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Consumer Brand Connection

The emotional link with fashion retail brands

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<p>The purpose of this thesis is to point out the emotional connection consumers have with fashion retail brands and proof that this connection and attachment is essential for the success of fashion retail stores. The research is presenting the awareness of these connections in the fashion industry and showing what they do to maintain it.</p> <p>With the help of primary and secondary research, the reader will gain an understanding of the fundamentals and the importance of marketing and branding, leaving with the thought of how brands use consumers' emotions to influence their buying habits.</p> <p>The research also revealed that there is an emotional connection between fashion retail brands and that consumers associate themselves in all the characteristics of the brand. The research conducted showed that fashion retailers and consumers both value customer loyalty and personal interaction.</p>	
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1 Introduction

Consumers during this time find themselves connecting to products that are related to fashion, one way or another. To help focus this idea, the understanding of emotional and personal connections they have towards fashion retail brands is the purpose of this thesis. There are many reports written about the connections consumers have with brands, and they all share the findings and present how relationships with fashion brands are formed with consumers. Being able to understand why some consumers are drawn to certain brands, while some are not, can help marketers create advertisements and present products in a more beneficial way. The idea of customer loyalty plays a big part when building and maintain consumers' connections with brands in general.

The first chapters of this thesis shares what is being said and pervious research that was done to help build a base of understanding the reasons and showing proof that there is an emotional attachment between consumers and fashion brands. Also the first chapters move onto what is being talked about, if in fact, these attachments help make up their personality as an individual and understanding why and how this makes consumers feel.

Understanding the relationship between marketing and consumer behavior and a look into the consumer's purchasing behavior is also presented. Basics of what brand means and understanding the emotional attachment to fashion brands, importance of visual merchandising, looking into how consumers may be socialized into certain brands will help show how consumers are emotionally connected towards fashion brands.

With that introduced, by the end of this thesis it will be better understood how the human relationship and behavior towards fashion brands are formed and comprehending the explanation of the social outcome when consumers attach themselves to fashion brands. Also realizing the importance of today's society's involvement online and offline, including the understanding of image the fashion brand brings on itself and how their actions affect the minds of their consumers.

2 Literature Review

2.1 Understanding Marketing

Introducing Marketing and understanding what it means will help us understand the relationships consumers have with their brands. Marketing can be defined by Kotler as managing profitable customer relationships. Not only does it mean telling and selling, but satisfying customer needs. Marketing is the process in which companies create value for consumers and build strong customer relationships in order to be valued by their customers (Kotler & Armstrong, 2012, p. 5).

Another explanation that defines marketing is knowing that marketing occurs when people decide to satisfy needs and wants through exchange relationships which is the act of obtaining a desired object from someone by offering something in return (Kotler & Armstrong, 2012, p. 7).

Marketing involves actions that help build and maintain exchanged relationships with the targeted audience that involves products and/or services. To give a clear meaning, there is a five-step model, "The Marketing Process" (Figure 1). The first four steps help companies work to understand consumers, create customer value, build strong customer relationships, and lastly the fifth step helps companies reap rewards (Kotler & Armstrong, 2012, p. 5).

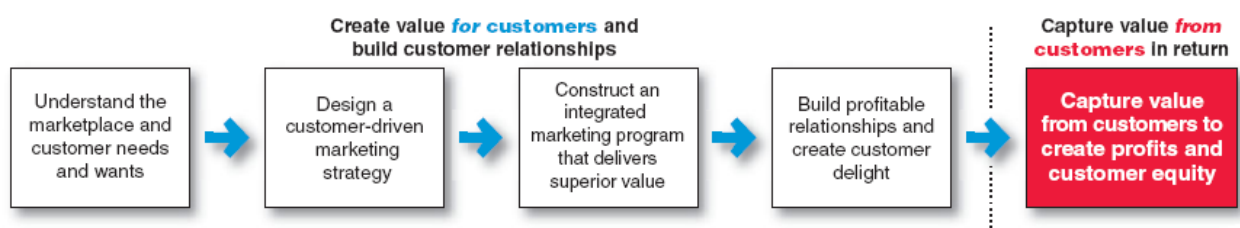


Figure 1. The Marketing Process

2.1.1 Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs

To succeed in marketing, marketers need to understand the basic concept of customer needs and wants and the market place in which they operate. The term "need" is explained as, states of deprivation, for example: food, clothing and safety. A "want" is seen as a form of human need when they take a shape of culture and individual personality. An example of a want would be a Big Mac, COKE or the Michael Kors watch one just has to have.

Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs (Figure 2) helps give a visual of human needs which include physiological, safety, social, esteem and self-actualization needs. It is understood that a person satisfies the most important need first. Once this is accomplished they will then satisfy the next (Kotler & Armstrong, 2012, p. 6). The first two needs are described as cognitive needs, while the remaining three from the pyramid are emotional needs.

- Physiological Needs: The need for shelter, food, water.
- Safety Needs: The need for financial security, family stability, trust.
- Social Needs: Need for love, group belonging, family relationships.
- Esteem Needs: The need for achievement, status, respect.
- Self-Actualization Needs: The need to be who we can be, the need to be as good as we can be.

(Ellwood, 2002)



Figure 2. Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs

2.1.2 Marketing Management, Target Market and Customer Relationship Management

With all these wants, there is demand for products and services. Human wants are backed by buying power. A company cannot go out and put their products or services into society once they have found the wants and needs for them. They must first decide to whom it will serve with the help of marketing management. Marketing management is the art and science of choosing target markets and building profitable relationships with those targets. (Kotler & Armstrong, 2012, p. 8).

Target Marketing is when companies identify market segments and develop products and marketing programs that are tailored to these segments. Marketers will divide these segments geographically, demographically and by psychographic and behavior variables. Understanding which segment to target and how, will help successfully connect the product with the target (Kotler & Armstrong, 2012, p. 190).

Continuing on building relationships with the market, it is important to understand customer relationship management. Customer relationship management is the process of building and maintaining profitable customer relationships by delivering superior customer value and satisfaction. Customer relationship management is important because it deals with acquiring, keeping and growing customers for companies (Kotler & Armstrong, 2012, p. 12).

2.1.3 Consumer Behavior

Often many consumers do not know what influences their buying behavior. This is an important piece of consumer behavior. Buyer behavior is important to look at while understanding consumer behavior. Buyer behavior, as referred by Michael R. Solomon, is a reflecting emphasis on the interaction between consumers and producers at the time of purchase. Consumer behavior relates to buying behavior and can be defined as the buying behavior of final consumers. Final consumers are the individuals and households that buy goods and services for personal consumption. Knowing the definition of consumer behavior, it can be concluded that the characteristics that influences consumer buyer behavior and their purchases are, cultural, social, personal and psychological. In addition to Solomon, Kotler shares that although these factors might not be influenced by the marketer, they can be useful in identifying interested buyers and shaping products that appeals to serve consumer needs (Solomon R., et al., 2013, p. 6).

The interest in consumer behavior does not only involve marketing, but also involves social sciences. It is essential to note that human behavior is learned while growing up in one's cultural society. A cultural influence on buying varies from country to country, city to city, and at times, household to household. When looking into the social factors, groups and networks, the most important role is the opinion leader. The opinion leader is the person in the group whose special skills, knowledge, personality and characteristics initialize social influences on others, according to Kotler. It is then very important for marketers to figure out how to reach the opinion leaders of the groups to help spread their brands (Kotler & Armstrong, 2012).

2.1.4 Purchase Decision Making

When making a purchase the buyer goes through a decision process (Figure 3). This process involves; recognition, information search, evaluation of alternatives, purchase decision and post purchase behavior. How this process works, according to Solomon, is that consumers carefully piece together as much information as possible with the information that they already know. They then weigh out the pros and cons before reaching an acceptable decision. (Kotler & Armstrong, 2012, p. 152)

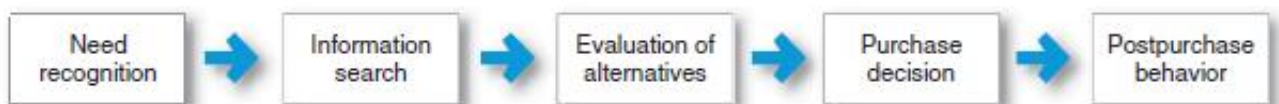


Figure 3. Buyer Decision Process

Looking into the decision process a little closer, Kotler explains the first stage, need recognition as the stage when the buyer recognizes a problem or need. The second stage of this process, information search, is when the consumer will obtain information above the product wanted. The next stage, alternative evaluation, is where the information the consumer collected is used to evaluate alternative brands of a product or service. Another way that Kotler explains what happens in this stage, is when the consumer ranks brands and then forms an intention to purchase. This then leads into the fourth stage, purchase decision. This is when the consumer will buy the most preferred brand. The final stage is post purchase behavior. This stage happens once a product is purchased and the buyer either regrets or is pleased with their decision (Kotler & Armstrong, 2012, pp. 152-154).

