

THESIS ON ECONOMICS AND BUSINESS ADMINISTRATION H49

Consumer's Journey as Ambassador of Brand Experiences

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Declaration:

Hereby I declare that this doctoral thesis, my original investigation and achievement, submitted for the doctoral degree at Tallinn University of Technology has not been submitted for any other academic degree or examination.

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IIVI RIIVITS-ARKONSUO

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LIST OF ARTICLES

This doctoral dissertation is based on the following scientific articles, which are referred to by Roman numerals throughout the text:

- I. **Riivits-Arkonsuo, I., & Leppiman, A.** (2015). Antecedents of online word-of-mouth and memorable experience concept. *International Journal of Business and Social Research*, 5 (9), 1-14.
- II. **Riivits-Arkonsuo, I., & Leppiman, A.** (2014). Online Word-of-Mouth on Brands and Experience Marketing. *Journal of Management and Change*, 32/33, 43-55.
- III. **Riivits-Arkonsuo I., Kaljund, K. & Leppiman, A.** (2014). Consumer Journey from First Experience to Brand Evangelism. *Research in Economics and Business: Central and Eastern Europe*, 6(1), 5-28.
- IV. **Riivits-Arkonsuo, I., & Leppiman, A.** (2015). Young Consumers and their Brand Love. *International Journal of Business and Social Research*, 5 (10), 33-44.

Other publications related to the doctoral thesis

- Leppiman, A., **Riivits-Arkonsuo, I., & Kaljund, K.** (2013). Improving non-profit organizations' capability through open architecture model. In G. Prause, U. Venesaar & W. Kersten (Eds.), *International Business – Baltic Business Development* (115-134), Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang GmbH.
- **Riivits-Arkonsuo, I., & Leppiman, A.** (2013). Consumer Behavior in Social Media: Patterns of Sharing Commercial Messages. In G. Prause, U. Venesaar & W. Kersten (Eds.), *International Business – Baltic Business Development* (297 – 317), Frankfurt am Main: PeterLang GmbH.
- **Riivits-Arkonsuo, I., & Leppiman A.** (2013). Consumer online word-of-mouth - analysis through an experience pyramid model. 9th Eurasia Business and Economics Society/ EBES Conference - Rome; January 11-13, 2013, Sapienza University of Rome, Italy. In *9th EBES Conference- Rome Proceeding*. 9, 1929 – 1934.
- **Riivits-Arkonsuo, I., & Leppiman A.** (2014). Online word-of-mouth in experience marketing, the voice of the consumers: on the example of Estonian social media users. In *Listening to Consumers of Emerging Markets: Proceedings of the 2014 Annual Conference of the Emerging Markets Conference Board*. 344 – 349. New Delhi.
- **Riivits-Arkonsuo, I., & Leppiman A.** (2015). Experiential Technology Brands for Generation Y. In Y. J.-C. Andreani (Ed.) *International Marketing Trends Conference* (1-11) Paris.

INTRODUCTION

The doctoral thesis is inspired by an inquisitiveness to discover why some brands get a lot of offline and online discussion and why they are loved among their consumers. The thesis is intended to discover the process that forms a meaningful relationship between the consumer and brand and how the devoted consumers act on the behalf of the brand as ambassadors. The author takes a proposition that before the meaningful bond with the brand manifests itself, the consumer takes a journey to learn about, purchase, and interact with the brand. The metaphor “consumer journey” is a sequence of events with meaningful touch points (Norton & Pine, 2013), and it is a widely used framework (Forrester Research) in marketing management and service design practice. Despite the importance of this method in brand management, there is less theoretical support in marketing literature concerning the consumer journey concept and its behavioral consequences. The doctoral thesis aims to address the gap in the academic literature and contribute to providing a brand ambassadors’ insight on developing a deep, meaningful experience with a brand.

The thesis lies in brand relationship theory (Fournier, 1998), behavioral decision theories, and experience economy theory (Pine & Gilmore, 1998). Consumer-brand relationships, social interactions, and brand experiences are the key concepts of the thesis. The research problem originates from the matter that the research area of the consumer experience is still far from its maturity. The consumer experience, as a concept and an empirical phenomenon, is not as established compared to other consumer and marketing concepts (Schmitt, 2010), such as attitudes, satisfaction, and loyalty. The meaningful consumer-brand relationship transforms consumption habits and attitudes. Furthermore, since the brand value is co-created in the context of use and experience (Vargo & Luch, 2008), the consumers become the brand value co-creators. Value co-creation is a function of the interaction. The firm bond to the brand leads the consumer to share positive words (Fetscherin et al., 2014), and thereby, the consumers promote the brand by influencing the purchase decisions of members of their social network. The consumers engage in traditional word-of-mouth (WOM) communications and, likewise, use social media networks in online WOM communications. The online communication research timeline is relatively short. Academic research into online WOM first appeared in scientific journals about fifteen years ago. The research on the experiential aspects driving for engagement in online WOM has remained rather limited.

Thus, the aim of this doctoral thesis is to contribute to the consumer experience through empirical phenomenon research and to provide a better understanding of consumers as co-creators of brand value through online and offline communications. The central research question seeks to determine what aspects transform the consumer into an ambassador of brand experience.

In particular, the present thesis investigates the formation of meaningful brand experience and its behavioral consequences by focusing on four research questions: (1) What experiential aspects affect online WOM positively? (2) What are the experiential aspects of online engagement? (3) How do brands obtain meaning for a consumer? (4) Where do the consumers get impulses to become acquainted with their favorite and most loved brand? To answer the research questions, four research tasks were set: (1) to find the experiential drivers of sharing and generating the positive online WOM; (2) to find the relationship between memorable, meaningful experiences and consumer-brand online engagement; (3) to reconstruct the consumer journey in order to provide deep insight into what the consumers experience during the process; and (4) to find the roots of brand attachment. The thesis is based on four sequential articles, each one feeding into the next. Figure 1 depicts the connections between the four articles, made up of four studies, which are connected by research questions (RQ) and tasks (T) described below.

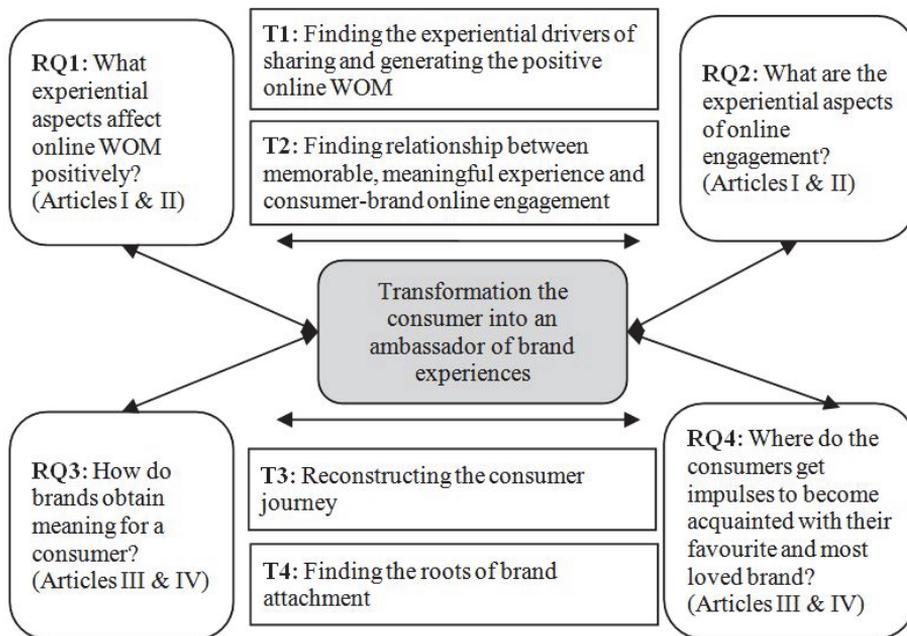


Figure 1 Research questions, tasks and interconnections of the articles. *Source: compiled by the author*

The first two articles utilize the same database, collecting information from a representative sample of Estonian Internet users (n=418) and focusing on those who have a Facebook account. The third article uses an international sample of consumers from Generation Y (GenY) , born between 1982 and 1994 (Hawkins & Mothersbaugh, 2013). The fourth article employs empirical data provided by international informants belonging to Generation Z (GenZ), born around 1994

(Bassiouni & Hackley, 2014). All the articles focus on the consumer as a brand ambassador and co-creator of brand value. The first two articles investigate the consumer-brand relationship in an online communications context where any memorable experiences are likely to be talked about on social media as well as through traditional WOM; thus, the study does not rely only on an online setting. Keller and Fay (2012) argue that 90 percent of conversations about brands take place offline while only 10 percent emerges online. Therefore, the third and fourth articles broaden the scope of the research landscape for the current thesis. Both studies empirically investigate how consumers perceive the journey from the first experience to a strong, meaningful, emotional bond with a brand and what the circumstances are that lead to brand love and brand evangelism. Brand love is a marketing construct that “helps explain and predict variation in desirable post-consumption behaviors among satisfied consumers” (Carroll & Ahuvia, 2006, 79). Brand evangelism is “the active behavioral and vocal support of a brand, [---] purchasing the brand, disseminating positive brand referrals, and convincing others about a focal brand by disparaging competing brands” (Becerra & Badrinarayanan, 2013, 372). According to Langner and others (2014), the experiences that are pivotal to the development of brand love appear unpredictable, personal, and largely outside of marketer’s control. Brand love and brand evangelism can be earned, but cannot be bought (Becerra & Badrinarayanan, 2013). The author of this doctoral thesis estimates the phenomenon of brand love and brand evangelism attract managers’ and academics’ interest. The research on the phenomenon is relevant since strong brand attachment leads to loyalty and a positive WOM. Such consumers are the ambassadors, volunteer brand marketers, dealing on the behalf of the brand.

This study **aims to contribute** to the existing body of marketing literature in both theoretical and practical terms. The contribution of the thesis lies in the following aspects:

First, the author will contribute to the literature of experience marketing concepts, such as meaningful experiences, interactions, value co-creation, and reciprocity. Second, the study contributes to research on online WOM by focusing on the implications of the experiential aspects of online communication between brand and consumer. Third, considering the importance of understanding the circumstances leading to brand evangelism and brand-related experiences, there is a surprising lack of studies in the marketing literature qualitatively exploring the consumer’s journey from first encountering the brand to becoming a brand evangelist. This study marks the first engagement with the theoretical experience pyramid model (Tarssanen & Kylänen, 2007) in the brand-consumer context. The study results reveal that the experience model enables a reconstruction of the consumer’s journey. Fourth, the study extends the scientific debate regarding relationship theory in consumer research, demonstrating how brands obtain meaning for the consumer. Fifth, the study provides a novel ecological systems context for exploring the formation of the consumer-brand relationship.

The contributions of the author into the articles:

Article I - “Antecedents of online word-of-mouth and memorable experience concept” (Appendix 1). The author of this thesis generated the research idea, prepared the literature review, compiled the measurement instrument, and handled the conducting the survey and using the statistical tools. Anu Leppiman provided ideas for the setup of the article. Both authors contributed to the interpretation and the results of the article.

Article II - “Online Word-of-Mouth on Brands and Experience Marketing” (Appendix 2). The author conducted the theoretical and methodological design and handled the using of statistical tools and interpretation of the survey data. Together with Anu Leppiman the author contributed to the interpretation and the results of the article.

Article III – “Consumer Journey from First Experience to Brand Evangelism” (Appendix 3). The author formed the research idea, compiled the empirical data set and co-wrote the article. Together with Kristel Kaljund and Anu Leppiman the codes and categories emerged from qualitative data were worked out.

Article IV - “Young consumers and their brand love” (Appendix IV). The author handled literature review and gathering the empirical data. Anu Leppiman provided ideas for the methodological approach. Together with Anu Leppiman compared the codes and categories emerged from narratives.

The author of the thesis handled publishing all the articles mentioned above.

The research has been reported in various international conferences including “9th Eurasia Business and Economics Society Conference” (Rome, 2013), “Annual Conference of the Emerging Markets Conference” (New Delhi, 2014), “14th Eurasia Business and Economics Society Conference” (Barcelona, 2014) “International Marketing Trends Conference” (Paris 2015), 1st (2013), 2nd (2014), and 3rd (2015) “International Marketing Spring Conference” at TUT (Tallinn).

The remainder of the review article is structured as follows. Chapter I presents the theoretical framework, including the consumer-brand relationships, meaning of experiences in consumer behavior and concepts of word-of-mouth. Chapter 2 explains the choice of methodology and research design including sampling, data collection, and analysis. Chapter 3 reveals the findings and constructed models. The chapters are followed by conclusions, the list of references, and appendices containing Article I-IV.

1. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This chapter builds the theoretical basis for the conceptual frameworks by explaining the principal concepts of this thesis and refines on study territories, the underlying foundation for the empirical research. The author will derive from appropriate literature discussed below the research questions and formulates the tasks to achieve the answers to the questions.

1.1. Positioning and focus of the research

All four articles enclosed in the thesis have focused on the consumer as a co-creator of brand value. The author of the thesis names such devoted persons dealing on the behalf of brand “ambassadors.” The thesis lies on relationship theory (Fournier, 1998), behavioral decision theories and experience economy theory (Pine & Gilmore, 1998).

The figure 2 illustrates how the author of thesis positions the research territory.

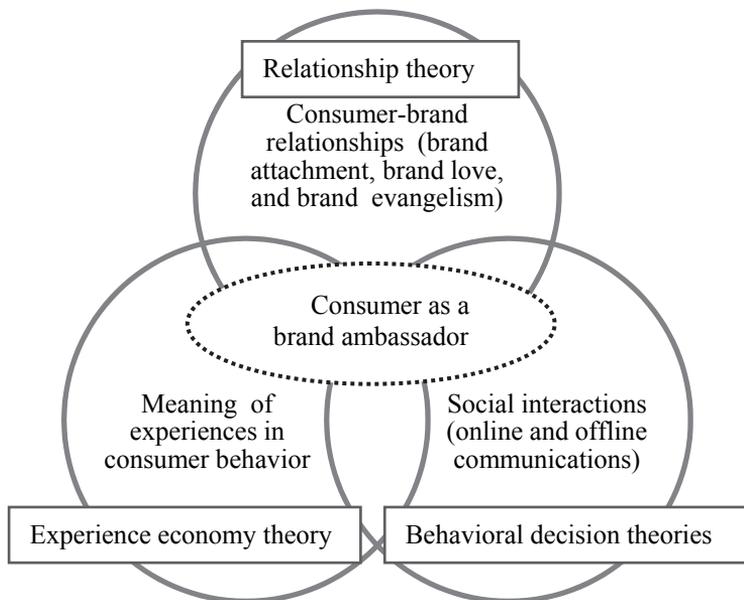


Figure 2 Positioning the consumer behavior research domains. *Source: compiled by the author based on theoretical framework*

Brand attachment that involves brand love and brand evangelism is the key concept besides meaning of experience in consumer behavior and social interactions, such as online and offline communications. The thesis involves three consumer behavior domains. The author of the thesis recognizes the

overlapping these domains in terms of meaningful experiences, consumer-brand relationship, and social interactions. The literature regarding value co-creation suggests that consumers are always active participants in the creation of value (Akaka, Vargo & Lusch, 2012; Grönroos, 2008; Leppiman, 2010; Vargo & Lusch 2004, 2008). Value is co-created during the interaction between the provider, that is, a brand and a consumer (Leppiman 2010; Prahalad & Ramaswamy, 2004; Vargo & Lusch, 2004). In the new prospect on marketing, the brands are seen as a continuous social process, whereby brand value is co-created through interactions and network relationships (Merz, He, & Vargo, 2009; Hutter et al., 2013). Consumer participation in value co-creation depends on consumers' ability and willingness to attend in value formation process (Grönroos, 2012). The value is co-created via meaningful experiences that lead to brand attachment and generates a positive offline and online response in the social network. In particular, with the rise of social media, consumers have been become producers of experiences both for each other and for companies (Chakrabarti & Berthon, 2012). Compared to shared brand experiences through traditional WOM, shared experiences via social media channels amplify and reach a large group of consumers. However, 90 percent of conversations about brands take place still offline (Keller and Fay, 2012)

In next section of the thesis the author will discuss prior work on relationships between consumers and brands followed by discussion meaning of experiences in consumer behavior. As a strong experience triggers a desire to share it then the discussion moves to related literature of social interactions.

1.2. Consumer-brand relationships

Since the consumers have different needs, motives and values they have various levels of engagement with brands. Brand may mean an informational cue, personal identity signal or cultural symbol (Schmitt, 2012). Keller (2009) developed the brand resonance concept referring the intensity of the psychological bond that consumers have with the brand and their level of engagement with the brand. The brand attachment appears on various levels indicating the bond that connects a consumer with a particular brand (Malär et al., 2011). At a lower level, the brand attachment is equivalent to liking. At a higher level, it transforms into the powerful passion (Sarkar, 2014). As those committed consumers may act as the unpaid spokesperson on behalf of the brand (Doss, 2014), then the concepts related to consumers' emotional attachment to the brand have received attention in marketing literature. Susan Fournier (1998) introduced in her seminal paper "Consumers and Their Brands: Developing Relationship Theory in Consumer Research" the idea that brand love is one key dimension of consumer-brand relationships. In order to indicate the relationships between consumers and brands, concepts such as brand devotion, brand zealotry, brand romance and brand love have been identified. Brand love as a marketing construct explains and predicts the satisfied consumers' post-consumption

behaviors (Carroll & Ahuvia, 2006). Brand love leads to stronger brand loyalty and to more positive WOM (Fetscherin et al., 2014). The predictors of brand love identified in the previous literature are satisfaction (Carroll & Ahuvia, 2008), brand identification (Bergkvist & Bech-Larsen, 2010; Albert & Merunka, 2013), sense of community (Bergkvist & Bech-Larsen, 2010), and trust (Albert & Merunka, 2013). Sense of community may lead to increased brand identification. Brand identification concept bases on the social identity theory. Consumers sense that a brand reflects characteristics that are central to their identity. They perceive oneness with a brand and are likely to work toward the benefit of the brand. Purchase and consumption of brands enable consumers to construct their identities; brands become part of consumers' identities. (Bergkvist & Bech-Larsen, 2010). The loved brands allow consumers to express who they truly are, or to reflect who they want to be (Batra, Ahuvia, & Bagozzi, 2012; Becerra & Badrinarayanan, 2013). Brand evangelism manifests itself in the higher level of brand love. Brand evangelists spread the message about their preferred brands, often oppose competing brands, and perceive oneness with the brand (Doss, 2014).

From marketing management perspective, brand love and evangelism can only be controlled to some extent (Bergkvist & Back-Larsen, 2010). The personal experiences that shape the trajectories to brand love are not accessible to brand managers (Langner et al., 2014). Driven by consumer passion and emotions is brand love and its higher level brand evangelism earned, and cannot be bought (Becerra & Badrinarayanan, 2013). Thus, importance to gain insights into forming meaningful experience that leads to brand love is twofold. First, it is not known whether the brand love is rooted in the brand, in the consumer or the relationship attributes between the brand and consumer (Albert & Merunka, 2013). Second, there is a need for a more holistic approach to understanding the forming of brand love and the circumstances leading to brand evangelism. This thesis aims to contribute to the scientific debate concerning relationship theory in consumer research formulating the research questions: How brand obtains the meaning for consumer? Where do the consumers get impulses to become acquainted with their favorite and most loved brand?

1.3. Meaning of experiences in consumer behavior

Consumer behavior discipline lies on three core domains: information processing, behavioral decision theory, and consumer culture theory. They all yield consumer insight on experiences that is a novel and exciting concept in marketing academia and practice (Schmitt, 2010). Gentile, Spiller and Noci (2007) conceptualize the consumer experience as a set of interactions between a consumer and a brand, which provoke reactions. The experience is personal and refers the consumer involvement at different levels, such as rational, emotional, sensorial, physical, and spiritual. Experience evaluation depends on consumers' expectations, stimuli appearing from interactions with company and moments of

contact, also known as touch-points. Sundbo and Sørensen (2013, 4) suggest following the definition of experience: “Experiences, in the context of experience economy could be defined as the mental impact felt and remembered by an individual caused by the personal perception of external stimuli. The impact might be entertaining or learning, but does not need to be so; the stimuli need to be authentic, but does not have to be; and the combination of stimuli and personal perception may invoke flow but the definition includes more than optimal flow experiences”. Some experiences are more intense and memorable. Other experiences are more common and less interesting, therefore quickly forgotten, such as the ordinary every-day experiences. (Gelter, 2010) Some experiences are short-lived, some long-lasting, stored in the consumer’s memory (Brakus, Schmitt, & Zarantonello, 2009). Thus, memorable experience is something unusual standing out from the rest. Carù and Cova (2003) determine ordinary and extraordinary experiences. An ordinary experience has to do with everyday life, routines, the past, and the passive acceptance of events. An extraordinary experience, on the other hand, must be outside daily routine to leave a memory. Experiences happen inside peoples’ mind and are provoked by external stimuli. The same stimulus does not provoke “an experience in all people and not even the in the same person in different situations. Whether an experience is provoked depends on the state of the individuals “mental readiness and the specific situation”. (Sundbo & Sørensen 2013, 4) A consumer creates meaning to everything he/she perceives (Leppiman 2010; Pine & Gilmore, 1998; Tarssanen & Kylänen, 2007). While products and services exist outside of the consumers, then experiences happen inside them. Brands do not deliver the experiences; they can only deliver elements that function as external stimuli and receivers get an experience (Sundbo & Sørensen, 2013). Brand experience is holistically perceived and varies in strength and intensity (Brakus, Schmitt, & Noci, 2009). Experience has been considered part of the marketing activities which focuses on the character of product of service (Sundbo & Sørensen, 2013) and which may have experiential value for the consumer. Marketing communications can establish the brand in memory, create a brand image, engage consumers both on-line and off-line, and create experiences (Keller, 2009).

Experiencing is the process and as such conceptualized by the several authors. Boswijk, Thijssen and Peelen (2007) determine experiencing as a chain process including sensory perception, emotion, experience, and ending with “giving meaning” to experience. Meaningful experience composes of feelings, new knowledge and beliefs acquired by the consumer through a brand, a product or a service (Gelter, 2010; Leppiman, 2010; Leppiman, Riivits-Arkonsuo, & Kaljund, 2013).

A theoretical model that Tarssanen and Kylänen (2007) call the experience pyramid is built up following the hierarchical logic. The model has two perspectives. Consumer’s experience forms through five levels of cognitive processes on the model’s vertical axes. These sequential levels are motivational,

physical, intellectual, emotional, and mental. The model is enhanced by the product elements on the horizontal axis of the model, contributing to the consumer experience. The product elements are individuality, authenticity, story, multisensory perception, contrast, and interaction. Together these can create the preconditions for a meaningful experience. The author of the thesis used this model for designing the interview or narrative guideline in order to gather data for Articles III and IV. The analytical model of consumers' journey adapted from Tarssanen and Kylänen (2007) is presented in Article III, page 10 (see Appendix 3).

Consumers look for brands that provide them with unique and memorable experiences, and for this reason, the concept of brand experience is of substantial interest to marketers (Brakus, Schmitt, & Zarantonello, 2009). Consumption experience as such involves feelings and emotions (Holbrook & Hirschman, 1982; Hirschman & Holbrook, 1982) and does not fulfil basic needs. Feelings and emotions are at the top of the hierarchy of needs (Maslow, 1943). Consumers are willing to pay a price for this. Pine and Gilmore, who launched the experience economy theory (1998) considered experiences not as amorphous construct; but as a real offering as any service, good, or commodity. Progression of economic value and competitiveness is achieved through experience economy. (Pine & Korn, 2011).

Schmitt (2010) argues that more research is needed on how experiential at various touch points create consumer experience, and how these experiences can impact consumer behavior in the short and long term. The author of the thesis responds to this call by setting the following research tasks: First, the study seeks to find the experiential drivers of sharing and generating the positive online WOM. Second, to find relationship between memorable, meaningful experience and consumer-brand online engagement. Third, this study aims to reconstruct the consumer journey in order to provide deep insight what the consumers experience during the process.

1.4. Social interactions

McColl-Kennedy and others (2012) determine interactions as the ways individuals engage with others actively searching for information and providing feedback. A strong experience triggers a desire to share it; people discuss experience with their friends. An important part of a brand-related experience is being able to communicate it by telling one's own story, recording the event in memorable pictures or videos, and sharing these experiences on social media platforms (Gelter, 2007; Kylänen, 2007). Consumers are more likely to engage in WOM when they experience significant emotional experience (Matos & Rossi, 2008; Söderlund & Rosengren, 2007). Offline WOM communication occurs among friends and family members while online WOM can occur among people who may never encounter one another face-to-face context. Those people may only be linked by a common interest or need. (Kimmel & Kitchen, 2014)

Online WOM communication refers “to any positive or negative statement made by any potential, actual, and former consumer about a product or company” (Hennig-Thurau et al., 2004, 39).

The online communication research timeline is relatively short, since the academic research into online WOM first appeared in scientific journals about fifteen years ago. Previous related studies focus primarily on the impact of online WOM on consumer purchasing decisions while research on the experiential aspects driving for engagement in online WOM has remained rather limited. Due to the conceptual closeness of online WOM and traditional offline WOM communications, research on traditional WOM can inform online WOM remaining largely relevant in social media context (Hennig-Thurau et al., 2004; Lang & Hyde, 2013; Toder-Alon, Brunel, & Fournier 2014). Satisfaction, loyalty, quality, commitment, trust, and perceived value are the most investigated antecedents of WOM (Matos & Rossi 2008; Lang & Hyde, 2013). According to some authors the roles of the drivers and characteristics differ between online and offline WOM. Lovett, Peres and Shachar (2013) argue that consumers spread brand-related word for three fundamental purposes: social, emotional, and functional. The main social driver is the desire to send signals to others about one's expertise, uniqueness, or social status. The functional driver motivates people to provide and supply information. The emotional drivers are excitement and satisfaction (*ibid.*) The sharing and creating online content has been explained by intrinsic and extrinsic consumer motivation. Intrinsic motivation refers to doing something because it is inherently interesting or enjoyable, and extrinsic motivation refers to doing something because it leads to a separable outcome (Ryan & Deci, 2000). Intrinsic motivation is driven by an intense interest and involvement in the activity itself, curiosity, enjoyment, peer recognition, a personal sense of challenge, accomplishment or belonging (Chu & Kim, 2011; Hennig-Thurau et al., 2004; Kietzmann et al., 2012; Riivits-Arkonsuo & Leppiman, 2013), whereas extrinsic motivation is driven by the desire to achieve some external reward (Hennig-Thurau et al., 2004; Kietzmann et al., 2012).

Kozinets and others (2010) suggest that WOM communications are co-produced in consumer networks where consumers are active co-producers of value and meaning. The author of thesis proposes that brand value is co-created in consumer networks where consumers are active co-creators of value and meaning. Thus, the research questions derived from the consumer behavior domain are as follows: What experiential aspects affect online WOM positively? What are the experiential aspects of online engagement? The corresponding tasks are to find the experiential drivers of sharing and generating the positive online WOM and to find the relationship between memorable, meaningful experiences and consumer-brand online engagement.

2. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

In this chapter, the research methodology set out in this thesis is discussed. The methodological section starts by discussing the choice of methodology and designing the study and then it turns to explaining the sampling, data collection followed by data analysis.

2.1. The choice of methodology

To answer the research questions (see Figure 1) empirical work during 2012-2015 has been conducted. All the gathered data were primary, collected for a specific purpose related to the doctoral thesis.

The thesis relies on multiple triangulations, “the combination of methodologies in the same study of the same phenomena” (Denzin, 2009, 297). The author opted for a mixed methodology for following reasons: First, a combination of qualitative and quantitative approach provides a more complete understanding of a research problem than either approach alone (Creswell, 2014). Second, considering the orientation of the doctoral thesis is phenomena-driven, and then the rationale for use the methodological triangulation is to observe the phenomenon from several angles rather than one angle (Neuman, 2003).

Furthermore, in this doctoral thesis the author uses data triangulation employing several sampling strategies. Since the gathered qualitative data was read and codes, categories, and themes were compared by co-authors of the articles (See Articles I, III, and IV) then investigator triangulation (Denzin, 2009) is used. Moreover, finally, theoretical triangulation is exploited while several theoretical positions helped in interpreting gathered data (*ibid*).

The methodology involved the qualitative content analysis of data collected from the interviews and written narratives. Credibility, dependability, confirmability, and transferability are the four alternatives for assessing the trustworthiness of qualitative research (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). To verify the trustworthiness of data collection the author of the thesis provides precise details of the sampling method and participants’ descriptions. The interview guide is presented in Appendix 6. To ensure the trustworthiness and credibility of the results, the author evaluated how the emerged categories covered the data and identified whether there were similarities within and differences between categories (Elo et al., 2014).

Gathering and analyzing the empirical data ethical issues the qualitative research (Ruth & Otnes, 2006) of confidentiality, privacy, anonymity and informed consent, were taken into account.

2.2. Designing the study

Corresponding to the mixed methods approach, appropriate sampling procedures were chosen. Quantitative data were gathered through a self-administrated online survey, fielded to a nationally representative sample of Estonian internet-users (n=418). Qualitative data were collected in the form of in-depth interviews and introspective written narratives. Table 1 presents the dynamics of the study, the choice of the methods and sampling logic to achieve the research purpose by answering the research questions.

The author of thesis started the collecting data for the first study (Article I), with an exploratory sequential mixed method. The study seeks to uncover what experiential aspects affect online WOM positively. The findings of the empirical data gathered from the first qualitative phase provided useful insights into defining a list of items for a survey conducted for the second quantitative phase. Thus, the second database builds on the results of the initial database. Article II seeks the answer to the question what are the experiential aspects of online engagement by finding the relationship between memorable, meaningful experiences and consumer-brand online engagement. The research utilizes the collected quantitative data for the first study.

Table 1 Research methodology.

Article	Data collection methods	Sample	Data analysis method
I - Antecedents of online word-of-mouth and memorable experience concept	An exploratory sequential mixed method In-depth interviews and a nationwide online survey	Heavy or at least medium users of social media channels (n=16) Estonian Internet users (n=418)	Content analysis Exploratory factor analysis. A linear regression analysis
II - Online Word-of-Mouth on Brands and Experience Marketing	Nationwide online survey	Estonian Internet users (n=418)	Bayesian Dependency Modelling
III - Consumer Journey from First Experience to Brand Evangelism	In-depth interviews with international sample	GenY International sample (n=45), selected (n=13) brand evangelists	Directed content analysis
IV Young consumers and their brand love	Introspective written narratives	GenZ International sample selected (n=15)	Content analysis

Source: compiled by the author

The third (Article III) and fourth (Article IV) studies apply a qualitative methods. The both studies aim to pursuit the consumer journey beginning from the first encounter with a brand to a strong emotional bond with a brand and consumer.

Each study, method, sampling procedure, and analyze method depicted in Table 1 has been thoroughly explained in published papers that are provided in the Appendices 1- 4.

2.3. Sampling, data collection and analysis

The empirical data for the Articles I and II were generated through in-depth face-to-face interviews with 16 Estonian informants in spring 2012. Eight females and eight males presented the heavy or at least medium users of various social media channels, such as Facebook, Twitter, and Youtube. Heavy and at least medium use refers frequency; interviewees use these channels either daily or every second day. Interviewees' age varied between 21 and 35 years. The author of the thesis developed the interview guide based on behavioral decision theories. The findings of the interview material were used in a second quantitative phase since a qualitative content analysis provided useful insights into defining a list of items for a survey. Furthermore, constructs measures were derived from the existing literature: the conceptual model of offline and online social networking (Brown, Broderick, & Lee, 2007), the model of online WOM in social networking sites (Chu & Kim, 2011), and the typology of motives of online consumer articulation (Hennig-Thurau et al., 2004). The constructs mentioned above were modified to suit the context of the first study.

A 7-point, Likert-type measurement scale (anchored at 1=disagree strongly, 7=agree strongly) included both behavioral and attitudinal indicators. A self-administrated online survey (Appendix 5) was fielded in May 2012. The online panel of a professional research agency was used. Turu-uuringute AS (Estonian Surveys Ltd.) recruits the panelists through nationwide surveys and panel members cover the representative demographic model of internet users in Estonia. After screening questions, the next items directly addressed Facebook users. The average age of respondents (n=418) was 35,5 years (SD 12,7). While the survey fielded, Facebook penetration rate was 35.62% of the country's population and 47.42% of all Estonian internet users (Socialbakers.com 2012).

