



Young Consumers and their Brand Love

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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.

Available Online: 2nd November, 2015.

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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.

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 where nothing compared to Apple’s products.

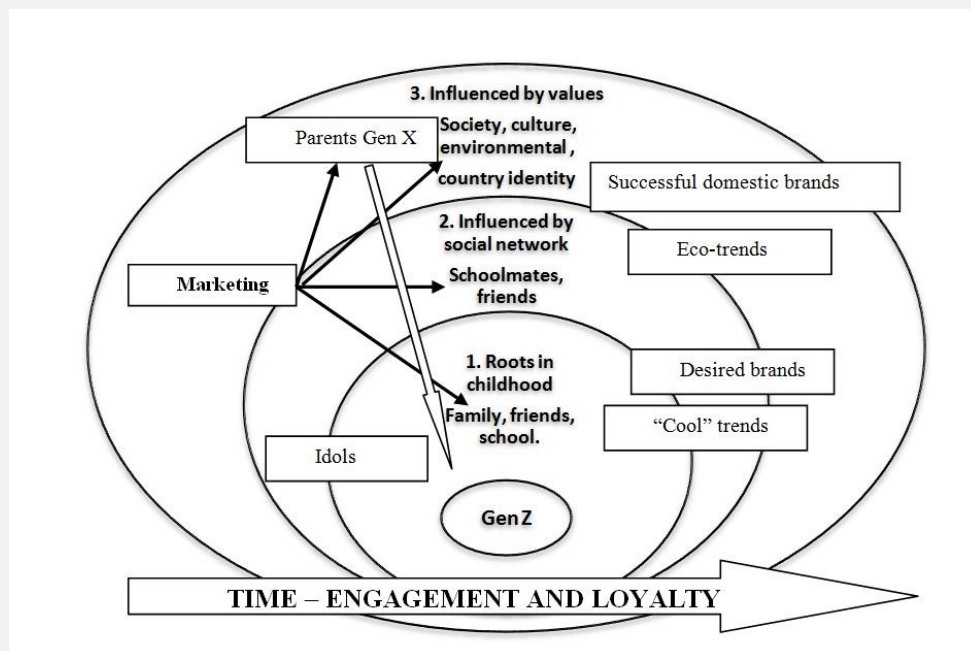
Several informants told that their first encounter with their beloved brand happened when they were either in secondary school or already after graduation. They have been **influenced by schoolmates, friends and “cool” trends**. They had more or less money to use and made the purchase decisions independently, 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 adaption 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 Iittala 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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