feel personally involved with the issue. This sense of involvement arises when the issue directly conflicts with their personal values and moral standards or when they strongly identify with the core objectives of the boycott.

This theme also covers the skepticisms about the boycott which was observed in the data collected. Such comments reflect doubts about whether the boycott will have a lasting impact or is merely temporary.

"Its gonna blow over in a week when everyone forgets and theyre back to buying Bud Light. Just like they did with Gucci and every other brand that did something Racist or Braindead. You really overestimate the comitment that people dont have. Nobody is gonna cancel bud light. I wish they would, but its not gonna happen." (Comment 50b)

"Because they made a trans person a personal can of beer? This is the dumbest boycott yet" (Comment 131a).

"they'll probably be selling more beer in the near future" (Comment 41u)..

"I can guarantee bud-light not going anywhere cry babies" (Comment 41r).

5.2 Misgendering

The second largest number of comments within a theme is that of Misgendering (n=192 comments). As explained by Pino and Edmonds (2024), misgendering can be referred to as the use of gendered language that does not match how people identify themselves. The backlash against Bud Light's partnership with Mulvaney featured prominently in a wave of comments that misgendered her, reflecting resistance and hostility toward her gender identity. This theme covers the comments in relation to using incorrect pronouns for Mulvaney, invalidating Mulvaney and Bud Light, not considering Mulvaney as a real woman and support for trans community. These comments highlight how misgendering within the discourse functions as a method of careful exclusion as well as a means of expressing dissatisfaction.

Commenters frequently engaged in misgendering Mulvaney by using he/him pronouns for her. For instance, *"You keep saying 'She' but Dylan is a man... I think the correct pronouns are HE"* (Comment 16), *"It's a he not she"* (Comment 50n) and *"Stop calling Dylan' Ms"* (Comment 96) that indicated misgendered.

On the other hand, comments like *"**she/her"* (Comment 249b) were seen trying to correct the pronouns.

It was also found that by refusing to acknowledge Mulvaney's identity, these commenters attempted to delegitimize her public presence and, by extension, invalidate any brand association that promotes or celebrates her. For example, *"Calling Dylan Mulvaney a real woman is like calling Bud Light a real beer."* (Comment 42), *"Drink pretending to be beer signs man pretending to be woman"* (Comment 42c) and *"Dylan pretends to be a woman and Budweiser pretends to be a beer"* (Comment 126o) this framing reveals not just misgendering but also an attempt to demean the product.

Furthermore, commenters employed misgendering as a means of asserting a traditional perspective, with one comment stating, *"Huh? That's a man. Take a biology course some day and learn about something called 'DNA'. You'll be better informed then. Good luck. SMH"* (Comment 24b) which was subject to a counter-comment, *" dna and gender have nothing to do with eachother sweetheart maybe you should be the one getting informed <3"* (Comment 24c)

This misgendering was consistently framed around a perceived conflict with reality and societal norms. For instance, *"If they can convince you that Dylan Mulvaney is a real*

woman then they can convince you of anything. Learn to think for yourself." (Comment 249e) and "Yeah most people are weird out by trans in real life" Comment 243e) indicating that they do not agree with the existence of transgender individuals.

Misgendering was also framed around commenters not wanting to be associated with a transgender person promoting beer - *"because people are all different, some don't wanna see a dude dressed as a girl promoting their beer . Then on the other hand people don't care . People act, eat different . I myself don't drink beer but I don't think I would want him , her promoting anything I did do . Just me"* (Comment 41o)

5.2a Real Women

A subset of commenters expressed specific outrage rooted in their identification as women, perceiving Mulvaney's representation as undermining or mocking womanhood.

"I mean... Honestly, I am offended by Dylan's expression of womanhood because I am a woman and I look, act, and sound very NOT much like him, and it feels like he is just making fun of women," (Comment 22)

"I am a woman and I do not identify with Dylan. He is not a woman and he will never be a woman no matter how many surgeries he gets." (Comment 22e)

"Brilliant! I love that and yep as I am a " real woman", the scrap material faux woman makes me wanna spit nails." (Comment 42i)

"Congratulations dylan on 0 days of being a woman" (Comment 3)

"' To celebrate a personal milestone'—So when do I get my own personalized can as a breast cancer survivor as a real, biological woman?" (Comment 49)

These remarks underscore feelings of erasure or disrespect among some women, who view Mulvaney's public prominence invalidates their lived experiences. Such responses may serve, whether intentionally or not, as a rhetorical strategy that marginalizes trans women. Solomon and Kurtz-Costes (2018) emphasize that media representations significantly shape public attitudes toward marginalized groups, including trans women. Drawing on Clark's (1969) four-stage model of minority representation—non-recognition, ridicule, regulation, and respect—they note that trans women have historically been depicted in ways that elicit ridicule or reinforce dominant norms, rather than being portrayed as fully realized individuals. These portrayals include depictions of trans women as deceptive,

violent, or objects of disgust, which not only reflect but also reinforce societal biases. Even ostensibly sympathetic portrayals can perpetuate harmful stereotypes when trans women are played by cisgender male actors, subtly reinforcing the notion that trans women are merely men in disguise. In this context, public discomfort or claims of erasure in response to trans women's visibility—such as that of Mulvaney—can be seen as drawing from these entrenched media narratives. These reactions, even when framed as concern for the integrity of womanhood, may function rhetorically to reassert normative gender boundaries and delegitimize trans identities, thereby contributing to their marginalization.

A commenter stated, *"Thank you for being a 'real woman.' We need to stand up for ourselves"* (Comment 49b), and another commented, *"exactly, it's all one big freak show now celebrating mental illness and making it seem cool it's disgusting plus ruining everything for real women ..."* (Comment 123l). The framing of "real" womanhood creates a division between transgender and cisgender identities, with some expressing that the brand's decisions are at odds with respecting their perception of womanhood. According to another commenter, *"Bud is too light on respect for real women of America,"* (Comment 93), highlighting a perception that the company has undervalued or ignored the experiences of cisgender women.

5.2b Support for Transwomen

A subset of comments showed support towards Mulvaney and her identity as a trans woman. One commenter stated, *"All women are real women including trans"* (Comment 92l) expressing that trans women are real women too.

One commenter specifically addressed this *"the transphobia here in insane. I mean, im not shocked. Of course a bunch of people who drink a shit ton of shitty ass beer would boycott a company over an ad containing a trans person."* (Comment 155d) This comment revealed that it is not surprising that transphobia would be found amongst this customer base of beer drinkers while another commenter asked the question, *"is there an end to your transphobic hate?"* (Comment 123ag)

Another commenter stated, *"But someone being transgender shouldn't be a controversial topic. It should just be accepted and people should move on"* (Comment 247n) and *"And of course, you misgender and chastise the trans person and HER success. Because that's all you have. It was never about 'getting' marketing for you. You just saw a*

chance to express your hatred and you mouthed off....." (Comment 255d) indicating support for transgender's identity.

5.3 Criticisms and Accusation at Bud Light

The third largest theme was the criticism and accusations directed at Bud Light (n=179 comments). This theme talks about the criticism and accusations directed at Bud Light, such as Bud Light taking a political stand, quality of the product, leadership, financial comments, accusing the brand of self-sabotage and causing identity crisis, and other unverified claims.

Commenters accused Bud Light of taking a political stand by partnering with an influencer who is trans. As one commenter stated, *"Using your brand to make a political statement is lunacy. Even the Clydesdales can't save them now."* (Comment 191), and another commenter stated, *"Companies selling a product shouldn't make political statements. Sell your product not a political agenda. I don't want to be told how to live or think by a company. It's not rocket science try keep up."* (Comment 243f) reflecting the view that businesses should avoid engaging in political issues.