The data of the quantitative study were analyzed using explorative factor analysis. The psychometrics properties of the latent constructs and the wording of the items were assessed. A linear regression analysis was employed using IBM SPSS Statistics 22.0 to investigate a significant relationship between predictors and dependent variables.

The second study (Article II) exploits the empirical data gathered for the first study. Due to the uncertainty of linear variable dependencies Bayesian Dependency Modeling was chosen. Bayesian method is an alternative to frequentistic statistical procedures addressing modeling problems, such as

continuous measurement level, multivariate normality, and linearity of the data (Nokelainen, 2008).

In the third study (Article III), a qualitative approach was applied. The theory-driven (Tarssanen & Kylänen, 2007) interview guide was developed by the author of thesis (Appendix 6). Face-to-face in-depth interviews were carried out in a semi-structured manner by MBA and MA students from the Tallinn University of Technology, who participated in a marketing research course during the spring and autumn semesters in 2013. Every student chose an interviewee from his/her social network. The author of thesis briefed the students carefully before they conducted the interviews. The material collected in the study included 45 interviews, carried out by 45 students. The age of the informants ranged from 19 to 36. The risk of using students as interviewers was justified regarding the matter that it helped access to a broad circle of GenY consumers, especially as the aim of a qualitative study does not reach a certain number of respondents.

The collected material was further processed systematically. The first stage of analysis involved all 45 interviews, the second 13. The qualitative content analysis provided the author of the thesis with three categories for recognizing brand evangelists. Emerged categories were applied as criteria that enabled to filter the brand evangelists among the interviewees from those who could not be recognized brand evangelists. The logic of the experience pyramid (Tarssanen & Kylänen, 2007) was used to analyze 13 interviews.

In the fourth study (Article IV), the focus research falls upon young consumers, in 20-24 years and their brand love. A qualitative research design was deemed the most appropriate strategy considering the purpose of this study. The international business students were assumed to represent the young consumers because they age ranges from 20 to 24. The author of the thesis saw them as a cohort holding similar patterns of thinking, feeling, behaving and expressing themselves when it comes to brand-related behavior. The empirical data were generated through written narratives. The informants wrote introspective answers in a narrative form concerning their favorite, most preferred and loved a brand. The narrator shapes, constructs and performs the self, experience, and reality (Chase, 2005). The guidelines for writing the introspective answers (Appendix 6) in a narrative form enabled informants to construct their consumer journey with meaningful touch points. Filtering the brand stories the author of the thesis worked out a set of selection criteria. Only those stories were selected (n=15) where the narrators indicated the emotional brand attachment, exposed emotions, thoughts, interpretations, and indicated what meaning their beloved brand has obtained. In the data analysis, open-coding procedures identified common themes by labeling, categorizing and describing phenomena (Corbin & Strauss, 1990).

3. RESULTS

Discussion of the results and presentations the models in this chapter is structured based on the research questions and the research tasks depicted in Figure 1. This chapter introduces first the findings concerning the consumer as a brand ambassador and value co-creator in social media. The first sub-chapter reveals the drivers of sharing and generating positive online WOM and discusses the relationship between memorable, meaningful experience and consumer-brand online engagement.

Next the author presents the reconstruction of the consumer's journey from the first encounter with a brand to becoming a brand ambassador. The final section discusses where roots the brand attachment and presents the model how GenY and GenZ become acquainted with their favorite brands in the ecological systems context.

3.1. The consumer and brand engagement in social media

The study (Article 1) seeks answers what impacts have distinctive constructs such as memorable online campaigns, willingness to engage in brand value co-creation, and enthusiasm to help the brand (reciprocity, gratitude) on sharing the online word. Table 2 demonstrates the proposed hypothesis and their supporting.

Table 2 Hypothesis testing.

	β	t-value	Result
H1: Memorable online campaign affects WOM positively	0,033	0,678	Not supported
H2: Willingness to engage in brand value co-creation affects online WOM positively	0,154	3,177	Supported
H3: Willingness to help brand (reciprocity, gratitude) affects online WOM positively	0,232	4,855	Supported
H4: A memorable online campaign affects willingness to help brand positively	0,217	4,530	Supported
H5: A memorable experience affects willingness to help brand (reciprocity) positively	0,561	13,923	Supported

Source: compiled by the author based on Article 1

No support to direct and positive relationship between willingness to share the online word and memorable online campaigns was found (H1). Thus, the memorable brand online campaigns by themselves do not predict positive online WOM. Though, the test results revealed that consumers' willingness to help

a brand (reciprocity and gratitude) and their willingness to interact in value co-creation have a positive impact to sharing the online word. The findings support relationships between willingness to interact in value co-creation and willingness to help a brand.

The author continued the research addressed to the experiential aspects of online engagement in Article II. Since the observed variables had the modeling problems, such as continuous measurement level, multivariate normality, and linearity of the data (Nokelainen, 2008) then Bayesian dependency modeling (BDM) was applied. BDM predicts the most probable statistical dependency structure between the observed variables (Nokelainen, 2008; Tirri & Nokelainen, 2012). The theoretical structure of the network model consists of the categories: high sharing threshold (F1), different messages from others in social media (F2), benefit seeking (F3), reciprocity (F4), memorable experience (F5), and interaction (F6). The wordings of the items (A1-A21) depicted in Figure 3 are available in Article II. The figure depicts a model based on a six-factor solution and BDM, calculated using B-course software.

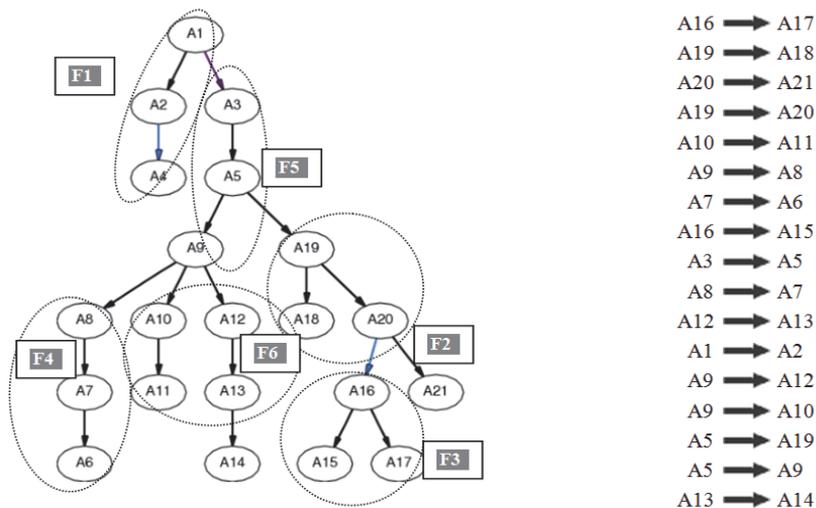


Figure 3 Six-factor and 21 items level dependencies. *Source: compiled by the author based on Article II*

Constructs as uniqueness (different messages from other brands), memorable experience and consumer-brand interaction in value co-creation are elaborated from experience marketing concepts.

Non-linear modeling found 17 strong dependencies between the variables. (A1) - "I am very picky about the brands I like and share" the most significant variable in the model. These findings support the expectation that consumers are

not generous when it comes to liking and sharing brands online. The author of the thesis argues that online brand-related WOM has a particular meaning for the consumer that presupposes unique positive and meaningful experience. The non-linear model provides new information by revealing the relationship between a memorable experience (F5) and consumer-brand and consumer to consumer interaction (F6). Moreover, social media campaigns providing distinguishable messages on social media (F2) and memorable experiences (F5) are related - memorable experience can be provoked by very special messages in social media.

F3 (benefit seeking) demonstrated weak dependencies between other variables. According to the study of Kietzmann and others (2012), belongs benefit seeking to extrinsic consumer motivation when engaging in online WOM. Benefits seeking, such as willingness to be more likely to be a fan, to like and share, if more personal benefit would be offered less important or important not at all while the users consider sharing and generating online content. Intrinsic motivation in turn refers to doing something because it is driven by an interest, enjoyment (Ryan & Deci, 2010), and involvement in the activity. The study results conducted by the author of thesis demonstrated that intrinsic motivation drives the social media users.

Thus, using the non-linear modelling three drivers lead the social media users to share and generate online content was identified. First, positive and memorable experience motivates the consumer to promote a company with positive online communication. Reciprocity takes place: the brand invests in the consumer, and thus the consumer is willing to invest in the brand. Second, memorable experience leads consumers enthusiastically to co-operate, to create content and to forward messages. If brands ask for their opinion about how to improve the services/products for the consumers, they readily share that. It indicates consumer to consumer and consumer to brand interaction. Third, to lead the consumer to co-operate with the brand in the social media, special, arousing attention, and memorable stimuli are needed. It can be a memorable and smart campaign that arouses the attention of the consumer. On the other hand, the results of Article I reported that such campaigns by themselves do not predict positive online WOM.

The author of the thesis argues that the success of brands relies on creating memorable and meaningful experiences and building long-lasting, trust-based relationships with consumers. The brand that has not earned consumers' trust cannot be helped with the extraordinary online campaigns.

3.2. Reconstruction the consumer journey

he author of thesis postulates that consumers are the brand value co-creators through their social interactions acting so as the brand ambassadors. The memorable experiences are likely to be talked about through social media but much more through traditional WOM and since doesn't the current study stay

only in an online context. The study of Keller and Fay (2012) reveals that 90 percent of conversations about brands take place offline. Therefore, next the author switches the focus on offline WOM, in other words, on traditional WOM communications. Moreover, as the thesis is inspired an interest why some brands get a lot of offline and online discussion and why they are loved among their consumers, then the Articles III and IV broaden the scope of the research landscape the thesis. Both studies investigate empirically how the consumers perceive the journey from the first experience to a strong, meaningful emotional bond with a brand and the circumstances leading to brand love and brand evangelism. The interview guide used in study III and its adapted version for writing the introspective answers in a narrative form in study IV is enclosed in Appendix 6.

The theory-driven data collecting strategy enabled to analyse the way the informants described the physical or virtual environment in which they underwent their brand experiences. Next, how the experience developed on the intellectual level following by the findings what memorable elements their brands offered them, and how they described those elements. Subsequently, the author aimed to gauge the meaning of the brand for the informants – the meaning that makes the relationship with the brand both emotional and passionate, triggering the wish to share the experience.

Figure 4 presents the model of the consumer journey from the first encounter with a brand to becoming a brand ambassador. Reconstruction the journey bases on findings of Articles III and IV. The author demonstrates that meaningful relationship with the brand forms through the process.

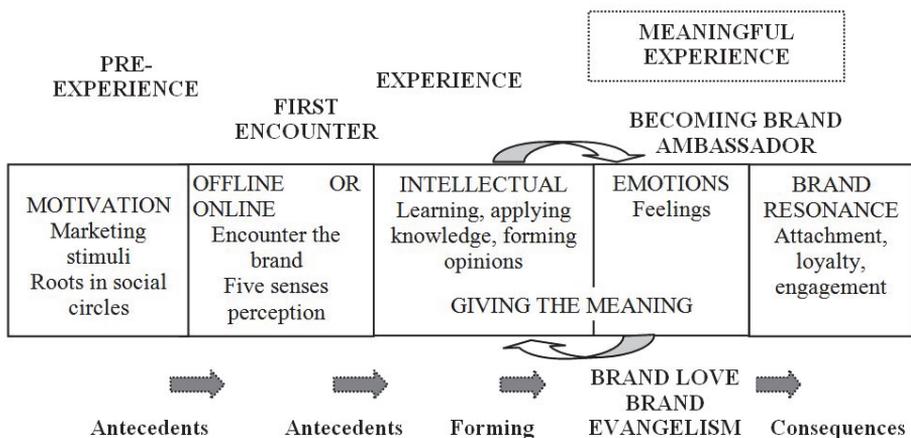


Figure 4. Reconstruction the consumer journey from the first encounter with a brand to becoming a brand ambassador. *Source: compiled by the author based on Articles III & IV*

The journey begins the first encounter with a brand, moves to forming opinions, applying knowledge, and follows by the meaning that the consumer gives to the brand. The brand and consumer relationship holds an emotional

charge based on experiences and experiencing and manifests itself as brand love or even brand evangelism.

The first encounter with brands happens in the physical environment (offline) where the consumer experiences and perceives the products or services of the brands through the five senses. However, nowadays some brands, such as computer games exist only online. That is, experience happens through sight, visual images, sound and touch on the screen followed by a call to interaction.

The empirical data gathered for study III and IV includes excellent examples of the significance of multi-sensory experiences. The multisensory experiences make or may make the brand special and meaningful. Furthermore, such experiences bring memories to present and the informants relive the unique moments related to sight, sound, smell, touch, and taste over and over again. Several informants describe how some stores offer an almost complete multisensory experience: one can touch the product, listen to music there, and be surrounded by extraordinary interior design. In stores can pick up smells, pay attention to goods beautiful display and experience the friendly service. Moreover, a product itself can offer a set of multisensory elements.

Multisensory experiences and appropriate service support the brand giving the feeling that brand is made just for them: “It all seems ...somehow if it were made for you” (Male, 25). Multisensory experiences and excellent service often mark meaningful touch points in consumer journey to forming the firm bond with the brand. On the other hand, the way how the consumers meet the brand may have influenced besides by marketing stimuli by the social network of consumers. The consumer brand choices can be triggered by their social circles surrounding them. Here they get impulses to pick up their favourite, most preferred and loved brand. The author will discuss such influences more detailed in the next sub-chapter. Thus, both impacts by social networks and multisensory experiences can be seen as the antecedents of forming brand love or even brand evangelism (see the arrows in Figure 4).

The author of the thesis argues the most important phase in the consumer journey be the giving sense to a brand. If the consumer perceives something particular and unique related to the brand, then it sticks to memory. The experience became meaningful, and the brand obtains a special meaning. The informants attributed meanings to brands such as “some happiness and having fun in life”; “colourful and exposes more positive values than the other brands” (Female, 22) or “I feel like I’m a grown-up person who needs to plan the future, but in the next moment I feel youthful and spontaneous again. The brand represents for me that I can be whatever I want” (Female, 24). The brand had been even obtained the meaning as follows: “when our family visited New York some years ago, the Apple store was known to be so impressive that it was on our attraction agenda, besides with the Empire State Building” (Female, 22). This example demonstrates the knowledge that the informant already had (Apple store was known to be impressive) and the meaning of the brand (attraction program besides with the Empire State Building).

According to the experience hierarchical model (Leppiman, 2010; Leppiman, Riivits-Arkonsuo, & Kaljund, 2013; Tarssanen & Kylänen, 2007), the experience becomes meaningful through learning and forming opinions on the intellectual level. On the next level of the model, the experience becomes meaningful through feelings and emotions.

In figure 4, the intellectual aspects are included before the affective ones. There has been a long, productive debate in psychology about which of the two come first. That is, are emotions cognitively driven or are judgments the results of emotions? The findings of studies conducted by the author of this thesis affirm that sometimes feelings and emotions come first, and other times, the informants reach the emotional bond to their brands by learning and applying knowledge. In figure 4, these processes are depicted by two directed arrows.

The important role in forming the brand attachment is seeking further information about the brand. On the other hand, such information seeking can be the behavioral consequence of brand attachment. One may begin to read forums, considering information trustworthy and expecting to find answers to questions. One may worry even about brand future pondering how the brand was able to survive the economic depression (Article III). Devoted consumers follow the brands in social media, and they may even create the content by blogging (Article IV). Boswijk

For the consumer's journey reconstruction is used brand experience (Boswijk, Thijssen, & Peelen, 2007; Tarssanen & Kylänen, 2007; Tynan & McKechnie, 2009) and brand resonance (Keller, 2009) concepts. The author of thesis considered the amalgamation of those concepts since she sees the conceptual closeness of brand experience and brand resonance. Brand experience and experiencing are an antecedent of forming a consumer-brand relationship where brand obtains particular meaning. Brand resonance including attachment, loyalty and engagement is meaningful relationship's behavioral consequences. It is considerable that almost all informants in both studies emphasized the loyalty to the brand, without that direct question having been asked. Every brand story selected for those two studies communicates informants' individuality, personality, attitudes, beliefs, and values. Their favorite brands can create a strong feeling of belonging, of being together with others. Should a brand communicate luxury and enable a person to identify with a particular social class, the informant does not fail to mention this. The brand may also boost the informants' self-esteem and get then compliments from friends. The brand can have a comforting effect; buying it can be felt as giving oneself a gift. The informants use the metaphors (Fournier, 1998) for describing the brand role in their lives – brand has made new friends, the brand has helped to connect with friends, family members, teammates. Brand remembers the idols, hobby, friends, and family. Thus, the informants immersed in their brand, – brand makes it possible to boost self-esteem, to improve the mood, to identify itself, and to relive the special moment from their past over and over again.

It is very likely that the informants talk about many of the things that they talked about in the interviews or wrote in narratives in their everyday life as well. Therefore, the author of thesis names them “brand ambassadors”. Through such interactions the consumers become brand value co-creators, “unpaid spokesperson on behalf of the brand” (Doss, 2014, 2). After they give their beloved brands a particular meaning, they feel the need to speak about their beloved brand to the people who belong to their networks and to share their experience on social media channels. They combine the controlled, rational aspects of the message (like facts about the brand) with the emotional element (brand-related experience and feelings) when the aim is boosting a brand. Brand ambassadors complement the story of the brand with their brand-related story. They do this in an emotional and suggestive way that is bound to make an impression on listeners who might then begin their journey with the brand. That is a way how brand ambassadors participate in brand value co-creation being able and willing to attend in such process.

3.3. Roots of brand attachment

From the qualitative data gathered for Article III and IV appeared that often the informants became acquainted with their brand already in childhood, within lie the roots of their close connection to the brand. This finding portrayed younger informants belonging to GenZ and likewise a bit older informants belonging to GenY. The childhood memories often include a strong positive emotion related to a strong feeling of happiness. This emotion has helped the first encounter to lead to a passionate brand relationship since the brand has obtained a special meaning and exposes more positive value.

Other family members may have owned products of the brand, for instance, “this brand...like it runs in our family” (Male, 24). GenZers parents, belonging to Generation X born between 1965 and 1976, (Hawkins & Mothersbaugh, 2013) may act as agents influencing their children brand attachment. They can do it directly through their purchases for the child or together with the child. They can do it indirectly being brand loyal consumers and influencing thus the next choices of the young consumer. Brand may have valued in the family since its success in the domestic or global market, for example, “my parents are very enthusiastic about the brand” (Female, 22). Besides, childhood idols may affect the brand choices and subsequent strong emotional bond with the brand. The encounter with a brand is in a way a second-hand one, first it was idol’s brand, and that matter made a brand desirable.

The informants have been influenced by parents, family members, schoolmates, friends and becoming older by “cool” trends. Owning the cult brands had been already desired in primary school, especially when older brother or sister owned it. They appreciated the positive feedback got by schoolmates and friends. The informants emphasized how important was to get comments and endorsement their brands by schoolmates since it “meant much.”

Although they got stimuli from marketing messages and cues, their attachment to the brand is influenced by their social network. Being teens or young adults they had more or less money to use and made the purchase decisions independently, without going to store with their parents. Their buying decisions follow typical consumer decision model - an intellectual sequence of thinking, evaluating, and deciding (Foxall, 2005). They compared brands and got impulses from conversations with people from the social network. If so, then they are influenced by the brand ambassadors' before them itself becoming the brand ambassadors.

Eco-trends and strong country identity may affect the social network values and through those values can the consumer reach the brand. Environmental and cultural values can be seen as the conscious brand choices enabling construct the consumer's identity. For instance, the informant knows that she supports the small local farmers and that she consumes "sustainable products with a good conscience" (Female, 22). In her "social environment," people give the products of the brand as a present because: "you do not can go wrong with this present". Thus, the brand attachment roots of most conscious young consumers are in their values and beliefs. If they want to do something useful for the society and the climate protection, then they brand love is related to the eco- and environmentally friendly brands and lifestyle. If they are proud of the domestic brands, then their beloved brands are succeeded locally or globally.

Summarizing the research findings, the author of thesis comes up with the adaptation ecological systems theory (EST) to show GenY and GenZ consumers in the ecological systems context. According to EST, the microsystem, mesosystem, exosystem, and macrosystems are nested around a focal individual like a set of concentric circles. A set of circles is connected by the direct and indirect social interactions of their participants. A chronosystem, the fifth dimension of this system encompasses change or consistency over the time not only in the characteristics of the person but also of the environment in which person lives. Such transition may refer to the changes over the life course in the family structure, socioeconomic status or place of residence (Bronfenbrenner, 1993). Figure 5 demonstrates where the GenY and Zens strong emotional bond with a brand are rooted. That is, where they got the impulses to pick up their favourite most preferred and loved brand.

In the inner circle, the family and childhood friends shape a microsystem where the young consumer has direct interaction with parents, grandparents, sisters and brothers. The first encounter with the brand or brand choice can be affected by this microsystem. It means that brand attachment is rooted in childhood and related to strong positive memories. Such informants are up to now loyal to their brand, and they do not forget to emphasize it in different contexts. They spread positive WOM dealing so as the brand ambassadors, but the author of thesis did find only a few pieces of evidence that they would fervently persuade others to engage with the brand.

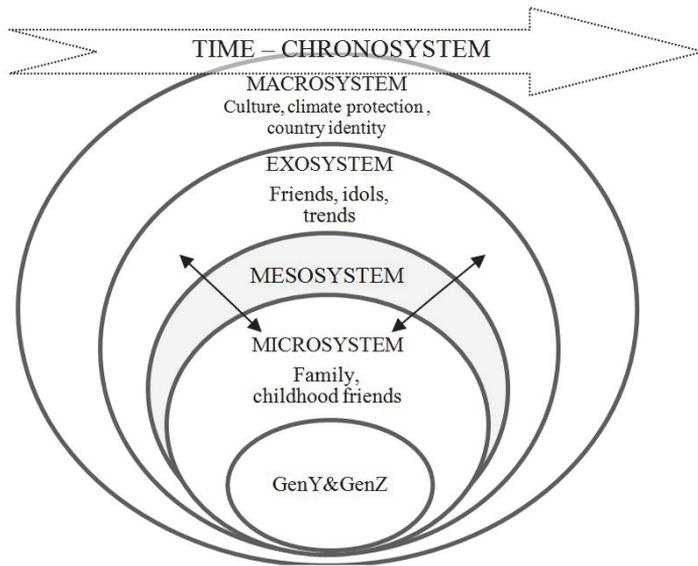


Figure 5 Impulses the becoming acquainted with loved brands in the ecological systems context. *Source: adapted from Bronfenbrenner (1979) and complemented by the author on the basis of Articles III and IV*

In the next circles (meso- and exosystem) has the consumer direct interaction with the friends, classmates, and other participants belonging to the network but may not have more direct interaction with family what comes to the first encounter with the brand and brand choice. The mesosystem consists of the interactions and relationships between the different parts of a person's micro- and exosystems (marked with two directions arrows in figure 5). The exosystem involves links between two or more social networks. The opinion of people belonging to the network may matter a lot. Those whose brand choice influenced by people belonging to their network are not too emotional in their expressions compared to them whose brand choice roots lie in childhood. Often they follow the trends and the opinion of the network matters a lot. Since the brand may reflect their values, then they are loyal. They tend to evangelize their brand experience to persuade others to engage with it (Tynan & McKechnie, 2009).

The fourth, macrosystem that is nested around a consumer involves society, culture, values (including environmental values), and country identity. Such choices are conscious and related to the informants' values and beliefs. Their value system is well-established. They may see the brand as an investment or reflecting socially responsible behavior. They follow the brands in social media, and they may create the content by blogging.

Adapting chronosystem in the marketing paradigm the author of thesis argues that it implies those consumers, who are engaged and brand-loyal. The brands

have obtained a special meaning for them. Such young consumers are up to now loyal to their brand and they emphasized it in different contexts without direct questions about loyalty and generating WOM was not asked.

In the marketing literature is discussed that experiences are provoked by stimuli. They may happen as a result of online and offline activities. The experiences may be evoked by products, packaging, communication, in-store actions, engineer work, salespeople, after-sale service, and events (Schmitt, 2010; Jensen, 2013). The study results carried out among the representatives of GenY and GenZ reveal that this is indeed the case, but experiences may occur likewise as a result of affecting the consumer by people belonging to their social circles. Marketing communication may have direct or indirect impact on those social circles since the circles work as filters amplifying or making less intense the diffusion of marketing cues.

The stories told by informants about their first encounter with the brand and the way they met the brand as children or adults are different. Because of the meaning of the brand for them today, they have either preserved or constructed a strong memory of the first encounter. Brand evangelists (Article III) use superlatives and speak of their brand in a passionate and emotional manner. Other consumers who also have the strong emotional bond with their brands use perhaps more modest vocabulary. Nevertheless, both they promote the brand and influence the purchase decisions the members of their social network participating thus to brand value co-creation.

CONCLUSIONS AND DISCUSSION

In this chapter, the author of thesis will summarize the answers to the research questions and discuss how the research tasks were completed and presents the methodological, theoretical (academic), and managerial (marketing) contributions. In additions to this, the author describes the limitations of the research and draws recommendations for future research based on the results of this thesis.

To answer the first research question, what experiential aspects affect online WOM positively and to second research question, what are the experiential aspects for online engagement two tasks were set up. The first task aims find the experiential drivers of sharing and generating the positive online WOM and the second seeks to find the relationship between memorable, meaningful experience and consumer-brand online engagement.

The data collected from 418 Estonian Facebook users were analyzed by the explorative factor analyze. Four out of five research hypotheses were supported (Article I). Applying the Bayesian non-linear dependency model provided new information by revealing the relationship between memorable, meaningful experience and consumer-brand interaction (Article II).

The results of Article I show that memorable brand online campaigns by themselves do not predict positive online WOM. Though, consumers' willingness to help a brand (reciprocity and gratitude) and their willingness to interact in value in co-creation have a positive impact to sharing and generating the positive online WOM. The author of thesis concludes that sharing and generating positive online communication involves reciprocal patterns, while a memorable experience, good brand experience, and interaction in value co-creation drive willingness to help the brand. The gratitude-related reciprocal online behavior is a "virtual praise".

The findings of Article II suggest three drivers leading to the decision whether involve to generating brand-related online content. First, memorable brand experience creates a true wish to help a brand. Such positive reciprocity is a reward for kind treatment. The second driver identified in the study is the willingness to participate consumer-brand and consumer-to-consumer interactions. The participants of online WOM communications perceive that the brand invests in the consumers, and, thus, they are willing to invest in the brand. The consumers are enthusiastic to co-operate, to create content and to forward messages. The third validated driver is related to memorable and distinctive from others social media campaign. The findings support the expectation that consumers are not generous when it comes to liking and sharing brands online. Consequently, there are not much brands that the consumers consider worthy of online sharing. Thus, the consumers are willing to engage in brand value co-creation through positive online WOM only under certain circumstances, such as

based on trust previous consumption experience or exciting and catching the brand message.

The contribution of those two articles is twofold. First, the studies contribute to the research of online WOM by highlighting the novel aspect of the high threshold of online content sharing and generating. The studies focus on the implications of experiential aspects for online communication between brand and consumer, contributing thus to conceptualization brand and consumer engagement in social media (cf. Hollebeek, Glynn, & Brodie, 2014). Second, the articles contribute to the literature of experience marketing concepts, such as meaningful experiences, interactions, value co-creations, and reciprocity.

To answer the third research question, how the brand obtains the meaning for consumer, and the fourth research question, where the consumers get impulses to become acquainted with their brand, next two tasks were set up. The third task aims to reconstruct consumer journey from the first encounter with the brand to consumer becoming a brand ambassador, and the fourth task seeks to find the roots of brand attachment. The empirical data for Articles III and IV were collected using the theory-driven interview guide from two different samples. The Article III focuses on brand evangelists, belonging to GenY. The Article IV focuses on brand love concept, and informants are the representatives of GenZ. The both concepts are manifestations of brand attachment that behavioral consequence is related to the consumer becoming a brand ambassador. Indeed, such behavior differs in valence and amplitude since the brand evangelists spread their word passionately and often oppose competing brands. The consumers having the just strong emotional bond with their brand can be more moderated in their communications. Doubtless, both consumer groups can be identified as brand ambassadors being volunteer brand marketers. To reconstruct consumer journey, the author of thesis exploited the empirical data from both studies.

The first encounter with “favourite, most preferred and loved brand” can be triggered by the social circles surrounding the consumer. The way how the consumers meet the brand may have influenced besides by marketing stimuli by the social network of consumers. After the experience becoming meaningful, the brand obtains the special meaning. The author of thesis argues that giving the meaning to a brand is the most significant phase in the consumer journey. Here lie roots the brand love or even brand evangelism.

Brand experiences and experiencing are an antecedent of forming brand attachment while loyalty and engagement are the behavioral consequences of the brand-consumer relationship. The consumer journey does not mean only an emotional charge, based on experiences and experiencing. The journey involves learning and applying knowledge. Moreover, devoted consumers are willing and ready to share their knowledge. Through the journey, consumers become brand value co-creators, feeling the need to speak about the brand to the friends, the people belonging to networks, and share the experience in social media

channels. The consumers combine the controlled facts about the brand with their brand-related experiences and feelings.

In the marketing literature is discussed that experiences are provoked by stimuli, such as advertisements, retail settings, and material goods. Exploring the consumer journey the author of thesis noticed that almost all the informants remembered their first encounter with their brand in the social context. That is, they met the brand through the people belonging to their social circles rather than direct marketing activities such as advertisements and campaigns. Adapting the ecological systems theory, the author identified the social circles from where the informants got impulses to reach their preferred and loved brands. The author of the thesis argues that by using such approach can be found the roots of brand attachment. First, in a microsystem young consumer has direct interaction with parents, grandparents, sisters and brothers. In line with the study of Braun-La Tour, La Tour and Zinkhan (2007) provide childhood memories to gain insight into brand meaning. The brand attachment that is rooted in childhood relates strong positive memories. Such informants are up to now loyal to their brand. It enables to analyze the brand stories in chronosystem. That is, to understand strong consumer-brand relationship passage through time.

In the mesosystem has the consumer direct interaction with the friends, classmates, and other participants belonging to network but may not have more direct interaction with family what comes to the first encounter with the brand. Often they follow the trends and the opinion of the network matters a lot. Since the brand may reflect their values they are loyal. They tend to evangelize their brand experience. The third, macro system involves society, culture, values (including environmental values), and country identity. The consumer journey is conscious and related to the informants' values and beliefs. They may see the brand as an investment or reflecting socially responsible behavior. They follow the brands in social media, and they may create the content by blogging.

The contribution of Articles III and IV is threefold. First, these studies contribute to consumer culture theory (Arnould & Thompson, 2005) exploring the lived reality of consumption and brands through the subjective meanings and interpretative processes of consumers (Moisander, Valtonen, & Hirsto, 2009).

Second, the articles explain the phenomenon of consumer experiences that form a meaningful bond with a brand. Thus, the study results contribute the further knowledge to the consumer experience concept. Third, Article IV extends the understanding of the forming brand love. Langner and others (2014) focused in their study specifically on mapping the trajectories of brand love over time. The author of the doctoral thesis provides a novel ecological systems context for exploring the forming brand love where chronoystem enables consumer-brand relationship passage through time. Such passage can be interpreted as loyalty for a brand.

Methodological and theoretical contributions

This thesis contributes insights regarding consumer-brand relationships, social interactions, and meaning of experiences on consumer behavior. The most significant contribution to the marketing literature relates the consumer journey concept and its behavioral consequences, providing a brand ambassadors' insight on developing a deep, meaningful experience with a brand. Considering the importance of understanding the circumstances leading to a strong consumer-brand relationship and brand-related experiences, in marketing literature, there has been a lack of studies qualitatively exploring the consumer's journey from first encountering the brand to becoming a brand ambassador. Examining the process of how and why consumers become a message conveyor for the brand, the author of the thesis provides theoretical support to the consumer journey framework that is a widely used method in marketing practice.