2.2 Understanding Branding

After introducing marketing and understanding consumer behavior and purchasing decision making, understanding the term brand and the act of branding will help better comprehend the information to come.

There are many definitions that explain what brand is; that a brand is a name, term, sign, symbol, or design, or even a combination of them. It is important to remember that brand is intended to identify the goods and services of one seller or group of sellers and to differentiate them from those of competitors. In addition to these understandings of brand, why does brand matter to the consumers? Brands have important functions. This means that they allow the consumer to assign responsibility to a particular manufacture or distributor. With this knowledge and recognition of what the brand represents, then the consumer knows exactly what quality or service to expect (Keller, 2008, p. 6).

Branding is a very important advertising tool for companies that are in the fashion industry. It is important because to be successful, which Karen Post shares, the brand must have a clear point of difference at an experiential level. Successful branding can make or break a product, label or even a whole company. Brands are a vital part of our economy, culture and our society and a brand is what an audience thinks and feels when it hears a name or sees a sign, a product, and/or a place of activity; branding is a way of life (Post, 2004).

When a company has a brand there needs to be meaning behind the brand for consumers to attach to. When branding in the fashion industry, it is important to understand how a line of clothing, accessories, etc. can relate to their customers. Can the customers see themselves while looking at a particular brand? Is the advertisement of the brand representing the full essence of the brand? Branding can be defined as more than just a logo or a name, but as a personality, an emotion and a certain reputation or status. A "brand cannot survive on its name alone, the name and how the brand is executed is equally vital for successful and sustained brand life" (Post, 2004, p. 131).

Branding should be considered essential since consumers view a brand as key part of a product because brands have meaning well beyond a product's physical characteristics. In addition, the name also becomes the basis on which a whole story can build around a product's special qualities (Kotler & Armstrong, 2012, p. 232).

Brands are a key element to the company's relationships with consumers; this is seen as brand equity and consumer brand relationship. To define brand equity: it is the differential effect of knowing that brand name has an effect on consumer response to a product or its marketing. In other words, brand equity is measuring the brand's ability to capture consumer loyalty. Referring back to Solomon, another way to look at brand equity is that the brand has a strong positive association in a consumer's memory and commands a lot of loyalty. (Solomon R., et al., 2013, p. 268). Consumer brand relationship knows that positive brand equity derives from consumer feelings about and connections with a brand (Kotler & Armstrong, 2012, p. 244). Over all, when dealing with brand equity, retaining consumer loyalty is a result of positive brand equity, the power and value of a brand.

2.3 Consumer Brand Relationship

Laforet's theoretical information about the relationship between brands and buyer is a great base. It is important to know that relationship is based on trust, because if there is no trust, then the brand relationship is fragile. It is helpful to understand that sometimes consumers may get bored of buying the same brands, or doing the same routines, thus they become "footloose", meaning that they find new interest (Laforet, 2011, p. 18). It is also keen to review and compare the relationships consumers gain with brands, with relationships they gain with people and noticing how consumers react. The relevant main focuses are the comprehension of people's connections and brand connections and present the study of the psychological mechanisms of how consumers relate to their brands (Reimann, et al., 2012, p. 128).

It is presented that there is indeed a sense of closeness that consumers have with brands and that brands can give consumers ideal selves to aspire to (Reimann, et al., 2012, p. 129). In all that was previously shared, it helps shine the light on the fact that there indeed is an emotional connection consumers have with brands and establishing brand attachment and developing brand love is proposed that a recently formed close consumer brand relationship is associated with the development of strong, positive affect toward the brand (Reimann, et al., 2012, p. 130). Feature findings that were not answered while reviewing research it is important that one might ask at what point in their lives do consumers develop these relationships altogether and does it take more from a brand to be loved at a later age? (Reimann, et al., 2012, p. 139). These questions fall in lines with the questions that were presented at the beginning of this review.

2.3.1 Self- Expansion Theory

It is important to review the relationship consumers have towards brands because the idea that brands can also be viewed as a relationship will help clear the reason why consumers are attached to certain brand products and services. Meaning, brand reflects a relationship between the buyer and the product bought (Laforet, 2011, p. 18). Continuing with the idea of relationship, there is the self-expansion theory. This theory suggests that, in early stages, close relationships are motivated by rapid self-expansions (Reimann, et al., 2012, p. 128). These ideas present important ground work for the connection between consumers and brands emotionally.

Self-expansion theory also suggests that relationships are motivated and later, close relationships are associated with the inclusion of others into the self. This is when explaining ones reason with humans. The people use love and close relationships synonymously for their purposes. Then tying in the idea of relationship and love to consumers, it is stated, these ideas of relationships may be relevant to consumers' close relationships with brands as people also form a similar type of relationship with objects. The object that is being referred in the statement is brands, which consumers relate to and use to identify them selves (Reimann, et al., 2012, p. 129).

“Consumers perceive brands in the same way they perceive people”

-Kervyn, et al., 2012, p. 166

The human social interaction in relationships translates to consumer- brand interactions in ways that are useful to inform brand positioning and brand communications. People relate to brands in many ways similarly to how they relate to people and consumers not only care about brand's features and benefits but they also care about a social aspect of brand perception and the emotional portion. Brands as Intentional Agents Framework (BIAF) integrates the two dimensions, intentions and ability, and the aspects of brand perception. Bringing up Stereotype Content Model, which presents how people perceive social groups in warmth and competence, which is a part of the dimensions of social perception. The Stereotype Content Model is slightly confusing to interpret, though is important when understanding “the social perception of brands” (Kervyn, et al., 2012, p. 166).

2.3.2 Enmity and Kinship Brand Relationships

The terms, enmity and kinship brand relationships will help present a clearer picture of the previously mentioned. Enmity is a negative affect towards brands and Kinship is a non-voluntary inherited. A simple example of Kinship is a college student who used brands because their mother used them. Then when thinking of the company point of view, brand managers need to identify the kind of group their brand belongs to. The understanding of the group when branding is important since it will be more likely that consumers will forge a strong relationship with their brand (Kervyn, et al., 2012, p. 170).

2.3.2.1 Humanizing Brands and Resonance

With the topic of the emotional attachment consumers have with brands, consumers develop a relationship with a brand and feel emotionally associated to their brands (Ismail & Gabriella, 2012). This idea of consumer brand relationship can be seen as a very important factor when wanting to understand how brands survive and thrive. How it is not only important to be aware of how these relationships are formed but to include the fact that there are key factors that initiate these relationships. From "Fashion Branding Unraveled", branding adds new dimension to the product as well as a new set of emotional values (Hameide, 2011, p. 66). With having an emotional attachment to a product, this then humanizes the product which then connects an emotional connection with the consumers.

How the relationship is built between a brand and consumer can be from the impact of the brand personality, the set of traits people attribute to a product as if it were a person, has over the consumer. The idea that brand resonance is the nature of the relationship means customers feel that they are 'in sync' with the brand (Keller, 2008, p. 72). Resonance is considered if there is a strong personal attachment. The term brand benefits pertain to the personal value and meaning that consumers are attach to the product or service attributes (Keller, 2013, p. 77). Brand benefits are useful to know when looking at how consumers attach or associate themselves to a brand. An example that can best explain this is looking back to Ismail and Spinelli, the idea that consumers have attachments to a brand, may say that they are in love with a brand and view it as something special they look forward to having.

2.3.3 Brand Knowledge

Keller has presented that brand knowledge may directly or indirectly influence consumer-brand relationships. Brand knowledge is defined as, the attributes, benefits, images, thoughts, feelings, attitudes and experiences that become associated to or evoked by the brand. Looking back on brand resonance, Keller characterized it in two terms, intensity and activity, how deeply felt is brand loyalty and how many different ways does brand loyalty manifest itself in day-to-day consumer behavior. Corporate credibility can be seen to also influence relationships. Expertise, trustworthiness and likability are three factors that define corporate credibility. In turn, it "measures whether consumers see the company or organization behind the brand as, good at what it does, concerned, and just plain likable" (Keller, 2012, p. 188).