There was a debate under comment 246, where comment 246e stated, *"In fairness to Bud Light, the ad with Dylan was not political. It's just that instead of Dylan representing Dylan, that ad reminds Budweiser drinkers of all the issues that come along with the trans movement, which they don't want to think about when they're enjoying a beer."* followed by another commenter saying, *"Including Dylan in the ad at all makes it political."* (Comment 246f), another commenter added, *"If they're used for a political agenda yes. You don't think black lives matter was political? Those are people and it's a political agenda"* (Comment 246j)

"We the people are sick of y'all forcing your identity politics on us" (Comment 196), reflecting resistance to any identity politics forced by the company, followed by another counter-comment, *"You're the ones forcing identity politics into the situation. Nothing Bud did was "identity politics." They just had a popular influencer endorsing their brand, and the bigots flipped their lids."* (Comment 196a) stating that this had nothing to do with politics but people getting triggered. In addition, the words 'We the people' holds significant historical and political importance, particularly in the context of the United States as they serve as the opening line of the Preamble of the US Constitution and have come to symbolize the

authority of the people in shaping the government, and in this context symbolizes the narrative of revolting against the identity politics forced on them.

Some commenters mocked the product with comments like "*Bud Wipe*" (Comment 155c), "*Trash Beer*" (156n), and "*Brokelight*" (156o), amongst others. Other commenters mocked the product itself as a symbol of poor quality or failure, with comments like, "*Bud Light is just flavored water lol*" (Comment 127m)

The backlash was framed as an act of self-sabotage by Bud Light, with commenters commenting, "*How to say you want to go bankrupt without saying it,*" (Comment 146) and "*This is what corporate panic looks like.*" (Comment 141) Such statements suggest that the brand's marketing decision was perceived as desperate or poorly conceived.

Some commenters portrayed Bud Light's actions as indicative of a more profound identity crisis, stating, "*.... They've created a conflicting identity crisis for the beer. Or more directly, Alissa Heinerscheid, beer genius did.*" (Comment 52d) This view suggests that the brand's attempt to adopt progressive messaging clashed with its traditional identity, resulting in confusion and backlash.

Comments of criticism of the marketing vice president also surfaced: "*The marketing VP has done such a great job in killing a brand.*" (Comment 183), "*Alissa H., how could you make such a mistake. I'm an 82, biological female. Live in Alabama. Even I know that was a bad marketing move.*" (Comment 41p) "*Heard it was some wokey woman*" (Comment 25g). This criticism not only reflects a personalization of blame, viewing the partnership as representative of leadership failure, but undermines the decision of the VP because she is a woman.

Unverified claims surfaced in the comment section such as accusations of Bud Light being funded by the LGBT community for this collaboration- "*ITS ALL ABOUT THE MONEY THEY GOT FROM THE LGBT COMMUNITY FOR THEM TO POST THE COMMERCIAL*" (Comment 25i).

While some comments speculated that the move was driven by data-driven trend chasing, with comments like, "*Perhaps the companys are using A.I's to pick a trend. Transgenderism debate is a major trend, so they are just picking most popular trend to get profits. That , or they are just using ideas to "earn" a spot on the market*" (Comment

247h). This perspective highlights a perception that Bud Light's actions were driven by trends rather than genuine commitment.

Some commenters commented on the financial and share loss the company is facing due to the boycott, *"Update: Budlight has LOST its status as the #1 beer in America. Companies fear conservative backlash 5/31/23"* (Comment 74) and some comments accusing them of misleading stock prices, *"Yup, They can keep artificially pumping their stock price, but earnings is where we will see the real loss in revenue"* (Comment 226a).

5.4 Consumer Identity

The fourth largest comments within a theme concerns consumer identity (n= 159 comments). This theme talks about comments expressing disconnect in consumer identity and perceived entitlement wherein comments stated entitlement by expressing dissatisfaction in ways such as alienation of the customer base, targeting younger generation, beer being a man's drink and by proclaiming to understand the motivations of the collaboration.

Comments stated the disconnect between personal representation and the brand, for instance - *"People only drank their product because they felt represented by it. The company told them it doesn't represent them, and now they don't drink it. It's as simple as that"* (Comment 44) and *"Exactly. This is why marketing is so important. People buy brands that they can see certain aspects of themselves in. For example, Old Spice is notorious for making people feel confident when they use their products. Not only has Bud Light called their customers "fratty" and "out of touch", but now lots people will always think of Dylan whenever they see Bud Light"* (Comment 44a).

A prominent concern among commenters was Bud Light's historical customer base alienation. One commenter's question exemplified this sense of alienation, *"Why would they risk so much to appeal to less than 1% of the population?"* (Comment 28) which was contradicted by another commenter, *"More than %1 and there are millions of trans people globally? They gonna make money off all the hate you guys are giving them. Genius marketing actually."* (Comment 28c) Another comment stated, *"There are like 900 out of 1000 people who are not trans...you don't care to market to that demographic"* (Comment 46g) and *"If EVERY single trans drank beer. Which we all know isn't the case. They just told*

99% of their actual dedicated customers don't matter & they are going woke. The trans community better drink up to give Bud the \$ they are going to lose!!" (Comment 37)

Another commenter elaborated on this perception of alienation by stating, *"Unbelievable they didn't know their consumer."* (Comment 222), and another commenter stated, *"It's the fact that they're literally and consciously going against their audience."* (Comment 141c)

A subset of comments highlighted confusion over who the campaign was targeting. Some expressed skepticism about whether the messaging was effectively reaching the intended younger audience, *"She just she just said the brand is known by college frat boys and then she goes to say that if young people don't start drinking this beer, the brand will die a total contradiction."* (Comment 44f)

"tick tocks average user base is about 15 in the US. Dylan Mullaney's average viewer base is 12 or 14, I can't remember. The saleswoman decided to have Dillon be included as a brand ambassador to appeal to a younger audience because bud light has a old and fratty out of touch base that will age out. The goal was specifically to market to adolescents....." (Comment 181f)

"They did reach the next generation!! they just forgot that young people don't drink bud . Its a boomer brand" (Comment 191)

"Do you realize they put a person who's fans are small kids under the age of drinking on a bottle of beer? Its not even about politics at that point but about trying I guess to get young kids to drink their crappy beer? Strange man super strange" (Comment 196b) this was disputed by a counter-comment, *"Most celebrities have fans who are underage, if that were the standard, then NO celebrities could be allowed to endorse beer. Clearly this hasn't been a problem before now, so why is this particular influencer a problem, if not "because bigotry?" The woman in question is 26 years old, and has plenty of fans in their 20s. Bud was trying to expand their market in that age bracket, 21-30 year olds who are fans of Mulvaney. Are you equally incensed by the Corona ads with Snoop and Samberg?"* (Comment 196c)

Another recurring thread in the discussion was the notion of Bud Light as a "man's beer." Some comments like, *"If some said design a marketing campaign to destroy a MAJOR MENS BEER. Think one up as a joke. Couldn't have been more well done. A true genius."*

(Comment 41q) and *".. also, why is she trying to market towards women? like 90 percent of the customers are men, so target men and not women. thats another basic marketing factor. you need to appeal to the majority and not the minority. thats how you make money. any average joe that drinks bud light and has half a brain could market better than this woman"* (Comment 45d), and *"Wrong. Bud light used to be the working mans beer."* (Comment 126c) emphasised on this notion. Other comments challenged this, *"When did bud light ever become a "man's" drink? I missed the train. I thought only women needed the light. You "men" need a beer gut only have regular."* (Comment 85a)

Some commenters proclaimed to understand the motivations and consequences of the collaboration, *"They can have their ads. We now know where the company really wants to be going!"* (Comment 81) and *"What triggered the backlash?? They literally insulted their customer base and used "inclusivity" as an excuse for it. Don't pander to people who do not buy your product and insult your existing customer base at the same time, it's a bad idea no matter how you try to spin it."* (Comment 187) and *"When it comes to companies selling their products... I think mostly it's not about pushing agenda, it's about sales. They are targeting some groups that will become their clients because of the message. They miscalculated in this case, but quite likely that social group will have a preference for their brand for a long time. Of course brands end up influencing culture too but i think mostly they are focusing on money."* (Comment 244f)

Others rejected the backlash as being overblown, *"The ad wasn't meant to appeal to you, it was meant for fans of Mulvaney. You only heard about it because some bigots got triggered and threw a fit about it."* (Comment 181c) and *".... The "Dylan cans" aren't even real, it was a private promotional thing they did for Dylan in private."* (Comment 121c)