The main contribution of the thesis lies in implementing the consumer experience concept that is not as established in marketing literature compared to attitudes, satisfaction, and loyalty. The author made a contribution to the literature of experience marketing concepts, such as meaningful experiences, interactions, value co-creations, and reciprocity. Furthermore, the research extends previous work on online communication, and it brings insight into the experiential aspects driving for engagement in online WOM, since there has been more theoretical but less empirical research so far. The data were collected from Estonian internet users focusing on those who have a Facebook account. This sample is representative of characteristics such as gender, age, education, and place of residence. Such sampling technique adds the generalizability value to the study results.

Moreover, the doctoral thesis contributes to the research on the phenomenon of brand love and brand evangelism. Both concepts are relevant, since strong brand attachment leads to loyalty and a positive WOM. The thesis extends the theoretical discussion of brand love, its antecedents, formation, manifestation, and consequences, focusing on the members of the young consumer segment. Such consumers are the ambassadors - volunteer brand marketers - and deal on the behalf of the brand. Methodologically, the author derived the findings from in-depth interviews and narratives, relying on an international sample that allows a more versatile consumer insight compared to only a single country.

The author's contribution consists of the construction of two models. Firstly, the study results reveal that the experience model enables reconstructing the consumer's journey. Thus, the study marks the first engagement with the concept of the experience pyramid in the brand-consumer context. Secondly, the author provides a novel ecological context for exploring the formed consumer-brand relationship and seeks an explanation from where the strong emotional bond with brands originates. Adapting ecological systems theory, the author depicts consumers in micro-, exo-, and macrosystems. Social settings surround the consumers and are connected by the direct and indirect social interactions of

their participants. The systems act as filters, amplifying or making less intense the diffusion of marketing cues. Chronosystem helps to understand the brand-attachment over time and involves loyalty as the long-term relationship between consumer and brand.

Managerial contributions

The study results demonstrate that the online campaign, although distinctive and memorable, would not ensure successful buzz. The competition for consumer attention is becoming increasingly difficult for the managers and they can't continuously come up with new and distinctive marketing communication. The brand that has not earned consumers' trust cannot be helped with the extraordinary online campaigns. This finding may indicate that consumers are selective, ignoring information that they perceive as unnecessary. Instead, they may appreciate a more long-term emotional bond with a brand that creates a true wish to help. A good prior brand experience in real live earns virtual praise. The success of brands relies besides on creating memorable and meaningful campaigns also on building long-lasting, trust-based relationships with consumers.

The author has reconstructed the consumer journey from the first encounter of the brand to the becoming consumer as the brand ambassador using experience reflections by two generation. The findings of doctoral thesis complement experience marketing with insights regarding the meaning of brand experiences for consumers and enables marketers to find out the development of a strong brand attachment. The findings would help brand managers understand how the brand becomes experiential and obtains a special meaning for a consumer. The proposed model related to consumer journey to becoming brand ambassador can be used as a research tool planning and analyzing studies to understand the consumer-brand relationship in depth. To a large extent, the model is derived from the framework of experience design. The concept of designing experiences should not be limited to business areas already including the strong experiential dimensions, such as cultural events and tourism. The concept of designing experiences can be consciously used in brand building and integrate into marketing communication for various material goods and retail settings.

The guidelines collecting the data for Articles III and IV proved to be useful research tool enabling to obtain rich and intense consumer insight. These guidelines can be used in consumer research to understand the consumer-brand relationship in depth. Moreover, the author suggests brand managers gather a group of devoted consumers and let them tell how they encountered their beloved brand, where they got impulses to pick up their brand, what attracted their attention, and what particular meaning the brand conveyed them. Such listening to consumers' experiences would provide valuable ideas of how to build consumer-brand relationships, how to engage consumers, and what management decisions to consider.

Furthermore, the author demonstrated from where the brand attachment is rooted and which impulses the young consumers get from their social circles. The author of the thesis emphasizes that brand-related experiences undergone in the childhood are remembered ten years after interacting with the brand and still influence current preferences. Such long-term effects cannot be highlighted in general advertising, marketing communication or the average sales campaign. These young consumers are up to now loyal to their brand, and they don't forget to emphasize it in different contexts. The parents of young consumers' may act as agents influencing their children brand attachment. They can do it indirectly being brand loyal consumers. That is, besides direct marketing communications, it is possible arrive in young consumer groups indirectly. Moreover, social settings including strong and weak communication ties, social identification, values, and beliefs influence not only young consumers' brand attachment but likewise other consumer cohorts. Thus, viewing the target groups in their social settings and systems offers marketers opportunities to planning the marketing campaigns and build up solid consumer-brand relationships.

Limitations and future research

Despite contributions, this thesis is also subject to several limitations that suggest opportunities for further research. The author reports the scale used for the quantitative study (Articles I and II) to be subject to specific statistical limitations. Due to growing scholarly interest regarding the undertaking of consumer research addressing online engagement, further research would serve developing a new research instrument for measuring the experiential aspects of brand performance in online WOM context. For instance, what kind of brand communication the consumer perceives as exciting, memorable, different from those encountered before, attractive, and impressive to such an extent to be worthy of the online WOM. Since the current empirical study shows the results at an aggregate level, without detecting differences between various kinds of services, products, or brands, the author proposes future research that investigates positive online consumer WOM for different brands or product categories. Additionally, the measurement scale would incorporate brand love (cf. Hollebeek, Glynn, & Brodie, 2014) construct.

Article III and particularly Article IV employed a sample of University business students studying abroad. Unquestionably such informants present the young consumer segment enjoying multicultural environments and taking the benefits of creating extensive networks with different nationalities and personalities. Further studies need to be carried out with various segments of young consumers belonging to GenZ. Every brand story selected for this study communicates authors' senses of individuality, attitudes, beliefs, and values. The meanings that they have given to their brands differ. That is why research needs to be conducted regarding the young consumers' values, beliefs, and attitudes. As the current research demonstrated, values have a significant impact on whether to support the brand and engage with it.

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Iivi Riivits-Arkonsuo
Tallinn, November 2015

KOKKUVÕTE

Turunduspraktikas on levinud tarbija teekonna ja brändi kokkupuutepunktide kontseptsiooni kasutamine. Teadusuurimustes on terviklik lähenemine tarbija teekonnale kuni tema brändisaadikuks muutumiseni aga vähe kajastamist leidnud. Doktoritöö probleem tuleneb sellest, et võrreldes teiste tarbijakäitumuslike kontseptsioonidega ei ole elamuslike tarbijakogemusi teaduskirjanduses kuigi palju käsitletud. Teiselt poolt, arvesse võttes seda, et tarbijad räägivad oma elamuskogemustest nii suusõnaliselt kui ka jagavad neid virtuaalkeskkonnas, on virtuaalsuhtluse uurimise ajaliin olnud üsna lühike. Teema on oluline, sest sügava tarbijasuhte kujunemist ning brändi ümber toimuvat suusõnalist ja virtuaalsuhtlust saavad turundajad küll mõjutada kuid mitte kontrollida.

Käesolev doktoritöö keskendub tarbija teekonna rekonstrueerimisele tarbija ja brändi esimestest kokkupuutepunktidest kuni tarbija muutumiseni brändisõnumi edasikandjaks ehk brändisaadikuks. Doktoritöö eesmärk on kujundada arusaama tarbijast kui brändiväärtuse kaasloojast läbi tema suusõnaliste ja virtuaalsõnumite. Keskseks uurimusküsimuseks on teada saada, kuidas tekib brändiga tähendusuhet kujundav sügav tarbijakogemus.

Doktoritöö eesmärgi täitmiseks püstitas autor neli uurimusküsimust. 1) millised elamuslikud aspektid mõjuvad online sõnumite genereerimisele positiivselt? 2) millised on tarbija ja brändi vahelise virtuaalsuhtluse elamuslikud aspektid? 3) millise tähenduse annab tarbija eelistatud ja armastatud brändile? 4) mis mõjutab tarbija jõudmist „oma brändini“? Autor kavandas püstitatud küsimustele vastuse leidmiseks vastavalt neli uurimisülesannet. 1) leida positiivsete virtuaalsõnumi jagamise ja loomise elamuslikud mõjurid 2) leida seos meeldejäeva ja tähendusliku kogemuse ning tarbija ning brändi koostoime vahel 3) rekonstrueerida tarbija elamusteekond 4) leida tähendusrikka brändisuhte algallikas.

Doktoritöö toetub neljale artiklile. Kaks nendest artiklitest uurivad tarbija tahet jagada ja luua brändidega seotud sisu sotsiaalmeedias ja kaks artiklit käsitlevad sügava brändikogemuse tekkimist ning sellele tarbijapoolse tähenduse andmist.

Esimesele ja teisele uurimusküsimusele vastamiseks kavandatud ülesannete täitmiseks kasutas autor empiirilise materjali kogumiseks üle-Eestilist valimit (n=418), mis on esinduslik internetikasutajate osas ja mis keskendub Facebooki kasutajatele. Uurimisinstrumendi väljatöötamisele eelnes 16 süvaintervjuid sotsiaalmeedia kanalite aktiivsete kasutajatega. Intervjuu materjali kontentanalüüs võimaldas sõnastada instrumendi käitumuslike ja suhtumuslike mõõdikuid lisaks varasemates uuringutes valideeritud mõõdikute kohandamisele. Autor püstitas viis hüpoteesi, millest neli leidis kinnitust. Hüpotees, et teistest erinev ja elamuslik online kampaania mõjutab kampaania jagamist onlainis positiivselt, ei leidnud siiski kinnitust. Küll aga mõjutavad

virtuaalsisu jagamist tarbija soov brändi aidata (retsiprookus, tänulikkus) ja valmisolek osaleda tarbijatevahelises interaktsioonis luues nii brändi väärtust (Artikkel I). Seoste leidmiseks meeldejäeva ja tähendusliku kogemuse ning tarbija ning brändi koostoime vahel kasutas autor Bayesi võrgustiku sõltuvuste meetodit (Artikkel II). Mittelineaarne võrgustikuanalüüs võimaldas leida 17 tugevat sõltuvust mudelisse sisestatud 21 muutuja vahel. Kasutatud meetodika valideeris järgmised kategooriad: kõrge künnis virtuaalsõnumite edastamisel; meeldejäev brändikogemus; tahe brändi toetada; tahe osaleda brändi-väärtuse koosloomes; meeldejäevad sotsiaalmeedia kampaaniad ja kasu otsimine. Viimane kategooria oli teistega kõige nõrgemini seotud. Need kategooriad võimaldavad vastata uurimisküsimusele näidates, mis juhib sotsiaalmeedia kasutajat jagama ja looma brändiga seotud virtuaalsisu. Tulemused võimaldavad koostada virtuaalsõnumi edastamise mõjurid, mille järgi on sotsiaalmeedia kasutaja väga valiv, millist sisu ta edastab. Kui ta seda siiski teeb, siis toimub see läbi tema eelneva meeldejäeva tarbijakogemuse. Seega, positiivne tarbijakogemus toob kaasa soovi brändi aidata ja osaleda brändi väärtuse loomes koos teiste kasutajatega. Kasutatud Bayesi võrgustikuanalüüs võimaldab vastata teisele uurimisküsimusele, millised on tarbija ja brändi vahelise virtuaalsuhtluse elamus kogemuslikud aspektid ja leida seos meeldejäeva ja tähendusliku kogemuse ning tarbija ning brändi koostoime vahel. Doktoritöö autor leiab, et tarbija annab virtuaalsisu loomisele ja jagamisele kindla tähenduse, mis eeldab, et bränd on kasutanud oma kommunikatsioonis midagi erakordset ja meeldejäavat. Ennekõike on selleks usalduslik tarbijasuhe ja kogemus, millele järgneb soov brändi aidata virtuaalsisu jagamisega (retsiprookus). Veel enam, brändi ja tarbija kokkupuutepunktid eelneval teekonnal on kujunenud selliseks, et tarbija on nõus bränditeemalises virtuaalkommunikatsioonis osalema.

Kolmas ja neljas artikkel laiendavad käesoleva doktoritöö uuringumaastikku põhjusel, et brändi väärtuse koosloome ei toimu ainult virtuaalselt vaid suures osas tarbija suhtevõrgustikus silmast-silma. Kuna doktoritöö on inspireeritud küsimusest, miks mõnedest brändidest räägitakse palju ja miks nad on tarbijate hulgas armastatud, siis kolmas ja neljas artikkel uurivad tarbija teekonda alates esimesest kohtumisest brändiga kuni tähendussuhte andmiseni, mis avaldub brändi armastuses või isegi brändi evangelismis. Selleks, et uurida tarbija süvakogemuse tekkimist, valis autor kvalitatiivmeetodi. Empiiriline aineistiku kogumiseks kolmanda ja neljanda artikli jaoks kasutas autor teooriapõhist juhust, rakendades seda kahel erineval valimil. Kolmas artikkel keskendub põlvkonda Y (sündinud aastatel 1984-1992) kuuluvatele brändi evangelistidele ja neljanda artikli fookuses on brändi armastuse kontseptsioon ning informantideks on kõige nooremate tarbijate esindajad (põlvkond Z), vanuses 20-24 aastat.

Esimene kohtumine oma armastatud brändiga võib alguse saada lisaks tarbija turunduslikust mõjutamisest hoopis impulssidest, mida tarbija saab oma lähedasemast või kaugemast sotsiaalvõrgustikust. Kohandades ökoloogiliste süsteemide teooriat, näitab doktoritöö autor, et sellised impulsid on sageli pärit lapsepõlvest (mikrosüsteem) ning seotud lähedaste pereliikmetega. Siit edasi

võivad impulsid olla seotud koolikaaslaste ning sõpradega ja sedakaudu omaksvõetud trendidega (eksosüsteem). Makrosüsteemist saadud mõjutused võivad olla seotud tarbija väljakujunenud väärtushinnangutega (ökoloogilised, kultuuriline identiteet) ning sealt omaksvõetud trendidega. Kronosüsteem võimaldab seletada sügava brändisuhte, sealhulgas lojaalsuse ajalist dimensiooni. Turunduskommunikatsioon saab kõiki süsteeme mõjutada kas otseselt või kaudselt.

Doktoritöö autor näitab kõige olulisema etapina tarbija teekonna uurimisel tarbijapoolse tähenduse andmist brändikogemusele. Siit saab alguse sügav ja tähendusrikas brändisuhe. Iga brändilugu, mida autor kolmanda ja neljanda artikli koostamiseks välja valis, edastab informantide personaalseid hoiakuid, arusaamu ja väärtusi. Brändi ja tarbija teekonna kokkupuutepunktid ei kannu endas mitte ainult emotsionaalset laengut, vaid selle oluline etapp on ka õppimine.

Oma armastatud brändi kohta koguvad tarbijad teadmisi ja jagavad neid oma suhtevõrgustikus nii silmast-silma kui mõnikord ka virtuaalselt lisades sinna personaalse elamuskogemuse. Just nii toimivadki tarbijad vabatahtlike turundajatena ehk brändisaadikutena, koosluues brändi väärtust.

Doktoritöö kõige olulisem teoreetiline panus on tarbija teekonna rekonstrueerimine. Sügav brändisuhe muudab tarbija brändielamuste saadikuks ja seega brändi väärtuse koosloojaks. Teiseks näeb autor oma panust uudse järeltule tegemises, et ökoloogilised süsteemid, mis tarbijat ümbritsevad, toimivad filtritena, mis tarbijale suunatud turunduskommunikatsiooni kas võimendavad või muudavad jõuetumaks. Seega on sotsiaalsel võrgustikul, ehk keskkonnal, kuhu tarbija kuulub, oluline roll, mis mõjutab tema brändivalikuid.

Doktoritöö rakenduslik panus seisneb tarbija sisekaemuse pakkumises. Kuna autor täheldas tarbija teekonnas rohkelt elamuslikke aspekte, siis on need olulised, et turundustegevust planeerida ja täide viia. Kuigi turundajad ei saa sügavat tarbijakogemust kontrollida, saavad nad selle teket suunata. Teiseks rakenduslikuks panuseks peab autor kvalitatiivse info kogumiseks kasutatud juhiste koostamist, mis tootsid väga rikkalikku uurimisandmestikku ja tõestasid oma kõlbulikkust tööriistadena kahel erineval valimil. Need juhised on kasutatavad tarbijauuringutes, et mõista tarbija- ja brändivahelise süvasuhte teket ja tähendust.

Järgnevad uuringud, mis on seotud tarbija teekonnaga, peaksid keskenduma väärtuste uuringutele, mis on levinud tarbijate suhtlusvõrgustikes. See võimaldaks eristada elamussegmente. Nagu käesoleva doktoritöö koostamiseks läbiviidud tarbijauuringute tulemused näitasid, on just suhtlusvõrgustikes levinud väärtushinnangud need, mis sageli määravad, kas brändiga tekib sügav tarbijasuhe või mitte.

ABSTRACT

The consumer journey and its meaningful touch points with a brand are widely used the framework in marketing management. In academic literature is a lack of studies holistically exploring the consumer's journey and the consumer becoming the brand ambassador. The research problem originates from the matter that the consumer experience, as a concept and as an empirical phenomenon, is not as established compared to other consumer and marketing concepts. On the other side, the memorable experiences are to be talked about through traditional WOM and social media as well. The online communication academic research timeline is relatively short. Thus, the purpose of the doctoral thesis is to contribute to a providing brand ambassadors' insight on the developing a deep, meaningful experience with a brand. The central research question focuses on providing the answers related to transforming the consumer into an ambassador of brand experiences.

The aim of doctoral thesis has been broken down into four research questions: (1) What experiential aspects affect online WOM positively? (2) What are the experiential aspects of online engagement? (3) How do brands obtain meaning for a consumer? (4) Where do the consumers get impulses to become acquainted with their favorite and most loved brand? To answer the research questions the author set four research tasks: (1) to find the experiential drivers of sharing and generating the positive online WOM; (2) to find the relationship between memorable, meaningful experiences and consumer-brand online engagement; (3) to reconstruct the consumer journey in order to provide deep insight into what the consumers experience during the process; and (4) to find the roots of brand attachment.

This thesis bases on four articles. All the articles included in this thesis have focused on the consumer as a co-creator of brand value. Two articles examine the consumers' willingness to share and create brand-related online content and two articles explore forming the meaningful consumer brand relationship and how the brand obtains a meaning for the consumer.

The answers to the first and second research question were found through quantitative data employing a self-administrated online survey, fielded to a nationally representative sample of Estonian internet-users (n=418). The content analysis of the in-depths interviews (n=16) material enabled to define the attitudinal and behavioral items for the survey instrument. Furthermore, constructs measures were derived from the existing literature. Four out of five proposed hypotheses were supported. No support to direct and positive relationship between willingness to share online word and memorable online campaigns was found. Though, the study results revealed that consumers' willingness to help a brand (reciprocity and gratitude) and their willingness to interact in value co-creation have a positive impact to sharing online word (Article I). To find the relationship between memorable, meaningful experience

and consumer-brand interaction the author of thesis implemented the Bayesian non-linear dependency model (Article II). Non-linear modeling found 17 strong dependencies between the variables with the 21 items. Bayesian network model validated the categories as follows: high sharing threshold; memorable brand experience; willingness to help brand; willingness to participate in brand value co-creation; memorable online campaigns, and benefit seeking. The latter category has the weakest dependencies between other variables. These categories enable to answer the first research question demonstrating what drives consumers share and generate brand-related online WOM. The consumers are picky about sharing and generating online content. The author of thesis argues that online WOM has a certain meaning for users that presupposes memorable consumer experience. Thus, memorable brand experience drives the willingness to help brand and engage brand value co-creation with other users. Bayesian network analysis helps to answer the second research question related to experiential aspects of online engagement. The sharing online word assumes that something meaningful and memorable in the brand communication has been used. Expectedly, it can be memorable and different from others online campaign. However, first and foremost it is long-term and based on trust brand experience followed the enthusiasm to help a brand. Moreover, brand and consumer touch points in prior consumer journey have developed into the direction that leads the consumer to participate in the brand-related online communication.

The third and fourth articles broaden the scope of the research landscape the current thesis. The rationale behind this is that the brand value co-creation does happen not only virtually but mainly face-to-face through consumer network. Since the doctoral thesis is inspired an interest why some brands get many discussions and why they are loved among their consumers, the third and fourth articles focused on the exploring consumer journey. The journey means the process beginning with the first encounter with a brand to a obtaining the meaning by the consumer. To investigate the deep, meaningful relationship between consumer and the brand the author of thesis used a qualitative method. The empirical data for third and fourth articles were gathered using theory-driven interview guide from two various samples. To study the formation of meaningful consumer-brand relationship the author employed a qualitative method. The third article concentrates on brand evangelists, belonging to Generation Y, (born between 1982 and 1994). The fourth article focuses on brand love concept, and informants are the representatives of Generation Z, in age between 20 and 24 years.

The first encounter with the beloved brand mark often multisensory experiences and appropriate service. Since the first encounter with a brand brings memories to the present, the consumer may relive the unique moments again. The way how the consumers meet the brand may have influenced besides by marketing stimuli by the social network of consumers. Adapting the ecological systems theory the author of thesis argues that the consumers get

impulses to reach their preferred and loved brands from their social circles. The content analysis of qualitative data revealed that often are the roots of meaningful brand-consumer relationship in childhood. Thus, the first encounter with the brand can be affected by the micro system where the young consumer has direct interaction with parents, grandparents, sisters and brothers. In the exosystem has the consumer direct interaction with the friends, classmates, and other participants belonging to the network and the first encounter with the favourite brand can be affected by trends and opinions of friends. The impulses got from the third, macro system are related to society and culture and involve consumers' values, beliefs and attitudes. Chronosystem helps to explain long-term brand engagement and loyalty. Marketing communications may have indirect or direct impact on those ecological systems.

The giving meaning to a brand is the most significant phase in the consumer journey. After the experience becoming meaningful, the brand obtains the special meaning. Every brand story selected for Articles III and IV communicates informants' individuality, personality, attitudes, beliefs, and values. The consumer journey does not mean only the emotions based on experiences and experiencing but likewise learning. The devoted consumers are willing and ready to share their knowledge. Through the journey, consumers become brand value co-creators, feeling the need to speak about the brand to the people belonging to networks and share the experience in social media channels. That is, being volunteer brand marketers are such consumers the brand ambassadors.

The main theoretical contribution of the thesis is the reconstruction the consumer journey. The meaningful brand relationship transforms the consumer into the ambassador of brand experiences and the brand value co-creators. The second contribution to the academic debate is the novel approach related to findings that ecological systems that surround consumers act as filters amplifying or making less intense the diffusion of marketing cues. Thus, the social circles have the impacts on the sprouting the brand attachment.

The practical contribution consists in the offering the two generation consumer insight. The findings of doctoral thesis complement experience marketing with insights regarded the meaning of brand experiences for consumers and enables marketers to find out the development of a strong brand attachment. The guidelines used to gathering the qualitative data proved to be a useful research tool, and these guides can be used in consumer research to understand the consumer-brand relationship in depth.

Further studies need to be conducted considering the consumers' values, beliefs, and attitudes. As the study results demonstrated, personal values, often influenced by social circles' values have a significant impact to estimate whether to support the brand or not and is a brand worth love.

Appendix 1. Article I

Riivits-Arkonsuo, I., & Leppiman, A. (2015). Antecedents of online word-of-mouth and memorable experience concept. *International Journal of Business and Social Research*, 5 (9), 1-14.



Antecedents of Online Word-of-Mouth and Memorable Experience Concept

Iivi Riivits-Arkonsuo¹ and Anu Leppiman²

ABSTRACT

This study aims to examine the antecedents of brand-related online word-of-mouth (WOM) communication from the memorable experience concept perspective. This paper considers the factors that are behind the willingness to participate in brand-consumer interaction when passing on messages, generating content, and sharing online communication. The study is built on complementary sources of information, employing a mixed methods approach. The results show that sharing and generating positive online communication involves reciprocal patterns, while a memorable experience, good brand experience, and interaction in value co-creation drive willingness to help the brand. The gratitude-related reciprocal online behaviour is a “virtual praise”. The findings provide insight into how meaningful experience, interaction in value co-creation, and reciprocity, which are the key concepts of experience marketing, cause and have an impact on sharing online communication. From a theoretical viewpoint, this study offers insights into the links between constructs of meaningful experience concepts and brand-related online communication. Understanding the experiential aspects of consumers' online behaviour, such as willingness to co-create value together with brands, offers an implication for marketing management.

Keywords: Gratitude, memorable brand experience, online word-of-mouth (WOM), reciprocity, value co-creation.

JEL Codes: M31, M37, M39.

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1.0 INTRODUCTION

Social networking sites, blogs, recommendation sites, and online communities are tempting channels for marketers to interact with and engage the consumers. On the other side, social media channels give their users a possibility to advocate, ignore or sabotage brands and, for this reason, marketers need to understand how to manage a consumer's online interactions. In the context of social media, interactions among consumers can, for example, be a viral video shared via YouTube, a liked campaign in Facebook or the retweeting of new product information in Twitter. Online WOM is the central element in

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consumers' engagement with marketing offerings (Hennig-Thurau et al., 2010; Lang & Hyde, 2013). The presupposition of successful marketing management is to generate meaningful and memorable experiences through innovative delivery channels. Personally relevant and meaningful experiences can generate a positive offline and online response. Meaningful experience (a.k.a. an experience different from those undergone before, standing out from the rest of experiences) is one of the keywords, which is a relatively new experience in marketing. Experience marketing, based on the experience economy theory, is usually broadly defined as any form of consumer-focused marketing activity that creates a connection to consumers (Schmitt, 2010). Consumers look for brands that provide them with unique and memorable experiences, and for this reason, the concept of brand experience is of substantial interest to marketers (Brakus, Schmitt, & Zarantonello, 2009; Zarantonello & Schmitt, 2010).

Online communication has received significant academic and managerial attention. Likewise, the experience concept has received attention in academic research, and it is utilized in business practices. In the academic literature, issues of experience production, creation, and design are highlighted and discussed, mainly on the marketing management-oriented side. On consumer insight, including the experiential aspects driving for engagement in online WOM there has been more theoretical but less empirical research so far. This study strives to address that gap in the existing literature by examining the antecedents of brand-related online WOM communication from the memorable experience concept perspective. In this paper, we discuss experience concepts, such as meaningful experiences, interactions, value co-creations, and reciprocity. We suppose the answer to this issue is needed to provide insight into the consumers' motives for engaging in brand-related, online WOM. We begin by highlighting research for the purposes of online WOM to understand why online communication takes place and why it is generated and shared. We discuss key concepts and develop an argument why memorable brand messages, interactions, value co-creations, and reciprocity may interact in the prediction of online WOM. In addition, we postulate research hypotheses. In the subsequent sections, we interpret the findings of the exploratory qualitative research. In particular, we test the model of factors influencing positive online WOM. Then, we show and discuss preliminary empirical evidence supporting the conceptual framework and encouraging further research. Finally, we discuss implications for marketing theory and management. The focus of this study is on antecedents of positive online WOM.

This paper contributes to the literature of experience marketing concepts, such as meaningful experiences, interactions, value co-creations, and reciprocity. Moreover, we suppose to provide insight into the consumers' willingness for engagement in online WOM exploring them as the co-creators the brand value and meaning.

2.0 RELATED LITERATURE AND HYPOTHESIS DEVELOPMENT

2.01 ONLINE WOM COMMUNICATION

The online communication research timeline is relatively short, since the academic research into online WOM first appeared in scientific journals about fifteen years ago. Online WOM communication refers "to any positive or negative statement made by any potential, actual, and former consumer about a product or a company" (Hennig-Thurau, Gwinner, Walsh, & Gremler, 2004, p.39). Due to the conceptual closeness of online WOM and traditional offline WOM communication, research on traditional WOM can inform online WOM remaining largely relevant in social media context (Hennig-Thurau et al., 2004; Lang & Hyde, 2013; Toder-Alon, Brunel & Fournier, 2014). Satisfaction, loyalty, quality, commitment, trust, and perceived value are the most investigated antecedents of WOM (Lang & Hyde, 2013; Matos & Rossi, 2008). According to some authors the roles of the drivers and characteristics differ between online and offline WOM. Lovett, Peres and Shachar (2013) argue that consumers spread brand word for three fundamental purposes: social, emotional, and functional. The main social driver is the desire to send signals to others about one's expertise, uniqueness, or social status. The functional driver motivates people to provide and supply information. Whereas the social and functional drivers are the most

important for online WOM, the emotional drivers (such as excitement and satisfaction) are the most important for offline (*ibid.*) However, taking the example of the travel industry consumer satisfaction with travel consumption experience is suggested one of the key factors affecting the travellers' online communication (Liang, Ekinci, Occhiocupo, & Whyatt, 2013).

One of the earliest researches on the factors leading to online WOM communication is published by Hennig-Thurau et al., (2004). They identified four motivational categories, such as consumers' desire for social interaction, desire for economic incentives, their concern for other consumers, and the potential to enhance their own self-worth. The related studies published beginning the second decade of Millennium belong already to the emerging venue of online information-sharing formats such as Facebook, Twitter and Youtube. Facebook groups constitute a new form of virtual communities. Facebook users interact with other group members and share information with ease and speed; therefore it is platform for marketers to build viral-driven and multidirectional communication with consumers (Chu, 2011). Thus, at the present the changes in communication environment may have been influenced by slightly different drivers leading to online WOM communication.

The sharing and creating online content has been explained by intrinsic and extrinsic consumer motivation. Intrinsic motivation refers to doing something because it is inherently interesting or enjoyable, and extrinsic motivation refers to doing something because it leads to a separable outcome (Ryan & Deci, 2000). Intrinsic motivation is driven by an intense interest and involvement in the activity itself, curiosity, enjoyment, peer recognition, a personal sense of challenge, accomplishment or belonging, whereas extrinsic motivation is driven by the desire to achieve some external reward (Kietzmann, Silvestre, McCarthy, & Pitt, 2012). Holbrook (2006) discussing the types of consumer value, distinguishes extrinsic value including economic and social values and intrinsic value that includes hedonic and altruistic values. These values, in turn, can be divided into self-oriented and other-oriented. Hence, motivational categories, which drive consumer online interactions, are conceptually close to the types of consumer value suggested by Holbrook. Kozinets, Valck, Wojnicki, and Wilner (2010) argue that WOM communications are co-produced in consumer networks where consumers are active co-producers of value and meaning. We propose that brand value is co-created in consumer networks where consumers are active co-creators of value and meaning.

2.02 MEMORABLE EXPERIENCE

In the marketing literature the idea that consumers are looking for memorable experiences is well established. Experiences are memorable events (Pine & Gilmore, 1999) and in order to leave a memory trace, they must take place outside the daily routine (Sundbo & Sørensen, 2013). Thus, memorable experience is something unusual standing out from the rest. Experiences are provoked by stimuli; they may occur as a result of offline and online activities; they may be evoked by products, packaging, communication, in-store actions, engineer work, salespeople, after-sale service, events (Schmitt, 2010; Jensen, 2013), and by special messages in the social media. A strong experience triggers a desire to share it; people discuss experience with their friends. An important part of a brand-related experience is being able to communicate it by telling one's own story, recording the event in memorable pictures or videos, and sharing these experiences on social media platforms (Gelter, 2007).

Experience has been considered part of the marketing activities which focuses on the character of product or service (Sundbo & Sørensen, 2013) and which may have experiential value for the consumer. Consumers are more likely to engage in WOM when they experience significant emotional experience (Matos & Rossi, 2008; Söderlund & Rosengren, 2007). Kaplan and Haenlein (2011) suggest that only messages that are both memorable and sufficiently interesting to be passed on to others have the potential to spur a WOM marketing phenomenon. Memorable message should be contrasting - different with respect to the consumer's earlier experiences (Riivits-Arkonsuo, Kaljund, & Leppiman, 2014).

The authors of the current study assume that the memorable brand online message (e.g. campaign, consumer game) is an antecedent of online WOM. Brands, whose messages on social media are

memorable and different from others may stimulate the consumers to click the like button, become a fan, share them in order that the friends see them as well, write a comment or even recommend the brand.

Hence we propose:

H1: Memorable online campaign affects WOM positively.