It is also noted how various concepts and theories from psychology suggests how aspects of brand knowledge are related to brand relationships thus introducing the functionalist theory of attitudes. The functionalist theory of attitudes posits that attitudes are determined by the functions they serve people. There are four different types of psychological functions, utilitarian, knowledge, value and ego-defensive and stating that these types of attitudes that a person has towards a brand has implications for the kinds of relationship also formed with that brand. This explains how consumers' emotions towards brands are that the same towards gaining relationships to people; how "many brands go beyond these more utilitarian considerations to create strong emotional connections... and tapping into ... brand attitude functions in the process" (Keller, 2012, p. 187).

2.4 Branding in Fashion

Branding has become very important for marketing fashion. Mark Tungate explains that branding is simply telling a story (p.22). When dealing with the fashion industry it is important to realize one can do as much marketing as they like, but if the final product does not deliver, the brand loses its power. Also, fashion brands cannot expect to thrive on marketing alone (p.207). Marketing can only persuade a consumer to push open the door, though this does not guarantee they will like what they see. Tungate believes that consumers are becoming increasingly disillusioned with brands that have no soul, thus concluding with the idea that if a brand's behavior does not reflect the culture it communicates through its marketing, it will quickly be called out by consumers (p.209). (Tungate, 2012)

Within the fashion industry, according to Susan Dillion, "brand" can be either the product of a designer or not, however, the designer's name is used most often. Brand is the personality of the company, a tool that will distinguish it from the competition. Since the fashion industry is forever changing, it is important that the brand quickly convey what the company stands for (Dillon, 2011, p. 148). Continuing with the understanding of personality, brands express their personalities directly through the clothing or indirectly through advertising, store design etc. (Ismail & Gabriella, 2012, p. 389). Looking back to Tungate, in his book, he shares that clothes and accessories are expressions of how one feels, how one sees themselves and that one does not buy clothes, but an identity (Tungate, 2012, p. 2).

When looking at fashion brands, quoting from Ismail and Gabriella, it is essential to keep in mind that consumers love their fashion brands that are well suited to them and make them feel and look good, this is because of the passion it inspires in them (Ismail & Gabriella, 2012, pp. 387-388). Looking into some fashion brands, like Zara, H&M and Mango, according to Ismail and Gabriella, these brands are popular worldwide and consumers fall in love with their fashion brands at a young age. Jörgen Andersson, Marketing director of H&M shared, "If there is a group of loyal consumers who love H&M, we should foster that relationship" (Tungate, 2012, p. 39). Also in agreement with this statement, Jean-Jacques Picart, who is a fashion consultant and worked with brands like, Louis Vuitton, shared that the métier of fashion has a sole objective: to create brand appeal and that everything they do is designed to make the consumers fall in love with their brand (Tungate, 2012, p. 6).

What makes these brands popular is their brand image, where previously mention, Posner states, "The image of a brand will differ depending on whether it is formed by a brand user or non-user" (Posner, 2011, p. 136). The image of the brand is also vital because image is an essential part of powerful brands which enable companies to differentiate their products. It is said that brand image will influence brand love, thus help present the findings how positive stimulation formulates the consumers' emotional connection towards fashion brands.

2.5 Emotional Connection within Fashion Retail Brands

“Branding is 200 per cent proof emotionality. And what’s better evidence than the sale vodka-odorless, colorless, tasteless liquor- where brand equity, aided by great name, great packaging and great advertising, is essential to creating loyal customers.”

-Dan Hill, *Emotionomics: Leveraging Emotions for Business Success*, 2010

After understanding brand and fashion brands, there also needs to be an understanding of fashion retail brands. These fashion brands are found in popular retail stores like, H&M, Zara, GAP, Primark or Stockmann. Again from Tungate, in recent times people have grown familiar with the concept of the brand experience, but more than a century ago retailers understood that they had to make shopping an adventure (p.60). This focuses on not only the brand itself, but the retailers’ brand and what they do to connect emotionally to consumers. Looking into Iain Ellwood, in addition to Tungate, the best way to generate a successful brand personality is when all elements combine create the brand experience. Bringing in brand identity, a branded space and service will result into a branded memory. These memories that are touched in the hearts and minds of the consumer helps that brand move to a deep level of brand satisfaction (Ellwood, 2002, p. 135).

Delivering a unique service and personalizing the relationship with the consumers is the major issue facing luxury brands, which Schwedt mentioned when talking about the luxury brands like Dior and Louis Vuitton. There are steps that fashion retailers use to help draw in consumers in hopes to connect with them on a personal level. Here are a few found in *Luxury Retail Management*.

- The first step is to focus on the customer by putting them at the center.
- Turn repeat customers into brand advocates.
- Deliver a unique brand experience.
- Adopt specific tools for retail optimization.

(Chevalier & Gutsatz, 2012)

To help establish these connections with consumers, fashion retail stores will build a long-lasting customer relationship, which requires them to define real customer relationships. Customer relationship can be explained from Kotler as, CRM or Customer Relationship Management. CRM is a process of building and maintaining profitable customer relationships by delivering superior customer value and satisfaction. In turn, this process will maximize

consumer loyalty, knowing that this is the end goal for fashion retailers to build successful connections.

2.6 What Retail Brands do to make the Connection

2.6.1 Consumer Loyalty

Knowing that companies search for ways to create a strong connection to their consumers, it is apparent that the motivation behind connecting with the consumers leads to the rise in consumer loyalty. Consumer loyalty involves loyalty to the retailer and loyalty to the brand (Wallace, et al., 2004). Consumer loyalty is important for retailers, especially in the competitive fashion industry, because this means that consumers continue to interact with the company. With continuous interaction, consumers loyal to a brand results in sales that increases financial performance of the company (Malär, et al., 2011).

A way that companies recognize these consumers is offering consumer loyalty programs. The ideas behind these programs are to reward the best consumers which the retailer wants a long term relationship with. There are five reward types that Barry Berman presents; Economic, Hedonistic, Social Relational, Informational and Functional. These programs honor the purchasing behavior and make the consumer feel special, thus resulting to the end goal, forming a long term relationship and a personal emotional bond with the consumer and gaining their trust and their return in future purchasing (Berman & Evans, 2010, pp. 38-39).

In addition to consumer loyalty, there is also emotional brand attachment. This reflects the bond that connects a consumer with a specific brand and involves feelings toward the brand (Malär, et al., 2011). What are used to moderate these relationships are product involvement, self-esteem and self-consciousness. This idea was previously discussed when describing how consumers share the same emotional relationship with brands and loved ones.

2.6.2 Customer Service

Retail stores also make use of other ways to help connect their brands to consumers. These ways to make the connection with consumers are on a more personal level and tap into the consumers emotions. One of these ways is customer service. Customer service is associated with the psychological attribute and comes closest to affecting the consumer's inner self. For the consumer, their sense of personal worth and security concerns them most deeply and

the company they made their purchase with should defend their consumers' belief that they made an informed purchase decision that benefits them. To sum up this understanding, respectfulness from the company helps to protect the consumers own self-respect (Hill, 2010, p. 177).

Likewise, customer service refers to the identifiable activities undertaken by a retailer in combination with products and services it sells and has an effect on the total retail experience. It is noted that consumers may evaluate the same service differently, and the service can be rated differently from the same consumer over time, even if the service stays the same. Service given is varied widely and challenges the retailers to ask consumers what services they would like to expect. This shows that the store considers their consumers' opinions and gives the opportunity of interacting with one another.

The interaction of employee and consumer has a strong effect on the relationship that is being created. Not only do the stores ask for consumer opinion for better services, but also ask about the service being given. When looking at personal customer service, this means that the attributes of the employee, for example, politeness and knowledge, will reflect the brand and image of the retailer (Berman & Evans, 2010, pp. 32-34). The face of the retailer starts with their employees and the first impression the consumers perceive is based on how well the employees represent themselves, the store brand and store image.