5.5 External Commentators

The fourth largest comments within a theme concerns involvement of external commentators (n=34 comments). Scholars like Albrecht et al. (2013) suggest that one is more willing to participate if one knows other participants or if publicly known people (e.g., politicians and sportsmen) participate in the initial stage of a boycott. As public personalities like Kid Rock and Travis Tritt publicly voiced their opinions and became symbols of resistance for many in the backlash, the Bud Light and Mulvaney controversy gained even more traction. One commenter stated, *"Kid Rock and Travis Tritt is just being honest to*

themselves and the world. They are not going along with this madness, just like the majority of society. No agenda intended." (Comment 23)

Some commenters acknowledged the theatricality of influencer-led responses while questioning their necessity. *"It's silly marketing for sure... the backlash is so over the top though. I still can't figure out why people are so upset they feel this compelled to shoot beer with a semi-automatic weapon lol,"* (Comment 41e) remarked one commenter, highlighting the extreme lengths to which some people have gone in their protests and another commented *"I don't know if Kid Rock's way is unique. Seems like every time a conservative is mad at something they want to appear like a lunatic and shoot the thing they're mad at with a gun. That's very strange to me. I get the concerns. We need to pump the breaks on many aspects on this for ex."* (Comment 41g) and another comment stated, *"Whole time?!?! One can?!?! Kid Rock heard about the existence of one trans-can and proceeded to unalive several cis-cans?!?! Those boys might just wanna boycott drinking all together."* (Comment 110)

The discussion surrounding Bud Light's partnership with Mulvaney extended beyond reactions to the brand, with many commenters directing their distrust in mainstream media. This theme of media distrust highlights a belief that media outlets play a critical role in shaping narratives and manipulating public opinion.

One comment stated, *"Just let the mainstream media tell you what to think... HELL NO!"* (Comment 31) encapsulates the sentiment that many feel compelled to resist perceived media-driven agendas. Other comments, such as *"This is another example of how social media does not reflect what really happens in the world,"* (Comment 243), highlight how online outrage may not always reflect the broader population's views, suggesting that social media amplifies certain voices disproportionately.

Similarly, frustration and disillusionment with media integrity were evident in comments like, *"Did we expect anything less from most of the media?"* (Comment 32) and *"I can't even watch American media anymore. Makes me so upset watching it."* (Comment 32a) The perception that the media has become predictable biased or unreliable to the extent that it evokes emotional reactions like anger and disillusionment is revealed by these comments.

The theme of media manipulation was frequently invoked, as one commenter stated, *"That's how they try to sway public opinion."* (Comment 21e) Comments like these imply a view that the media has excessive control over public opinion and consumer behaviour, frequently in ways that some perceive as manipulative.

Mockery and critique of media coverage were also present in statements like, *"It's so funny how delusional the media is. Hahaha. These broadcasters are in fairy land. Lol."* (Comment 24) Others viewed the broader issue as sign of a more significant societal problem, with one user reflecting, *"...Nobody is perfect, and there is way too much disinformation in an alleged' information age."* (Comment 125f) This comment highlights the apparent paradox of living in a time when information is plentiful, but access to the truth is still perceived as becoming more challenging because of misinformation and biased reporting.

5.6 Miscellaneous Comments

There were several comments that did not fall into any of the major themes. For instance, *"Right-winger crying"* (Comment 9a), and *"Reality triggers leftwingers."* (Comment 19) that express the commenter's political stance. Other comments directed at the YouTube accounts, for instance *"The Young Turks are so cringe."* (Comment 8)

6. Discussion

The previous chapter discusses the five major themes found in the data collected. The most prominent theme, “Go Woke, Go Broke”, covers the comments relating to the boycott, where commenters engaged in the boycott to punish the brand. At the same time, some had scepticism concerning the boycott, and others called out for a boycott of not only Bud Light but also parent company ABInBev and other distributors by refusing to buy Bud Light beer and switching to other brands along with negative word of mouth. One main reason for the boycott was the misalignment of personal, moral, and societal values. The second central theme covered “Misgendering”, which involved misgendering by using wrong pronouns, invalidating Dlyan of being a real woman, her gender identity and the brand, along with reinforcing traditional perspectives. Even though there were comments that attacked Mulvaney, there were some that supported her and validated her presence. The third theme was surrounding the “Criticisms and accusations at Bud Light”, including accusations of Bud Light taking a political stand, quality of Bud Light beer, accusations of self-sabotaging and identity crisis, its leadership decisions, unverified claims and financial comments. The fourth theme covers the disconnect in “Consumer identity” expressed by commenters about confusion about the target audience, beer being a man’s drink and claims of understanding the motivations behind the collaboration. The fifth central theme covers the comments about “External commentators”, mainly the protest action of Kid Rock and the distrust in the media and the YouTube accounts. Apart from these central themes, some comments did not fit those themes, mainly relating to politics and other brands mentioned.

This chapter aims to answer the research question: How does misinformation manifest in online discussion during a brand controversy? The chapter aims to answer this question by discussing the findings and relating them to the existing literature discussed in previous chapters. The chapter first discusses the types of misinformation that Ekbal and Kumari (2024) identified by considering that they may relate to the types identified in the data set. The chapter then considers the presence of echo chambers and theories like confirmation bias, self-enhancement, social and altruistic motivations, emotions and sentiments, social media fatigue, and external commentators in amplifying misinformation. This chapter also examines the presence of gendered misinformation. Finally, this chapter reviews misinformation regarding negative consumer behaviour in the data.

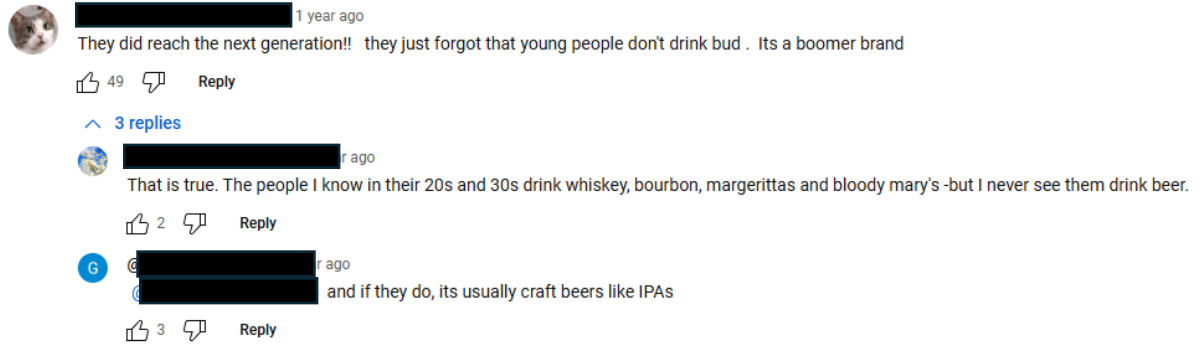
1298 comments were collected from the 13 videos using the sampling framework mentioned earlier to represent the data for this research. There was no interaction with the commenters; thus, it can be challenging to know if they are/were consumers of Bud Light; however, there are instances where the commenters have called themselves consumers, and they can potentially be consumers of Bud Light.

6.1 Types of Misinformation

Previous researchers have described misinformation as false information lacking the intent to deceive or mislead (Wardle,2018; Rubin,2022; Ekbal & Kumari,2024; Wu et al., 2019). Thus, as mentioned earlier in the research, this research defines misinformation as inaccurate or false information disseminated without the intent to deceive.

Ekbal and Kumari (2024) identified that misinformation can take several forms. This analysis uses their framework to identify how each type was present in the Bud Light and Mulvaney controversy:

As Ekbal and Kumari (2024) have defined, misinformation is the unintentional sharing of misleading content, and disinformation refers to intentionally sharing false information intended to mislead. As I began to look for comments representing misinformation and disinformation, it was unclear whether the commenters believed the information to be accurate and if they shared inaccurate information intending to deceive. The unclarity in intention suggests the complexity of distinguishing between misinformation and disinformation. For instance, in the below example, the commenters state that young people do not drink Bud Light and their opinions of young people drinking any other alcohol but beer. In the first comment, the commenter mentioned Bud Light as a 'boomer brand', but this statement does not have a statistical background, thus proving that the information is inaccurate even though the commenter might believe it. The comments reinforce the misleading narrative that young people are not the target audience of Bud Light as they do not drink beer/Bud Light. Although the intent to deceive may be challenging to understand, the statement 'That is true' underlies a sense that the commenter believes the information to be accurate. However, it is still unclear if the intention to deceive is present.