2.03 INTERACTIONS IN VALUE CO-CREATION

With the rise of social media, consumers are becoming co-producers of products and services. Moreover, they are also becoming producers of experiences both for each other and for companies (Chakrabarti & Berthon, 2012). The literature regarding value co-creation suggests that consumers are always active participants in the creation of value (Akaka, Vargo, & Lusch, 2012; Grönroos, 2008; Leppiman, 2010; Vargo & Lusch, 2004, 2008). Value co-creation is a function of interaction. McColl-Kennedy, Vargo, Dagger, Sweeney, and van Kasteren (2012) determine interactions as the ways individuals engage with others actively searching for information and providing feedback. Interactions are the source of experiences and the value is derived from consumption experience (Grönroos & Voima, 2013; Minkiewicz, Evans, & Bridson, 2014). Brand value co-creation process involves the interaction among brands and consumers during which consumers take an active role and co-create value together with brand (Merz, He, & Vargo, 2009; Prahalad & Ramaswamy, 2004). Consumers can associate themselves with brands by becoming in social media platforms a friend or a fan. That is, consumers are seeking ways to interact with brands and other consumers. The creation of content and willingness to share online word with others is notably useful in increasing brand engagement. From integrated marketing communication perspective, the closer the consumer and brand, the more willing the consumer is to interact, share information, and introduce friends to the brand (Duncan & Moriarty, 2006).

Consumer participation in value co-creation depends on consumers' ability and willingness to attend in value formation process. Accordingly value creation and destruction can occur during the same interactive process. Interactive value formation is not only linked to positive outcomes (Echeverri & Skalen, 2011), but also associated with value co-destruction. The focus of this study is on antecedents of positive online WOM and therefore we hypothesize that good consumption experience creates the need for engaging in brand value co-creation.

H2: A good brand experience and thus, willingness to engage in brand value co-creation affects online WOM positively.

2.04 RECIPROCITY AND GRATITUDE

A theory of reciprocity explains the behavioral response to perceived kindness or unkindness (Falk & Fishbacher, 2006). Both traditional and online brand-related WOM involves the reciprocal patterns. The consumer is motivated in online communication to give the company something in return for a good experience (Hennig-Thurau et al., 2004; Blazevic et al., 2013). The emotional core of reciprocity is gratitude towards the giver (Becker, 1986). Skakeby (2010) suggests that compared to the classic economic exchange paradigm the gratitude paradigm may provide a better way of understanding social media communication.

This leads to expectation that:

H3: Willingness to help brand (reciprocity, gratitude) affects online WOM positively.

The concept of reciprocity (including gratitude) is applied in relationship marketing (Palmatier, Jarvis, Bechhoff, & Kardes; 2009; Raggio, Walz, Godbole, & Folse, 2014) and in experience marketing (Leppiman 2010). Reciprocity and gratitude are important components in the co-creation of value (Pongsakornrungrungsilp & Schroeder 2011; Skakeby 2010). Therefore, in line with three main hypotheses we propose:

H4: A memorable online campaign affects willingness to help brand positively.

H5: Willingness to engage in brand value co-creation affects willingness to help brand positively.

3.0 RESEARCH DESIGN

In order to develop a stronger understanding of drivers the brand-related online WOM we use an exploratory sequential mixed method approach for our research design. A combination of qualitative and quantitative approaches provides a more complete understanding of a research problem than either approach alone (Creswell, 2014). Furthermore, the rationale for use the methodological triangulation is to observe the phenomenon from several angles rather than one angle (Neuman, 2003). We begin with a qualitative method (study 1) to enhance in-depth information and then use the findings in a second quantitative phase (study 2). In our research, the second database builds on the results of the initial database. The intent of such strategy is to see if data from a few individuals can be generalized to a broad sample of a population.

3.01 STUDY 1 QUALITATIVE PHASE

An exploratory qualitative study (n=16) was designed to understand why consumers forward and generate the brand-related online WOM. Face-to-face in-depth interviews were carried out in a semi-structured manner. The sample was selected with an attempt to concentrate on heavy or at least medium users of various social media channels (such as Facebook, Twitter, Youtube). The interviewee group was composed of students, IT-specialists, health professionals and bank employees as well as high-level managers. 8 females and 8 males were involved, the age of the informants ranged from 21 to 35, and their education varying from high school up to postgraduate degrees. The interviewees were asked to describe their social media usage and habits, to explain their motives to pass on brand messages, and to share positive and negative opinions. An interview lasted in average about 50 minutes. The transcribed interviews were read by two researchers in parallel (Mayring, 1999), either researcher familiar knowledge with the topic. The categories that emerged in the systematic reading process were discussed and carefully compared.

The qualitative content analysis provided the following categories (1) memorable brand experience, (2) interaction in value co-creation, and (3) reciprocity and gratitude. We assume that categories derived from our qualitative data may have the impact on consumer online interaction and can be antecedents of positive online WOM.

The study data demonstrate that the interviewees are not generous when it comes to liking and sharing brands in Facebook. Thus, the sharing threshold is high. They see clicking the like button as equal to giving an opinion, thus they will not do that without considering it first, in order not to devalue the like button. The interviewees emphasized that they like and share only the brands they appeal truly. The interviewees understand that if they like and share, they promote WOM marketing. They do it if a brand has used something in its communication that the receiver perceives as interesting, memorable and extraordinary. The brands whose online and offline messages are entirely different from others brings along sharing. Female, 29 years old, describes an advertising campaign of a bike store:

A bike in an ice cube was put up in front of the store towards the end of winter. Then they let the people estimate when the bike would melt out of the ice. The one whose estimate was the closest, became a prize. It was a very popular campaign and the consumers constantly demanded new information [new pictures on Facebook] in order to see how much ice was left.

Male, 28 years old, describes an online campaign:

That was years ago, but one of the most genius things I have seen in my life was the way an advertising was built up [an alcohol brand, Pisang] ... Multidimensional, I shared that with all my friend since it was really – wow!

A good experience creates wish to help. The interviewees hope to promote the welfare of the company as well that of the people working there by sharing brands and posting on the wall of the latter:

Good service in real life has earned a virtual praise. (Female 25)

I thought I'll help them and write a positive comment, maybe it promotes their sales. (Female 31)

I gave feedback about the service person, hoping to influence the salary in a positive way. (Male, 23)

Thus, a positive consumption experience creates a true wish to help and promote the company. In marketing literature this phenomenon is known "feeling gratitude".

3.02 STUDY 2 - QUANTITATIVE PHASE

In order to generate instrument we began with scales in the Marketing Scales Handbook (Bruner, James, & Hensel, 2001) and refined them. We used the results of the qualitative study (study 1) to construct the items of the scale as well as took over items that have been identified in previous related research (Brown, Broderick, & Lee, 2007; Chu & Kim, 2011; Hennig-Thurau et al., 2004), modifying the latter to suite the context of present study. The 7-point measurement scales included both behavioral and attitudinal indicators using the Likert scale from 1 (disagree strongly) to 7 (agree strongly). The survey was fielded to a nationally representative sample of Estonian Internet users. The online panel of a professional research agency was used. Estonia ranks as one of the countries with the highest Internet penetration rate in Eastern Europe (78%, during the survey was fielded), making it a suitable market to study online issues.

An e-mail was sent to 1,350 panelists inviting them to fill out a web questionnaire. In four days, responses of 542 panelists were returned. This data was weighed in order to correct the results of the sample so that they would match the model of the whole Estonian Internet users as close as possible. After answering "no" to the question "How often do you use social media network sites (such as Facebook, Twitter, Youtube)", the questionnaire was closed for 56 (10.3%) panelists. The question about Facebook account usage screened out another 68 panelists (13.9%) who responded that they do not use Facebook. Information about the demographic profile of the sample is presented in Table 1. The table shows those Facebook user profiles who completed the questionnaire.

Table 1: The demographic profile of the sample, n=418

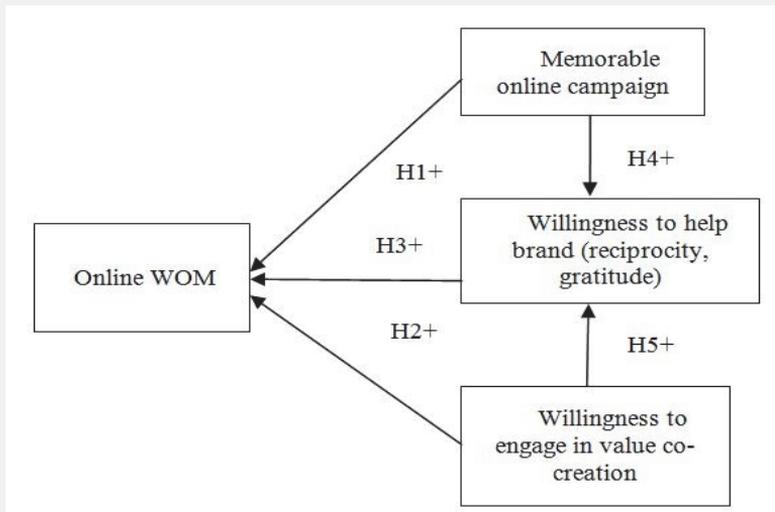
The variable	Categories	Percentage of the sample
Age (M=35.55; SD 12.68)	15-19	4.5
	20-29	37.9
	30-39	25.4
	40-49	16.1
	50-59	10.7
	60+	5.5
Gender	Female	54.8
	Male	45.2
Education	Primary or basic	6.6
	Secondary (high school)	44.0
	College or University	44.3
	Other	5.1
Place of residence	Capital	31.7
	City > 50,000 inhabitants	18.4
	Town, 5,000-50,000 inhabitants	23.8
	Smaller town < 5,000 inhabitants	11.6
	Village, rural area	14.5

Since Facebook is the most popular social network site in Estonia our focus was on Facebook users and their willingness to share and generate online WOM.

4.0 HYPOTHESIS TESTING

Based on the theoretical framework discussed above and on findings the qualitative interviews, we choose for the conceptual model (Figure 1) three distinctive constructs to analyze what impact they have on online interaction. Three constructs are addressed as antecedents of online WOM while online WOM is considered as a central construct.

Figure 01: Conceptual model of sharing online word



We are interested what impacts have distinctive constructs 1) memorable online campaign, 2) value co-creation, and 3) willingness to help brand to consumer online interaction?

The collected quantitative data ($n=418$) were analyzed using and exploratory factor analysis. Using IBM SPSS Statistics 22.0 software, first, 21 items characterizing behavior and attitudes were entered into an analysis of principal components to examine the dimensionality of the entire set of items. Since the correlations of some items were too low, we abandoned the initial matrix containing 6 components. A principal component analysis (PCA) was conducted on 16 items with orthogonal rotation (varimax). The Kayser-Meyer-Olkin measure verified the sampling adequacy of the analysis, $KMO=0,844$ ("great" according to Field, 2009), and all KMO values for individual items were $> 0,7$, which is well above the acceptable limit of 0.5 (Field, 2009). Barlett's test of sphericity $\chi^2(136) = 3416.26$ $p < 0.001$ indicated that correlations between the items were sufficient for the PCA. An initial analysis was made to obtain eigenvalues for each component in the data. Four components had eigenvalues over Kaiser's criterion of 1 and in combination explained 63.86 % of the variance. All factor loadings greater than 0.4 were considered for further analysis. Given the large sample size and the convergence of the scree plot and Kaiser's criterion on four components, a number of components were retained in the final analysis. The psychometrics properties of the latent constructs and the wording of the items are displayed in Table 2 below. All composite reliability (CR) values are at or above the recommended 0.80.

Table 2: Psychometric properties of the applied scale

Construct	Item	Loading	Mean	SD	CR
Sharing online word	I am very picky about the brands I like and share	0.80	5.89	1.75	0.82
	If I like and share, then only because I really like something	0.80	6.24	1.39	
	Many companies offer good service/good products but in order to share and like them, it must be at least outstanding	0.70	5.33	1.79	
Memorable online campaigns	There are brands whose message in the social media is so different from others that				0.93
	... I have clicked the like button and become a fan	0.90	3.49	1.98	
	... it has led me to write a comment or send posts	0.88	3.59	2.06	
	... it has led me to share them since I want my friends to see the message as well	0.87	3.10	1.94	
	... it has led me to recommend the services or the products of that company	0.83	3.10	1.89	
Reciprocity	A sales/service person who served me well can be helped by writing positive comments or sending posts	0.87	5.1	1.7	0.85
	A company can be helped by writing positive comments or sending posts	0.77	5.1	1.8	
	Companies who really care for their clients positive comments should be sent written/posts	0.67	4.7	1.8	
Interaction in value co-creation					0.8
	I readily read the posts and comments of those who have tried the product/services before me and recommend them	0.70	4.93	1.83	
	If a service/a product is especially good, one just has to click the like button and share it	0.67	4.22	2.21	
	There are brands that I like so that I think I should share them	0.66	4.50	2.14	
	If brands ask for my opinion about how to improve their services/products for the consumers, I readily share that	0.63	4.46	1.89	
	One should write comments/send posts about really good brands	0.60	4.47	1.86	
	It is important that brands ask for the consumer's opinion about how to improve their services/products	0.54	5.42	1.62	

A linear regression analysis was employed using IBM SPSS Statistics 22.0 to investigate significant relationship between predictors and dependent variables. As depicted in Table 3, four hypotheses out of five are confirmed. No support to direct and positive relationship between willingness to share online word and memorable online campaigns was found (H1), thus the hypothesis is rejected.

Table 3: Research hypothesis

	β	t-value	Result
H1: Memorable online campaign affects WOM positively	0.033	0.678	Not supported
H2: Willingness to engage in brand value co-creation affects online WOM positively	0.154	3.177	Supported
H3: Willingness to help brand (reciprocity, gratitude) affects online WOM positively	0.232	4.855	Supported
H4: A memorable online campaign affects willingness to help brand positively	0.217	4.530	Supported
H5: A memorable experience affects willingness to help brand (reciprocity) positively	0.561	13.923	Supported

H2: Willingness to engage in brand value co-creation affects online WOM positively The relationship between willingness to share online WOM and interaction is significant at the 95 per cent confidence level ($P < 0.05$). In this relationship, the multiple correlation coefficient (R) is 0.232, and the R-square is 0.054. Thus, the predictor variable of interaction has illustrated 5 per cent of the variance in the dependent variable WOM. The beta coefficient (β) is shown to be positive and statistically significant at the 0.001 level. Therefore, the higher the interaction scores, the higher their WOM scores ($\beta = 0.232$, $t = 4.855$, $P < 0.001$) In addition to this, the hypothesis (H2) is supported at t-value $> \pm 1.96$.

H3: Willingness to help brand (reciprocity, gratitude) affects online WOM positively.

The results show that the relationship between willingness to share online WOM and willingness to help brand is significant at the 95 per cent confidence level ($P < 0.05$). In this relationship, the multiple correlation coefficient (R) is 0.154, and the R-square is 0.024. Thus, the predictor variable of reciprocity has illustrated 2 per cent of the variance in the dependent variable WOM. Table 3 displays the standardized beta coefficient (β) between the predictor variable reciprocity and the dependent variable WOM. The beta coefficient (β) is shown to be positive and statistically significant at the 0.001 level. Therefore, the higher the reciprocity scores, the higher their online WOM scores ($\beta = 0.154$, $t = 3.177$, $P < 0.001$) In addition to this, the hypothesis (H3) is supported at t-value $> \pm 1.96$.

H4: A memorable online campaign affects willingness to help brand (reciprocity) positively.

The relationship between willingness to help brand (reciprocity) and memorable online campaign is significant at the 95 per cent confidence level ($P < 0.05$). The multiple correlation coefficient (R) is 0.217, and the R-square is 0.047. Thus, the predictor variable of memorable online campaign has illustrated 4 per cent of the variance in the dependent variable reciprocity. The beta coefficient (β) is shown to be positive and statistically significant at the 0.001 level. Therefore, the higher memorable online campaign scores, the higher their reciprocity scores ($\beta = 0.217$, $t = 4.530$, $P < 0.001$) In addition to this, the hypothesis (H4) is supported at t-value $> \pm 1.96$.

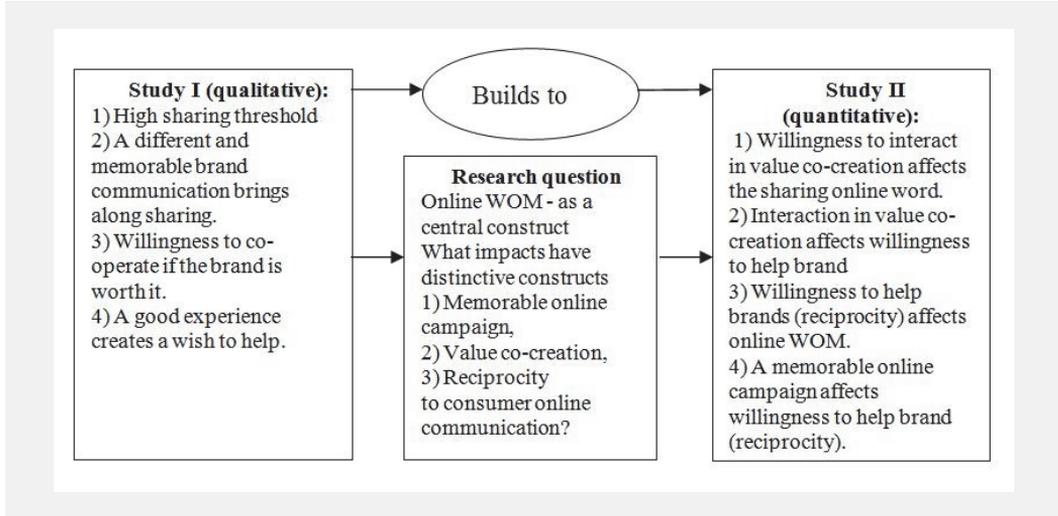
H5: Willingness to engage in brand value co-creation (interaction) affects willingness to help brand (reciprocity) positively.

The relationship between willingness to help brand (reciprocity) and willingness to engage in brand value co-creation is significant at the 95 per cent confidence level ($P < 0.05$). The multiple correlation coefficient (R) is 0.561, and the R-square is 0.315. Thus, the predictor variable of interaction has illustrated 35 per cent of the variance in the dependent variable reciprocity. The beta coefficient (β) is shown to be positive and statistically significant at the 0.001 level. Therefore, the higher the interaction scores, the higher their reciprocity scores ($\beta = 0.561$, $t = 13.923$, $P < 0.001$) In addition to this, the hypothesis (H5) is supported at t-value $> \pm 1.96$.

5.0 RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The research design involved a two-phase project in which we collected qualitative data and then we built on this database with a second quantitative data collection and analysis (Creswell, 2014). Figure 2 depicts the research design and results. The qualitative study delivered us the themes related to the high sharing threshold and expectations that brand communications would be memorable and different from others.

Figure 2: Research process and results, exploratory sequential mixed method.



The content of interviews revealed that informants are willing to cooperate when they appreciate the brand to be worth it. In addition, the informants emphasized that a good brand experience creates a true wish to help. We interpret this result as reciprocal behavior, more precisely as manifestation of gratitude. On the themes mentioned above we built the research question for the next phase of our study. According to our conceptual model, we are interested in what impacts have the distinctive constructs on online WOM. These constructs are memorable online campaigns, willingness to engage in brand value co-creation, and enthusiasm to help the brand.

We argue that online WOM has a certain meaning for the consumer that presupposes special positive and memorable experience. The findings support the expectation that the consumers are not generous when it comes to liking and sharing brands online. Our questionnaire contained the statement: "There are (1=very few if any, 7= very many) brands which I have liked and shared because of very good experiences". The result ($M=2.43$, $SD=1.22$) shows how picky the consumers about sharing are. On the other side might ask how the consumers determine a "very good experience" to be worth online sharing. Is every memorable brand experience worthy online communication or do the consumers have only limited number of excellent experiences? It may depend on the individual propensity to like and share overall and is it related to the local culture context.

The current study compares what impact a memorable and/or a distinguishable brand online campaign to an online WOM that was tested under H1: Memorable online campaign affects WOM positively. The findings show that the memorable brand online campaigns by themselves do not predict positive online WOM. Though, we found that consumers' willingness to help a brand (reciprocity and gratitude) and their willingness to interact in value in co-creation have a positive impact to sharing online word. The findings support relationships between willingness to interact in value co-creation and willingness to help a brand. In addition, willingness to help a brand and memorable online campaign have a positive

relationship. However, the latter is not antecedent of positive WOM. Our study results reveal that the aspects of brand value are co-creation and reciprocity. We discuss both the findings more detailed below.

5.01 BRAND VALUE CO-CREATION

Value is co-created during the interaction between the provider, that is, a brand and a consumer (Leppiman, 2010; Prahalad & Ramaswamy, 2004; Vargo & Lusch, 2004). Successful communications between the brands and the consumers mean a mutually beneficial cooperation. The participants of online WOM communications perceive that the brand invests in the consumers, and, thus, they are willing to invest in the brand. The consumers are enthusiastic to co-operate, to create content and to forward messages. If brands ask for their opinion about how to improve the services/products for the consumers, they readily share that. Thus, the consumers engage with others who are actively searching for information and providing feedback (McColl-Kennedy, et al., 2012). Moreover, brands are expected to give information about new products or services, and the consumers are willing to co-operate with them by expressing their opinions. Consumers appreciate reading the posts and comments of those who have tried the product/service before. Communication on social media platforms involves a trust-based dialog between a consumer and a company (Diffley, Kearns, Bennett, & Kawalek, 2011; Keller 2007). If no trust exists between the brand and consumer, there is no willingness to co-operate. Prahalad and Ramaswamy (2004) highlight the meaning of interaction between a brand and consumer in value creation and value extraction. We argue that the more positive online WOM is, the higher the brand value extraction is.

5.02 RECIPROCITY AND GRATITUDE

The brand's value is derived from consumption experience; hence, such experiences are positive. The exchange that takes place is perceived as fair: the brand offers a good experience and, in return, the consumer engages in value co-creation. Our findings show that a good brand experience creates a true wish to help a brand. By giving positive online WOM, the consumers help and promote the brand. The findings of our two studies (qualitative and quantitative) are consistent with studies from Hennig-Thurau et al. (2004) and Blazevic et al. (2013) in that they support consumers' motivation to give the company something in return for a good experience. Sense of gratitude elicits a positive word of mouth (Soscia, 2007). Such positive reciprocity is a reward for kind treatment. A good brand experience in real life has earned virtual praise. In marketing literature, gratitude-related reciprocal behavior is referred to as "thankfulness," "gratefulness," or "appreciation" (Palmatier et al., 2009). We suggest defining the gratitude-related reciprocal online behavior as "virtual praise".

6.0 CONCLUSIONS AND POLICY IMPLICATIONS

Although there have been a number of studies investigating brand-related online interactions and motives why consumers engage in online WOM there is still little known about relationships between online WOM and key concepts of experience marketing. This study offers insights into the links between constructs of meaningful experience concepts and brand-related online communication. We contribute to the marketing literature by conceptualizing online WOM communications from a consumer's perspective, suggesting three dimensions. This research established that consumers use social media channels to producing brand value co-creations and to provide gratitude. We have proposed a framework of reciprocity as an earned virtual price and consumer willingness to be consumer-to-consumer and brand-consumer interactions impact on online communication and through its brand value co-creation. The central concept of experience marketing is that it be a memorable, meaningful experience. Such experience is different from those undergone before, standing out from the other experiences. If a brand offers a memorable experience then it may lead consumers to click the like button and become a fan, to write a comment or send a post, to share these messages since the friends would see it as well, or even to recommend the services or products of that company. In this study, the antecedents of positive online communications are viewed as consequences of memorable brand experiences whether it be an especially good service, product, or kind treatment. A good brand

experience creates a true wish to help. We interpret this result as reciprocal behavior, as manifestation of gratitude. Our study reveals that consumers' willingness to help a brand (reciprocity and gratitude) and their willingness to interact in value in co-creation have a positive impact to sharing online word. A good brand experience in real live earns virtual praise. The more positive online WOM, the higher is the brand value extraction.

From a practical perspective, the current study results demonstrate that the online campaign, although distinctive and memorable, would not ensure successful buzz. The brand that has not earned consumers' trust cannot be helped with the extraordinary online campaigns. This finding may indicate that consumers are selective, ignoring information that they perceive as unnecessary. Instead, they may appreciate a more long-term emotional bond with a brand. The participants of online WOM communications perceive that the brand invests in the consumers, and, thus, they are willing to invest in the brand. The present study shows that prior good brand experience is a factor that determines whether the consumer is willing to help a brand. Grateful consumers are motivated to give the company positive online WOM in return for a good experience. When gratitude is expressed, a non-financial exchange takes place, which can increase the likelihood of future market-based (a.k.a. financial) exchanges; thus, gratitude is a fundamental component (Raggio et al., 2014) of brand-consumer relationships.

The competition for consumer attention is becoming increasingly difficult for the managers and they can't continuously come up with new memorable experiences. The success of brands relies besides on creating memorable and meaningful experiences also on building long-lasting, trust-based relationships with consumers. A long-term and based on trust consumption experience motivates the consumer to promote a brand with positive WOM. That is, the consumer becomes a message conveyor for the brand and a brand value co-creator through the online and offline communications.

7.0 LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH

This paper suffers from several limitations that need to be addressed in future research. First, the current empirical study shows the results at an aggregate level, without detecting differences between various kinds of services, products, or brands. We propose future research that investigates positive online consumer WOM for different brands or product categories. Second, future researchers must consider developing a new research instrument for measuring the experiential aspects of brand performance in online WOM context. For instance, what kind of brand communication the consumer perceives as exciting, memorable, different from those encountered before, attractive, and impressive to such an extent to be worthy of the online WOM.

Third, an Estonian sample was used for the study, so it is not possible to generalize the results to other countries and cultures. We propose future research that compares the consumers' propensity to engage online WOM in the different nationalities and cultures context.

Fourth, consumers who participate in online communications are not a homogeneous group. Brand value is subjectively experienced; the meaning given is individual. In social media, brand value is collectively co-created but subjectively experienced. Additional research might help establish the consumer segments participating in online communication.

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Appendix 2. Article II

Riivits-Arkonsuo, I., & Leppiman, A. (2014). Online Word-of-Mouth on Brands and Experience Marketing. *Journal of Management and Change*, 32/33, 43-55.

Online Word-of-Mouth on Brands and Experience Marketing

Iivi Riivits-Arkonsuo and Anu Leppiman

Abstract

This article seeks to investigate linkages between online word-of-mouth and experience marketing concepts. The empirical study investigates the factors affecting Facebook users' willingness to generate and share brand-related online communication. A nationally representative sample of Estonian internet users was conducted and consisted of the responses of 418 respondents.

Applying the Bayesian non-linear dependency model provides new information by revealing the relationship between memorable, meaningful experience and consumer-brand interaction. Likewise, meaningful experience depends on different-from-other-brand messages on social media.

This research extends previous work on online communication, and it provides insight into the relationship between experience marketing and consumer participation in word-of-mouth marketing. Further future research should provide empirical evidence on the relationship between meaningful experience (in other words, an experience different from those undergone before) and the precise behavioral consequences related to online word-of-mouth.

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Keywords

Online word-of-mouth communication, meaningful experience, consumer experience, brand experience, word-of-mouth marketing, experience marketing

Introduction

Marketers view word-of-mouth (WOM) as a useful promotional tool in the marketing mix (Harrison-Walker, 2001); WOM is an indicator for market response, whereas brands and WOM are two fundamental marketing concepts (Lovett et al., 2013); WOM is a critical factor in consumer behavior since consumers trust it more than other sources and rely on it when making purchasing decisions (Hawkins, and Mothersbaugh (2013:624).

Online WOM communication on different social media platforms makes it possible to hear the voice of consumers in a way that was heretofore impossible (Breazeale, 2009). Social media platforms usually have such WOM mechanisms as recommend, share, like, comment, reply, and retweet. The phenomenon known as online word-of-mouth is also referred to as spreading the word, electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM), internet word-of-mouth, and word-of-mouse.

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Academic research into online WOM first appeared in scientific journals about fifteen years ago. Thus, the online communication research timeline is rather short, and the research stream relatively novel. To assess the online WOM research, Breazeale (2009) applied the four levels of the paradigmatic research funnel, rating the literature on electronic WOM from the explicit and observable to the implicit and unobservable. The first level of the funnel represents articles that employ empirical observation; the second level contains those articles that address analytical methods; the third level consists of articles that investigate theories and theory building. The fourth level of the funnel contains those few articles that challenge core ontological, epistemological, methodological, and axiological assumptions. Applying the logic of the funnel described above, our article contributes to the largest, empirical part of the funnel.

Consumers are more likely to communicate through both traditional and social media when they are engaged with product, service, or idea (Mangold and Faulds, 2009). The memorable experiences are likely to be talked about through traditional WOM as well through social media. In the new perspective on marketing, the brands are viewed as an ongoing social process, whereby brand value is co-created through network relationships and interactions (Merz et al., 2009; Hutter et al., 2013).

The purpose of this article is to find the link between consumer online brand-related WOM and experience marketing concepts. This study explores the following key question: Why and how are consumers willing to generate and share brand-related online communication? First, we distinguish 'online WOM' and 'experience marketing' concepts on which this study is focused. After reviewing the related literature, we describe our sample, data analysis procedure, and then we present our findings. Finally, we end with a discussion of the core implications of our study.

Conceptual Framework

Online WOM

Harrison-Walker (2001:63) defines WOM as '*informal, person-to-person communication between a perceived non-commercial communicator and a receiver regarding a brand, a product, an organization, or a service.*' Online WOM is characterized by scalability, speed of diffusion, multi-way exchanges of information, and the use of various electronic technologies and platforms (Cheung and Thadani, 2010). Unlike offline WOM, online WOM is measureable and observable. Online WOM is long-lasting and far-reaching (Graham and Havlena, 2007). While offline WOM occurs spontaneously and then disappears, online WOM is not necessarily spontaneous and remains in virtual reality. The nature of online WOM increases the consumer's ability to make his or her voice heard by more people and for an extended period. (Breazeale, 2009)

The primary factors leading to online WOM behavior are consumers' desire for social interaction, their desire for economic incentives, their concern for other consumers, and the potential to enhance their own self-worth (Hennig-Thurau et al., 2004). However, these authors consider that due to the conceptual closeness of online WOM and traditional offline WOM communication, consumer motives that have been identified in the literature for traditional WOM can also be expected to be of relevance for online WOM. Brown et al. (2007) disagree and insist that the existing offline theory may be inappropriate to describe online WOM and its influence on consumer behavior. They offer a conceptual model of online interaction and information evaluation process, in which the three key constructs driving social online relationships are tie strength, homophily, and source credibility. The study by Chu and Kim (2011) extends the conceptual model of the online interaction created by Brown and colleagues. A conceptual model developed and tested by

Chu and Kim identifies tie strength, homophily, trust, and normative and informational interpersonal influence as important drivers of online WOM behavior. The study results of Cheung and Lee (2012) reveal that a sense of belonging to the community, reputation, and enjoyment of helping others are the most critical factors that encourage consumers to share their experiences in an online context. Kietzmann et al. (2012) distinguish between intrinsic and extrinsic consumer motivation. Intrinsic motivation is driven by an intense interest and involvement in the activity itself, curiosity, enjoyment, peer recognition, a personal sense of challenge, accomplishment, or belonging. Extrinsic motivation is driven by a desire to achieve some external reward.

Levett and colleagues (2013) distinguish between offline and online WOM, observing that the roles of the drivers and characteristics differ between the two communication media. The authors find that whereas the social and functional drivers are the most important for online WOM, the emotional drivers (such as excitement and satisfaction) are the most important for offline WOM. These drivers help marketers to understand particular brand characteristics that play a role in stimulating WOM. Keller and Fay (2012:17) emphasize that most WOM volume is still offline; 90 percent of conversations about brands take place offline while 10 percent are online.

It is not fully known why online word-of-mouth takes place, how it is generated, and why it shared. Previous online WOM studies focus primarily on the impact of online WOM on consumer purchasing decisions, while research on the reasons why consumers engage in online WOM has remained rather limited (Cheung and Thadani, 2010; Chu and Kim, 2011; Cheung and Lee, 2012). In our article, we support the view of authors mentioned above and contribute to extending previous work on online communication. This study investigates the factors affecting consumers' willingness to generate and share brand-related online communication.

Experiences and Experience Marketing

A consumer creates meaning in everything he or she perceives; therefore, experience is perceived subjectively. A consumer's experience is a meaningful relationship marked by communication between a brand and the consumer who perceives and experiences it meaningfully (Leppiman and Same, 2011). Schmitt (2011) views experiences as dynamic sensations, feelings, cognitions, and behavioral responses triggered by specific stimuli in the consumer's environment. The Lapland Centre of Expertise for the Experience Industry (LCEED) defines experience as a strong, multisensory, memorable, and individual experience (Tarssanen and Kylänen, 2007).