2.6.3 Social Media

Social media can be seen as an extension of customer service. This is a tool that is newly used to help build a connection to consumers and a platform where consumers can easily communicate to their favorite brands. When describing social media, it makes it easier for people to share, have conversations and express their opinions, needs, ideas and complaints. Social media is the use of communicating via the internet in the form of; blogs, tweets, videos, pictures and daily comments on websites like; Facebook, Instagram, YouTube and Blogger. The use of social media helps strengthen customer relationships further (Kotler & Armstrong, 2012).

Looking into publications from the early 21st century, from Iain Ellwood, interactivity allows the opportunity for companies to deliver brand experience and expand beyond brand message. This allows the development of a one-to-one relationship with the consumers over a course of time. When understanding the research that was done about media, consumers

who receive appropriate attention to their complaints are more likely to be loyal to that brand than if the brand had not attended to the complaint (Ellwood, 2002, pp. 115-116).

2.6.4 Merchandising

Within the physical aspects of the retailer, merchandising involves all the activities necessary to present the brands to the consumer. Merchandising has to deal with acquiring particular goods and services for the customers. "If you take good care in the buying of the product, it does not come back. If you take good care of your customers, they do come back" (Berman & Evans, 2010). The merchandise carried by the retailer is decided on the breath of assortment across the store and the depth of the assortment with each category, taking into consideration the quality of the items within the assortment. Along with quality, a pricing strategy is also important. Along with the assortment of merchandise, monitoring sales is a vital part of the merchandising process because it establishes the effectiveness of the planning and notes if the plan is not meeting the retailers' objectives (Dawson, et al., 2008, pp. 214-217).

2.6.4.1 Use of Visual Merchandising to Link Brand Relationship

Visual Merchandising is considered a physical aspect for the retailers. It is a combination of store image and creating the atmosphere, both which will be presented in detail in the upcoming paragraphs. Shona Kerfoot, Barry Davies and Philippa Ward, from, "*Visual Merchandising and the Creation of Discernible Retail Brands*", include the fact how visual stimulation and communication are important properties in retailing. This information is flip to the merchant side of how to make products or services seem desirable to consumers and how it is important in what way they are displayed or advertised. Visual merchandising can be seen as the "art of attracting customers with visual cues and when department stores begin using theatrical set design and lighting to create exotic displays to entice customers" (Dillon, 2011, p. 98). Visual merchandising success factors are areas where fashion brands and retail stores succeed in when enhancing and creating their identity. (Figure 4)

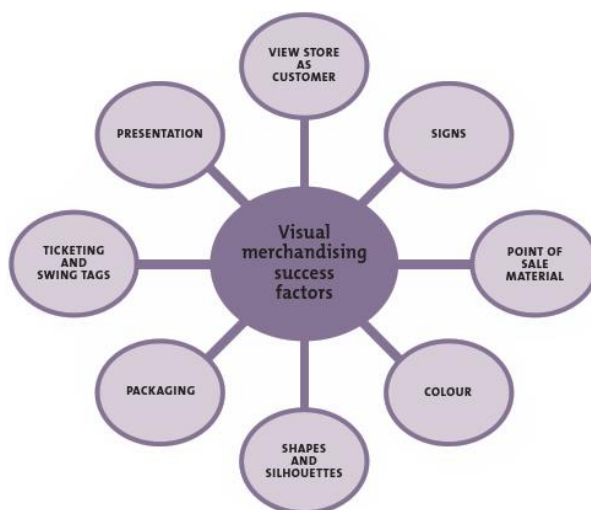


Figure 4. Visual Merchandising Success Factors

To link relationships to brands, consumers have expectations regarding display, if not met the brand may be re-evaluated (Kerfoot, et al., 2003). This means that companies would be spending a lot of working hours and cost if their first attempt to win over an audience did not work. Fashion brands express their personalities directly through the products themselves, or indirectly through advertising, store design, shopping malls, etc. (Ismail & Gabriella, 2012, p. 389). Thus concluding how import design is in-store, that surroundings are import when it comes to attracting merchandise to consumers and how consumer expectations are rising.

With visual presentation, some brands are positioned highly on personality and the image of the brand; this is to help show the culture and attitude. However, surroundings and presentation in the store are not the only things that are important. Packaging also can help visualize and verbalize what a brand stands for (Laforet, 2011, p. 324). This helps bring a link between the brand and the consumer.

Laforet, Larry Percy and Richard Elliot also mention semiotics. Advertising operates as a structure that transforms the language of objects into that of people and vice versa (Larry Percy, 2005, p. 24). Though this explains when dealing with advertising, Laforet discusses the use of semiotic with brands as the understanding that brands are less about the material benefits of goods and services, than about the meaning and emotions they trigger in the hearts and minds of consumers (Laforet, 2011, p. 331). Semiotics is a study of signs that is a popular method of understanding how consumers comprehend the meaning of a brand. (Ellwood, 2002). Therefore there is an awareness of the symbolic connection consumers have with brands and in advertising, it is being used to tap into the emotions of targeted consumers.

2.6.5 Brand Value and Brand Equity

Moving from emotional brand attachment, fashion retailers also use brand equity and brand value when building and maintaining a connection with their consumers. These terms were previously introduced when understanding brands. To find and understand a company's brand value, companies will use a process to estimate their total financial value of their brand. This process is called, brand valuation. (Kotler & Armstrong, 2012). Also, brand value can be seen as the "economic value or price consumers attach to a brand" (Laforet, 2011, p. 52).

Along with understanding brand value and how much a brand is worth, retailers then know if they have high brand equity, which was described as, the differential effect that knowing the brand name has on consumer response to a product or its marketing. This also includes assets and liabilities linked to a brand that can be built over time (Laforet, 2011, p. 51). Continuing on the understanding and the importance of brand equity for fashion retail stores, Keller states in general, that consumers might be more accepting of new brand extensions for a brand with positive brand equity and less sensitive to price increases. This results to the fact that consumers have high level of awareness and familiarity with the brand and hold strong favorable associations to them (Keller, 2013, pp. 48-53).

2.7 Building Emotional Connection within Fashion Retail Brands

2.7.1 Building Store Image

To help but value to the brand of the retailer, there is store image. According to Laforet, there is an importance in store image when building a retail brand. Store image can have an impact on consumer loyalty. Store image is a complex combination of tangible and intangible attributes, and functional and psychological attributes. These attributes are; location, atmosphere, price, merchandise, service, advertising, sales promotion, store brand and store name. This means that the look and feel to the store is just as important as the customer service in the store (Laforet, 2011, p. 304). Introduced before, visual merchandising helps express image in these attributes.

Another way to build store image is the identity prism. The identity prism helps focus the retailer's attention on the communication with their consumers. In "The Retailing Reader", it presents six identity prism facets. They are:

- Physical: The fictional attributes of the store and what it offers.
- Personality Relational: Symbols or personalities used in promotions.
- Cultural: Retailers relate to the culture from which they originate.
- Cultural Customer's Reflection: The image portrayed of customers the retailer uses.
- Customers' Self-Concept: The image of the customer that is portrayed by the customer patronizing the store.

The importance of the prism is that it forces retailers to look beyond the main functional attributes that retailers offer. These six facets also stress the importance of symbolic actions and their approaches. Fashion retail brands focus on all aspects when trying to build a connection with their brand to the consumer in hopes to gain and maintain consumer loyalty (Dawson, et al., 2008, p. 106).

2.7.2 Building the Physical Aspect of the Retailer

Store image is heavily connected to the atmosphere of the retailer. The psychological feeling the consumer gets when visiting is the main reason behind having an atmosphere. The sole purpose of the atmosphere is to influence the consumer's shopping enjoyment. The atmosphere needed to create a store brand is to utilize the use of, the store layout, exterior, interior and interior displays. Detail in items as large as a sign to as small as the kind of light fixtures to use, influences the consumer's mood. The exterior sets the mood of the store and what the consumer is to expect once inside. The interior sets the theme of the store. This helps brand the store, presenting to the consumer the stores' personality and to make an emotional connection and spark interest. The layout involves the use of floor space, for example; consumers are encouraged to walk through the store in any direction without feeling rushed. For the interior displays, this includes point-of-purchase (POP). POP adds to the atmosphere and serves as a promotional roll for the store. Promotions within merchandising use the full range of physical tools to communicate the message to the consumer (Berman & Evans, 2010, pp. 508-521). These ideas also tie into the visual merchandising of the store that was shared in depth when explaining how the link of merchandising and creating an emotional connection with consumers.