(Sub-comments under Comment 192)

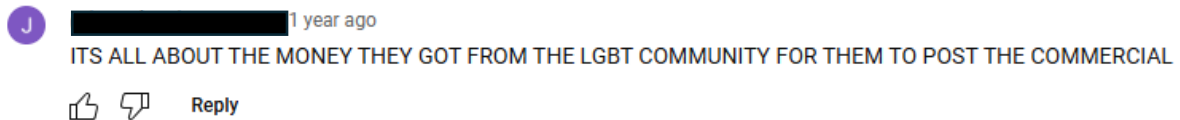
While the comment below tends to undermine Mulvaney’s gender identity and state that Mulvaney is not a woman, it is unclear if they believe the information to be accurate and the intention of the commenter. For instance, the commenter might believe that Mulvaney is a boy with makeup and a dress or might not. Additionally, they might intend to deceive others or just share the information without intent to deceive. Thus, it further emphasises the complexities of navigating whether a piece of information is misinformation or disinformation.



(Sub- comments under Comment 161)

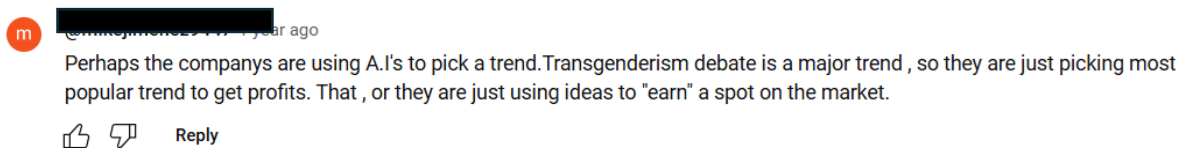
Rumours refer to unverified claims circulated without confirmation of their validity (Ekbal & Kumari 2024). UNHCR (2022) mentions that one's perspective, influenced by the accessibility of information and the credibility of the sources, affects the perception of a rumour as a fact or something ridiculous. In the below example, the intention is unclear therefore this comment is rather a statement or a claim that is inaccurate and is being used

as an insult to the LGBT community by indirectly stating that the LGBT community is giving money to companies to post commercials.



(Comment 25i)

Propaganda involves disseminating information by groups or governments intending to influence public opinion, often lacking full transparency (Ekbal & Kumari, 2024). In the below comment, the commenter appears to influence public opinion by spreading information that the company is using Artificial Intelligence to pick transgenderism. Anheuser-Busch mentioned that the company works with hundreds of influencers, and the can was a gift from Bud Light, not intended for public sale (Flood & Kornick, 2023). The statement released by Brendan Whitworth stating, “We never intended to be part of a discussion that divides people. We are in the business of bringing people together”, suggests that the brand did not know that by teaming up with a transgender influencer they would be making a clear socio-political statement (Anheuser-Busch, 2023). Thus, implying that there is a lack of evidence that the company intended to use a transgender individual because it is a trend. However, the comment indicates the presence of propaganda to spread inaccurate information about the company using Artificial Intelligence to pick popular trends or using ideas to “earn” a spot on the market.



(Comment 247h)

According to Ekbal and Kumari (2024), satire utilises humour and exaggeration to ridicule its subjects, frequently targeting public figures. Wardle (2017) suggests that satire has the potential to mislead, but it does not necessarily intend to cause harm. However, in

the example below, satire is used not only to cause harm to Bud Light's quality as a product but also to mislead others into believing that Mulvaney is not a real woman.



[Redacted] 1 year ago

Calling Dylan Mulvaney a real woman is like calling Bud Light a real beer.



3.2K



Reply

(Comment 126)

Bias involves personal opinions swaying judgments, leading to unfair support or opposition toward specific ideas or individuals (Ekbal & Kumari, 2024). The below example of the commenter stating their opinion about the company choosing to be political led to support for the narrative that the brand wanted to switch its image, neglecting its primary consumers. There is no evidence that the collaboration intended to do that, but the commenter's bias has supported this misleading narrative, leading to misinformation caused by bias.



The problem I feel is that they were relatively non-political for years but suddenly, they decided they wanted to switch their image from the so-called "frat" scene and into what I guess sophisticated beer. Problem is they decided to do this by going political and forgot the customers who would be buying it. It's sort of like they all sat down, brought up a bunch of stuff, and someone who doesn't speak often says, "What about the customers?" and everyone just poking fun him and calling him names and telling him to leave.



14



Reply

(Comment 230)

The types of misinformation can be interconnected and interchangeable based on personal interpretation. At times, the information may contain elements of the various types of misinformation, not making it identifiable to just one type. Ekbal and Kumari's framework of the types of misinformation cannot simply be applied, and our understanding of misinformation needs to account for complex pieces of information where the intention to deceive is unclear, like the ones identified earlier in this chapter.

One of the key findings of this study is the inherent challenge in distinguishing between misinformation and disinformation within digital environments. Although this initially appeared to be a methodological limitation, it ultimately underscores a broader issue in

online communication: the ambiguity of user intent. On platforms such as YouTube, where anonymity is prevalent and contextual cues are minimal, it is often impossible to determine whether a user is intentionally spreading falsehoods or simply misinformed.

This ambiguity was particularly evident in the case of the Bud Light and Mulvaney controversy. Some comments appeared to deliberately misrepresent facts about Mulvaney's identity or Bud Light's marketing decisions, while others seemed to reflect genuine confusion or reliance on misleading narratives circulating elsewhere. This reinforces the idea that misinformation is not just a content problem, but a context problem—one that complicates moderation, policymaking, and public understanding alike.

6.2 Echo chambers and Confirmation Bias

Sun et al. (2022) contend that the structural design of YouTube discourages the formation of homogenous user clusters, given that users tend to engage more with video content than with each other. However, the presence of echo chambers observed in the analysed YouTube comments suggests a more complex dynamic, indicating that such clusters may still emerge within the platform's comment sections. This study does not consider nor have the scope to delve into the role of algorithms in forming echo chambers. However, the intention is to understand the presence of echo chambers as represented by the content of YouTube comments. The research analysed in-depth the Top 20 comments and sub-comments of Matt Walsh's video (Video 7), a right-wing podcast host, to understand the presence of echo chambers. The findings indicate that most of the comments (80 out of 223) talked about boycotting Bud Light. The other majority of the comments (47 out of 223) were misgendering Mulvaney's gender identity and expressed negative associations with Bud Light because of Mulvaney. The presence of these two prominent right-wing views in the YouTube comments under the right-wing account Matt Walsh suggests the potential presence of echo chambers and misinformation in this discussion. It reinforces the definition by Cinelli et al. (2021), who define echo chambers as environments that reinforce users' opinions, political leaning, or beliefs about a topic due to repeated interactions with peers or sources with similar tendencies and attitudes.

By not studying the algorithm side of the echo chamber, it is challenging to know if YouTube facilitated the creation of the echo chamber in this controversy. However, previous research by Wiggins (2021) states that social media algorithms create an environment

conducive to echo chambers by tailoring content, limiting the news exposure to ideas and opinions that align with a user's beliefs. This personalised content delivery not only isolates individuals from diverse perspectives but also reinforces confirmation bias, leading to the polarisation of views and the dissemination of misinformation (Wiggins, 2021; Akyüz, 2021). Del Vicario et al. (2019) mentioned that user polarisation and confirmation bias foster the spread of misinformation on online social media. People naturally tend to conform to the views of those around them, and when surrounded by like-minded individuals, the pressures of conformity can become overwhelming (O'Connor et al., 2019), and they are also inclined to accept information that pleases them (Lazer et al., 2023). This psychological tendency is further amplified by the highly interactive nature of social platforms amplifying similar thoughts, and individuals may become more hostile to differing opinions (Salaverría & León, 2022; O'Connor et al., 2019). The algorithmic systems create an ideal environment for the spread of misinformation and strengthen the perception of cultural "truths" that align with certain ideological stances, such as the backlash against "wokeness" in the case of Bud Light and Mulvaney controversy (Salaverría & León, 2022). Cancel culture evolves from the notions of brand boycott and anti-branding consumer movements motivated by ideological incompatibilities and has emerged as the practice or tendency to participate in mass cancellation to express disapproval and exert social pressure (Costa & Azevedo, 2023). It was observed that the commenters wanted to cancel the brand because of them going woke, thus echoing 'Go woke, go broke' The power of amplification and coordination is harmful as individuals feed off one another's content and form a complex misinformation ecosystem (United Nations, 2023), thus implying that echo-chambers can form a complex misinformation ecosystem.