A good experience is memorable, extraordinary, and meaningful. Carù and Cova (2003) distinguish ordinary experience from extraordinary experience. An ordinary experience corresponds to everyday life, routine, the past, and the passive acceptance of events. An extraordinary experience produces emotions and transformations in the individual. Only the person living the experience can define its meaning and significance (Gelter, 2007).

Meaningful experience is one of the key terms in the relatively new field of experience marketing. Meaningful experience is composed of feelings, new knowledge, and beliefs acquired by the consumer through a brand, product or service (Gelter, 2007; Leppiman, 2010). Experience marketing can deliver sensory, emotional, cognitive, behavioral, and relational value (Tynan and McKechnie, 2009). Experience marketing is usually broadly defined as any form of consumer-focused marketing activity that creates a connection to consumers.

Experience marketing is generally based on the experience economy theory. According to Pine and Gilmore (1999), the economic value lies in co-producing staged experiences via customer participation and connection. The staging of experiences is not about entertain-

ing consumers, but rather engaging them. The brand value co-creation process involves the interaction among brands and consumers, during which consumers take an active role and co-create value together with the brand. Informed, networked, and active consumers are increasingly co-creating value with the firm. (Prahallad and Ramaswamy, 2004; Merz et al., 2009)

With the rise of social media, just as consumers are becoming producers of products and services, they are also becoming producers of experiences both for each other and for companies (Chakrabarti and Berthon, 2012). Compared to shared experiences through traditional WOM, shared experiences via social media amplify and reach a large group of consumers. Current technologies have enabled and strengthened the opportunities for experience-oriented offerings beyond limitations of time and place (Chang et al. 2010). Digital technology enhances any individual's ability to perform. According to Korn and Pine (2011), almost all companies can benefit from experience-designed digital innovation, if not for their offerings, then for their internal processes.

An important topic in experience marketing is authenticity. Authenticity refers to the credibility of the brand communication determined by the consumers themselves. The brand communication is authentic if the consumer feels that it is credible and genuine (Pine and Gilmore, 2007; Leppiman 2010).

How can one measure an experience that is perceived subjectively and determined by the consumers themselves? In 2009, Brakus and colleagues emphasized that no scales for measuring experiences have been developed. They distinguished several experience dimensions and constructed a brand experience scale that includes sensory, affect, intellectual, and behavioral dimensions. Zarantonello and Schmitt (2010) used brand experience scale to profile consumers and predict consumer behavior.

Little is known about meaningful experience and consumers' behavioral consequences related to online WOM. Ismail (2011) investigated which factors influenced customer experience in the hospitality sector and confirmed the importance of WOM as a major predictor of customer experience. Riiivits-Arkonsuo and Leppiman (2013a) presented a new approach by combining the online WOM with the experience pyramid model. The current study contributes to the study of online WOM by focusing on the implications of experiential aspects for online communication between brand and consumer.

Method, Data Analysis, and Results

The study had three phases: exploratory qualitative study, exploratory factor analysis (EFA), and Bayesian modeling. Each is described below.

Exploratory Qualitative Study: 16 Interviews

First, an exploratory qualitative study was planned to determine online communications in social media channels. The sample was selected with an attempt to concentrate on heavy or at least medium users of various social media channels (such as Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn). A total of 16 interviewees were asked to describe their social media usage and habits, to explain their motives to share and generate brand-related messages, and to share positive and negative opinions. Eight females and eight males were involved, and the age of the informants ranged from 21 to 35.

The results of the interviews show that interviewees like and share only the brands they really admire, and only if they have had a very positive experience. They even hope to promote the welfare of the company—as well that of the people working there—by sharing brands, and by posting on the walls of brands. The interviewees are not generous when it

comes to liking and sharing brands in Facebook. If no trust has emerged between the brand and the consumer, there is no liking and no sharing. The users understand that if they like and share, they promote WOM marketing. Online brand communication is expected to be an extraordinary, one-time, enabling experience. If those preconditions are fulfilled, the users are willing to share the brand and to co-operate with the brand since the exchange that takes place is perceived as fair: the brand offers a memorable experience, and in return, the consumer shares that. A mutually beneficial co-operation takes place: the brand invests in the consumer and thus the consumer is willing to invest in the brand. Some interviewees are willing to co-operate with the activity of the brands in social media, calculating the benefit they can gain.

The qualitative content analysis provided us with six new categories: (1) high threshold, (2) extraordinary brand messages, (3) benefit seeking (4) reciprocity, (5) memorable experience, and (6) interaction.

In the next step, our goal was to collect statistical evidence for consumers' online expressions.

Quantitative Study

A qualitative content analysis of the interview material provided useful insights into defining a list of items for a survey. Furthermore, based on the literature (Hennig-Thurau et al., 2004; Brown et al., 2007; Chu and Kim 2011) we modified the items to suit the context of the present study. A 7-point, Likert-type measurement scale (anchored at 1=disagree strongly, 7=agree strongly) included both behavioral and attitudinal indicators.

A self-administrated online survey was fielded to a nationally representative sample of Estonian internet users. The online panel of the professional research agency Turu-uuringute AS (Estonian Surveys Ltd) was used. An e-mail was sent to 1,350 panelists inviting them to fill out a web questionnaire.

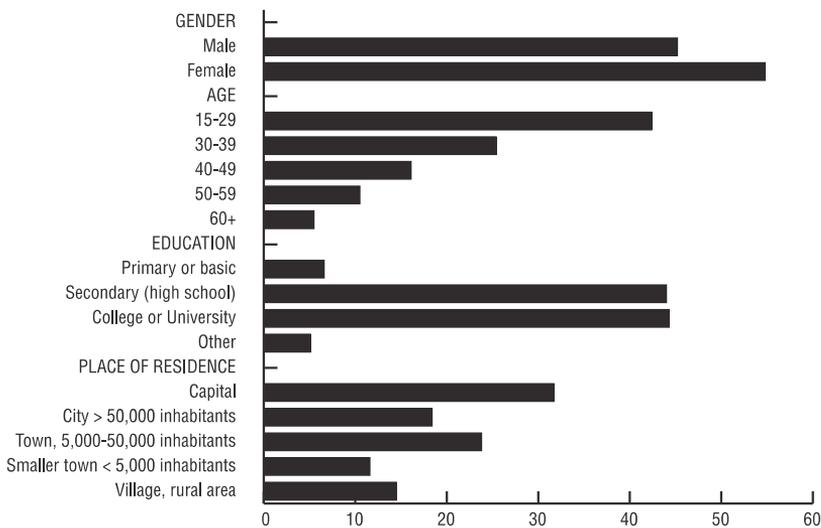


Figure 1: The demographic profile of the sample, % n=418

In four days (May 2012), responses of 542 panelists were returned. This data was weighted in order to correct the results of the sample so that they would match the model of the whole of Estonian internet users as close as possible. The answer 'no' to the question 'How often do you use social media network sites (such as Facebook, Twitter, Youtube)?' closed the questionnaire for 56 (10.3%) panelists. The question about Facebook account usage screened out another 68 panelists (13.9%) who responded that they do not use Facebook. (cf. Riivits-Arkonsuo and Leppiman, 2013a:313)

Information about the demographic profile of the sample is presented in Figure 1. The figure shows those Facebook user profiles who completed the questionnaire. While the survey fielded, Facebook was the most popular social network site in Estonia. Facebook penetration rate was 35.62% of the country's population and 47.42% of all Estonian internet users. (Socialbakers.com 2012). This platform allows users to build up a list of 'friends' and interact with them by sharing personal information, pictures, and other self-presentational items.

For marketers, Facebook is an appealing platform in order to increase brand awareness, and to engage and interact with their current and potential consumers.

Exploratory Factor Analysis (EFA)

As far as Bayesian modeling was concerned, the collected quantitative data ($n=418$) were analyzed using the explorative factor analysis. Using IBM SPSS Statistics 20, we first entered 21 items characterizing behavior and attitudes into an analysis of principal components in order to examine the dimensionality of the entire set of items. Since the correlations of some items were too low and thus the Cronbach's α was too low, we abandoned the initial matrix containing 6 components. A principal component analysis (PCA) was conducted on 16 items with orthogonal rotation (varimax). Four components had eigenvalues

over Kaiser's criterion of 1 and in combination explained 63.86 % of the variance.

Bayesian Modeling Approach

The study results indicated that the assumptions for the data proved to be *'quite challenging in traditional frequentistic statistical analysis'* (Nokelainen et al., 2007). Phenomena under investigation are seldom purely linear or continuous in nature. Measurement of data collected on a Likert scale is ordinal. It is not advisable to model it with traditional statistical analysis that relies on the concept of normal distribution, and requires the calculation of mean and standard deviation (ibid.) Nokelainen and colleagues (2007) argue that Bayesian modeling approach is a viable alternative to frequentistic statistical techniques addressing modeling problems, such as continuous measurement level, multivariate normality, and linearity of the data (Nokelainen 2008). Bayesian models do not require a multivariate normal distribution of the observed variables. Bayesian dependency modeling (BDM) predicts the most probable statistical dependency structure between the observed variables (Nokelainen, 2008; Tirri and Nokelainen, 2012). Due to the uncertainty of linear variable dependencies, non-linear and non-parametric Bayesian statistical techniques are applied.

As the qualitative content analysis provided us with six new categories, we used these categories to build the theoretical network model. Table 2 presents the expected results (the theoretical structure) of the network model.

Results

A graphical visualization of the Bayesian network contains two components: (1) observed variables visualized as ellipses and (2) dependencies visualized as lines between nodes. A variable is considered independent of all

Table 1: Data variables

A1	I am very picky about the brands I like and share.
A2	If I like and share, it is only because I really like something.
A3	There are brands that I like so much that I think I should share them.
A4	Many companies offer good service/good products, but in order to share and like them, it must be at least outstanding.
A5	If a service/product is especially good, one just has to click the like button and share it.
A6	Writing positive comments or sending posts can help a company.
A7	Writing positive comments or sending posts can help a sales/service person who served me well. A8
A9	One should write comments/send posts about really good brands.
A10	I readily read the posts and comments of those who have tried the product/service before me and recommend them.
A11	The posts and comments make it easier for me to purchase a product/service.
A12	If brands ask for my opinion about how to improve their services/products for the consumers, I readily share that.
A13	It is important that brands ask for the consumer's opinion about how to improve their services/products for the consumers.
A14	If a company/brand reacts to a post, it is a sign of caring for the consumers.
A15	I would be more likely to be a fan, to like and share, if I expected more personal benefit.
A16	Those who like and share a brand should receive special offers.
A17	Those who write comments on a brand and send posts should receive special offers.
A18	There are brands whose messages on social media are so different from others that I have clicked the like button and become a fan.
A19	There are brands whose messages on social media are so different from others that I have shared them since I want my friends to see the messages as well.
A20	There are brands whose messages on social media are so different from others that I have written a comment or sent posts.
A21	There are brands whose messages on social media are so different from others that I have consumed the services or the products of those companies.

NOTE: A1, ..., A21 scale is a Likert scale from 1=disagree strongly to 7=agree strongly.

Sum of items: minimum value is 1+1+1=3 and maximum value is 7+7+7=21

Table 2: Theoretical structure of the model—Sharing online WOM

Behavioral and attitude scale	Factors	Items (21)
High threshold	F1	A1, A2, A4
Different message on social media	F2	A18, A19, A20, A21
Benefit seeking	F3	A15, A16, A17
Reciprocity	F4	A6, A7, A8
Memorable experience	F5	A3, A5, A9, A14
Interaction	F6	A10, A11, A12, A13

other variables if there is no line attached to it (Nokelainen et al., 2007). BDM resulted in a model that is depicted in Figure 2.

Non-linear modeling found 17 strong dependences between the variables.

I am very picky about the brands I like and share (A1) is the most important variable in the model, as it has a direct statistical relationship to the variables If I like and share, it is only because I really like something (A2) and There are brands that I like so much that I think I should share them (A3). The role of this variable (A3) is relevant, as it is a connecting node to the variable If a service/product is especially good, one just has to click the like button and share it (A5). (A5) is in turn connected to (A9) One should write comments/send posts about really good brands and to (A19) There are brands whose messages on social media are so different from others that I have shared them since I want my friends to see the messages as well.

Many companies offer good service/good products, but in order to share and like them, it must be at least outstanding (A4) has a weak relationship to the variable If I like and share, it is only because I really like something (A2). Variable (A16) Those who like and share a brand should receive special offers has a weak relationship to the node (A20) There are brands whose messages on social media are so different from others that I have written a comment or sent posts.

The non-linear model provides new information by revealing the relationship between a memorable experience (F5) and interaction (F6). Also, different messages on social media (F2) and memorable experiences (F5) are related—memorable experience depends on the difference from other messages in social media.

Discussion and Implications

The aim of the current study was to investigate linkages between online word-of-mouth

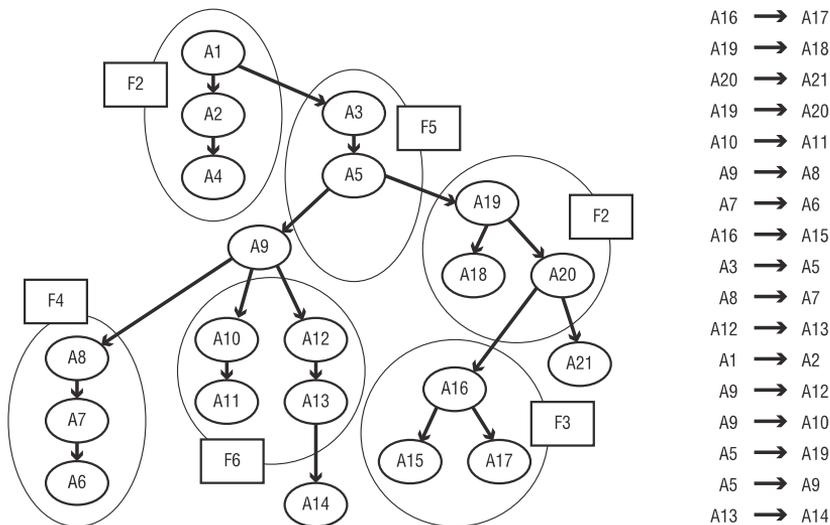


Figure 2: Bayesian network model, calculated using B-course software

and experience marketing concepts. In this article, we examined why and how consumers are willing to generate and share brand-related online communication. The study's findings contribute to our understanding of the implications of experiential aspects for online communication between brands and consumers.

In-depth interviews with 16 heavy or at least medium users of various social media channels revealed six new categories that can explain consumer willingness to participate in brand-related online WOM: (1) high threshold, (2) extraordinary brand messages, (3) benefit seeking (4) reciprocity, (5) memorable experience, and (6) interaction. Our findings point to the interpretation that memorable experience (which comprises extraordinary brand messages), reciprocity, and interaction are the concepts belonging to the framework of experience marketing.

Using a sample of 418 Estonian internet users, this study indicates the relationship between memorable experience and interaction between brand and consumer. Our results reveal the aspects of co-creation and interaction. In our study's context, it means a mutually beneficial co-operation place; the brand invests in the consumer and thus the consumer is willing to invest in the brand, generating online conversation. Giving positive online WOM, consumers help and promote the brand. Sharing positive online WOM involves reciprocal patterns (cf. Riivits-Arkonsuo and Leppiman, 2013a:322). The consumer is motivated in online communication to give the company something in return for a good experience (Hennig-Thurau et al., 2004).

Not surprisingly, from qualitative and quantitative studies, we found that the online sharing threshold is high. Our findings support the expectation that consumers are not generous when it comes to liking and sharing brands online. Consequently, there are very few brands that are considered worthy of online sharing.

Lovett and colleagues (2013) argue that brands with a higher degree of differentiation, which thus enables consumers to express their uniqueness, are likely to have greater WOM. Our findings highlight the fact that online brand-related WOM has a particular meaning for the consumer that presupposes unique positive and meaningful experience. Such experience emerges if a brand has used something in its communication that the receiver perceives as exciting, memorable, impressive, and different from those encountered before. It could be a positive and memorable former consumption experience or an established relationship with the brand that the consumer is willing to share online. Meaningful experience may occur purely as a result of a brand's online activity, for example, viral video shared via YouTube or a campaign on Facebook.

To illustrate a case of how a brand used exciting, integrated communication and provided a memorable experience, we present here an example of how an interviewee described the advertising campaign of a bike store: *A bike in an ice cube was put up in front of the store towards the end of winter. Then they let the people estimate when the bike would melt out of the ice. The one whose estimate was the closest won a prize. It was a very popular campaign and the consumers continually demanded new information [new pictures on Facebook] in order to see how much ice was left.*

Campbell and colleagues (2012) suggest that consumers prefer interacting online with each other rather than directly with marketers. Our results indicate that if a brand message is different from others, then it may lead consumers to click the like button and become a fan, to write a comment, or to send a post, in order to share these messages since the friends would see them as well. This finding is in line with Kaplan and Haenlein's (2011) suggestion that only messages that are both memorable and sufficiently attractive to be passed on to others have the potential to boost a WOM marketing phenomenon.

Our research yields several marketing implications. First, our research extends previous work on online communication, and it brings insight into the relationship between experience marketing and consumers' participation in WOM marketing. Understanding the experiential aspects of consumer online behavior points to implications for marketing and marketing research practice. Second, a brand manager or marketer can evaluate how to design WOM into a brand. Communication on social media platforms involves a trust-based dialogue between a consumer and a brand (Keller, 2009; Diffley et al., 2011). As highlighted above, the brand communication is authentic if the consumer feels that it is credible and genuine (Pine and Gilmore, 2007; Leppiman 2010). Consumers do notice whether a brand (actually the marketing personnel) is dishonest, and whether they take actual interest in the consumer (Riivits-Arkonsuo and Leppiman, 2013a). Trusov and colleagues (2009) draw attention to the fact that when a company stimulates WOM activity, it is no longer 'organic' WOM. Stimulated WOM may be less effective than organic communication, because consumers may not perceive it as genuine and authentic. Third, the success of brands relies on creating memorable and meaningful experiences and building long-lasting, trust-based relationships with consumers. Social media enable brands to build relationships directly with consumers. Social media bring the consumers' voice closer to the company and help the company stay in touch and communicate with them. The marketers might consider more carefully what consumers think, feel, and want. This would help the marketers to include consumers in the marketing process and to make consumers feel more engaged with brands.

Further research could provide the empirical evidence between meaningful experience (in other words, an experience different from those undergone before) and the exact behavioral consequences related to online WOM. This study was conducted only with Estonian-speaking Facebook users. Hence, the users of

other social media channels and people who belong to a different language and cultural context should be included in future samples. Further research could explain what the experiential aspects of brand communication are, and how a consumer gives experiential meaning to the brand. Although brand-related memorable experiences are likely to be talked about through traditional WOM and—according to Keller and Fay (2012)—90 percent of conversations about brands take place offline, we see an interesting issue here. The extension of this research could construct a research instrument containing five dimensions: motivational, physical, intellectual, emotional, and mental. Such a research tool would offer insights into consumers' online and offline WOM behavior and enable analysis of consumers' journeys from encountering brands to developing meaningful experiences with them.

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Appendix 3. Article III

Riivits-Arkonsuo I., Kaljund, K., & Leppiman, A. (2014). Consumer Journey from First Experience to Brand Evangelism. *Research in Economics and Business: Central and Eastern Europe*, 6(1), 5-28.

Consumer Journey from First Experience to Brand Evangelism

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Abstract

This paper aims to access the lived reality of consumption and brands through the subjective meanings and interpretative processes of consumers, exploring how they perceive the journey from the first experience to a strong meaningful emotional bond with a brand. We follow the logic of the experience pyramid model in analysing qualitative interviews with brand evangelists, starting with the motivational level, moving on to the physical level where the evangelist meets the brand, and further to the level of experience where, if appropriate, the emotional bond with the brand manifests itself: for the customer, the brand has become experiential with a singular meaning. The experience model proved a useful research tool for understanding the consumer-brand relationship in depth. The study complements experience marketing with insights regarding the meaning of brand-related experiences for consumers, and enables marketers to understand the development of a strong emotional bond between a brand and a consumer. In addition, the results of the study shed further light on recognizing brand evangelists.

Keywords: brand evangelism, consumer behaviour, brand experience, consumer experience, experience pyramid

1. Introduction

Brand evangelists communicate the character and features of a brand; that is, brand messages that traditional marketing might communicate as well, but on top of this they offer their families, friends, colleagues and communities a unique personal recommendation (Smilansky, 2009, p. 5). Research on brand evangelism has to be built on an understanding of how the consumer actually experiences the journey from the first encounter with a brand to becoming a brand evangelist.

Until now, research in this area has attempted to map the phenomenon of brand evangelism, the circumstances leading to brand evangelism, and brand-related experiences through developing and testing statistical models and using path analysis to form hypotheses about causal relationships among different variables in this area of experience (Matzler et al., 2007; Albert et al., 2008; Batra et al., 2012; Becerra and Badrinarayanan, 2013; Doss, 2014). There is clearly a need for a more balanced approach in order to holistically understand the consumer's journey from first encountering the brand to becoming a brand evangelist. Thus, the purpose of our study is to reveal the content of the individual elements of the abovementioned process – to understand the meaning of those elements.

Personally relevant and meaningful experiences can generate brand evangelism. Experience and evangelizing are tightly interwoven concepts (Holbrook, 2001). Meaningful experience (which in the language of the experience pyramid model is an experience different from those undergone before) is one of the keywords in the relatively new field of experience marketing. Experience marketing can deliver sensory, emotional, cognitive, behavioural and relational value (Tynan and McKechnie, 2009). According to the experience marketing conception, constructing experiences provides important added value for a consumer (Pine and Gilmore, 1999). The concept of experiences has attracted attention in academic research as well as being utilized in business practices. A special model for co-creating, understanding and analysing the meaningfulness of experiences in products and services, as well as for illustrating the progress of consumer experience, has been created and used at the LCEEI (Lapland Centre of Expertise for Experience). The experience pyramid model was originally constructed for tourism and travel products. The name illustrates its logic: Instead of speaking of 'a triangle' that would refer to a relationship between three sides and three angles, the authors of the model wish to highlight the presence of six experiential elements on different levels of consumer experience, and the progress of experience itself; therefore, the name 'experience pyramid' is more appropriate (Tarssanen and Kylänen, 2007).

The model is now increasingly being applied to different contexts. Vallius et al. (2007) use the experience pyramid model to analyse shared experiences in the virtual games world. Riiivits-Arkonsuo and Leppiman (2013) have addressed the experience pyramid concept in the consumer online word-of-mouth (WOM) context. To our best knowledge, apart from these studies, the experience pyramid concept has not been used to analyse the consumer perspective.

This study seeks answers to the following questions: How does a consumer become a brand evangelist? How is the theoretical experience pyramid model compatible with the way brand evangelists perceive and describe their journey from the first encounter with the brand to developing a deep, meaningful experience with it? Thereby, we hope to fill the theoretical model with empirical content, taking into consideration the depth and meaningfulness of the relationship between brand evangelists and their brands.

After briefly outlining the phenomenon of brand evangelism and the concepts of consumer and brand experience, we consider the elements contributing to the formation of a meaningful experience and how the experience model may function as a useful methodological tool in this context. A detailed outline of the data collection procedure and analysis is then provided, followed by the findings. Based on the in-depth interviews conducted in this study we attempt to reconstruct what brand evangelists experience during the process of becoming evangelists. The article then concludes with a consideration of the implications of this work for consumer researchers and experience marketing.

2. Conceptual framework

2.1 Brand evangelism

Brand evangelism is a strong consumer-brand relationship that manifests itself as an extension of positive consumer-to-consumer WOM communication. Brand evangelists are committed consumers who have a strong emotional connection to a brand and spread the message about their preferred brands. Doss (2014) defines brand evangelists as 'individuals who communicate information, ideas, and feelings concerning a specific brand freely, and often times fervently, to others in a desire to influence consumption behaviour'. According to Matzler et al. (2007), brand evangelism describes an active and committed way of spreading positive opinions and trying to persuade others to become engaged with the same brand, as 'consumers who evangelize are passionate about their brand and feel the need to share their emotions with others.' Becerra and Badrinarayanan (2013) see brand evangelism as 'the active behavioural and vocal support of a brand including actions such as purchasing the brand, disseminating positive brand referrals, and convincing others about a focal brand by disparaging competing brands'. A brand evangelist acts as an unpaid spokesperson on behalf of the brand (Doss, 2014).

Numerous studies on marketing have examined the way brand evangelism functions. Doss (2014) proposes that the elements leading to brand evangelism include brand satisfaction, brand salience, consumer-brand identification, brand trust, and opinion leadership. Becerra and Badrinarayanan (2013) delineate the varying influence of two relational constructs – brand trust and brand identification – on three brand evangelism-related behaviours: purchase intentions, positive brand referral intentions, and oppositional brand referral intentions. Albert et al. (2008) examine the dimensions of brand love. Their study reveals eleven brand love dimensions: passion, a long-duration relationship, self-congruity, dreams, memories, pleasure, attraction, uniqueness, beauty, trust (satisfaction), and a willingness to declare the love. The former can be considered WOM communication. Online environments are likewise a platform for demonstrating brand evangelism (Becerra and Badrinarayanan, 2013), as online WOM communication is amplified by the speed of diffusion and the large size of the communication network of social media channels.

It is easy to see that the concept of brand love, as consumers experience it, is related to brand evangelism. Batra and colleagues (2012) in turn found seven core elements of brand love: self-brand integration, passion-driven behaviours, positive emotional connection, long-term relationship, positive overall attitude valence, attitude certainty and confidence (strength), and anticipated separation distress. Consumer love for a brand has certain

consequences, such as brand loyalty, positive WOM, resistance to negative information, and willingness to pay a price premium (ibid).

Brand evangelism is linked to consumer-brand identification, which as a concept is based on the social identification theory. Consumers sense that a brand reflects characteristics that are central to their identity. They perceive oneness with a brand and are likely to work toward the benefit of the brand. Purchase and consumption of brands enable consumers to construct their identities; brands become part of consumers' identities (Batra et al., 2012; Becerra and Badrinarayanan, 2013).

Terms like brand evangelists, champions, inspirational consumers, advocates, brand zealots, volunteer salespeople, customer apostles, and brand ambassadors, which can be found in the literature on marketing, are similar in terms of content and connotations (Doss, 2014). Brand evangelists have a strong psychological and emotional commitment to the brand. Their brand-related behaviour is characterized by (1) communicating positive information, ideas and feelings concerning a specific brand both offline (WOM) and online (word-of-web), (2) co-creating the overall brand image by actively engaging in discussions about the attributes of the brands with other consumers, (3) purchasing the favoured brand name products, (4) influencing consumer behaviour, (5) operating as an unpaid spokesperson on behalf of the brand, (6) opposing competing brands, and (7) perceiving oneness with the brand.

8

Personally relevant and meaningful experiences can generate brand advocacy, loyalty, and a positive offline and online response. Consumption and brand experiences are part of real life and people often talk about their experiences to others.¹ However, what is of interest here is the meaning that the consumer gives to the brand and what it is that makes the relationship with the brand emotional and passionate, triggering the wish to share the experience.

2.2 Consumption experience and brand experience

The idea that consumer behaviour has an experiential dimension was first introduced by Holbrook and Hirschman (1982). They focus on the symbolic, hedonic and aesthetic nature of consumption and propose that consumption experience is directed toward the pursuit of fantasies, feelings and fun. Hirschman and Holbrook (1982) defined and linked constructs like multisensory experience, emotive responses, and fantasy imagery firstly to each other and then to various consumption processes. Consumption experience as such does not fulfil basic needs but involves feelings and emotions.

Consumption experience takes place over a period of time and comprises all experiences across all touch points between consumer, business and product, such as the product itself, the store in which the product is bought; engineer work, salespeople, and after-sale service (Jensen, 2013). According to Arnould et al. (2002, p. 347), a consumption experience begins with a pre-consumption experience involving searching for, planning, daydreaming about, foreseeing, or imagining the experience. The purchase experience derives from choice, payment, packaging, and encounters with service and environment. The core consumption experience includes the sensation, the satiety, the satisfaction or dissatisfaction, the irritation or flow, and the transformation. The last stage of the consumption experience involves the

¹ Findings of a study conducted among passionate car owners (Matzler et al., 2007) show that extraverted consumers are also more likely to be passionate consumers and engage in brand evangelism.

memory of the consumption experience and the nostalgia experience. An important part of a consumption experience is being able to communicate it by telling one's own story, recording the event in memorable pictures or videos, sharing these experiences in communities, writing a diary or a blog (Gelter, 2007; Kylänen, 2007). A strong experience triggers a desire to share it. Consumers evangelize their experience in order to persuade others to engage with it (Tynan and McKechnie, 2009).

Brakus et al. (2009) refer to a brand experience as sensations, feelings, cognitions, and behavioural responses evoked by brand-related stimuli that are part of a brand's design and identity, packaging, communications, and environments. Brand experience is holistically perceived and varies in strength and intensity; some brand experiences are stronger or more intense than others. Brand experiences also vary in valence: some are more positive than others, and some may even be negative. Some experiences are short-lived, some long-lasting, stored in the consumer's memory (ibid.). A good experience is memorable, extraordinary and meaningful. By exploring these "good experiences" in depth we build on and significantly complement existing empirical work in the field.

2.3 The formation of a meaningful experience

Carù and Cova (2003) distinguish between ordinary and extraordinary experiences. An ordinary experience has to do with everyday life, routines, the past, and the passive acceptance of events. An extraordinary experience on the other hand evokes emotions and transformations in individuals. Experiences are memorable events (Pine and Gilmore, 1999), and in order to leave a memory trace, they must take place outside the daily routine (Sundbo and Sørensen, 2013). Hansen and Mossberg (2013) argue that the concept of immersion appears to be one of the key elements of an unforgettable consumer experience. Only the person living the experience can define its meaning and significance (Gelter, 2007).

Meaningful experience is composed of feelings, new knowledge and beliefs acquired by the consumer through a brand, a product or a service (Gelter, 2007; Leppiman, 2010). The academic literature centres on issues such as experience production, creation and design (Boswijk et al., 2007; Kulmala, 2007; Gelter, 2007; Chang et al., 2010; Leppiman 2010).

Tynan and McKechnie (2009) and Arnould et al. (2002) take a holistic look at the consumer experience and divide it in three: the pre-experience, the customer experience, and the post-experience. The consumer's experience forms through five levels of cognitive processes, namely the motivational, physical, intellectual, emotional, and mental levels (Tarssanen and Kylänen, 2007). In Tarssanen and Kylänen's theoretical model, which they call the 'experience pyramid', 'experience is regarded [as] a multisensoral, positive and comprehensive emotional experience that can lead to personal change' (ibid.) The model has two perspectives: 1) six product elements on the horizontal axis, and 2) five levels of consumer experiences on the vertical axis. Together these can create the preconditions for a meaningful experience.

The product elements on the horizontal axis of the model, contributing to consumer experience, are individuality, authenticity, story, multisensory perception, contrast, and interaction. Individuality refers here to uniqueness; that is, the same or similar product or service is not available elsewhere. Authenticity refers to the credibility of the product in the consumer's eyes. A story is closely linked to authenticity as a credible and authentic story adds significance and content to the product. Contrast on the other hand, emphasizes difference from the perspective of the consumer: the product should be different with respect

to the consumer's everyday life. Multisensory perception refers to the fact that all sensory perceptions are carefully designed to strengthen the chosen theme. Last but not least, interaction indicates successful communication between the product and its consumers.

The vertical axis consists of the motivational, physical, intellectual, emotional, and mental levels of consumer experiences. On the first level, the motivational level, the interest of the consumer is awakened. On the next, the physical level, the consumer experiences and perceives the product through the five senses. The intellectual level means learning (Leppiman and Puustinen-Niemelä, 2006), thinking, applying knowledge, and forming opinions. The emotional level is where one undergoes the meaningful experience. On the mental level, a positive and powerful emotional experience may lead to an experience of personal change, either in the physical state of the consumer, in his/her state of mind, or lifestyle (Tarssanen and Kylänen, 2007; Leppiman, 2010).