3 Literature Review Conclusion

After reading the sources, there are insightful amounts of information regarding how consumers attach themselves to certain brands and how companies present their products so that they exude certain characteristics that pertain to their ideal buyer. To see how different publications mention this same idea, either as their topic of interest or in a section in a book, their explanations were all relevant to see how the big picture of relationships with brands is formed and how companies utilize this information. The theory and the science that is involved to know just how to get the product to be desirable and understanding the human natural characteristics are indeed important and should not be left out when wanting to succeed in making an emotional and personable connection with consumers.

Brand personality should be treated very much like a person or character, since this is easier for consumers to understand and accept. Consumers are able to depict between subtle differences in brand personalities and build up their own loyal or even, disloyal relationships (Ellwood, 2002, p. 132).

The overall theory for the end of the research is to present how important personal connections are with consumers towards fashion retail brands and how this concept is aware in marketing and should be included when conducting market research for promoting new effective marketing campaigns.

The information that was presented forms an understanding of the theme throughout this report. With presenting the idea of an emotional connection toward fashion retail brands, the importance of the need of consumer relationships, positive store image and a clear understanding of the brand depends on the survival of the retail store. As well as a full understanding of the meaning of Marketing and Branding to set the foundation for this type of idea. The dependency retailers have to make the connection with their consumers is evident in loyal customers, purchasing decisions and positive feedback in terms of sales and interaction.

4 Methodology

4.1 Research Methods

Research is defined as the systematic study of materials and sources in order to establish facts and research new conclusions and in practice. Research is often an open-ended process that is likely to generate as many questions as answers (O'Leary, 2005). Within research, there are two categories; Exploratory and Conclusive Design. They can be defined as followed:

1. Exploratory Research: Research design characterized by flexible and evolving marketing phenomena that are inherently difficult to measure.
2. Conclusive Research: Research design characterized by the measurement of clearly defined marketing phenomena.

Exploratory design involves both qualitative and quantitative research, whereas conclusive deals with descriptive and causal, these can be defined as followed:

1. Qualitative Research: An unstructured design based on small samples used to generate hypotheses and identify variables that should be included in quantitative approaches. This method can help support exploratory design and descriptive design or help define research problem as a design in its own.
2. Quantitative Research: Research techniques that seek to quantify data and apply some form of measurement and statistical analysis.
3. Descriptive Research: Research that is preplanned and structured and is used to describe a large representative sample.
4. Causal Research: Research that is used to obtain evidence of cause and effect and requires a planned and structured design.

Understanding these designs for conducting research helps fulfill the research question. The challenge faced with choosing a design is to know which design will give the proper

outcome. Every precaution should be taken into consideration when creating a design (Malhotra, et al., 2012).

4.2 Research Methodology

This thesis is planned to present information in a theoretical approach. This means that all information will be based on previous findings from literature on the topic. These findings are considered secondary data which is a method of exploratory design. Secondary data is easily accessible and inexpensive and can be obtained quickly. These reasons are why the sole base of this thesis is build using secondary data in the form of textbooks and journals and presented in the literature review.

The research done will be qualitative, another method used in exploratory design. To better understand the consumer brand emotional connection, the qualitative research consists of conducting in depth interviews. In depth interviews are looked as an unstructured, direct and personal interview which a participant is asked questions to uncover underlying motivations, beliefs, attitudes and feelings on a topic (Malhotra, et al., 2012, p. 255). The method of in depth interviews was chosen to be able to gain more focused and detailed results. This method was also chosen because of the allowance of a personable response from the interviewee and gives the flexibility to ask further follow up questions not thought of beforehand. The goals of these interviews are as listed:

- Pull personal and corporate level knowledge as to how retail brands form emotional connections to their consumers.
- What goes on in the mind of the consumers shopping in retail shops they feel they have strong connections towards?

To fulfill the goal of these interviews, questions asked were tailored to the position of the interviewee. This allowed multi-level understanding to analysis when referring to the connections consumers have towards fashion retail brands. It is encouraged to use various research methods for a more completed outlook of the questions asked. Due to timing, the in depth interview method was the appropriate choice to gather needed detail information in a short period of time.

4.3 Interview

4.3.1 Interviewee Background

The main research data that was significant was the opinions of the people that work in the companies that deal or have dealt with consumer connections. The roles of the people were important because they have been involved in some shape or form, working for a brand that understands the importance of connecting and maintaining successful emotional connection with their consumers.

Three women were interviewed that have working backgrounds in the retail and fashion retail industry and have worked with brands and responsibilities with maintain positive brand images. The other group interviewed where a mixture of women consumers that ranged from ages 22 years old to 47 years old. (Appendix 1)

4.3.2 Questions

Previously mentioned, in-depth interviews allow information to be giving in an unstructured way. This allows the flexibility to asked unplanned questions and the interviewee to feel comfortable sharing their ideas and opinions. The organization of the interview questions where matched up with the literature review. There are questions that were focused on each section of the literature review for the interviewee to answer. Not all sections were covered due to the fact that questions could not be formed from them, however, there were 18 questions formed for both the management point of view and the consumer's point of view. Some questions had multiple parts and some, naturally, were following up questions for certain answers that were given.

Having planned the questions ahead of time allowed the interviews to flow at a timely matter. Pre planning questions also allows the interviewee to see what questions would be asked ahead of time and know the topic of the conversation. This allows both parties at the time of the interview to be prepared.

After the interviews, the answers were then analyzed against the theoretical aspect of the literature review. This allowed seeing what the theorists say and what is done practically. The following sections are organized by both groups of the interviewees' opinions and knowledge and compared to the literature review that was done.

4.4 Challenges in Interviews Collected

Once the interviews were conducted and reviewed, there of course were some limitations with the results that were completed. As in every research conducted, there is great need to fully interview a wider range of consumers and different positions that the interviewees hold in the retail industry.

With the advantage of conducting an in-depth interview, there are also challenges, and for this thesis the challenge was not being able to interview a wider group of people to gain a more balanced response. With a wider group, it would offer what opinions consumers have with the emotional connection they may have with fashion retail brands, and see what other workers in the field had to share from their point of view. The challenges that were faced are common when conducting in-depth interviews. These challenges were, the length of the interviews and the response acquired were difficult to analyse and interpret given the time allowed to give the interview and most importantly, the total participants represent eight female opinions.

Lastly, the quality and completeness of particular questions made it hard for respondents to answer, however, some questions were difficult to answer, the information conducted from the overall interview was efficient enough to draw conclusions, understand multiple opinions and see similarities of thought and comparing the information with the secondary research done beforehand.

To further understand the idea behind the connection of fashion retail brands and consumers, it is recommended that a wider scale of interviews be done from a more diverse sample representing both male and female participants from different age groups. In addition to sample expansion, the inclusion of surveys will help support the opinions of the sample by adding a quantitative approach to the meaning behind these attachments. These recommendations will help in future and further research in understanding the emotional connection consumers have toward fashion retail brands.

5 Emotional Connection from Top Management Point of View

5.1 Ways to Maintain Emotional Connections with Consumers

5.1.1 Brand Experience

Understanding brand experience is very essential when retail brands are connecting to their target consumers. The secondary research process presented that brand experience is known as the memorable experience that is created with the use of a story that satisfies the consumer's desires. There are three aspects of brand experience; product experience, the look and feel and experiential communications (Figure 5). According to Schmitt in *Customer Experience Management*, the look and feel that encompasses a product includes the visual identity, packaging, store design and merchandising. Schmitt's meaning was a physical experience, when interviewee Naz Amarchi-Cuevas, from Rovio, was asked: *Thinking about consumers and how they experience brand, what is your meaning of brand experience*, her opinion, "brand experience is how the brand makes one feel and how one engages with a brand". Cuevas' own personal meaning stands similar to Ismail and Gabriella, that consumers love their fashion brands that are well suited to them and how it makes them feel and look good (pg.11).



Figure 5. The Three Key Aspects of the Brand Experience

In addition to her opinion, Cuevas' continued:

People want to feel loved, liked and good about themselves; that fashion, being a choice, focuses particularly on consumers' feelings about themselves. This universal feeling holds true because these three thoughts are what people seek when buying.

From the secondary research it's known already that marketers and brand owners are aware of the consumers' wants. The most effective way to make an emotional connection to consumers is marketing towards their self-esteem, showing how they will feel wearing the brand and when shopping in the store, aiming at their personal feelings so the consumers feel loved, liked and in the end, feel good about themselves.