An example of confirmation belief and echo chamber was seen in replies under comment 246 that accused Bud Light of taking a political stand by collaborating with a transgender influencer.



@jacobhall1288 1 year ago (edited)

@gypsyscometotown....is a trans model really political? A living breathing human shouldn't be considered "political"

👍 10 🗨️ Reply



@advikdeshmukh805 1 year ago

.....political

👍 2 🗨️ Reply



@duckmercy11 1 year ago

..... Including Dylan in the ad at all makes it political.

👍 2 🗨️ Reply



@gypsyscometotown 1 year ago

..... polarizing issue, fact.

The fact that the president invited him to the White House shows it's a political issue, why else would he be invited?
That and the fact that the VP insulted their current customers by calling them fratty & out of touch 🤔

👍 🗨️ Reply



@gypsyscometotown 1 year ago

..... a yes.

You don't think black lives matter was political?
Those are people and it's a political agenda

👍 🗨️ Reply

(Replies under Comment 246)

- 
[REDACTED] ago
[REDACTED] last time i checked 6 year olds don't drink alcohol. also trans woman are real woman. kindness is a good thing u should try it :)
 8 likes 1 reply
- 
[REDACTED] ago
[REDACTED] keep telling yourself that nonsense 🤔🤔🤔🤔
 56 likes 1 reply
- 
[REDACTED]
 Dylan is the "boy" in boycott.
 4 likes 1 reply
- 
[REDACTED] 1 year ago (edited)
[REDACTED] If they can convince you that Dylan Mulvaney is a real woman then they can convince you of anything. Learn to think for yourself.
 3 likes 1 reply
- 
[REDACTED] year ago (edited)
[REDACTED] clown
 1 like 1 reply
- 
[REDACTED]
 🤔🤔🤔
 1 like 1 reply
- 
[REDACTED]
[REDACTED] him, he
 1 like 1 reply
- 
[REDACTED] 1 year ago
 The only thing he ended was where the alcoholics get their alcohol from. They still drinking.
 1 like 1 reply
- 
[REDACTED] 1 year ago
[REDACTED] if trans women were real women then how come u have to put "trans" to clarify the type of "woman" it is?
 1 like 1 reply

(Responses under Comment 249)

In these comments, the commenters confirm their beliefs of trans being a political issue, and Bud Light chose to take a political stand by including Mulvaney in the ad. One commenter tried to change the other's view that Trans women are women. Then it was followed by other comments who disagreed with that commenter, reinforcing their gendered misinformation about Mulvaney's gender identity, with one commenter explicitly emphasising the 'trans' word transwomen add instead of just using woman. Further emphasising the narrative that trans women are not real women. Out of the top 260 comments, only 49 times did the commenters debate each other under the main comments. This discussion aligns with the research by Salaverría and León (2022), where it was

observed that individuals were more resistant to changing their minds, selectively attending to evidence that supports their beliefs while disregarding contradictory information.

In the above example, the commenters attacked fellow commenters with comments such as ‘clown’, this could also mean that there were other commenters who wanted to challenge the misinformation but did not do that because of the fear of being attacked; this reason was observed in the framework by Gurgun et al. (2023) that mentions potential reasons people do not challenge misinformation. This potential reason for not challenging misinformation can be implied by the data showing that 23 comments indicated an attack on fellow commenters. The study by Chen and Feng (2024) made an identical observation, where repliers would frequently resort to attacking individual comments rather than discussing the content of the video, resulting in an increasingly hostile conversation.

6.3 Motivations and Amplification by External Commentators.

As mentioned earlier in the study, it is challenging to understand the intent of the commenter, thus making it challenging to understand the motivation behind the spread of the misinformation; however, previous studies suggest that self-enhancement, social and altruistic motivations (Metzger et al., 2021; Domenico et al., 2021; Chen & Sin, 2013), emotions and sentiments (O’Connor & Watherall, 2019; Ekbal & Kumari, 2024), and social media fatigue (Talwar et al., 2019) are some motivations for individuals to share misinformation. These motivations can be identified in the data set.

6.3a Self-enhancement, Social & Altruistic motivations:

According to Metzger et al. (2021), motives for sharing news—whether accurate or misleading—include acting as an opinion leader, advocating for one’s beliefs, socialising, gaining social status, and informing others. Further motives for spreading misinformation are self-enhancement- to appear expert or knowledgeable in the eyes of others; social - to engage with their community and feel part of a group; altruistic- sharing information to show concern for others and to try to help others and self-expression (Domenico et al., 2021; Chen & Sin, 2013).

Self-enhancement motivated comments like - *“As someone who majored in marketing, I could see this coming from a mile away. There’s a reason understanding demographics and how they behave is vital for success. There’s nothing wrong with*

marketing products to other demographics as that's the nature of business, but when you do things that rewrite your company's values and alienate your target audience, then your customers are going to be upset" (Comment 255) here the commenter intends to appear knowledgeable by mentioning about his marketing major (education) and stating that there is nothing wrong with marketing to different demographics but also enforcing the false narrative that the company attempted to rewrite its values and alienated its target audience. Thus, it provides an example of how the commenter shared knowledge for their self-enhancement to look like a knowledgeable commenter in the eyes of others. This comment also implies that self-enhancement motives are used to raise credibility in the information shared.

Socially motivated comments like – *"I'm in the UK and didn't even realise Bud Light was sold here, but I was in the store yesterday and they had a boxes of bottles (20 x 300ml) for £9.99, which is about \$12. Nobody had bought any as the display was full. A few friends of mine have mentioned the whole DM controversy and refuse to drink it, so it's definitely reached UK shores"* (Comment 185), is an example of the commenter informing other commenters about the situation of Bud Light in the UK, socially motivated to engage with the online community by sharing personal experience.

Altruistically motivated comments like - *"And of course, you misgender and chastise the trans person and HER success. Because that's all you have, it was never about 'getting' marketing for you. You just saw a chance to express your hatred, and you mouthed off...."* (Comment 255d) is an example of the commenter using an altruistically motivated comment to defend Mulvaney and her identity.

Self-expression motivated comments like - *"To celebrate a personal milestone." So when do I get my own personalised can as a breast cancer survivor as a real, biological woman?"* (Comment 49) wherein the commenter has expressed themselves as more deserving of a personalised can than Mulvaney, and by indirectly giving into gendered misinformation that Mulvaney is not a real woman. Metzger et al. (2021) mention that the ability to self-expression on social media motivates people to spread misleading information.

6.3b Emotions and Sentiments

As Ekbal and Kumari (2024) mentioned, emotion and sentiment are used to spread misinformation. People share misinformation that aligns with sentiments on specific topics

(O'Connor & Watherall, 2019), as observed in the Bud Light and Mulvaney controversy; emotionally appealing comments reinforce misinformation by appealing to specific emotions shared by like-minded commenters. For instance, comments like *“CEO said that they are for American values, what they did went totally against American values!”* (Comment 82) were emotionally appealing to patriotic views of Bud Light going against American values. Subtly, this comment also notes a sense of betrayal that the commenter felt by Bud Light’s actions of collaborating with a transgender influencer. The study by Chen and Feng (2024) suggests that comments with intense emotions tend to draw attention and provoke responses from other commenters.

6.3c Social Media Fatigue

Comments like *“The person responsible for this at Budweiser has, they, them pronouns on their LinkedIn account supposedly. I didn’t waste my time with fact-checking it, but with the state of things it’s highly believable”* (Comment 25f) illustrates that the commenter did not fact-check information before sharing it because it would waste their time. They assumed it was correct information as the Bud Light employee was perceived as woke by the commenter. However, the commenter indicated Alissa Heinerscheid, and upon checking her LinkedIn, she mentioned pronouns as she/her and not they/them, as stated by the commenter. This discussion supports research by Talwar et al. (2019) that suggests that social media fatigue contributes to misinformation sharing, where users are fatigued by the continuous information flow and may resort to sharing without fact-checking to remain active online.