Figure 1. The analytical model adapted from Tarssanen and Kylänen (2007) and Tynan and McKechnie (2009), and complemented by the authors.



In order to understand the consumer's journey from the first experience to becoming a brand evangelist, and the meaning he/she has given to the brand, we draw on an analytical model (Figure 1). Integrating the dimensions of the experience pyramid (Tarssanen and Kylänen, 2007) into the model, we start observing the consumer's journey by taking a look at his/her first experience. We are interested in the way brand evangelists become aware of their brands in the first place and what they know about their brands before that.

3. Research methodology

In order to understand the consumer-brand relationship in depth as well as the drivers that are involved in a consumer becoming a brand evangelist, a qualitative approach was applied. The basis of successful, meaningful interviews is the possibility to create a relationship between researchers and interviewees, enabling the latter to feel that he/she is being taken seriously (Mayring, 1999, p. 51). Through conversations we can learn about other people's experiences, dreams, feelings, and hopes and the world they live in. The qualitative research interview is 'an interview where knowledge is constructed in the interaction between the interviewer and the interviewee' (Kvale, 1983, p. 2).

Taking the process whereby meaningful experience is formed as a starting point, and in particular the experience pyramid model (Tarssanen and Kylänen, 2007), the research team worked out theory-driven open-ended interviews to give the interviewees the opportunity to express their thoughts and feelings and to speak of their experiences. Face-to-face in-depth interviews were carried out in a semi-structured manner by MBA and MA students from the Tallinn University of Technology, who participated in a marketing research course during the spring and autumn semesters in 2013. Each student chose an interviewee from his/her own social network. The interviewers were carefully briefed before they conducted the interviews. The material, collected in this interactive way, was further processed systematically. Since the aim of the analysis was to analyse text, the interviews were recorded, following the principle of minimising the storage of data (Flick, 2002, p. 250) – no cameras were included, as it was not expected that visual information would be of interest. The same applied to the transcription of the data – linguistic and suchlike accuracy was not prioritised as the material would have lost clarity, and therefore, complicated the analysis without contributing to finding out the meaning of the experiences. The transcripts of the recorded interviews were produced by each interviewing student.

For the present study, the triangulation principle is of great importance. Triangulation means combining different research methods, data, sources, and theories (Denzin, 1988). Denzin and Lincoln (1998, p. 3–4) distinguish between four types of triangulation: multiple data sets, multiple theory, multi-method and multi-investigator (Leppiman 2010, p. 114). True to the last principle (Mayring, 1999), the text that emerged was read in parallel by two researchers, one of whom was well aware of the theoretical background of the consumer-brand relationship and one less so, in order to compare the categories that emerged in the systematic and, at the same time, innovative reading process. The categories that either researcher came up with were discussed and carefully compared with the experience pyramid model. Such an approach enabled the interviewees (i.e. their subjective realities) to have maximum impact on the results of the study as the theoretical knowledge informing the study did not dominate and yet was present throughout (Kraimer, 1995; Flick, 2002).

The material collected in the study included 45 interviews, carried out by 45 students. All in all the interviews resulted in 390 pages of data. An interview lasted on average about 40 minutes. Thirty-three interviewees resided in Estonia and were interviewed by students who selected them from their own social networks. Twelve interviewees resided abroad (in Germany, Lebanon, Poland, France, and Brazil) and were interviewed by students of an international MBA. The extracts from interviews in Estonian that we use as examples were translated into English for the article; in the case of the interviews carried out in English the original transcription was left unaltered. The interviewees included 23 females and 22 males.

The first stage of analysis involved all 45 interviews, the second 13; the selection of those 13 is explained below. The age of the informants ranged from 19 to 36. Thus, the majority of them belong to Generation Y, the Net Generation, which consists of people born between 1982 and 1994, who have a strong sense of independence and autonomy. They are emotionally and intellectually expressive, innovative, and curious (Hawkins and Mothersbaugh, 2013, p. 125). Brand names are important to members of Generation Y, and they tend to remain relatively loyal to a brand (Napoli and Ewing, 2001). They have started their career; some of them are married and have children. The ratio of Estonians versus participants of other nationalities played no role in our analysis as we did not notice differences on that scale in the interviews, as the Estonian informants belonging to Generation Y grew up with the brands that are well known among the same age groups in countries with highly developed economies, and unlike older Estonian generations, the Estonian Net Generation has never experienced the deficit of goods that was characteristic of the Soviet economy. Therefore, all the interviewees were members of Generation Y and can be seen as possessing similar patterns of thinking, feeling, behaving and expressing themselves when it comes to brand-related behaviour. The interviews did not aim to find out underlying cultural differences in brand-related behaviour.

The quality of the collected data depended on the communication skills of individual interviewers, which varied, thus accounting for some loss of potential data, for example through lack of previous interviewing experience. This resulted in difficulties for some interviewers in maintaining a smooth discussion, some forgetting to treat the interview script as a flexible guideline, while others could be seen at times to be using suggestive or leading language in their questioning, resulting in the answers to these questions being eliminated from the study. However, the collected material shows that the interviewers were in general able to create an atmosphere of trust and the research objects were therefore open and honest, as the topic covered was not perceived as dangerous or sensitive (Mayring, 1999; Flick 2002). The interviewers themselves assessed the procedure in general as dynamic, flowing, interesting, and pleasant, including funny moments, which made the interview feel cosy and friendly. Therefore, the risk of using students as interviewers was justified in terms of the fact that it facilitated access to a wide circle of Net Generation consumers, especially as the aim of a qualitative study is not reach a certain number of respondents.

In reading the transcribed interviews, our theory-based suspicion that not all interviewees can be considered brand evangelists, and that the quality of the collected data does not enable us to determine this, was confirmed. Our aim was to analyse how a brand obtains a meaning for the consumer that is strong enough that the consumer becomes a brand evangelist. The interviews were read by two researchers in parallel who decided independently which of the interviews could be classified as dealing with brand evangelism. The final criteria that helped us select the interviews that were included in the actual analysis were born in dialogue; that is, we compared the way in which some interviews featured recurring elements (for example, an interview being full of superlatives, usually from beginning to end), while in other interviews, these elements did not appear at all. In this way, we systematically worked out a joint system for identifying brand evangelists. Using the three categories mentioned below as criteria, we filtered 13 brand evangelists from the 45 interviews.

4. Findings

4.1. Filtering brand evangelists

The first stage of the qualitative content analysis provided us with three new categories for recognizing brand evangelists: (1) (the use of) superlatives, (2) passion (in the speaker's tone), and (3) distinction. The first two of these categories are new to scholarship in the field, while the third is consistent with previous research. We used these categories as criteria that enabled us to filter the brand evangelists among the interviewees from those who could not be considered brand evangelists.

The features that characterize the speech of brand evangelists are as follows:

Superlatives: The use of superlatives and the presence of a visibly high emotional charge. The interviewees who fall into this category tend to use superlatives and keep returning to the topic of their selected brand without the interviewer requesting this. They speak of their brand in a passionate and emotional way:

(-->) well, most Mercedes have a really nice classy, sporty or sexy look and ... all of the Mercedes are really strong cars (-->) it's a very nice elegant car, it's a very strong car, it can be, like, be really nice sporty styles (-->), and it's really, like, [a] reliable, safe and fast car. (Male, 28)

(-->) the stores [Zara] normally are very attractive, organized, they have a good service. And the products are also very beautiful, fits perfectly with my style. The service is very good (-->) very big, very attractive stores, very bright, good lightening design, (-->) very nice clothes collection. (Female, 30)

This festival [Trzy żywioly] is unique. I couldn't find another similar event in Poland. This place is very special and unique. You are surrounded by happy people who [have] experienced a lot, who have a big knowledge and are very eager to share (-->) this knowledge. (-->) It is very tempting to follow those people. (Female 22)

It's hell nice! [VANS] I really liked what I found in the store. (Male, 21)

In these examples, the use of words like 'really, very' or 'classy', 'sporty', 'attractive', 'perfectly', 'unique' etc. stands out, conveying an emotion and implying that the interviewee is making an effort to impress the person he or she is speaking to.

Passion: The interviewees falling into this category seemed to need to speak about the selected brand. The brand evangelists spoke about recommending the brand to other people without that question having been asked. They spoke about the social media channels they use for sharing the brand, about uploading pictures, writing stories and suggesting that friends check out brand-related videos on YouTube:

I recommend this event [Trzy żywioly] on Facebook showing my pictures and writing about my experiences. A lot of people ask about it and want to join me [at the] festival the next time. (Female, 22)

They create an amazing atmosphere. For example, visit YouTube, and watch VANS videos, you'll understand! (-->) And get some VANS shoes! (Male, 21)

(-->) if my daughter wears their clothes and I upload pictures into my blog, I write there that her clothes are from [Polarn O. Pyret]. (Female, 22)

One of the brand evangelists went as far as calling himself a brand importer and emphasized that he keeps his friends informed and updated about the brand:

(---) when I hear of a new mobile phone model [Samsung] and pictures of that have leaked out (---) then I've shared that information – maybe someone is interested. (---) In a way I consider myself an importer. If I read something somewhere, I let others know as well. (Male, 28)

One brand evangelist felt the need to introduce the Estonian brand she is passionate about outside Estonia and also emphasized its singularity. She was conscious of feedback on the brand and happy if this was positive:

If I visit someone abroad, I will definitely take some Kalev chocolate with me. And I've had loads of feedback! (---) everybody has liked it a lot. For example the white chocolate with blueberries – there's nothing like that anywhere in the world! (Female, 25)

Another participant mentioned that she invites friends to shop with her by telling them about prices and products:

I always tell and recommend to my friends [Zara], and always invite them to come with me to the store. For sure I would be talking about the beautiful products and prices. (Female, 30)

The meaning of the brand can be so strong for the consumer that he/she starts to identify with it. Just like the following brand evangelist who recommends that her father buy her mother the same perfume that she has as she assumes that her parents associate it with her and that the fragrance makes them think of her:

(---) Mum has a Chanel perfume now thanks to Dad. (---) Thanks to the brand they think of me more than before. (Female, 29)

Distinction: Positive distinction of the selected brand compared to other brands by the interviewee. Existing quantitative research shows that one of the characteristics of brand evangelism can be the positive distinction of a brand compared to competing brands (Becerra and Badrinarayanan, 2013; Doss, 2014). The qualitative approach enables us to see how emotionally the comparison is done and examine the interviewees' choice of words. Many of the interviewees showed support for their brand by criticizing other brands:

Everything they [VANS] do is amazing, not like others brands with ridiculous ads or unpleasant staff. (---) Forget expensive brands like DG who just means you're rich and we don't care about it! (Male, 21)

From the moment that I saw them [Polarn O. Pyret] and touched their products, I felt as if other baby clothes were rags compared to them. They are solid and make a lasting impression. (Female, 22)

The interviews showed that comparisons are always favourable towards the selected brand, but do not have to be as negative towards the other brands as in the former example. The following is a fairly positive comparison:

Leica preserves its spirit and has a long history, doing the same thing in a minimal but beautiful manner – it's brilliant! Sony, Canon, Nikon ... those systems change and they change fast, they concentrate on functions, not on simplicity. (Male, 36)

Of course I tried a lot of cars. I drove like ... my parent's, my sister's, my girlfriend's car; my friends' cars and like ... I never had like ... the same comfortable and like ... enjoyable experience as in my Mercedes. (Male, 25)

The next section of this paper analyses the interviews with the 13 brand evangelists that we filtered from the 45 interviews conducted, investigating in depth the journey of the consumer from their first experience with the brand to the moment they become brand evangelists.

4.2. Levels of consumer experience

In this section we analyse the way the interviewees describe the environment in which they underwent their experiences as consumers (the physical level), how the experience developed (the intellectual level), which experiential elements (individuality, authenticity, story, multi-sensority, contrast, or interaction) their brands offer them, and how they speak about those elements. Subsequently, we aim to gauge the meaning of the brand for the interviewees – the meaning that makes the relationship with the brand both emotional and passionate, triggering the wish to share the experience. At the same time, we take a look at the stage of the experience pyramid model that involves a transformation on the mental level and brings about both a change in consumer behaviour and new values. We are interested in discovering how the brand evangelists talk about this transformation. We consider how the interviewees talk about their first encounter with the brand, and observe the way they perceive their journey to establishing a close emotional relationship with the brand through various levels of experience.

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4.2.1. The remembered emotion: From pre-experience to the first experience

Almost half of the brand evangelists became acquainted with their brand already in childhood: therein lies the roots of their close connection to the brand. The home environment, relatives, and schoolmates played a role in this, as well as the child's ability to catch on to the fact that the brand was perceived as something special by others. Because of the singularity of the brand for them today, they have either preserved or constructed a strong memory of the first encounter, as in the following interview example:

When I was a little boy and I heard about Samsung, I knew that it is going to be one of my favourite brands... And, surprise, that's what happened! (Male, 28)

Sometimes other family members had owned products of the brand and thus the encounter was inevitable:

Well, this brand ... like it runs in our family, basically everyone got a Mercedes, basically I was brainwashed since I was a kid. (Male, 24)

Such childhood memories often include a strong positive emotion related to the first experience – an emotion that has helped the first encounter to lead to a passionate brand relationship:

My uncle had an old-style Mercedes and the first time I drove a car, it was with that. I was a little boy with no driving license (---) When I remember my childhood, I remember the brand and that first encounter and I have dreamed of it since then. I had seen Mercedeses before, on TV and in magazines and in town, and the moment my uncle let me drive his car, I put it all together! (Male, 28)

A similar emotion can be detected in the next example: the candy that was received as a present was in strong contrast with the economic hardship of the family, and therefore, the moment remains with the interviewee as something very special, related to a strong feeling of happiness:

My family was not really well-off. My Godmother worked in a shop and gave me a Ferrero Rocher bonbon. That was very, very precious for me; my Mum would not have brought me that. I was ecstatic! (Female, 27)

In the following example, on the other hand, the memory related to economic hardship is present as a negative emotion, as envy and desire:

In school, either in the third or fourth class, basketball became super popular. Everybody had fancy basketball shoes from Nike or Adidas ... (Male, 25)

Some memories of the first experiences with the brand do not go as far back as childhood; the emotion present in them is nevertheless strong. The yearning for belonging and owning can be recalled in a positive way, and later turn into the first experience with the brand. Many interviewees spoke of having waited a long time for the brand to become available in their home country. H&M was such a brand for the Estonian informants: so far shopping experiences with H&M were associated with travels to desirable destinations in Western Europe like Helsinki and Stockholm. The interviewee from Brazil expressed her feelings in a similar way in relation to Zara: the memory she preserved included a yearning for the European brand and positive holiday experiences:

I heard a lot about Zara before, from friends who used to travel abroad and always arrived in Brazil with maaaany bags from Zara (---) My first experience was in 2007, when I travelled to Barcelona for vacations. Before that I had already heard a lot about this brand, so I already was very curious to try it. And, in Spain you can find a Zara store everywhere, (---) Yes it was special for me, mainly because I was in holidays, and during holidays the willingness to buy and try new experiences is greater! But since 2009 Zara opened its filial in São Paulo, so I am very happy to have it much more accessible now. (Female, 30)

Finally, the interviews revealed that sometimes the first experience of the brand is in a way a second-hand one; that is, the feeling, the desire, emerges from a source such as a film. For the following interviewee, the awareness of the desire to own a brand that she calls 'perfect' goes back to a film:

I had seen the logo of the brand Chanel before. But then I watched the movie about the life of Chanel. This awakened my interest in that company (---) And I discovered the Coco Chanel Mademoiselle perfume that was perfect for me. It had everything I had been looking for (---) I can find no perfume equal to that. (Female, 29)

The stories told by brand evangelists about their first encounter with the brand and/or the way they met the brand as children or adults are different; however, they share a common denominator: they all involve strong stimuli and intense, gripping emotions.

4.2.2. Physical level and sense perception

In the experience pyramid model, the physical level refers to the second stage after the motivational level. The interviewees mentioned different contexts in which the multisensory experiences that support the brand had been experienced and which made the brand special for the interviewees.

It has been established that the consumer experiences and perceives the product through the five senses on the physical level (Tarssanen and Kylänen, 2007; Hansen and Mossberg, 2013). This was evident in the interviews in this study, which included, among other things, excellent examples of the significance of multisensory experiences for consumers and how this multisensory supports their connection to the brand.

For example, a young man speaks of the smell of expensive leather. He is of the opinion that although other cars have leather upholstery as well, a Mercedes can be distinguished from others by its unique smell, which is superior to that of other cars.

That car has a singular smell. It is ... let's say, expensive, the smell of leather. The smell differs from the way other cars smell, those with leather upholstery (---), they smell different, not as good as the Mercedes. The smell made me like the car even more. (Male, 28)

The same man described experiences related to colours, cosiness, tasty coffee at the Mercedes-Benz sales and service agency – a set of multisensory elements that have made him feel special:

It is nice and neat, clean there; a very cosy beige colour that makes a very positive impact and definitely ... beautiful, colourful, cool cars. (---) And you are certainly offered good coffee there ... the coffee is good. I feel, if I may say so, like a king there. (Male, 28)

The experiences described in the following interview are similar: the young woman has picked up on the sweet smell and the beautiful display of goods in the chocolate store, as well as the friendly service:

(---) the Kalev sweets store (---) if you enter the store, the aroma there ... it awakens the senses of taste and smell immediately ... and very good service and a wide selection of products ... the way it all is displayed there ... I'd say very ... customer friendly. (Female, 25)

An Apple store offers an almost complete multisensory experience: one can touch the products, listen to music there, and be surrounded by extraordinary interior design. The young man in our interviews who could be considered the brand evangelist of Apple, gladly expressed his feelings about his experiences in Apple stores – experiences that gave him the strong, gripping feeling that it is made just for him:

I'd say they have a welcoming store, a very helpful team, the shop design ... it is all very welcoming, especially in the right Apple store somewhere abroad. The shops are very stylish and inviting. The main stores are especially stylish, made of glass. In the Apple store in London for example they play very good jazz music. You have the possibility to touch and try everything first hand. It all seems ... somehow as if it were made for you. (Male, 25)

For one interviewee, the children's clothing brand Polarn O. Pyret offers a visual and tactile experience, which conveys a sense of authenticity around the brand:

You hold the cotton and it really is 100% cotton, strong textile and you wash it and in 100 years it still looks exactly the same. You can boil it in the washing machine and it is still exactly ... you feel with your hand that it is a product that has its seam made nice and neat

and there is nothing that would make it wear out; and the colour of the cloth does not fade. (Female, 22)

The festival Trzy zywioły, an event that brings together a number of different cultures, offers experiences for all the five senses, and brand evangelists of the event, as expected, notice this. Moreover, the festival creates a strong feeling of belonging, of being together with others.

Tastes of sophisticated and exotic dishes, the sound of foreign music, colours of clothes from different countries and the smell of meals and incenses from all over the world (---) People who take part in this event can feel this event [with] all their senses. They can touch it, they can feel it. (---) This is a place when you have deep interactions with people. You talk with them, spend a lot of time with them and share your life and views. You create a trace that is visible and usually results in establishing a long-term relationship. (Female, 22)

The interviewee describes the feeling of being together and the value it holds for her and what she imagines herself gaining from that: an exchange of experiences, and therefore, learning through your own experiences and those of others.

As these examples show, the brand evangelists gladly shared the sensory experiences they have had with their brands on all possible levels; the feelings associated with sensority were shown to be strong and important to them.

4.2.3. Intellectual level and learning

Within the experience formation model (Tarssanen and Kylänen, 2007), the intellectual level of an experience refers to learning, thinking, applying knowledge and forming opinions. A good brand provides the consumer with the possibility to learn something new, to develop, and gain new knowledge.

Once one has become interested in the brand and is aware of this interest, one may begin to read about it, seek out further information and worry about how it is doing on the market. The following is an example from an interview in which the brand evangelist ponders how her brand was able to survive the economic depression:

They have a study group of designers for its collection. I heard they are a strong fashion store worldwide, they are present in every continent. And also that ZARA belongs to a Spanish group of stores (Inditex Group), which has constantly growing sales revenue, and also very good position in the stock market, despite the Spanish crisis. And I think it's thanks to the popularity of ZARA worldwide. Yes, I am more aware about the company's history and reputation. (Female, 30)

The detail she offers suggests that she may also talk about this in her everyday life; for example, when inviting friends on a joint shopping trip, as she hinted elsewhere in the interview.

The Apple brand evangelist in our study revealed that he seeks information from forums he considers trustworthy and where he expects to find answers to his questions. Once again we can see how a brand is pitted against other brands. Here, as in the previous example, it is easy to imagine how the message might be spread in everyday life by the brand evangelist:

(---) I have found out a lot about their second-hand market. You can sell all their products for a very good price later. As far as I know other companies don't have a second-hand market like this. I can't imagine selling a Dell laptop after having used it! Apart from

that, the Apple forums function very well, they are well monitored and you always get answers to your questions there. (Male, 24)

The following example shows how a young man we interviewed found out about the product range of his favourite brand. It can be assumed that he also shares this information, which is obviously important to him, with other people interested in jogging:

When I bought this warm sports undershirt, I found out that they [Nike] have different shirts for warm and cold climates, that for the warm climate they offer breathing and cooling shirts. First I thought: one and the same shirt, who cares what you do with it (---) but actually you have a choice. If you do more sports in winter, then you'll buy a shirt that keeps you warm and if you go jogging in autumn, you need quite a different kind of shirt. (Male, 25)

The examples presented here comprise seemingly objective, rational messages (for instance, that the products have a good second-hand market, or are good in different climatic conditions) that the brand evangelists use in advocating their brands. However, it is the combination of these arguments and the emotional element – the brand evangelists relate positive personal experiences – that makes the message convincing when used in everyday communication with the aim to push a brand. These are the tools that brand evangelists use in promoting a brand.

4.2.3. Emotional level and experience

A meaningful experience happens on the emotional level; it is through emotions that the experience becomes meaningful. The brand evangelists we interviewed integrate memories into the story of their brand, emphasize the strong tie between themselves and the brand, and assure the listener that the brand is special and perfect:

It was my first car. (---) it resembles a lot, especially from where I come from [Lebanon] ...this car and from the point of view that it was my first car ... so it was like something special to me. So I always have this connection to that car. And the brand itself, it just speaks for itself, Mercedes is a worldwide known luxurious brand ... new cars, old cars, it doesn't matter. When you see Mercedes, you just think like ... reliability, you think luxury, you think comfort, you think just a really good car. (Male, 25)

The same young man explains why he made a repeat purchase of a Mercedes-Benz – it is a similarly emotional description, full of superlatives. As it is a brand that communicates luxury and enables a person to identify with a certain social class, the interviewee does not fail to mention this:

I experienced the car for around 5 years, and [it] was, like, really handy and it always supported anything that I wanted, supported, like, my social status, [it] is everything, so ... that's why I was a re-buyer from them. It's a social status, it's a very nice elegant car, it's a very strong car, it can be, like ... be really nice sporty styles... and it is really, like, reliable, safe and fast car, so yeah what else do you need in a car. (Male, 25)

The brand may also boost the brand evangelist's self-esteem and get them compliments from friends:

I'm happy to have discovered that brand [VANS]. My friends often tell me that I'm well dressed. (Male, 21)

At the same time, the brand can have a comforting effect; buying it can be experienced as giving oneself a gift:

If I don't like something and I'm unhappy and feel that I have to pamper myself, then I go and buy myself a box of Ferrero Rocher. (---) If I take the box and switch on a movie that makes me cry, then I sort of cure my mood with that. (---) I am giving myself a gift. (Female, 27)

The story that began with the first experience of the brand in childhood (for example the uncle letting the boy drive the Mercedes-Benz) – a singular moment that the adult man telling the story keeps reliving in his memory and conveys strong emotions and meaning. The dream came true and the singular moment can be relived again and again. He is able to relive the meaningful experience simply by buying petrol:

You can use the brand to create your own personality. It is simply ... there's no effort in it, you just think that ... you close your eyes and there's your dream. All you got to do is buy petrol and drive! (---) And now I live inside that moment. (Male, 28)

The examples above show that brand evangelists are in a way immersed in their brand, fused with it – it makes it possible to talk of fate, to boost self-esteem, to improve their mood and to relive the special moment from their past over and over again.

The stories brand evangelists tell clearly convey the strong emotions and passionate attitudes they hold towards the brands. An example of this was the story about cameras manufactured by Leica, which seemed on the surface to be more reserved, like a calm and philosophical consideration – less obviously emotional. However, powerful feelings were nonetheless expressed and respectively created in the communication partner by using strong links to the brand: World War II, Vietnam War; or majestic metaphors like 'the king of cameras'. Moreover, the abstract illustrates the immersion of the brand as the interviewee feels that a part of him is saved in the picture, and speaks of a singular emotion that a connoisseur presumably recognizes in pictures made with a Leica:

World-renowned photographers have used Leica for taking photos and have praised its quality (---) Many pictures that we see nowadays have reached us through the photo media (---) pictures of World War Two and of the Vietnam War (---) where Leicas were used (---) when the object lens takes the photo, then I feel as if I were in it myself. Maybe the professionals of the world can identify which pictures are made by Leica. I don't say that I could ... It depends also on what's in the picture although I am sure I'd recognize the certain emotion on the picture and would want to know what is the fingerprint of Leica. The history behind the photos makes Leica the 'king' of cameras. (Male, 36)

This story told with such emotional charge and mental effort shows what the interviewee has learned from his brand and how the way he thinks has changed over the time. Therefore, the brand offers a singular, meaningful experience for the consumer, an extraordinary and meaningful experience that generates emotions and can transform the individual.

4.2.4. Mental level and transformation

On the mental level, a positive and powerful emotional experience may lead to an experience of personal transformation, either in a person's physical state, state of mind, or lifestyle (Tarssanen and Kylänen, 2007; Leppiman, 2010). The interviews analysed in this study contained an insightful instance of how the brand encouraged the brand evangelist to take a second look at her values and start realising her dreams – in addition to having enriched

her life with mental and emotional experiences. Here the interviewee talks about the festival of cultures:

I couldn't find another similar event in Poland. It was special for me cause I met people who had the same hobbies like me, I could improve my knowledge about geographic foreign culture and I discovered new interesting things. Since that moment I have been inspired. I have started travelling more and I realized my dreams (---) I improved my geographic skills. I met a lot of interesting people who encouraged me to travel, visiting new places. I'm more open minded and I'm not afraid of undertaking new ventures and task. I'm not afraid of new [things]. Festival provides great background for meeting people and to settle relationships. It both festival and people changed my life. (Female, 22)

A change in the individual's way of thinking is also obvious in the story where the consumer dropped the products he had been buying until then when he discovered his favourite brand, VANS:

I learned one big thing: you don't need to spend a lot of money to have nice clothes! I used to buy expensive goods, but I can't do it anymore. (Male, 22)

Thus, becoming a brand evangelist can bring about a change in the way a consumer thinks. An experience becomes meaningful, and the brand evangelist feels the need to speak about it in an emotional and colourful way to his friends, and share the experience in social media channels.

4.3. Elements of consumer experience

As consumers construct experiences, they tend to refer to the elements of a product (in our case a brand) that correspond to components in the experience pyramid: the significant elements of the consumer experience are individuality, authenticity, story, multisensory perception, contrast, and interaction. Together, these components can create the preconditions for a meaningful experience (Tarssanen and Kylänen, 2007). In order to identify if and where these elements of consumer experience occur in the interviews conducted with brand evangelists, it is useful to consider how they have been defined by Tarssanen and Kylänen themselves (definitions below in italics) in their experience pyramid:

Individuality refers to uniqueness, i.e. the same or similar product/service is not available elsewhere. Several instances of individuality appear in the interviews; for example, although several car manufacturers have their cars fitted with leather upholstery, the upholstery in the Mercedes-Benz is described as the only one with a unique smell. Trzy żywioły, a festival of cultures, is depicted as the only one of its kind in Poland by its brand evangelist. The white chocolate with blueberries produced by Kalev is said to be like nothing else in the whole world. One young lady is of the opinion that one can find no perfume equal to Coco Chanel Mademoiselle. Finally, other brands of baby clothes are dismissed as 'rags' compared to those made by Polarn O. Pyret.

Authenticity refers to the credibility of the brand determined by the consumer himself. *This message is resoundingly clear in the interviews: Mercedes-Benz cars are called reliable, safe, and fast. Polarn O. Pyret products are characterized as made of 100% cotton. Apple forums are perceived as trustworthy.*

A *credible and authentic story* adds significance and content to the brand. This element is also evident in the data analysed in this study: one brand evangelist reports that it was the film about the life of Coco Chanel that raised her interest in the brand. World-renowned photographers are mentioned as users of Leica cameras, while pictures of World War Two and the Vietnam War are also claimed to have been taken by this brand of camera.

Contrast emphasizes difference. The product should be different with respect to the consumer's everyday life. As with the other elements, we find evidence of this in the data: a brand evangelist recalls how her Godmother gave her a Ferrero Rocher sweet that she imagined her mother would never have bought her. The festival was described as 'special' by the interviewee as she met people there who had the same hobbies as her.

Multisensory perception refers to the fact that all sensory perceptions are carefully designed to strengthen the chosen theme. As mentioned already, this element pervaded the interviews: a brand evangelist recalls the smell of expensive leather in a Mercedes-Benz as well as the good quality of the coffee in the sales agency. Another interviewee talks of the smell of chocolate and the impression that the display of products made on her visual senses. The good music and stylish interior of the Apple store have been noticed and remembered by the brand evangelist. The experiences that the festival guest has retained in her memory involve all five senses: smell, taste, sound, touch, visual images.

Lastly, **interaction** means successful communication between the brand and its consumers. Completing the pyramid, this final element of experience was also present in the interviews: A consumer claims that a customer feels like a king when in a Mercedes-Benz agency. Another interviewee recalls feeling as if it were all made for him in the Apple store. The evangelist advocating the chocolate brand describes the chocolate store as customer friendly. The festival is described as an event providing great opportunities for meeting people and entering new relationships. And finally, another brand evangelist feels the need to disseminate information about new Samsung products.

5. Discussion

This article explored how an experience becomes meaningful, how brand evangelists speak about the role of the brand in their lives, and how the brand transforms their consumption habits, attitudes and way of thinking. We used the logic of the experience pyramid (Tarssanen and Kylänen, 2007) to analyse the interviews, beginning with the motivational level where the brand first catches the interest of the consumer, moving on to the physical level where he or she actually encounters the brand, and then to the level of experience where it becomes clear whether an emotional connection to the brand is developed or not. If the emotional connection appears, the brand has become experiential; it has obtained a singular meaning for the consumer. A further intensified bond with the brand can change the way the consumer thinks.

Our analysis centred on the concept of brand evangelists. It is highly probable that the interviewees talk about many of the things that they talked about in the interviews in their everyday life as well. In order to promote a brand, brand evangelists modify their tone of speaking about the brand experience; that is, they apply the right level of emotionality for that purpose. At the same time, they bolster their pro-brand arguments by referring to their own experiences as a buyer.

If we look at the brands that the brand evangelists talked about, we see that strong, mostly international superbrands dominate the selection: among others, there were two confectionery brands (the international producer Ferrero Rocher and the Estonian brand Kalev), a luxury brand (Chanel), a sports equipment brand (Nike); three clothing brands, Polarn O. Pyret, Zara and VANS, the last of these specializing in skateboarding apparel; and three technology brands (Samsung, Apple and Leica). Two evangelists spoke about the premium car brand Mercedes-Benz and one about an event, a festival of cultures (Trzy żywioly). The stronger, the more attractive and the more desirable a brand is, the more the consumers talk about it and the higher the probability that brand evangelists will be able to persuade members of their social network that the brand is unique and worthwhile. Therefore, brand evangelism is in a way a built-in characteristic of superbrands, or rather it is earned, as brand evangelism is driven by consumer passion and emotions and cannot be bought (Becerra and Badrinarayanan, 2013).