When Anne Salter, the men's casual buyer at Stockmann, was asked: *What is your meaning of brand experience*, she gave the meaning from a retailers' general point of view:

For the fashion brands, brand experience meant they already knew what their own idea of the brand is supposed to be when it comes to the brands' lifestyle and the lifestyle of their target customers. The brand creates their strong image of who they are and what their brand is about. For the fashion brand retailers, it is the image and the lifestyle and the message that they want their consumers to receive.

In the case of the retailer Anttila, Anna Rhoades, previous buyer for women's clothing for Kesko, she shared how experiencing the brand was through image. The current image however for Anttila is not inspiring and in Rhoades' opinion,

The atmosphere of a store really helps to create the brand. With stores like Anttila, when you have an effective layout, you have to think of new things all the time to keep the customers interested, and for the future, Attila will re-organize their stores to better connect with their current loyal customers and maintain and attract new ones.

This idea continues when realizing which retail stores are expressing their customers in a positive way. When retail fashion stores have a clear image of what they are, they will successfully build the connection to their customers.

Revisiting image, store image is a part of the total brand experience. Environment and the visuals give customers the feeling to look around when engulfed, in example, Stockmann. From Anne, Stockmann's store image influences to gain customer buying behavior. They want their customers to experience an inspiring and international shopping environment. In general Anne said that they want an environment that helps make the Stockmann brand stronger. Along with the environment, Stockmann expands its brand experience to the

employees. "The employees at Stockmann try and give the Stockmann brand. They do this by knowing how to reach the customer and how to make their shopping experience positive" (Salter, 2014).

An example given by Rhoades about another retail store expressing their customers in a positive way through image, she gave Lindex, saying,

I think Lindex has done a good job in the past few years by having interesting lines of clothing. They have also used other designers than their own (e.g. Missoni) to make designer clothing affordable for all... they've done co-operation with big Hollywood names such as Kate Hudson and Reese Witherspoon. They've used the celebrity's style as an inspiration for the line and also have them modeling the clothes.

Positive retail brand experience is associated with emotional brands and it was learnt that these particular brands satisfy the psychological and sociological needs for self-identity and status of the consumers.

5.1.2 Social Media

Social media was talked about heavily during the interviews and was referred on page 14. Getting consumers active in communicating with a retailer's brand is important for the retailer, especially in an industry that is quick to change and move on to the next big fashion trend. Looking into social media the question was asked: *Do you think with social media, people can feel they can be personable with a brand because they can follow and interact with them*, it was learnt that,

Social media puts consumers in a one-on-one position with the brand. The owners of fashion retail brands want to connect on a personal level with their loyal customers and gain new loyal customers. Another way to look at social media is to understand that social media has taken the advertiser out of the picture. (Amarchi-Cuevas, 2014)

From the interview with Cuevas, she described that advertisers can be seen as the middle man, a person that connects the brand to the consumers. Without the advertiser, brands can now directly have a one-on-one relationship with their consumers.

This allows the fashion retail store to understand what the consumers are going through, how they are experiencing the brand and their thoughts about the brand. Letting the fashion retailers know what they, the consumer, think of the brand and send feedback to the retailer in a way that the retailer can personal connect and interact to feedback. (Amarchi-Cuevas, 2014)

This can be seen in practice with Stockmann, when Salter was asked a similar question about maintaining loyal customers. In addition to connecting to them using traditional media, Stockmann connects to their consumers via the use of Facebook. "The use of the internet is a good and cost effective way to launch new brands or trends in a company like Stockmann. Using the internet is the fastest way to get the information out" (Salter, 2014). For Stockmann, using social media helps connect new fashion brands to their current consumers. Social media helps make brands a brand.

Cuevas' opinion about if companies create or cater to consumers lifestyles, was how at first brand owners told what the consumers needed, and that in today's world, that has switch. Fashion brands are where they are because of the consumers talking about them and interacting with them on the internet.

Social media is the reason the retailers are now following the trends that their consumers are interested in. The brands are looking at today's generation and following up on what they say and what they like, though this poses a problem. "The real value is in the interaction, real interaction isn't about giving people more content to choose from. It's about letting people create their own content" (Ellwood, 2002, p. 113). Marketers allow too much power to the consumer.

The power of choice for the retailers is less when the marketers give power to the masses. When retailers give power to the massive, they hope that they will in turn choose and do the trend and re-post it on social media. Marketers find these group leaders which are the ones that share the stories and make the trends and brands seem like they are liked by all (Amarchi-Cuevas, 2014).

5.2 Importance of Maintaining an Emotional Connect with Consumers

Referring to the interviews that were shared and connected with the secondary research; there is great importance for consumers to have an emotional connection with brands and importance for brands to maintain these connections. Rhoades shared how connecting in an emotional way makes the customers more loyal with the use of loyalty rewards. For the Kesko, she said they maintain loyal customers by giving extra discounts and extra services. Salter for Stockmann said they maintain consumer loyalty with the programs and special offers that they have for their customers every month, like Hullut Päivät and discounts for their card holders.

An important way to measure to see how the people react to a store that Rhoades shared is with numbers and those sales in the company will show how successful and strong the connection is between retail stores and consumers. Customer satisfaction is also measured with the use of mystery shoppers, which Salter and Rhoades both shared during their interview.

With the help with consumer loyalty cards, they can receive information about their customer's shopping behavior and indicate the key performance of the card, if customer loyalty is decreasing, this way appropriate strategies can be drawn up to raise it. (Rhoades, 2014)

Knowing that brand experience and social media enlarge the understanding of why there are these connections help the fashion retail brands grow and succeed. Significantly understanding that consumers are convinced by how these brands are marketed will fulfill the consumer and allow the brand to live through them and the people they are around.

Revisiting the idea how consumers perceive brands in a similar way they perceive people (p.8), this shows that the consumer becomes more loyal and associated to the brand. The three interviewees that are involved with the industry all expressed how maintaining the connection with their consumers help them build a loyal customer base, and know that there are consumers that see themselves in a brand and that they feel a personal connection when interacting with the brand. Having one-on-one interaction lets the consumers feel like they matter and are being heard, this is how fashion brands can succeed with today's generation and society's use of social media and sharing.

6 Emotional Connection in the Eye of the Consumer

6.1 Consumer Experience with Fashion Retail Brands

Before presenting the opinions of the consumers that were interviewed, branding for companies has become a way for them to enhance their brand value. Companies will give attention to brand image, value and personality to attract a close connection to their loyal and newly attained consumers. Realizing the strengths of the brand within brand, it is noted the positioning of the brand and retail store, the service given and innovation have a heavy effect for succeeding. Innovation is viewed narrowly and consumers often view innovation of a new product, service or communication will improve how they live (Schmitt, 2003, pp. 34-37).

When explaining the consumers' brand experience, different people react in different ways (Salter, 2014) when it comes to environment, atmosphere, quality, price, service, brand experience and purchasing behavior. Consumers are aware that they think and feel at the time of purchasing or when deciding to enter a retail store. Every day the consumers' decisions are based on mix feelings and thoughts. They also face a time to weigh the options. It was noted that interviewee 2 may like one brand more than another, which happens daily, sometimes they could not explain why they like a retail brand or fashion brand better than the other if the choices are similar. This is when price and quality and brand loyalty come into play. Based on their interview, these qualities in a brand dictate where they shop and how they shop and why they favor certain brands than others.

Price is a big factor, if I see sale signs I would go in, even if I wasn't planning on going in. Sometimes if Free People is too expensive, I'll go to Macy's and see if they have a similar look, their 20% off loyalty coupons make my choice a little more appealing. Price also helps me evaluate my purchase. Sometimes I have disappointing experiences because I have spent a lot of money on something that I no longer connect with.

Interviewee 2

When it comes to deciding to go into a store, along with price, interviewee 3 shared their opinion on environment and atmosphere, and how they favor one store over another.

I like a clean, organized store where I can find the merchandise without having to do a scavenger hunt. Price would probably be secondary and I don't consider myself loyal to any store. I do prefer Target over Walmart but that's because Target is organized while Walmart tends to be messy.