6.3d Amplification by External Commentators

According to Govindankutty and Gopalan (2023), influencers often possess high credibility, which leads audiences to believe the information they share, causing influencers to act as powerful agents in disseminating false information. The shooting of Bud Light cans by Kid Rock in the video he shared attracted a lot of media attention and, in turn, connected with like-minded audiences who shared his views about not wanting any association with Bud Light because they collaborated with Mulvaney.

Comments like *“The ad wasn’t meant to appeal to you; it was meant for fans of Mulvaney. You only heard about it because some bigots got triggered and threw a fit about*

it” (Comment 181d) illustrate how the action of Kid Rock shooting Bud Light cans escalated the controversy bringing in the broader audience and further commentary.

At times, there were accusations of media manipulation, statements like “*Just let the mainstream media tell you what to think—HELL NO!*” (Comment 31) and “*This is another example of how social media does not reflect what really happens in the world,*” (Comment 243) illustrate that commenters had less trust in the media and accused them of manipulating the views. Interestingly, these comments were primarily observed when the YouTube video content supported Mulvaney’s gender identity or Bud Light.

6.4 Gendered Misinformation

One of the key findings was that numerous commenters engaged in misgendering Mulvaney's gender identity. At times, she was not considered a real woman, while at other times, she was accused of being dangerous to society. Commenters engaged in deliberately using he/him pronouns. One of the main reasons why commenters did not want to be associated with Bud Light was because they did not want to be seen drinking a beer that a transgender woman drank. Several false narratives emerged in the comments discourse about Mulvaney. As previously noted, it is challenging to know the intention of the commenter, thus making it difficult to distinguish between disinformation and misinformation; in this case, the word misgendered disinformation is interchangeable with misgendered misinformation. Billard (2023) argues that misgendering is not merely a terminological error but a form of media violence that functions as disinformation. It is used strategically to delegitimize transgender identities and reinforce cisnormative power structures, particularly in media and public discourse. As per United Nations (2023), gendered disinformation aims to harm individuals and society by spreading inaccurate or misleading information. Gendered disinformation forms part of Disinformation because of its key characteristics, such as hurtful intent, falsity, and coordination (United Nations,2023). Unlike other forms of Disinformation, gendered disinformation uses preexisting gender narratives along with misleading information to support existing hierarchies and restore the dominant order to achieve its social and political objectives, such as preserving the gender status quo or polarizing the electorate (United Nations,2023; Billard, 2023).

Garofalo (2023) explains that the use of misinformation to harm LGBTQ+ individuals is not a new concept, but rather a well-established tactic that exploits societal anxieties and

traditional stereotypes. This gendered disinformation often portrays LGBTQ+ people—especially transgender individuals—as threats to children or public morality, echoing the exact narratives found in the comments analyzed in this study. These findings reinforce the idea that misgendering and related narratives are not isolated acts of ignorance but part of a broader disinformation ecosystem that seeks to marginalize trans identities.

Comments such as *"...also, why is she trying to market towards women? like 90 percent of the customers are men, so target men and not women. thats another basic marketing factor. you need to appeal to the majority and not the minority. thats how you make money. any average joe that drinks bud light and has half a brain could market better than this woman"* (Comment 45d) engaged in gendered misinformation, this comment about beer being a Man's beer showed how the commenter wanted to restore the dominant order of beer being a man's drink as most of the customers are men and also challenged the decision of the female VP.

United Nations (2023) mentions that Gendered Disinformation affects LGBTQ+ communities disproportionately by perpetuating harmful stereotypes and further marginalizing them. United Nations (2023) further mentioned that transgender persons, especially transgender women, have been a target of gendered disinformation campaigns from a variety of sources, including trans-exclusionary radical feminists, with malicious allegations of them causing harm to society; this was observed in comments such as *"Big facts I could care less what they do with there body my problem is they are targeting my children and have men in the restroom with my 5 and 7 year old little girls and that's why I can not support that crap you give someone. An inch they will take a mile it's been happening in the country for years now look at the stores still getting looted for not even food"* (Comment 29a)

6.5 Consumer Identity and Perceived Entitlement

Commenters associated the collaboration of Mulvaney and Bud Light with themselves, resulting in conflicting consumer identity for themselves. Additionally, comments directed at this collaboration seems to have a perceived sense of entitlement where the commenters argue that Bud Light went against the target audience.

Narratives about the partnership's intent and funding confused commenters about Bud Light's values and target audience. Mosley et al. (2024) mention that for some

individuals, showing their affiliation with a brand becomes a key aspect of their social identity, with consumers gravitating toward brands that mirror the image they want to project. Self-referencing occurs when consumers relate information to themselves, and the decision to self-reference can reveal the depth of their connection to the brand and the extent to which they perceive the brand's crisis as personally threatening. (Mosley et al., 2024)

Comments such as - *"People only drank their product because they felt represented by it. The company told them it doesn't represent them, and now they don't drink it. It's as simple as that."* (Comment 44) depict how commenters used the product to represent themselves, additionally, that the collaboration indicated to the commenters that Bud Light is a trans beer, and they find it threatening to their identity by being associated with it.

Commenters also claimed to understand the motivations and consequences of the partnership. Drawing from the literature surrounding rumours, "social psychologists argue that rumours arise in contexts of ambiguity, when the meaning of a situation is not readily apparent, or potential threat, when people feel an acute need for security" (Qazvinian et al., 2011, p.1589). Several rumours were found in the comments, which indicated that the commenters believed this collaboration was intended for the LGBTQ+ audience, purposefully aimed at alienating the cisgender community, which was thought to be the core audience. For instance, comments like *"Why would they risk so much to appeal to less than 1% of the population?"* (Comment 28) expressed this rumour as well as sense of perceived entitlement that the brand should not appeal to others than the primary customer base.

6.6 Misinformation and Negative Consumer Behaviour

Social media has provided a platform for people to express their opinions and, thus encouraging freedom of expression. However, these opinions and thoughts are not always positive and can result in negative consumer behaviour, of which negative word of mouth, customer retaliation, consumer boycott, and consumer brand sabotage are a part (Kähr et al., 2016).

Commenters engaged in Negative Word of Mouth, for instance comment like *"My friends family owns two bars, and one restaurant, we were watching the game and saw that commercial and his father was absolutely floored at what he saw, He said "During the NCAA Finals, are you kidding me" Anyway they called their distributor and canceled all Anheuser Busch products and told them he want a refund for everything, he stopped serving any of it*

the same day and most customers understood, that and the fact it's his businesses. "It's Miller Time" (Comment 129) is an example wherein the commenter is telling about their family friend who immediately boycotted Bud Light and encouraged people to switch from Bud Light to Miller. In the example, the belief that Bud Light chose to go woke by collaborating with a trans influencer, and they do not want to be associated with Bud Light. According to Chen & Cheng (2023), the higher the consumers' belief in misinformation, the more likely they are to incorporate it into their judgments, leading to negative word of mouth and further spread of misinformation.

As previous research by Kucuk (2019) suggests that individuals engage in consumer boycotts through ways such as refusing, switching, and engaging in negative word of mouth, which also suggests misinformation can inevitably hurt the brand. It is to be noted that it is unclear on if the commenter is consumer, however this behaviour was observed throughout the discussion. This is observed in the comment, *"I'm an Anheuser-Busch customer through and through. If I'm reaching for a domestic beer on football Sunday, there's a good chance I'm grabbing a Bud Light. If I want an imported beer, 9 times out of 10 I'm drinking a Stella Artois. Not anymore. I'll be drinking Coors Banquet or Miller High Life if I want something domestic and Heineken if I want something imported. Nothing tastes better than the satisfaction of standing up for what you believe in."*(Comment 132) state that the commenter was a loyal customer but now they are going to refuse Bud Light and switch to other brands because they feel like it is the right thing and will get satisfaction in standing up for what one believes in thus supporting the boycott.