How might other producers be able to generate brand evangelism and design their brand as experiential? To answer this we must return to the findings of the study: What did the brand evangelists experience when becoming evangelists? What distinguishes a meaningful experience from other experiences? For example, a brand evangelist, a young man, describing the advertising messages of his brand, recommended that the interviewer watch VANS videos on YouTube and, in comparison, described the advertisements of other brands as downright ridiculous and the personnel in the stores of other producers as unfriendly. This is symptomatic of brand evangelists: most of them describe the personnel in the store of their brand as friendly and competent, the shop design as beautiful, the display and the music as well chosen. The products are described as high quality and unique. The information that the brand evangelists have sought out and found; for example, through the Apple forum (which is perceived as trustworthy) or from reading about the history of Leica (which is perceived as a success story), is effectively integrated into the narrative that they have of the brand. Marketers can make use of all these values in their brand communication. Besides that, a good brand offers a story. Brand evangelists complement the general story of the brand with their own brand-related story. They do this in an emotional and suggestive way that is bound to make an impression on listeners who might then begin their own journey with the brand – from awareness and interest all the way to evangelism.

According to Kilian (2010), complex multi-sense brand signals are obtained by combining several brand elements. The sensorial component has been shown to constitute the most important component for several experiential brands (Gentile et al., 2007; Schmitt, 2010). Our research reveals that the feelings related to the sensorial are strong and important for brand evangelists. The set of multisensory elements that the brand and its sales locations offer, as well as the service which the brand evangelists perceive as individually tailored and excellent, make them feel special and amplify the feeling that something about the experience (for example the service or the decor) is made just for them, strengthening the bond between the evangelist and the brand.

Vallius et al. (2007) used the experience pyramid as a framework for analysing how a group of players form shared experiences in a virtual game world. They investigated the ways in which perceived experiences matched the experience pyramid in real life as the model had been constructed first of all for tourism and travel products, and therefore, the hierarchical structure of the elements of an experience could in this case have turned out to be a limitation. According to the pyramid, the first three levels of experience must be reached

before emotional responses occur; however, in some game sessions the players reported strong emotional experiences before even having learned how to play the game due to audio-visual elements used in the game. Our study offers proof for this line of reasoning. Our results suggest that the experience pyramid goes beyond the hierarchical structure originally conceived for it – it is instead an open architecture model. The levels of the experience pyramid consist of experiential elements, each of which (for example authenticity or contrast) might constitute the dominant element throughout all the levels; that is, throughout the consumer's journey. This conceptualization also supports our understanding of the model as an open architecture experiential model with movable 'dividing walls'. The advantage of the open architecture model is its customizability, changeability and openness (Leppiman et al., 2013).

The concept of designing experiences has so far mainly been used in creating services in the tourism, hospitality, architecture, digital media, culture and entertainment sectors (Tarssanen and Kylänen, 2007; Leppiman, 2010; Pine and Korn, 2011; Sundbo and Sørensen, 2013). Schmitt (2010) analyses experiential stimuli, attributes, and their touch points as part of product design by global and local brands. The framework of experience design and experience marketing should not be limited to fields of business already including a strong experiential dimension (involving, for example, new experiences, new knowledge, being together with others, strong and memorable emotions), such as the festival of cultures, *Trzy żywioly*, which was included in the data analysed in our study. The concept of designing experiences can be consciously used in brand building and integrated into marketing communication for various products and services.

Once a customer has become interested in his or her 'own' brand, he or she starts to read about it, seeks out further information about it and worries about its future. The controlled, rational aspects of the message (like facts about the brand) combined with the emotional element (brand-related experience and feelings – the brand evangelists rely on positive personal experiences when speaking of the brand) are bound to result in a convincing message when used in everyday communication aimed at boosting a brand. These are the tools that brand evangelists use in promoting a brand. They integrate memories into the story of their brand, emphasize the strong bond between themselves and the brand, and assure the listener that the brand is special and perfect.

Among other things, the brand can boost the self-esteem of brand evangelists and win them the admiration of friends. This constitutes another emotion-based element in the consumer-brand relationship. Brand evangelists in a sense immerse themselves in their brand, fusing with it, making it possible to talk of fate, to strengthen self-esteem, to give oneself a gift, to improve one's mood and to relive the special moment over and over again. Evangelists love to tell stories about their brand and about their meaningful experiences with the brand; they tell them in an emotional vein and with considerable mental effort, gladly pointing out how the brand has enriched their world and changed the way they think.

6. Conclusions and implications

This study sheds further light on the characteristics whereby brand evangelists can be recognized. Our analysis shows that these individuals use superlatives and speak of their brand in a passionate and emotional manner. Existing quantitative research has indicated

that one of the possible characteristics of brand evangelism is the positive distinction of a brand compared to competing brands. Qualitative research can, on the other hand, point out how emotional the comparison is as well as analyse the specific choice of words. It is important to recognize this as we expect that brand evangelists will use the same suggestive tone when discussing the brand with their friends, family members, fellow students, colleagues, and people with whom they share hobbies, in short, in their everyday life, thereby promoting the brand and influencing the purchase decisions of members of their social network. Based on our results, we offer marketers some insights into how people speak about their favourite, most preferred, beloved brand, and how a tight emotional bond with the brand develops.

The study reveals that the roots of the close connection to the brand often lie in childhood. The home environment, relatives, or fellow schoolmates influence the child's ability to get switched on to the brand, perceiving it as special for a variety of reasons. Later, as the brand has obtained a special meaning for the brand evangelist as an adult, he or she will either have preserved or constructed a strong memory of the first encounter with the brand. Even if the memories of the first encounter do not go as far back as childhood, the emotion present in them is equally strong. The yearning for belonging and owning, and the long wait for the brand to become available in one's home country can be remembered in a positive light, and later be turned into what one recalls and preserves as the first experience with the brand.

Regarding implications for consumer researchers, our findings suggest that an experience model that takes into account all the elements at all levels of a meaningful experience can be used as a research tool for planning and analysing studies in order to understand the consumer-brand relationship in depth. The concept of the experience pyramid has not been addressed in the brand-consumer context so far, as it was developed for a different purpose. If we stop seeing the model as a hierarchical one and treat it as an open architecture experiential model, it becomes both universal and multifunctional in analysing the consumer's journey. The model helps us to understand how consumers perceive brands, and what leads the consumer to become a brand evangelist. It provides an insight into the meaning of brand-related experiences for consumers and how consumers perceive and understand the theoretical concepts of brand authenticity, story, individuality, interaction, contrast, multisensory perception, and meaningful experience, which may have implications for experience marketing. Each of these concepts have been investigated and theorized in a number of studies. For instance, Schallehn et al. (2014) indicate in their empirical study that authenticity is perceived when a brand is consistent, continuous and individual. Being consistent means that the brand fulfils its brand promise. Napoli et al. (2014) have found that authenticity is built around perceptions of heritage, nostalgia, cultural symbolism, sincerity, craftsmanship, quality commitment, and design consistency. Thinking of further research, it is important to know the meaning that is attached to authenticity by those with a strong emotional bond to the brand, and how they speak of it. In order to fill the theoretical experience model with solid empirical content, more detailed empirical studies and theoretical discussion are needed.

With a view to future research, it is also important to consider the limitations of the present study. The qualitative interviews were carried out by students who had no previous experience with this kind of data collection. It enabled us to collect an extensive amount of data in a short time but the transcriptions of the interviews show that in spite of the students' efforts, their lack of experience caused a loss of data as the moderators often did not know

how to work with an interview guideline. Consequently, it is likely that many experiences that the interviewed brand evangelists would surely have shared with the moderator remained hidden in the interviews. However, the amount of usable data was more than sufficient for a valid analysis, and offers a basis for further, deeper qualitative and quantitative studies in the field.

While our investigation focused on the behaviour of individuals belonging to Generation Y, the consumer population now also includes consumers from Generation Z and soon from Generation Alpha, who reveal a change in values and consumption patterns. Their journey to brand evangelism is also worth approaching in a detailed manner, and an open architecture experiential model, the experience pyramid, is likely to offer invaluable insights into their behaviour.

This study marks the first engagement with the concept of the experience pyramid in the brand-consumer context. Our findings reveal the experience model to be a useful research tool for gaining an in-depth understanding of the consumer-brand relationship and of the consumer's journey from the first brand experience to becoming a brand evangelist. The new categories for recognizing brand evangelists, that is, the use of superlatives and passion in verbal statements about the brand in question, constitute a further contribution of the study to research on this topic.

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Appendix 4. Article IV

Riivits-Arkonsuo, I., & Leppiman, A. (2015). Young Consumers and their Brand Love. *International Journal of Business and Social Research*, 5 (10), 33-44.



Young Consumers and their Brand Love

Iivi Riivits-Arkonsuo¹, Anu Leppiman²

ABSTRACT

Although consumers' emotional attachments to brands have been measured and written about in several contexts, little is known about where a "love" type consumer-brand relationship is rooted and what meaning the consumer gives to such deep experience. The current study aims to extend the discussion of the brand experience dimensions and to form the brand love, focusing on the members of the youngest consumer segment. Based on the introspective written narratives using an international sample of young consumers, this qualitative study offers a holistic view of forming brand love. The findings underscore the relevance of a first encounter with a brand. Adapting the ecological systems theory, the authors identified three social systems from where the informants got impulses to reach their loved brands.

Keywords: Brand experience, brand love, consumer journey, meaningful experience, young consumers.

JEL Codes: M31, M37, M39.

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1.0 INTRODUCTION

Emotional brand attachment indicates the bond that connects a consumer with a particular brand (Malär, Krohmer, Hoyer, & Nyffenegger, 2011) and involves an intense feeling the consumer develops toward the brand (Albert & Merunka, 2013; Carroll & Ahuvia, 2006). Consumers' emotional attachment to brands, including the brand love concept has received considerable attention in marketing literature. Brand love is conceptualized as a marketing construct that "helps explain and predict variation in desirable post-consumption behaviors among satisfied consumers" (Carroll & Ahuvia, 2006, 79). Brand love is cognitively based and not blind (Sarkar, 2014). The concept is relevant since brand love leads to loyalty and positive word-of-mouth. However, little is known about what constitutes the roots of brand love. According to Langner and others (2014), the experiences that are pivotal to the development of brand love appear unpredictable, personal, and largely outside of marketers' control. Brand love can be earned but cannot be bought (Becerra & Badrinarayanan, 2013). We aim to broaden understanding of how a beloved brand

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becomes experiential and obtains a special meaning for a consumer. This empirical study is focused on the youngest consumer segment, falling upon young people between 20 and 24 years old. We name this age group “Generation Z,” although Generation Z, also known as the Digital Natives, consists of people born around 1994 (Bassiouni & Hackley, 2014). There is yet minimal empirical academic research on Generation Z's brand attachment. Moreover, the competition for young consumer attention is becoming increasingly difficult for managers. Thus, the purpose of the study is to offer a holistic view of the forming and manifestation of brand love among Generation Z. This study aims to contribute to the scientific debate in terms of the brand love concept formulating the following research questions:

1. Where do the young consumers get the impulses to become acquainted with brands? That is, what is the origin of their brand-love roots?
2. How and why does the brand obtain meaning for the young consumer?
3. How does their brand love manifest itself?

The contributions of the current study are threefold. First, the paper captures the holistic view of forming a meaningful consumer-brand relationship, and thereby extends and contributes to the literature of brand love and experiential brands. Second, we propose a novel model to indicate the roots of the brand love. Third, we shed light on the meanings that young consumers give to their beloved brands. Furthermore, we show what aspects make the beloved brands unique and memorable.

We report our work in following steps: The paper opens by highlighting the research on brand love concepts, its antecedents, and its consequences. The remainder of the paper is devoted to discussing the brand experience that is the theoretical basis of current empirical research. Next, the study design is reported, followed by a discussion of the empirical findings. Finally, discussion elaborates theoretical contributions and implications of this study for marketers and brand managers.

2.0 RELATED LITERATURE

Consumers have different levels of engagement with brands because their needs, motives and values differ (Schmitt, 2012). Consumer love for a brand is surrounded by complex nuances (Patwardhan & Balasubramanian, 2011). At a lower level, it is equivalent to liking while at a higher level; it takes the form of powerful passion (Sarkar, 2014). Summarizing the work on previous authors, brand love has antecedents, such as satisfaction, brand identification, sense of community, and trust (Albert & Merunka, 2013; Carroll & Ahuvia, 2006; Bergkvist & Bech-Larsen, 2010). The consequences of brand love are satisfaction (Carroll & Ahuvia, 2006), brand commitment (Albert & Merunka, 2013), loyalty (Carroll & Ahuvia, 2006; Bergkvist & Bech-Larsen, 2010; Batra et al., 2012), positive word-of-mouth (Carroll & Ahuvia, 2006; Batra et al., 2012; Albert & Merunka, 2013), active engagement (Bergkvist & Bech-Larsen, 2010), passion driver behavior (Albert, Merunka & Valette-Florence, 2008; Batra et al., 2012), resistance to negative information (Batra et al., 2012), and willingness to pay price premium (Batra et al., 2012; Albert & Merunka, 2013). Taken together, the existing literature has established a brand love concept involving its antecedents, and behavioral consequences. Nevertheless, there is limited understanding in how and why the first encounter with a brand develops into brand love. Langner and others (2014) investigated and mapped graphically the paths toward brand love suggesting five distinct trajectories of brand love dynamics. They argue that trajectories to brand love are strongly shaped by personal experiences and largely outside of marketer's control. The study does not provide insights into the trajectories' effect on consumer behavioral outcomes. We take a different approach by offering a holistic view of the forming and manifestation of brand love. We conceptualize the brand love as a process that begins with the first encounter with a brand, moves to forming opinions, involves the emotions, and follows by obtaining a special meaning for a consumer. In this paper, we integrate the experience forming concepts (Boswijk, Thijssen, & Peelen, 2007; Brakus, Schmitt & Zarantonello, 2009; Tarssanen & Kylänen, 2007) and brand resonance concept (Keller, 2009) in order to offer holistic view of forming the consumer-brand meaningful relationship. We call such relationship the “brand love,” since it holds an emotional charge based on experiences and experiencing. Boswijk, Thijssen, & Peelen (2007) conceptualize experiencing as chain-process including sensory perception, emotion and experience, followed by “giving meaning”. Meaningful experience is composed of feelings, new knowledge and beliefs acquired by the consumer

through a brand, a product or a service (Leppiman, 2010; Tarssanen & Kylänen, 2007). Tarssanen & Kylänen (2007) suggest that the consumer's experience forms through five levels of cognitive processes, namely the motivational, physical, intellectual, emotional, and mental levels. On the *motivational* level, the interest of the consumer is awakened. Experiences are provoked by stimuli; they may occur as a result of online and offline activities. On the *physical* level all goods and services are perceived. The consumer experiences and perceives the product through the five senses (Brakus, Schmitt & Zarantonello, 2009; Tarssanen & Kylänen, 2007; Hansen & Mossberg, 2013). However, nowadays some brands, such as computer games exist only online. That is, experience happens through visual images and sound. The *intellectual* level means learning, thinking, applying knowledge, and forming opinions. The *emotional* level is where one undergoes the meaningful experience. Creating meaning starts as perception through the senses to emotions (Boswijk et al., 2007). Emotional level is the hardest to predict (LaSalle & Britton, 2002) since it is perceived subjectively (Leppiman, 2010). The authors of the present study argue that on the emotional level it becomes clear whether a brand love is developed since here, after applying the knowledge and forming opinion brand obtains particular meaning for the consumer.

Brand *resonance* concept refers to the intensity of the psychological bond that consumers have with the brand and their level of engagement with the brand (Keller, 2009). Brand resonance is the most difficult and the most desirable level to reach because it can be achieved when consumers feel a deep psychological bond with brand. Brand resonance is composed by loyalty, attachment and engagement. Brand love manifests itself in the same characteristics – such consumers are loyal (Carroll & Ahuvia, 2006; Bergkvist & Bech-Larsen, 2010; Batra et al., 2012), they are passionate (Albert et al., 2008; Batra et al., 2012), and actively engaged (Bergkvist & Bech-Larsen, 2010). In this study, the amalgamation of brand experience and brand resonance concepts was considered since we see the conceptual closeness between them. Brand experience and experiencing are viewed as antecedents of forming a consumer-brand relationship where a brand obtains a particular meaning. Brand resonance includes attachment, loyalty, and engagement and is seen in a brand love behavioral consequences.

Brand love conceptualizing discussed above enables construct the consumer journey with meaningful touch points. The metaphor “consumer journey,” itself means the sequence of events that consumers go through to learn about, purchase and interact with company offerings commodities, goods, services or experiences (Norton & Pine, 2013). It is a widely used framework (Forrester Research) in marketing management and service design practice. Despite in importance of this method in brand management, there is a less of theoretical support in marketing literature concerning the consumer journey concept and its behavioral consequences.

3.0 METHODOLOGY

3.01 STUDY DESIGN

When designing a brand relationship study, it is highly suggested that researchers design the study in a way that respondents can choose their favorite brand (Fetscherin, Boulanger, Filho, & Souki, 2014). The methodology applied to investigation consumer experience as the mental events should include introspective reports, such as personal narratives (Holbrook & Hirschman, 1982). Consumers' stories and storytelling are central to attaining a deep understanding of brand experiences (Woodside, Sood, & Miller, 2008). Following these recommendations, we deemed qualitative research design the most appropriate strategy. We considered that the narrative data fit the best into the research process since this method enables one to outline how everything started, how things developed, and what they became (Flick, 1998). Narrative involves a retrospective meaning making. The narrator shapes, constructs and performs the self, experience, and reality (Chase, 2005).

The informants of the current study wrote introspective answers in a narrative form concerning their favourite and most loved brand. The guidelines for writing were theoretically derived from a cognitive perspective including sensory perception and emotions followed by meaning giving process. After the

couple warming questions, they reached the core question: “Please think about of a product or service brand that you love the most. What is its importance to you?” The next questions explored the motivational level where the brand first catches the interest of the informant, moved on to the physical (or virtual) level where the informant encounters the brand, and then to the level of experience where it becomes clear whether a brand love is developed. The direct questions about loyalty and generating WOM were not asked. Such strategy for the design of guidelines was aimed to help understand how informants perceived their favourite, most loved brand and what how the brand obtained meaning. Moreover, it enabled informants construct their consumer journey for brand with meaningful touch points.

3.02 SAMPLE AND ANALYTIC APPROACH

A purposive sample of international business administration undergraduate students was approached to participate in this study. The business students were deemed to represent the young consumers because they age ranges from 20 to 25. Thus, they belong either to the older group Generation Z or to the younger group Generation Y. Generation Y consists of people born between 1982 and 1994 (Hawkins & Mothersbaugh, 2013). We see those students between 20 and 25 years old as a cohort holding similar patterns of thinking, feeling, behaving, and expressing themselves when it comes to brand-related behaviour. They have had fully different experiences of growing up compared to people born earlier due to their access to digital communication technology (Bassiouni & Hackley, 2014). In this study, we use the term Generation Z when exploring the cohort mentioned above. The sample included 31 (53%) males and 27 (47%) females. The age of the informants ranged from 20 to 25 (mean 23, mode 22).

The empirical data were analyzed in two-phase. In the initial phase of analyzing we worked out the filtering criteria that helped us select the self-reflections that we included in the further analysis. First, the authors of narratives indicated a deep consumer-brand relationship, the explicit devotion to the brands and convinced us that the brands are their consumption objects. They *really like, are really attached, are absolutely fallen in love; like the brand more than they know, and could not survive without their brands. They admire and adore*³ their brands. Second, they described emotionally what happened, expressed the thoughts and interpreted their lived experiences (Chase, 2005). The third filtering criterion was the informant’s ability to express what meaning he/she gives to the brand. The first stage of analysis involved all 58 self-reflections while the second stage involved 15. The table 1 depicts the sampling procedure and characteristics of the informants.

Table 01: Sampling procedure

Stages of analysis	Number	Gender	Age
1 – all informants	n=58	Males 53%, females 47%	Range 20-25, mean 23, mode 22
2- after filtering	n=15	Males n=6, females n=9	Range 20-24, mean 22, mode 22

The study was conducted with a sample of university business students studying abroad. They came from different cultures, and they expressed their brand stories in English, not in their native language. Good communication skill in fluent English and willingness to self-reflection was the stories selection criteria. Otherwise, we couldn’t gather and analyze a rich qualitative data. Therefore, the data are biased towards Finnish, Germany, and France native speaking young consumers’ brand experiences.

The authors of fifteen brand stories selected for current study conveyed the role what the brand plays in their life in a captivating manner. In order to increase the accuracy of interpretation the data, the self-reflections were read by two researchers in parallel (Mayring, 1999), either researcher familiar knowledge with the topic. The findings from a directed content analysis offer supporting evidence (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005) for the theoretical approach. In the present study context it means that brand love is the process of experiences and experiencing while attachment, loyalty, and engagement are the manifestation of brand love. The data were analyzed manually line-by-line (Strauss & Corbin, 1998)

³ Text in *italic* - the original wording was left unaltered

followed by interpretation the meanings. The categories and themes that emerged in the systematic reading process were discussed and carefully compared.

4.0 RESULTS

This section answers to research questions related to brand love roots, meaning giving to the brand and the brand love manifestation.

4.01 THE IMPULSES TO PICK UP THE “FAVOURITE, MOST LOVED BRAND”

The study reveals that part of informants became acquainted with their brand already in childhood. We call this group “**brand love roots in childhood.**” They have been influenced by family, friends, and schoolmates. The childhood memories often include a strong positive emotion related to the first brand experience – a feeling that has helped the first encounter to lead to a brand relationship. **Siblings** may have owned a brand, and that has influenced how the young consumers encountered their favourite brand. The young woman remembers already before school age, how her older brother obsessed with Nike: “*He would not wear anything else from head to toe – literally*”. Another young woman recalls that her first experience with Apple was when her sister got the first iPod for her birthday. She was very *jealous*. Especially the fact that her big sister, the person she admired “*most in the entire world,*” had an Apple product made the brand seem very special and cool to her. **The childhood friends** may have owned the desired brand. **The parents** may act as agents influencing their children brand attachment. For instance, the informant thinks that she had first clothes from Finnish brand Marimekko already when she was a baby. She mentioned that her mother has always been a loyal customer for Marimekko. The **childhood idols** may affect the brand choices and subsequent strong emotional bond with the brand. The encounter with a brand is in a way a second-hand one, first it was idol’s brand and that matter made a brand **desirable**. The informant felt that Tiger Wood is the superman and he started to copy his style. Owning the **cult brands** has been already desired in primary school. The informant remembers that having an Apple was *extremely cool*, since similar products were nothing compared to Apple’s products.

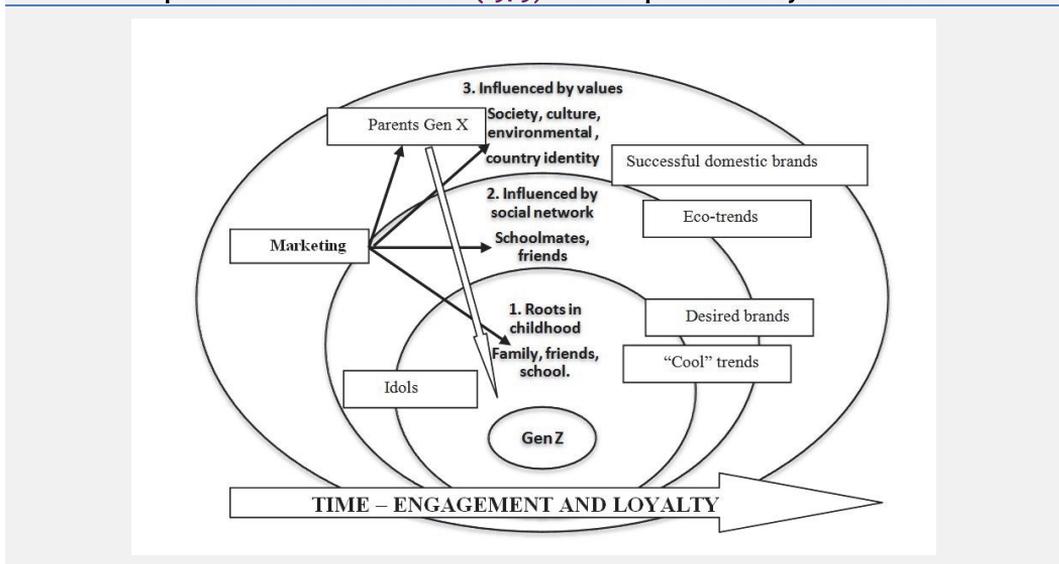
Several informants told that their first encounter with their beloved brand happened when they were either in secondary school or already after graduation. They have been **influenced by schoolmates, friends and “cool” trends**. They had more or less money to use and made the purchase decisions independently, without going to store with their parents. They compared brands, got ideas from conversations with people belonging to their network and got stimuli from the marketing messages. Their brand love roots lie in their social networks. We call this group “**influenced by social network**”. For instance, after getting Samsung, the informant was satisfied and “*the happiest girl*”. It was important to get endorsement by schoolmates since it “*meant much*”. **They appreciated the positive comments their brands** received by schoolmates and friends. Thus, the opinions of people belonging to the young people network may matter a lot in the brand choices.

The third group we identified includes the informants whose value system is well-established. Their beloved brands convey **the ecological and cultural values or represent strong country identity**. We call this group “**influenced by the personal values and beliefs**”. Such choices are conscious and related to the informants’ values and beliefs. Eco-trends may affect the social network values and through it can the consumer reach favourite brand. Environmental values can be the conscious choice of the lifestyle and through those values consumer may encounter the favourite brand. They can see the brand as a reflection of socially responsible behaviour. If such young consumers want to do something good for the society, climate protection, or “*for the support of the traditional agriculture and the next generations*” then their brand love is related to ecological brands and lifestyle. For instance, sustainability and biological products are important for informant’s lifestyle and her consumer behaviour reflects it. The brands conveying the local culture, traditions, and values influences the favourite brand choices. Such decisions can be influenced either by values and beliefs of GenZers’ social network or reflect the young peoples’ individual values and beliefs. Summarizing the research data we come up with the adaptation the

ecological systems theory in order to show Generation Z consumers in the ecological context. The ecological system depicts the social circles. A set of concentric circles is connected by the direct and indirect social interactions (Bronfenbrenner, 1979) of their participants.

Figure 1 demonstrates where roots the brands love of the Generation Zers participating in this study. That is, where they got the impulses to pick up their favourite and most loved brand. In the inner circle depicted in the figure, the family and childhood friends consists a micro system where young consumer has direct interaction with parents, grandparents, sisters and brothers. The first encounter with the brand or brand choice can be affected by the micro system. In our study context it means that a brand love is rooted in childhood. In the next circle has the consumer direct interaction with the friends, classmates, and other participants belonging to network but may not have more direct interaction with family what comes to first encounter with the brand and brand choice. The journey to the brand love is influenced by their social network. The opinion of people belonging to the network may matter a lot.

Figure 01: Generation Z and triggers their brand choices in the ecological systems context, adapted from Bronfenbrenner (1979) and complemented by the authors.



The third, macro system that is nested around a consumer involves society, culture, values (including environmental values), and country identity. Such choices are conscious and related to the informants' values and beliefs.

The brand love may affect by childhood idols, but they may also affect later choices. Brand love can be triggered by cool trends and by desired, cult brands like Apple or other technology brands. Eco-trends may affect the social network values and through it can the consumer reach brand love. Environmental values can be the conscious choice and through it the consumer reaches brand love. Furthermore, Generation Zers parents, belonging to Generation X may act as agents influencing their children brand love. They can do it directly through their purchases for the child or together with the child. They can do it indirectly being loyal brand consumers and influencing thus the later choices of the young consumer. Marketing communications may have direct or indirect impact on all social systems.

Furthermore, common to the brand attachment stories presented above is the fact that informants emphasized that they are loyal for the brands that up to now, although they encountered those brands

in their childhood. It enables to analyze their stories in chronosystem. That is, to understand strong consumer-brand relationship passage through time.

4.02 THE ASPECTS THAT MAKE THE BRAND MEANINGFUL

In this section we aim answer the second research question exploring how and why brand obtains the meaning for consumer? If the consumer perceives something special and unique related to brand then it sticks to memory. The experience became meaningful and the brand obtains a special meaning. The informants attributed meanings to Fanta such as *“some kind of happiness and having fun in life ; exposes more positive values than the other brands”* or to Escada *“I feel like I’m a grown-up person who needs to plan the future, but in the next moment I feel youthful and spontaneous again. The brand represents for me that I can be whatever I want”*. The most loved brand has been even obtained the meaning as follows: *“when our family visited New York some years ago, the Apple store was known to be so impressive that it was on our attraction agenda, besides with the Empire State Building”*. This example demonstrates the knowledge that the informant already had (Apple store was known to be impressive) and the meaning of the brand (research agenda besides with the Empire State Building). The young man argues that he likes to buy beautiful clothes because the physical aspect is important in business and social life for him. It is what makes that the person id credible or not. Derived from values mentioned above, he claims that his brand is Apple with considerable meaning to him. Another informant asserts that her favourite brand is Picture Organic Clothing. There are several aspects reflecting the informant’s values and that is why brand has obtained a particular meaning for her: *“This company sponsored a lot of different events in my city. They won once again the IPOS innovation award one week ago in Munich”*.

The **domestic brands** have obtained the meanings in several contexts. In one way or another they are proud of the brands with their country of origin. Finnish brand Marimekko is important to the informant, because it is a domestic and successful company. Another Finnish brand littala represents to the informant Finnish innovation, craftsmanship and design. A young man loves Turkish Airlines, because it is a Turkish company, reflecting Turkish culture since of offering Turkish coffee, Turkish delights, and Turkish music. The bunch of stories presented above demonstrates that young consumers take the national pride in brands specific to their country or made in their country.

4.03 MANIFESTATION OF BRAND LOVE

In this study, we suggest that brand attachment, loyalty, and engagement are the manifestations of brand love. Three young consumer groups, identified by an ecological systems context, are analyzed using this framework (table 2 below).

Table 02: Manifestation of brand love, based on categories and themes emerged from

Brand Love	Roots in childhood	Influenced by social network	Influenced by personal values and beliefs
Brand attachment	More emotional	More rational, may follow the trends	Conscious choice, value system is well-established
Loyalty	Yet Brand loyal	Brand often reflects their values, thereby loyal	Brand often reflects their values, thereby loyal or intend to be loyal. See brand as investment or reflecting socially responsible behavior
Engagement	Positive WOM	May evangelize their brand experiences, persuade other to engage with it.	Follow the brand from social media and different media channels such as blogs. May create the content (blogs, Instagram)

The young consumers whose brand love roots lie in the childhood are emotional in their reflections since the brand brings good memories from childhood to present. They are yet loyal to the brand, and they emphasize it in different contexts. Their reflections are more genuine comparing to other groups identified in this study. They spread positive WOM, but we didn’t find any indication that they would persuade other to engage with the brand.

Those whose brand choice seems to be influenced people belonging to their network are not too emotional in their expressions. Often they follow the trends and the opinion of the network matters a lot. Since the brand may reflect their values then they are loyal. They tend to evangelize their brand experience. For instance, the informant emphasizes her loyalty to Samsung. Moreover, she has told about Samsung's phones to many of her friends "*being able to convince few of them to actually buy one*". The third group whose value system is well-established has done conscious brand choices. They may see the brand as an investment or reflecting socially responsible behavior. They follow the brands in social media, and they may create the content by blogging.

The consumer journey for a beloved brand does not only mean an emotional charge based on experiences and experiencing; the journey involves learning and applying knowledge. Moreover, devoted consumers are willing and ready to share their knowledge. Through the journey, consumers become brand value co-creators, feeling the need to speak about the brand to friends and people belonging to their networks and to share the experience in social media channels.

5.0 DISCUSSION

Any brand could establish and achieve a "love" type relationship with consumers, not depending on the product category (Fetscherin et al., 2014). However, the findings of the study by Carroll and Ahuvia (2006) suggest that compared with utilitarian product categories love is greater for brands in product categories that consumers perceive as more hedonic. We suggest that love is greater for brands, not for categories, which are experiential and can obtain meanings for consumers. For instance, Turkish Airline is beloved by the informant because it provides hedonic values while Norwegian Airline is beloved because it represents freedom and an opportunity to being in contact with the foreign friends. The informant is ready to pay more (in line with Albert & Merunka, 2013) to get the feeling and comfort that Turkish Airlines offers while another informant emphasizes that low-prizes flights have brought to her memorable moments gatherings with old friends.