Interviewee 3

Interviewing the opinions of the consumers, the overall experience while shopping played an important role with the interviewees purchasing behavior and brand loyalty and how they identified with a brand. There are many experiences that these interviewees go through that effect how they perceive a fashion brand or fashion retail brand. The brand experience that the interviewees go through and the interaction effect their connection to a brand, they were openly eager to express why the fashion retail stores were their favorite and why they repurchase the fashion brands from the retailer.

My three favorite stores, Guess, Anthropologie, Free People, definitely understand me as a person. I feel they give different elements that are very basic. I have a very eclectic style. So the three stores help me be me.

Interviewee 2

Experiencing positive interactions with brands and connecting with fashion brands were important to the interviewees. It was understood that once one found the right fashion retail store that carried the right personal style, it came down to the fit of the clothing. For some interviewees, it helped them become very loyal to certain brands, especially from department stores, which carry multiple brands and styles to choose from, but none the less, these consumers stay loyal to the retail store as a whole.

Macy's is my favorite clothing store simply because they carry INC clothing, my favorite brand for tops - because they make fashionable tops in larger sizes.

Interviewee 3

6.2 Shopping Experience

Analyzing the interviewees' shopping experiences and looking at the theory of consumer behavior (p.6), understanding how and why they shop is significant to present when looking how it effects their connection with the retail stores. When asked: *Do you prefer to shop online or in person* the responders all agreed that in store shopping was preferable.

Online shopping causes many risks. I may begin online because I can find out what types of styles are there at each store and I know what I'm looking for and also shorten my shopping time. I prefer shopping in person, I can try on outfits to be sure they fit me, rather risking ordering the wrong size.

Interviewee 1

Shopping in store allows the consumers to experience the mood of the brands that the retailers offer and helps the interviewees feel more confident before making a purchase. To be able to see the brands in person allows them to have a more personal shopping experience, which interviewee 3 shared and from her response making important purchases

may require some research and validation of a product in person before making the final purchase.

I prefer to go in-store when purchasing clothes & shoes. I like to make sure they fit and I'm comfortable wearing them. Any other items I don't mind purchasing online (such as furniture, computer supplies) but I usually will go to the store so I can see the dimensions and quality of merchandise.

Interviewee 3

Interviewee 1 and 2 shared they like how they are able to interact with employees that help represent the brand. Customer service along with atmosphere and mood of the store dictate if the brand is worth the purchase. Customer service can bridge the connection between the retail fashion brand and the consumer. This is because a positive purchasing experience tends to lead the interviewees to go back to the retail store. Great customer service given to the consumers will make the consumers feel important. This positive feeling was realized from the interviewees.

The people that work at Free People and Anthropologie are really welcoming and they love the brand and the clothes...they'll always comment what you are trying on and try to help you make an outfit.

Interviewee 2

If I have great customer service, I feel very much like I should buy the product...If I do not get the help I need or want I tend to just leave.

Interviewee 1

Revisiting customer service from the literature review, it was understood that the face of the retailer starts with their employees and the first impression the consumers perceive is based on how well the employees represent themselves, the store brand and store image. These attributes from the employees will help connect to the consumers and have them return to the retailer. In the fashion retail industry it is vital that customer service in the stores should attempt to deliver the same quality to all customers. A service is a service when it has been experienced by consumers, and thus a brand only becomes brand experience when it has been bought and consumed (Ellwood, 2002, pp. 45-47).

6.3 Consumers Connecting with Social Media

Social media is an extension of customer service and to extend brand experience in an interactive way. Today's fashion buyers are no strangers to online media. When looking at social media, today's retailers are using them. From the previous interviews that were presented, these fashion retail brands rely on social media to maintain a customer

connection on a personal level. This allows the consumers to voice their opinion, feelings and thoughts. Follow their favorite brands online about what is trending, what they are planning for the following season, and what they are doing for their consumers. Social media for the consumer has allowed a bigger view into the world of fashion brands. The consumer communities, or virtual communities, have strong voices for their brands they connect with and love, and they can now view fashion brands, voice their opinions and read what other followers are saying.

I have Facebooked about American Eagle and announced my love once or twice. I definitely have come to social media to let people know my own opinion and experiences with the brand.

Interviewee 1

I follow them, Anthropologie, Free People and Guess, on Instagram. I like seeing what they put together.

Interviewee 2

I tend to follow my brands on Instagram more. I'll take pictures of outfits I'm wearing and hashtag the ones (brands) I'm wearing. Sometimes that brand would like my picture or even comment; I get a bit star struck, like "Wow, of all the pictures they're mentioned in, they took the time to comment on mine".

Interviewee 5

Social networking allows consumers to express themselves and interact with other consumers that share the same connection to a brand. Social media has many characters; personal content, consumer engagement, social relationships and group dynamics. Looking into these characteristics, social engagement helps consumers (today's generation) help create the sense of self. Just like how their personal connections to fashion brands help create themselves, expanding on the interaction to share their experience online with others is how consumers create a coherent and fragmented sense of self in the online society (Moriarty, et al., 2012).

Based on the responses from the older interviewees, over 40 years old, social media was not in their interest when following fashion brands. Interviewee 3 saw it as a trend for the "younger crowd", and interviewee 4 had this to say what she preferred:

I prefer fashion magazines and websites. I'm not a fan of the advertisements on Twitter, Instagram, etc – they clog up my feed.

Interviewee 4

6.4 Growing Connections to Fashion Retail Brands

Seeing brands and companies change with the times and knowing how the society is changing, there is pressure for retail brands to stay in contact with their consumers. In addition with the society changing, the connections that need to be made with today's generation in the 21st century are going to be challenging, however some retailers are making the relevant connections by being socially responsible.

Established from the interviewees, this effort shows that brand marketers are willing to adapt to the present culture norms instead of sticking to the past "safe" social norms when advertising and presenting brands. Understanding that times are changing and applying advertisements and campaigns to the present allows the retail brands to stay relevant to their consumers and relevant to the changing society.

Walking through Macy's, there was a picture of a wedding couple that was of two men, this made me and my friend like Macy's a little more...we like to see progressive companies and notice them noticing progressive trends and taking part with society.

Interviewee 2

This idea of minding the trends of the society was evident with the interviewees. They showed the emotional connection they have to the retail brands that are moving forward and progressing in what platforms they stand by. Also being socially responsible allows the consumers to support a cause that is dear to them. For example, interviewee 3 is more drawn to purchases products with pink ribbons to support breast cancer or drawn to a fashion retailer based on causes that are being featured through the retailers' visual marketing.

American Eagle announced that they won't be photo shopping their own lingerie line, which holds true to my personal views with advertising. I feel I connect more to stores when they stand for something, and in this case, real beauty.

Interviewee 1

6.4.1.1 Fashion Brands Showing Social Responsibility

Reviewing a case where the heart of a brand was in the right place, but the execution from the company missed the mark with some consumers and fans, Victoria Secret, known for their lingerie brands and lounge wear, had joined the "Love Your Body" campaign bandwagon, which was started by the consumer brand Dove (Vanessa, 2010). In this case, Victoria Secret was launching a new line of bras dubbing the 2011 campaign, "Love My Body". The images of the campaign showed models posing, but unlike similar campaigns by other brands using models in all shapes and sizes, Victoria Secret used their own typical

models. The campaign did not appeal well to the masses once released since the women pictured in their ads represent the 1% of the female population and the women viewing these ads felt that Victoria Secret was not following the message of the body acceptance movement that was going on at the time (Rodgers, 2013).

The interviewees mention GAP Inc., J.Crew, H&M and TOMS shoes and how they are connecting to their consumers through social responsibility. GAP Inc., with their Product RED and Be One campaigns and J.Crew who is placing value on the ability to provide joy or happiness, which is seen in their approach to fostering happiness to attract their consumers with the strong sense of brand loyalty (AdvertisingWeek Social Club, 2013). Along with Gap and J.Crew, fast fashion retailer H&M has also associate themselves with the organization, All for the Children, which is a project aimed to get children out of work and into schools, which helps the children in Bangladesh and India (H&M, 2013).

Even though I may not buy a brand because of price or not my personal style, I tend to notice that I'll "like" their Facebook page or browse their website and notice that they are doing something, or recognizing the change in sociality, but even that, I feel they should already do these things. But I guess it's a start in the right direction, and I'll remember that.

Interviewee 5

Interviewee 3 shared she likes to buy TOMS shoes to support them with giving away shoes to children in parts of the world that cannot afford new pairs, and again, she mentioned the breast cancer awareness pink ribbon, which this organization allows brands to pattern with them to help raise money for research.