6.7 Summary

To begin with, the complexity in the data where the intention to deceive is unclear, makes it challenging to clearly distinguish between the various types of misinformation using the framework by Ekbal and Kumari. As defined early on, misinformation in the context of this research is inaccurate or misleading information. A notable form of misinformation found in the comments was gendered misinformation, where commenters engaged in misinformation by accusing Mulvaney and delegitimizing her gender identity. It was found that commenters engaged in perpetuating harmful stereotypes about transgender individuals. The research highlights the presence of echo chamber within the YouTube comments that amplified the spread of misleading narratives. Various psychological motives

such as self-enhancement, social, altruistic, and motive to express oneself were identified through the comments along with comments that indicated presence of emotions and sentiments. The presence of social media fatigue added to the misinformation. The consumer identity and perceived entitlement further amplified the spread of misinformation which was often supported by claims of understanding the motivation and consequences of the collaboration. The influence of external commentators was observed in the spread of misinformation.

These discussions aid to answer the research question: *How does misinformation manifest in online discussion during a brand controversy?* Misinformation manifests in online discussions during a brand controversy through the presence of echo chambers that confirm to the inaccurate narratives about the controversy which are shared by commenters who are motivated by self-enhancement, social, altruistic, self-expression or emotions and sentiments. Additionally, comments indicating boycott further confirms to the misleading narrative resulting in perpetuating misinformation further.

7. Conclusion

The previous chapter discusses the complexity in the data where any intention to deceive is unclear, making it challenging to clearly distinguish between the various types of misinformation using the framework by Ekbal and Kumari (2024). As recognised in the early stages of this thesis, existing literature that defines misinformation places emphasis on information that is inaccurate or misleading but without clear intent to deceive. As the findings of the original research detailed in this study have demonstrated, this can make misinformation very difficult to identify and categorise, and there are certain nuances that need to be accounted for. A notable form of misinformation found in the comments analysed as research data was gendered misinformation, where commenters used misinformation to delegitimise Mulvaney's gender identity. This is still complex because it is challenging to understand whether the commenter believes that Mulvaney is a real woman or not. However, due to my position statement I believe in more than two genders, however that might not be the same with the commenter. The chapter also discussed the negative commenter behaviour and the effect of consumer identity and perceived entitlement in spreading misinformation. The previous chapter also discusses the presence of echo-chambers, confirmation bias, emotions and sentiments and other psychological motivations in the spread of misinformation.

7.1 Concluding Summary

As Peng (2023) reminds us, influencer collaboration has been a growing trend and brands continue to collaborate with influencers to increase their target audience, aiming to increase their profits and gain more brand recognition. The Mulvaney and Bud Light controversy is an effective case study for investigating online misinformation in the context of a brand controversy. The recentness of the event ensured the availability of rich data suitable for analysis. As discussed earlier in the thesis, the YouTube comment section can act as a kind of public sphere for users to share their views and facilitate discussions (Chen & Feng, 2024). This public sphere that facilitates discussions is neither neutral nor immune to manipulation as it allows different users to express different views and opinions. Alongside information that include different views and opinions, misinformation has also thrived on social media and can have short-term and long-term effects on a brand that may be at the centre of controversy. Thus, the significance of this research was to illustrate the many ways that misinformation manifested in online discussions. The misinformation in the comments

were identified as misinformation, disinformation, rumours, propaganda, satire and bias. Furthermore, the presence of echo chambers perpetuates inaccurate narratives about the controversy. As Mishra et al. (2024) suggested, the motivations for doing so can range from self-enhancement, social, altruistic, self-expression or emotive and sentimental actions. The comments also reflected how individual motivations and digital group dynamics interacted to shape public opinion in the presence of these echo chambers. It was also argued that social media fatigue can add to the spread of misinformation because of an inherent information overload. Additionally, the fear of attacking because of challenging misinformation enables more misinformation. What makes it more complex is the use of negative word of mouth and anti-branding activities that aim at reinforcing narratives or creating new narratives that aligns with the existing beliefs that thrive in discussions during a brand controversy, suggesting the important role of confirmation bias. The commenters also referenced other external activities such as the protest by Kid Rock to justify their stance on the boycott. Additionally, commenters claimed to understand the motivations and consequences of this influencer collaboration, which further perpetuates misleading narratives.

One of the main takeaways from this research is the blurry line between misinformation and disinformation, as discerning the intent of the commenter is rarely possible. This uncertainty surrounding the commenter's intent, as discussed in the previous chapter, makes it difficult to determine whether a commenter is deliberately misleading or genuinely believes in the information that is shared. Due to this ambiguity, it was complicated to understand the comments under the YouTube videos and thus highlights the importance of careful interpretation when analysing online conversations. Furthermore, the difficulty in distinguishing between misinformation and disinformation complicates not only moderation efforts but also the ability of brands, policymakers, and advocacy groups to respond effectively.

This study also highlights how digital platforms like YouTube have evolved into contested spaces where public opinion, identity politics, and misinformation intersect, affecting the parties involved. The Bud Light and Mulvaney controversy serves as a compelling example of how a marketing decision can rapidly escalate into a symbol of political and cultural division. This case reveals the fragility of brand identity in a hyper-connected media environment, where consumer reactions are shaped not only by the

campaign itself but also by broader ideological narratives, especially their views on LGBTQ+ individuals. At the same time, the findings point to a deeper tension surrounding identity—not only Bud Light’s brand identity, but also Mulvaney’s personal identity, which was repeatedly questioned, misrepresented, and politicised in the comment section. This reflects the vulnerability of trans identities in online spaces, where individuals can become unwilling symbols in larger ideological conflicts. As such, this study underscores the role of digital platforms in shaping not only consumer sentiment but also public understandings of gender, identity, and legitimacy.

7.2 Significance and implications of the research

This research makes a valuable contribution to the growing body of literature on digital misinformation by examining how misinformation takes shape in online contexts. It offers practical insights that can help businesses navigate crises and safeguard their reputations in an increasingly dynamic digital environment. This study shows how echo-chambers enable false information to boost polarizing views. The existence of gendered misinformation about Mulvaney in this study highlights the need for interventions, particularly on social media platforms, to lessen the harm caused to transgender individuals. While this research set out to explore the role of misinformation in online debates surrounding a brand controversy, the analysis revealed that identity politics also played a significant role in shaping the discourse. Although not an initial focus, the themes that emerged from user comments indicated that identity-based narratives and tensions were deeply intertwined with both the spread and reception of misinformation in the context of the Bud Light and Mulvaney controversy.

In today’s media environment, where ideological tensions can quickly escalate into public controversies, the need for brands to adopt a proactive approach to crisis communication is even more essential. This involves not only maintaining transparency but also clearly articulating positions that reflect their core values. At the same time, brands must remain sensitive to the potential for misinterpretation and backlash. The confusion surrounding the Bud Light and Mulvaney collaboration illustrates that the brand was not clear in their communication. This portrays the risks of ambiguous messaging, particularly when engaging with socially or politically sensitive topics. The significance of education and media literacy in countering misinformation is also highlighted by this study, emphasising the part that public narratives play in spreading false information. Additionally, social media

platforms should refine policies and algorithms to control echo-chambers formation where misinformation thrives, emphasising the importance of fact-checking and misinformation - flagging systems.

This case study also invites a broader philosophical question: *When a single social media post by an influencer can ignite widespread public backlash and misinformation, to what extent can—or should—brands remain neutral in the social and political conversations they inevitably become part of?* In the case of Bud Light and Mulvaney, what began as a one-off Instagram promotion quickly escalated into a controversy, highlighting how even minor marketing decisions can carry significant sociopolitical weight. This raises important questions about the responsibilities of brands in a digital environment where identity, business, and public opinions are increasingly intertwined and inseparable.

7.3 Limitations of the research

A significant limitation of the research was the inability to identify or measure the intent of the commenters. This made it difficult to differentiate between misinformation and disinformation, highlighting the complexity of online discourse and the importance of accounting for situations where individuals' intentions are unclear. Additionally, it was challenging to determine whether commenters were, or had ever been, consumers of Bud Light. This distinction is important because it affects how we interpret the backlash: if the majority of negative comments came from individuals with no prior relationship to the brand, the controversy may reflect broader ideological opposition rather than a genuine shift in consumer sentiment. On the other hand, if discontent is expressed by long-time consumers, the reputational and commercial implications for the brand are more direct. Alternative qualitative methods, such as interviews, may be able to provide this level of insight, but would conversely be restricted by the challenges of understanding the nuances around a prior timeline. The demographics of the accounts have not been recorded, which could have influenced the spread of misinformation. The choice of using the top 20 comments and the sub-comments limits the data to only the popular views, not considering other views could provide different findings. Additionally, the analysis was focused only on YouTube comments; other platforms like X or Facebook might reveal different findings. The YouTube videos selected are limited to a relatively narrow timeframe of April 2023. Thus, the comments uncovered within this sampling period may not necessarily capture changing

narratives in the case study. However, as explained previously, this timeframe was essential to the feasibility of this study and sufficiently captures a critical moment in this controversy.