The authors of the study noticed that almost all of the informants remembered the first encounter with their brand in a social context. That is, they became aware of the brand through people belonging to their social circles rather than direct marketing activities, such as advertisements and campaigns. Adapting the ecological systems theory (Bronfenbrenner, 1979), the authors identified the social circles from where the informants got their impulses to obtain their preferred and loved brands. We determined three groups that varied in brand attachment, consumer journey, and behavioral consequences of brand love. In line with the study of Braun-La Tour, La Tour and Zinkhan (2007) provide childhood memories to gain insight into brand meaning. Brand love roots often lie in childhood (Riivits-Arkonsuo Kaljund, & Leppiman, 2014), and brands form good memories from childhood to present. According to the ecological systems theory, the first encounter with a brand can be affected by one's upbringing since the young consumer has direct interaction with his/her parents, grandparents, and siblings. Parents might act as agents that influence their children's brand attachments. They can do it directly, through their purchases for the child, or together with the child. They can also do it indirectly, by being brand loyal consumers and, thus, influencing the future choices of the young consumer.

The second group has their first encounter with a brand later on in life. In this exosystem (Bronfenbrenner, 1979), the consumers have a direct interaction with friends, classmates, and other participants belonging to networks, but might not have a more direct interaction with their family in encountering the brand. Their buying decisions follow a typical consumer decision model - an intellectual sequence of thinking, evaluating, and deciding (Foxall, 2005). In their stories, they emphasize the satisfaction and loyalty to the brand. They evangelize their brand experience in order to persuade others to engage with it (Tynan & McKechnie, 2009). The brand love roots of the third, most conscious young consumer group are in their values and beliefs. Adapting the ecological systems theory, they have the impulses to encounter the brand from the macrosystem that "*consists of the overarching pattern of micro-, meso-, and exosystem characteristics of a given culture or subculture, with particular reference to the belief systems, bodies of knowledge, material resources, customs, life-styles, (---) that are embedded on*

each of the broader system” (Bronfenbrenner, 1993, 40). If such young consumers want to do something good for the society and climate protection, then their brand love is related to ecological brands and lifestyle. They may see the brand as an investment or a reflection of socially responsible behaviour. If they are proud of the domestic brands, then their beloved brands are successful locally or globally.

6.0 CONCLUSIONS

Current research extends the theoretical discussion of brand love, its antecedents, formation, manifestation, and consequences (Albert & Merunka, 2013; Patwardhan & Balasubramanian, 2013), focusing on the members of the young consumer segment. Moreover, it contributes to understanding how and why brand experiences are related to consumer-brand relationships (Schmitt, 2013). The following conclusions can be outlined from the current study.

To answer the first research question, where do the young consumers get the impulses to become acquainted with brands, we propose the novel model, which indicates the roots of brand love. We adapted Bronfenbrenner’s ecological system theory in order to show Generation Z consumers in the ecological context. We show the social systems, which formed their impulses to pick their “favorite and most loved brand.” The first encounter with the brand or brand choice can be affected by the microsystem. That is, brand love is rooted in childhood since the young consumers have direct interactions with their parents, grandparents, and siblings. In the next circle, the consumers have direct interaction with friends, classmates, and other participants belonging to the network but might not have a more direct interaction with their family in encountering the brand. The journey to brand love is influenced by their social network since the opinions of people belonging to their network might matter a lot. The macrosystem involves society, culture, values (including environmental values), and country identity. Such choices are conscious and related to the informants’ values and beliefs. Chronosystem involves loyalty in the long-term relationship between consumer and brand.

To answer the second research question, how and why does the brand obtain meaning for the consumer, we argue that the most important phase in the consumer journey is the giving sense to a brand. If consumers perceive something special and unique related to the brand, then it sticks in their memory. The experience becomes meaningful, and the brand is given a particular meaning. Every brand story selected for the current study communicates the participants’ individuality, personality, attitudes, beliefs, and values. Through their experiences, the participants created meanings that made the brand unique, memorable, and beloved.

The third research question was, “How does brand love manifest itself?” In almost all of the analyzed stories, loyalty was emphasized even though that question was not directly asked. Moreover, young people use their online and offline networks to promote and evangelize beloved brands. We can conclude that such consumers become brand value co-creators. They feel the need to speak about their beloved brand to the people who belong to their networks and to share their experience on social media channels. They are volunteer brand marketers, dealing on the behalf of the brand. That is, they have impulses to pick up the brand after hearing about it in their social circles. After they give their beloved brands a particular meaning, they may begin spreading the word to the potentially devoted consumers in their network.

7.0 POLICY IMPLICATIONS

The implications of this research paper in theoretical and practical terms lies in the following:

- The reconstruction of a consumer journey, in the context of a beloved brand, will broaden the understanding of the consumer-brand relationship. Brand love can only be controlled to some extent (Bergkvist & Back-Larsen, 2010). The experiences that are pivotal to the development of brand love appear unpredictable, personal, and largely outside of marketer’s control (Langner et al., 2014). Thus, it is important to gain insights into the formation of meaningful experiences that lead to brand

love. Through their experiences, the consumers create meanings that make the brand unique, memorable, and beloved.

- Brand love leads to stronger brand loyalty and, ultimately, to more positive words (Fetscherin et al., 2014). The article of Langner et al., (2014) presents the trajectories to brand love shaped by personal experiences. However, the study does not provide insights into the trajectories' effect on consumer behavioral outcomes. The authors of current article offered a holistic view of the forming and manifestation of brand love.
- The experiential categories that consumers create for brands are, nevertheless, not always the same as the categories invented by the marketers (Fournier, 1998). Hence, this study helps brand managers understand how the beloved brand becomes experiential and obtains a special meaning for a consumer. We show in this study how the social circles that surround a young consumer act as filters, amplifying or reducing the diffusion of marketing cues. Marketing communications may have indirect or direct impacts on those social circles. That is, besides direct marketing communications, it is possible arrive in consumer groups indirectly.
- The study results support the previous research (Albert & Merunka, 2013; Hwang & Kandampully, 2012; Malär et al., 2011) that beloved brands make it possible to boost self-esteem, improve mood, identify itself, and relive the unique moments from the past over and over again. On the basis of those findings, we suggest emphasizing such experiential and emotional categories to create meaningful and memorable brand communication. Moreover, we suggest brand managers gather a group of devoted consumers and let them tell how they encountered their beloved brand, where they got impulses to pick up their brand, what attracted their attention, and what particular meaning the brand conveyed them. Such listening to consumers' experiences would provide valuable ideas of how to build consumer-brand relationships, how to engage consumers even with a tight budget, and what management decisions to consider.
- The last implication relates to the national pride that consumers take in brands specific to their own country or made in their country (Rahman & Cherrier, 2010). The current study reveals how in the local culture and traditions, strong brands with local origins or local brands with environmental values have influenced the brand love of the young informants. This suggests that besides the cult brand Apple or super-brand Nike, there is the young consumer segment that appreciates the values offered by brands with local origins. Even though some such brands may be a bit too grown-up for young consumers, the brands convey national pride and a country's identity potential to obtain a special meaning from and be loved by young people.

8.0 LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH

This study was conducted with a sample of university business students studying abroad. As the business students, some of them tended to reflect their consumer journeys for their beloved brands through marketing paradigm. We noticed this especially with regards to those informants whose brand love was not formed in childhood. Thus, further studies need to be carried out with various segments of young consumers belonging to Generation Z.

In this study, the people between 20-25 years are seen as young consumers representing Generation Z. Further studies need to be conducted focusing on young consumers born after 1995. The meanings that the informants gave to their brands differ. That is why research needs to be conducted regarding the young consumers' values, beliefs, and attitudes. As the current research demonstrated, values have a significant impact on whether to support the brand and engage with it.

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Appendix 5. Online questionnaire

QUESTIONNAIRE FOR PROGRAMMING - SCREENER

Dear respondent, this questionnaire concerns your behavior as a consumer on social media sites. Consumer behavior for the purposes of this study entails your opinion on how brands and companies that represent brands (as well as employees of such companies) communicate with you as a consumer in online environments. The other side of the coin includes your communication towards them.

1. How often do you use social media sites (e.g. Facebook, Twitter, Youtube)?

1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Very rarely	Quite rarely	Rarely rather than often	Depends	Often rather than rarely	Quite often	Very frequently, all the time

Never ->TERMINATE

-----new page

What is your opinion in relation to the following statements?

2. I speak of my good consumer experience ...

1	2	3	4	5	6	7
face to face only	mainly face to face	face to face, rather	either way, depending on the situation	in social networks, rather	mainly in social networks	in social networks only

Do not speak of it at all 0

3. I speak of my bad consumer experience...

1	2	3	4	5	6	7
face to face only	mainly face to face	face to face, rather	either way, depending on the situation	in social networks, rather	mainly in social networks	in social networks only

Do not speak of it at all 0

4. If a webpage that interests me has links to social media sites (e.g. Facebook, Twitter, Youtube), I open the links...

1	2	3	4	5	6	7
very rarely	quite rarely	rarely rather than often	depends	often rather than rarely	quite often	very frequently

Do not open such links at all 0

-----new page

Currently, the most common social networking site in Estonia used by brands as well is Facebook. This means that Facebook is used as a platform for campaigns and consumer games, consumers can share brand related contents and send posts directly to the brand. The following questions seek to ascertain your opinions and whether you go along (if at all) with “liking” and “following” a brand.

5. How often do you visit your Facebook account?

1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Very rarely	Quite rarely	Rarely rather than often	Depends	Often rather than rarely	Quite often	Very frequently, all the time

Do not use my account at all 0 -> TERMINATE

-----new page

MAIN QUESTIONNAIRE

1. Brands I have selected as friends are

1	2	3	4	5	6	7
very few or none	quite few	few rather than many	in moderate numbers	many rather than few	quite many	very many

2. Brands I have liked and shared based on super good experience are ...

1	2	3	4	5	6	7
very few or none	quite few	few rather than many	in moderate numbers	many rather than few	quite many	very many

-----new page

To reply to the following statements, please use a 7-point scale where “1” means “do not agree at all” and “7” means “totally agree, corresponds to my opinion exactly”. “Cannot say” is also listed as a possible answer option; however, please only use this option as a last resort if you really feel you do not know the answer.

Liking and sharing

1. I am very picky about the brands I like and share
2. If I like and share, it is only because I really like something
3. There are brands that I like so much that I think I should share them.
4. Many companies offer good service/good products, but in order to share and like them, it must be at least outstanding.
5. If a service/product is especially good, one just has to click the like button and share it.

Comments/posts

1. You can help a company if you write positive comments or send posts.
2. You can help a salesperson/an attendant that provided a good service if you write positive comments or send posts.

3. You should write positive comments/send posts about companies that are truly interested in their customers.
4. You should write comments/send posts about truly good brands.
5. I like to read posts and comments by people that have already tried a product /service and recommend it.
6. Reading posts and comments makes it easier for me to decide on purchasing a product/service.
7. If brands ask for my opinion on how to improve their services/products for consumer purposes, I am glad to share my views.
8. It is important for brands to ask for the consumers' opinion on how to improve their services/products for consumer purposes.
9. The person writing on behalf of a brand doesn't really care about me one way or the other.
10. If I really lose it, I will probably post something out of anger.
11. I think warning others of a bad service/product/negative experience is the right thing to do.
12. I don't want to post negative comments under my name.
13. I don't want to post negative comments for everyone to see.
14. If a company/brand responds to a post, they care about their consumers.
15. I like following social media contents more than writing posts and comments myself.
16. I consider it useful and necessary that brands that are my friends send posts to my wall related to their new products and services.

Consumer games, campaigns

1. Those games are mainly similar and emotionless.
2. Consumer games must be interesting, exciting, and original.
3. I know people that share and like everything so as to win something.
4. It bothers me when people share campaign adverts and consumer games.
5. I don't even open the consumer games my friends share.
6. I think consumer games are fun and useful entertainment.
7. I never like and share anything just to win a prize.

Benefit seeking

1. I would be more likely to be a fan, to like and share, if I expected more personal benefit.
2. Those who like and share a brand should receive special offers.
3. Those who write comments on a brand and send posts should receive special offers.

Different messages from others

1. There are brands whose messages on social media are so different from others that I have clicked the like button and become a fan.
2. There are brands whose messages on social media are so different from others that I have shared them since I want my friends to see the messages as well.

3. There are brands whose messages on social media are so different from others that that I have written a comment or sent posts
4. There are brands whose messages on social media are so different from others that that I have consumed the services or the products of those companies.

Please comment such experiences!

THANK YOU FOR THINKING ALONG AND CONTRIBUTING YOUR
TIME TO OUR STUDY!

Appendix 6. Interview guide

INTRODUCTION. WARM-UP QUESTIONS

General info about the informant (background and values, purchase behavior)

- Please tell about yourself a little. What is your age, what do you do? How would you characterise yourself in a few words?
- What are your interests? What is important for you in life? And what is it that you don't really care about, what values are unimportant for you?
- How do you characterise yourself as a consumer? Do you like to try new things or are you rather a conservative buyer? How do you make your purchases, do you consider everything rationally or do you sometimes let emotions direct you? Can you give some examples?

BRAND AND EXPERIENCE

Please think of a product or service brand that you like very much. What is its importance to you? *TRY TO ARRIVE AT A DEFINITE BRAND NAME WITH THE INFORMANT, BECAUSE THE FOLLOWING INTERVIEW CONCERNS EXACTLY THAT. IT CAN BE ANYTHING THAT IS CHARACTERISTIC TO THE INFORMANT AND CONSIDERED IMPORTANT BY HIM OR HER. BY THIS POINT IN THE INTERVIEW YOU SHOULD KNOW THE INFORMANT WELL ENOUGH TO BE ABLE TO ASK WHAT THE BRAND MIGHT BE.*

AFTER YOU HAVE AGREED ABOUT WHAT PRODUCT OR SERVICE BRAND YOU WILL BE TALKING:

INTEREST, MOTIVATION, CURIOSITY

- Please talk about your first experience with that brand. How did you arrive at that brand? How was it special for you, why did it catch your attention?
- Did you know anything about the brand before? If yes, then what? Did it have its own story? How did this knowledge (story) reach you (did someone recommend it, was it a promotional campaign?)
- How did this brand win your interest, how was it special? How did it differ from others?
- What possible sensations (taste, sound, touch, colours, smell) caught your attention and interest?

PHYSICAL AND/OR VIRTUAL ENVIRONMENT

- Where did you encounter that brand, where did you see it? Was it in a physical environment (a store, a salon) or virtually (online)? Or was one supported by another?
- Please tell about the brand's sales environment. Who are there, what happens there? How are people being served there? How is it different from other environments?

- How is the brands' physical environment supporting its "story"? How is it visible in the physical environment?
- What possible sensations (taste, sound, touch, colours, smell) does the brand's physical (or virtual) environment give? How does that environment support it?
- How is that brand's sales environment different from the everyday, ordinary environment? I mean the sales environment of other brands that are ordinary and unimpressive for you.

EXPERIENCE, learning

- What have you learned or what do you now know in relation with consuming that brand? In what way are you now "wiser and more aware" than before?
- What makes that knowledge valuable to you?
- How did this experience supplement "the brand's story"?

EXCITEMENT, MEANINGFUL EXPERIENCE

- As it is your favourite brand, it must have given you something extraordinary, something exciting, otherwise we wouldn't be talking about it so long. If you had to tell other people about that brand, what would you tell? Why is it special, why is it so memorable, so meaningful?
- Could this brand be liked by many people (why?), few people (why?) or people like you (similar values, but which ones?)
- What sensations (taste, sound, touch, colours, and smell) make this brand unique, different from others?
- What physical and/or virtual environment makes this brand special, memorable?

Change

- How your life (as a consumer) was different before that brand became your favourite, compared to now? Does consumption of this brand make you (and people close to you) special? Does it connect you to a community or friends? If yes, then please elaborate. What is its symbolic meaning?
- Again, you must be telling and recommending that brand to others, right? How have you shared it in social media (FB, Twitter, blog)? Have you "liked", shared, commented it? If any of those, please elaborate!

FINAL WORDS, SUMMARY

Do you want to add anything, comment on our topic as a conclusion?

THANK YOU!

ELULOOKIRJELDUS

1. Isikuandmed

Ees- ja perekonnanimi Iivi Riivits-Arkonsuo
Sünniaeg ja -koht 19.08.1959 Pärnu
Kodakondsus Eesti
E-posti aadress Iivi.riivits@ttu.ee

2. Hariduskäik

Õppeasutus (nimetus lõpetamise ajal)	Lõpetamise aeg	Haridus (eriala/kraad)
Tallinna Tehnikaülikool	2015	Ärikorraldus, doktorikraad, PHD
Tallinna Tehnikaülikool	2005	Ärikorralduse magister/ MBA
Tartu Riiklik Ülikool	1987	Ajalugu /magistrikraadile vastav kvalifikatsioon
Elva Keskkool	1977	Keskharidus

3. Keelteoskus (alg-, kesk- või kõrgtase)

Keel	Tase
Eesti	emakeel
Inglise	kõrgtase
Soome	kõrgtase
Vene	kesktase
Saksa	algtase

4. Täiendusõpe

Õppimise aeg	Täiendusõppe korraldaja nimetus
28.-30.10.2011	Prof. Anu Valtonen, Lapi Ülikool, kursus „Ethnography“, TTÜ
15.11. - 16.11.2011	Dr. Petri Nokelainen, Tampere Ülikool, kursused „Scientific Writing“, TTÜ

5. Teenistuskäik

Töötamise aeg	Tööandja nimetus	Ametikoht
09/2013 -	Tallinna Tehnikaülikool	Lektor (1.0, turundusuuringud, e-turundus)
2011-2013	Tallinna Tehnikaülikool	Lektor (0.5, turundusuuringud)
2005-2011	Tallinna Tehnikaülikool	Tunnitasuline õppejõud (turundusuuringud)
1997 -	Turu-uuringute AS	Uuringujuht

6. Teadustegevus ja juhendatud lõputööd

Publikatsioonid

Riivits-Arkonsuo, I., & Leppiman, A. (2015). Young consumers and their brand love. *International Journal of Business and Social Research*, 5 (10), 33-44.

Riivits-Arkonsuo, I., & Leppiman, A. (2015). Antecedents of online word-of-mouth and memorable experience concept. *International Journal of Business and Social Research*, 5 (9), 1-14.

Riivits-Arkonsuo, I., & Leppiman A. (2015). Experiential Technology Brands for Generation Y. In J.-C. Andreani (Ed.) *International Marketing Trends Conference* (1-11) Paris

Riivits-Arkonsuo, I., & Leppiman, A. (2014). Online Word-of-Mouth on Brands and Experience Marketing. *Journal of Management and Change*, 32/33, 43-55.

Riivits-Arkonsuo I., Kaljund, K. & Leppiman, A. (2014). Consumer Journey from First Experience to Brand Evangelism. *Research in Economics and Business: Central and Eastern Europe*, 6(1), 5-28.

Riivits-Arkonsuo, I., & Leppiman A. (2014). Online word-of-mouth in experience marketing, the voice of the consumers: on the example of Estonian social media users. In *Listening to Consumers of Emerging Markets: Proceedings of the 2014 Annual Conference of the Emerging Markets Conference Board*. 344 – 349. New Delhi

Riivits-Arkonsuo, I., & Leppiman A. (2013). Consumer online word-of-mouth - analysis through an experience pyramid model. 9th Eurasia Business and Economics Society/ EBES Conference - Rome; January 11-13, 2013, Sapienza University of Rome, Italy. In *9th EBES Conference- Rome Proceeding*. 9, 1929 – 1934.

Riivits-Arkonsuo, I., & Leppiman, A. (2013). Consumer Behavior in Social Media: Patterns of Sharing Commercial Messages. In G. Prause, U. Venesaar & W. Kersten (Eds.), *International Business – Baltic Business Development* (297 – 317), Frankfurt am Main: PeterLang GmbH.

Leppiman, A., Riivits-Arkonsuo, I. & Kaljund, K. (2013). Improving non-profit organizations' capability through open architecture model. In G. Prause, U. Venesaar & W. Kersten (Eds.), *International Business – Baltic Business Development* (115-134), Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang GmbH.

Konverentsi ettekanded

Töö tulemusi on ettekantud viiel rahvusvahelisel konverentsil: Roomas, New Delhis, Barcelonas, Pariisis ja Tallinnas.

Juhendatud magistritööd

- Sõnumi leviku jälgimine Twitteri näitel, 2013
- Eesti elanike meediatarbimise segmentide analüüs integreeritud turundus-kommunikatsiooni planeerimiseks, 2012
- Sotsiaalsete ostukeskkondade turg Eestis Cherry Media OÜ näitel, 2012
- Elamusturundus sotsiaalmeedia kanalis AS EMT ja ELISA AS ettevõtete näitel, 2012
- Sotsiaalne meedia turundusuuringu platvormina, 2010
- E-poodidest mittevirtuaalseid kaupu ostvate tarbijate segmentatsioon Eestis, 2011
- Roheline turundus ja roheline segmendi uuring Tallinnas (Eesti ja vene tarbija ostukäitumise võrdluse näitel), 2010

7. Teadustöö põhisuunad

sotsiaalmeedia, suust-suhu sõnumid, tarbijakäitumine ja elamusturundus

8. Kaitstud lõputööd

Magistritöö: Riivits-Arkonsuo, Iivi (2005) Tarbijaturu väärtuspõhine segmentimine *Valuegraphics* meetodi alusel. Juhendaja Ann Vihalem. Tallinna Tehnikaülikool.

9. Teadusorganisatsiooniline ja administratiivne tegevus

2013-2015 Doktoritööde töörühma liige

CURRICULUM VITAE

1. Personal data

Name	Iivi Riivits-Arkonsuo
Date and place of birth	19.08.1959, Pärnu
Citizenship	Estonian
E-mail address	Iivi.riivits@ttu.ee

2. Education

Educational institution	Graduation year	Education (field of study/degree)
Tallinn University of Technology	2015	Business, Doctor of Philosophy, PhD
Tallinn University of Technology	2005	Master in Business Administration
Tartu State University	1987	History/University Degree
Elva Secondary School	1977	Secondary Education

3. Language competence/skills (fluent, average, basic skills)

Language	Level
Estonian	Native language
English	Fluent
Finnish	Fluent
Russian	Average
German	Basic skills

4. Special courses

Period	Educational or other organization
28.-30.10.2011	Prof. Anu Valtonen, University of Lapland, course "Ethnography", fieldwork, learning diary, at TUT
15.11. - 16.11.2011	Dr. Petri Nokelainen, University of Tampere, Course „Scientific Writing” and „Quantitative Research Methods”, TUT

5. Professional employment

Period	Organization	Position
09/2013 -	Tallinn University of Technology	Lecturer (1.0, marketing research, e-marketing)
2011-2013	Tallinn University of Technology	Lecturer (0.5, marketing research)
2005-2011	Tallinn University of Technology	Fee-based teaching (Marketing research)
1997 -	Turu-uuringute AS	Research Manager

6. Research activities

Publications

Riivits-Arkonsuo, I., & Leppiman, A. (2015). Young consumers and their brand love. *International Journal of Business and Social Research*, 5 (10), 33-44.

Riivits-Arkonsuo, I., & Leppiman, A. (2015). Antecedents of online word-of-mouth and memorable experience concept. *International Journal of Business and Social Research*, 5 (9), 1-14.

Riivits-Arkonsuo, I., & Leppiman A. (2015). Experiential Technology Brands for Generation Y. In J.-C. Andreani (Ed.) *International Marketing Trends Conference* (1-11) Paris

Riivits-Arkonsuo, I., & Leppiman, A. (2014). Online Word-of-Mouth on Brands and Experience Marketing. *Journal of Management and Change*, 32/33, 43-55.

Riivits-Arkonsuo I., Kaljund, K. & Leppiman, A. (2014). Consumer Journey from First Experience to Brand Evangelism. *Research in Economics and Business: Central and Eastern Europe*, 6(1), 5-28.

Riivits-Arkonsuo, I., & Leppiman A. (2014). Online word-of-mouth in experience marketing, the voice of the consumers: on the example of Estonian social media users. In *Listening to Consumers of Emerging Markets: Proceedings of the 2014 Annual Conference of the Emerging Markets Conference Board*. 344 – 349. New Delhi

Riivits-Arkonsuo, I., & Leppiman A. (2013). Consumer online word-of-mouth - analysis through an experience pyramid model. 9th Eurasia Business and Economics Society/ EBES Conference - Rome; January 11-13, 2013, Sapienza University of Rome, Italy. In *9th EBES Conference- Rome Proceeding*. 9, 1929 – 1934.

Riivits-Arkonsuo, I., & Leppiman, A. (2013). Consumer Behavior in Social Media: Patterns of Sharing Commercial Messages. In G. Prause, U. Venesaar & W. Kersten (Eds.), *International Business – Baltic Business Development* (297 – 317), Frankfurt am Main: PeterLang GmbH.

Leppiman, A., Riiivits-Arkonsuo, I. & Kaljund, K. (2013). Improving non-profit organizations' capability through open architecture model. In G. Prause, U. Venesaar & W. Kersten (Eds.), *International Business – Baltic Business Development* (115-134), Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang GmbH.

Conference presentations

The study results were presented by the author in four international scientific conferences: in Rome, New Delhi, Barcelona, Paris, and Tallinn (see above).

Master Thesis Supervisor

- Tracking of messages spreading in Twitter, 2013
- Analysis of media consumption segments in Estonian population for integrated marketing communication planning, 2012
- The market of social commerce in Estonia, on the example of Cherry Media, perspective of the business model, 2012
- Experience marketing in social media channels, on the examples AS EMT and ELISA AS, 2012
- The segmentation of non-virtual goods purchasing consumers in Estonia, 2011
- Social media as marketing research platforms, 2010
- Green marketing and the study of green consumer segment in the city of Tallinn (based on comparison of Estonian and Russian consumers' purchasing behavior), 2010

7. Main areas of scientific work

Social media, word-of-mouth, consumer behavior, experience marketing

8. Defended theses

Master's thesis: Riiivits-Arkonsuo, Iivi (2005) Segmentation of consumer market on the basis of values (case valuegraphics method). Supervisor Ann Vihalem. Tallinn University of Technology.

9. Administrative responsibilities

2013- 2015 Member of the Doctoral Studies Working group

**DISSERTATIONS DEFENDED AT
TALLINN UNIVERSITY OF TECHNOLOGY ON
*ECONOMICS AND BUSINESS ADMINISTRATION***

1. **August Aarma**. Segmented Analysis of Bank Customers and Banking Information: Estonian Case. 2001.
2. **Enn Listra**. The Development and Structure of Banking Sector: Retail Banking in Estonia. 2001.
3. **Tatyana Põlajeva**. The Comparative Analysis of Market's Attractiveness. 2001.
4. **Tuuli Tammeraid**. Modeling Flow of Funds for Estonia. 2002.
5. **Ivo Karilaid**. The Choice in General Method for Investment and Performance Evaluation. 2002.
6. **Hele Hammer**. Strategic Investment Decisions: Evidence from Survey and Field Research in Estonia. 2003.
7. **Viljar Jaamu**. The Methods and Instruments for Solving the Banking Crisis and Development of the Banking Sector in Estonia. 2003.
8. **Katri Kerem**. From Adoption to Relationships: Internet Banking in Estonia. 2003.
9. **Ly Kirikal**. Productivity, the Malmquist Index and the Empirical Study of Banks in Estonia. 2005.
10. **Jaanus Raim**. The PPP Deviations between Estonia and Non-Transitional Countries. 2006.
11. **Jochen Sebastian Heubischl**. European Network Governance – Corporate Network Systematic in Germany, the United Kingdom and France: an Empirical Investigation. 2006.
12. **Enno Lend**. Transpordiühenduse ja logistikasüsteemi interaktsioon (Saaremaa ja Hiiumaa näitel). 2007.
13. **Ivar Soone**. Interrelations between Retail Service Satisfaction and Customer Loyalty: A Holistic Perspective. 2007.
14. **Aaro Hazak**. Capital Structure and Dividend Decisions under Distributed Profit Taxation. 2008.
15. **Laivi Laidroo**. Public Announcements' Relevance, Quality and Determinants on Tallinn, Riga, and Vilnius Stock Exchanges. 2008.
16. **Martti Randveer**. Monetary Policy Transmission Channels, Flexibility of the Economy and Future Prospects of the Estonian Monetary System. 2009.

17. **Kaire Põder**. Structural Solutions to Social Traps: Formal and Informal Institutions. 2010.
18. **Tõnn Talpsepp**. Investor Behavior and Volatility Asymmetry. 2010.
19. **Tarmo Kadak**. Creation of a Supportive Model for Designing and Improving the Performance Management System of an Organisation. 2011.
20. **Jüri Kleesmaa**. Economic Instruments as Tools for Environmental Regulation of Electricity Production in Estonia. 2011.
21. **Oliver Parts**. The Effects of Cosmopolitanism on Estonian and Slovenian Consumer Choice Behavior of Foreign *versus* Domestic Products. 2011.
22. **Mart Nutt**. Eesti parlamendi pädevuse kujunemine ja rakendamine välissuhetes. 2011.
23. **Igor Novikov**. Credit Risk Determinants in the Banking Sectors of the Baltic States. 2011.
24. **Mike Franz Wahl**. Kapitaliühingute lõppomanike alusväärtuste ja tahte uurimine ning omanikkonna tüpoloogia konstrueerimine. 2011.
25. **Tobias Wiebelt**. Impact of Lease Capitalization on the Development of Accounting Standards: A Theoretical Research. 2012.
26. **Sirje Pädam**. Economic Perspectives on Environmental Policies: The Costs and Benefits of Environmental Regulation in Estonia. 2012.
27. **Juhan Värk**. Venemaa positiivse hõlvamise poliitika ja teiste välispoliitiliste liinide mõjud Eesti-Vene suhetele aastail 1991–2011. 2012.
28. **Mari Avarmaa**. Implications of Capital Structure and Credit Constraints for Company Performance: A Comparative Study of Local and Multinational Companies in the Baltics. 2012.
29. **Fabio Filipozzi**. The Efficiency of Interest Rate and Foreign Exchange Markets in the Euro Area and Central and Eastern Europe. 2012.
30. **Aleksei Netšunajev**. Developments and Determinants of Intra-Industry Trade in the Baltic States. 2012.
31. **Aleksandr Miina**. Critical Success Factors of Lean Thinking Implementation in Estonian Manufacturing Companies. 2012.
32. **Angelika Kallakmaa-Kapsta**. Before and After the Boom: Changes in the Estonian Housing Market. 2013.
33. **Karen Voolaid**. Measurement of Organizational Learning of Business Schools. 2013.
34. **Archil Chochia**. Models of European Integration: Georgia's Economic and Political Transition. 2013.

35. **Hannes Ling.** Developing an Assessment Measure for Enhancing Entrepreneurship Education through a Metacognitive Approach. 2013.
36. **Marina Järvis.** Assessment of the Contribution of Safety Knowledge to Sustainable Safety Management Systems in Estonian SMEs. 2013.
37. **Aleksandr Michelson.** Destination Branding and Constructing Symbolic Capital in the Reproduction of Heritage Space: the Case of UNESCO Designated Hanseatic Old Towns. 2014.
38. **Alar Kolk.** Co-evolution of Capabilities' and Alliance Portfolios: Multinational Firms in Global ICT Industry. 2014.
39. **Svetlana Raudonen.** Impact of Corporative Taxation on Foreign Direct Investments: Evidence from the European Union. 2014.
40. **Riina Koris.** Customer Orientation at a Higher Educational Institution: The Perspective of Undergraduate Business Students in Estonia. 2014.
41. **Merle Rihma.** Ethics Audit: A Management Tool for Assessing of Corporate Social Responsibility and Preventing Ethical Risks. 2014.
42. **Anu Virovere.** The Role of Management Values, Knowledge Management and Conflict Management for Improvement of Organisational Sustainability. 2015.
43. **Kristina Hunke.** Conceptualisation and Management of Green Transport Corridors. 2015.
44. **Eneken Titov.** Management Paradigm Values in Real and Propagated Level as Prerequisites of Organisational Success. 2015.
45. **Siiri Same.** Conceptualization of Experience Marketing and Country Branding from a Marketing Management Perspective. 2015.
46. **Helbe Põdder.** Combining Work and Family Life – A Comparative Perspective on Changes in Parental Roles in Estonia, Finland and Sweden. 2015.
47. **Katrin Toompuu.** The Full Costing Model and Its Implementation at Universities: The Case of Tallinn University of Technology. 2015.