Prior research by Ribeiro et al. (2020) suggests that YouTube's recommendation algorithm favours far-right material, however this study did not have the scope of examining this in detail. The presence of comments that expressed far-right views indicates validity of Ribiero et al.'s claims, and investigating and/or confirming whether a specific ideological context dominates online discussion on channels like YouTube, is a productive opportunity for future research.

7.4 Recommendations for further research

This study focused on an example of a consumer-brand boycott; However, similar research can be conducted on consumer brand sabotage. Further research can examine how demographic factors influence susceptibility to and dissemination of misinformation. Further research could also use this research as a basis to understand misinformation in other case studies of brand controversy to understand commonalities throughout different case studies. This research was limited to YouTube comments, however further research could expand the scope of analysis to include other platforms such as TikTok, X (formerly Twitter), Facebook, and Reddit. This would offer a more comprehensive view of how misinformation circulates in different social media platforms. Each social media platform has its own algorithmic logic, user base, and cultural norms, all of which shape how narratives are formed, challenged, and sustained, understanding these could aid in mitigating misinformation. Additionally, a cross-platform approach would also account for the spillover effect, where misinformation originating on one platform migrates and evolves across others. Another scope for further research is longitudinal research which could further enrich this research by tracking how misinformation surrounding the Mulvaney and Bud Light controversy developed over time. Finally, future research could explore strategies for mitigating misinformation. This includes examining how brands can proactively anticipate misinformation risks, respond effectively during crises, and rebuild trust with consumers. Such work would be valuable not only for corporate reputation management but also for informing platform governance and public policy.

In conclusion, there is considerable scope for future research to further explore the intersections of misinformation, brand controversies, and identity politics within digital

environments. The complex dynamics of these interactions carry significant implications, not only for brands and consumers but also for society at large. As digital communication continues to shape public discourse, understanding and addressing these complexities becomes increasingly vital.

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Appendices

Appendix A – Sample Transcript

Transcript of Video 1 –

[Dylan Mulvaney's video] I kept hearing about this thing called March Madness and I thought we were all just having a hectic month, but it turns out it has something to do with sports and I'm not sure exactly which sport but either way it's a cause to celebrate this month I celebrated my day 365 a Womanhood and Bud Light Sent Me possibly the best gift ever a can with my face on it. (Video ends) Dylan Mulvaney was celebrating the fact that Bud Light had sent a special beer can over to her of course she's a tiktok star who has been basically documenting her transition um now of course that simple video led to a little bit of a hissy fit on the right uh and I gotta say some portions of that tantrum are amusing to watch and we're gonna see what I'm talking about in just a moment now a little more context into what Budweiser was doing here so Mulvaney who has about 11million followers on TikTok recently celebrated the one year anniversary of her days of Womanhood Series in which she documents um the everyday highs and lows of transitioning okay that's why Bud Light Sent enter that special can of beer now let's get to the crazy reactions starting with um I think the most unhinged let's watch [Kid Rock's video] Grandpa's feeling a little frisky today let me uh say something to all you and B as clear and concise as possible (Video involves shooting cans) Bud Light and Anheuser-Busch have a terrific day but I wonder who paid for that beer Kid Rock did you pay for that beer you bought the beer just to shoot the beer okay I mean by the way Dylan Mulvaney's 26 years old like why are they so up in arms about this who cares I mean look I argued before guns don't do you know there's no they don't do anything they haven't saved lives but look at that you know just he bravely saved us from the transgenders I don't like I just the performativeness is it's like whenever Republicans have a problem they just shoot it just shoot it you know what I mean you don't like climate change shoot it you know and and it seems funny to me but then you just obviously this is an automatic weapon I don't know which one I'm gonna get added if I say the wrong one right um you don't even know I don't care but it looks scary and it kind of looks like a mass shooter weapon so I might say an AR-15 the point is is it's a stand-in for her it's a stand-in for Dylan Mulvaney I know he's trying to go after Bud Light but you know what that is in this air in this moment of massive anti-trans laws and anti-gender affirming care laws passed throughout this country that's just violence against trans people and honestly like this is the

whole thing with like oh you went woke no no Bud Light wants to sell more Bud Light and I'm sorry if your Converse is from the 90s thank you yeah your commercials with like two blonde twins being like Oh yeah tap the Rockies I don't know if that was Coors I don't care but all of your commercial they ain't hitting so you got to go to The Tick Tock Stars you got to pay them so money and they're gonna get out to the 10 million 11 million followers that she has no 100 100 how do they not understand this like by the way for everyone doesn't matter what your political leanings are okay stop getting upset or giving credit to corporations that only do things to maximize profits or to Market themselves to in this case 11 million people who follow this popular tiktoker that's all this is about okay bud light is not taking a strong stance like woo so risky so courageous no Bud Light is looking out for their profits they're looking for different ways to Market and honestly when you think about the demo for Bud Light which is I think young people like young people drink Bud Light because Bud Light is awful like it tastes like garbage yeah it's it's a step up from you're in yeah yeah a little maybe I don't know we might want to do a taste test uh let's do some focus groups to see if that's the case but no I mean don't put that on the internet Anna put that out there but my point is this is beer pong beer right this is what college students are drinking so it's actually a really smart marketing move uh from Bud Light especially I don't know for sure but I would venture to say that Dylan Mulvaney's audience is Young And so it's smart to Market this way that's all this is but yeah you're right they're trying to stick it to White claw you know what I mean they're like oh we need an angle get Dylan Mulvaney put her put her face on a can that's so per it's perfect it's easy and it's a special can that they sent specifically to her right so if you're a Bud Light connoisseur and you're also a transphobe don't worry you're not gonna have to drink out of a can of beer that has her face on it um we do have some more unhinged reactions I'm just going to go to some of the tweets um I agree with half of the comment here although I don't know if we could even say the first word so I'm just going to say it's another it's a synonym for P that was tweeted here pea water masquerading as uh as beer hires man masquerading as woman I don't agree with the second half of that but Bud Light does taste like pink so anyway but no I mean like who cares who cares who cares why he thinks he's so clever oh he's so clever someone fed him that and then he someone dm'd him that joke and then he deleted it and that's great uh Tim pool with this clever One Bud Light is college party beer almost no one goes out to a bar to chill and orders Bud Light it's trash that young people drink to get wasted uh and where's the dunk you know what I respect that there was no dunk it was just a factual tweet it might be one of Tim Poole's only

factual tweets so you're right thanks for watching The Young Turks I really appreciate it another way to show support is through YouTube memberships you'll get to interact with us more there's live chat emojis badges you've got emojis of me Anna John Jr so those are super fun but you also get playback of our exclusive member only shows and specials right after they air so all that all you gotta do is click that join button right underneath the video thank you.

Appendix B: Sample of the raw data

Sample of the comment from Video 1



[Redacted]

It's so funny how delusional the media is. Hahaha. These broadcasters are in fairy land. Lol.

103 Reply

[3 replies](#)



[Redacted]

theyre legit talking about a advertisement. what does it say about you when you are being offended by some girl on a beer can?

Reply



[Redacted]

ago (edited)

HUH? That's a man. Take a biology course some day and learn about something called 'DNA'. You'll be better informed then. Good luck. SMH

1 Reply



[Redacted]

dna and gender have nothing to do with eachother sweetheart maybe you should be the one getting informed <3

Reply

Appendix C: Links of the YouTube videos

YouTube Video	Link
1	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=F5d2nd0Eiv0
2	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WpzbT2ZfvDc
3	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=z2hC5Vlcigg
4	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LaqGC_8RfsY
5	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jkaisXqnp3c
6	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xbzEshmhSY4
7	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-WzoiicLiT0
8	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=85zvTMFv9Ck
9	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8UrhJXnuCnw
10	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YxH8Qvyy9k
11	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mZQMZfq-3w
12	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ThgZe9zLIUI
13	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5Fnf89yvHOE