I do know of Toms shoes and have purchased some hoping that they actually do give a pair away. I do try to buy items with the pink ribbon for breast cancer awareness.

Interviewee 3

The movement of using social responsibility as a tool and attach a personal meaning behind fashion retail brands can be seen in a good or bad way to market to consumers. However, many consumers and the consumers interviewed are more likely to purchase and choose to interact to brands that are associated with a cause and show that they are socially aware of their surroundings.

7 Unsuccessful Consumer Connection

With successful connections that are made toward fashion brands, there are also unsuccessful connections. The importance on recognizing that brands have the potential to dissatisfy consumers is essential for the fashion retailers to understand. When a brand disappoints a consumer or they cause a negative reaction, the emotional characteristics need to be addressed to retain customer loyalty (Ellwood, 2002, p. 164). Emotional brand satisfaction is seen as intangible and irrational, yet very impactful decision makers in the consumers' mind, as interviewees 1-5 shared. It was seen how satisfaction is the core expression of how consumers enjoy a specific brand.

When asked: *Which retail stores do you feel have failed in connecting to their customer*, Cuevas, from Rovio, shared that she felt that potentially the fashion retailer store, Banana Republic, is not communicating what the brand stands for correctly to their customers. She brought the idea that, "if Banana Republic wants to grow, they would need to widen their scope, the clothing they offer, and reconsider their customers".

-Follow up research was done on this and it was found that Banana Republic's performance has been noticed to be uneven in current years, and with the new chief marketing officer (CMO), Catherine Sadler, her biggest challenge will create a global brand position that attracts to their longtime customers and customers that are experiencing the brand for the first time (Zmuda, 2013).

For the consumers' interviewed, store image seemed to effect the connection and depending on the image, turned them off for interacting with retail brands. This was a good example where store image affects the shopping experience. Consumers can feel disconnected towards a store if the layout is too crowded or allows the consumer to feel rushed and overwhelmed. The image really affects the consumers' mood because if they feel happy being there, they feel more relaxed and enjoy the atmosphere the retailer offers.

Guess and Free People are stores I feel rushed to get out since they are small and they have so much stuff in them and you feel claustrophobic. Sometimes I feel I don't want to pick things up because it's too much stuff in my hands for a small store, and I get a little flustered and want to leave.

Interviewee 2

Along with store image, the placement of some merchandise put off some interviewees. Interviewees 1 and 5 both agreed on some stores' placement choice of undergarments. It was interesting to see the similarities of how they answered the question: *How does the*

store layout in your favorite store affect your mood? Both said they felt embarrassed when shopping in Victoria Secret, since their main display is undergarments in the front of the entrance. They both, more or less, describe similar situations where some men would watch women pick through the bins for undergarments.

Looking at the dissatisfaction the interviewees experienced shows how they do not enjoy or share a personal connection with a specific brand. Mentioned before, recognizing which aspects of a brand is being received negatively, is important to change if to regain customer loyalty (Ellwood, 2002, p. 178).

8 Discussion and Recommendation

The three women that work in the industry, Anne Salter, Anna Rhoades and Naz Amarchi-Cuevas, had shared their general opinions about; how companies maintain connections with consumers, the importance of maintaining the connections and representations of the brands and the retail stores as a whole. Their opinions will be linked and compared with the interviewees 1-5's opinions.

Starting with brand experience, knowing how Naz Amarchi-Cuevas mentioned that experience is how the brand makes consumers feel, it was learnt from interviewees 1-5, this experience was extended to mix feelings and thoughts, and stretched from how a brand made them feel, to how the brand was as a whole. For interviewees 1-5, it extended to price, quality and image, where Cuevas shared how consumers wanted to feel important in general. All these elements that were shared can be noted to affect the overall brand experience for the consumers, and the proper execution that the companies do, helps the consumers have a positive experience.

Shopping experience went coherently with brand experience. This included customer service and consumer behavior. Interviewees 1-5, once analyzed, it can be concluded that they favored in-store shopping due to customer service and in person experience. Generally speaking from the information that was gathered from, Naz Amarchi-Cuevas, Anne Salter and Anna Rhoades, there is much work for companies to think about when providing good service and building connections. As was shared, the service that was a great example was customer loyalty programs. There was a brief understanding of the consumer behavior, more importantly, purchasing decision practices. Either what they wanted or needed was chosen based on prices or loyalty coupons. Learning this, from the general understanding of Cuevas, Rhoades and Salter, these tactics were used when maintaining consumers in general. Trying to show consumers that they need their brand and that they will feel complete and a part of their fashion community. It was noted that these efforts spent in loyalty programs benefit the interviewees 1-5 since all agreed that price and experience was important to them, and they agreed, loyalty programs do have them attached to a brand and store.

Social media can also be linked with brand experience; both groups distinguished that the use of social media maintains connections. Social media is seen to connect the consumers in an inspirational way, and a way to give immediate feedback to the companies, where in turn companies use social media to help advertise and communicate to their consumers. Both

sides also agreed about how the interactions can be seen as a personal, one-on-one way of interacting and maintaining connections. Also knowing that today's consumer generation is a sharing generation, social media channels like Facebook, play a big part in both interviewees 1-5, Cuevas, Salter and Rhoades. Though keeping in mind, this method may not appeal to all age groups since two for the interviews from a different age group favored traditional media.

The last section from the consumers was about how they felt when companies and brands progressed into society and are socially aware of the changing views of the consumers. There was not an opinion of this idea from, Naz Amarchi-Cuevas, Anne Salter and Anna Rhoades; however there are multiple sources of interviews and reports online explaining this sudden trend. Some of these sources that were shared alongside both interviewee 1, 2 and 5 helped gain recognition about the changes these interviewees are noticing.

Once overlooking what the industry is doing and comparing it to the theoretical literature and taking account the thoughts shared from interviewees 1-5, there has been general recommendations for the future of fashion retail brands.

- Making valuable use of the interior of the retail store. Fashion stores try and mind the amount of space allowed to move around. Floor-plans filled with T-racks and long single bar racks can make a space feel and look cluttered. Focusing on displays that allow movement to flow around them well make the space inviting and obstacle free.
- For some consumers, adequate seating is important. Lack of seating outside dressing room areas and throughout the store would help some of the consumers' guest to feel comfortable waiting, thus letting the consumer feel less pressured to leave without a purchase.
- To help connect during the first impressions of the fashion retail store that seems not to be connecting, allow a more friendly entrance that draws the consumers in, this could be signage of sales and offers for loyal customers and new ones that sign up.

These recommendations are given as a general option for the fashion retailers in hopes to help them plan for the future when it comes to redesigning their overall store's interior and exterior image since this was a reacquiring response from the consumers that were interviewed.

9 Conclusion

The purpose of this thesis was to show the emotional connection between fashion retail brands and their consumers. This idea is a well-known topic for researchers working in the marketing, branding and consumer relations field. The work confirmed and brought into general understanding that the awareness of an emotional connection between brands and consumers is evident and consistently used as a tool to gain and maintain loyal consumers.

The purpose of the secondary research was to build strong foundations and gain a proper understanding and knowledge of the marketing and branding area along with an extensive amount of previous research done about the topic. Once the basics were covered the theoretical information and previous research showed how the emotional connection between consumers and fashion brands indeed exists and that these connections are similar to emotional connections between two people.

After completing the theoretical research based on previous works of the subject it was interesting to see what of workers in the industry and the consumers actually thought of the subject. The secondary research validated the fact that maintaining emotional connections with the consumer is vital for the success of a company. Studying the different points of views and comparing them to the previously researched material; the marketers, advertisers, brand owners and brand users are all aware of how emotions are an important trait to consider when building brands.

9.1 Recommendations for Further Research

As mentioned in the Methodology, there were challenges that were faced while conducting the primary research (page 24). These challenges left room for developing new research topics that are relevant to this topic. This thesis was focused on bringing a clear understanding that consumers intend associate a feeling towards fashion brands and there are many factors that come to play to make the connections a success. Given that, here are some recommendations based on the limitations that this thesis dealt with:

1. Looking to understand these emotional connections, focus on how the advertising agencies target in on these connections. Conducting a consumer study based on a list of advertisements that are created to connect to consumers in a psychological way, and compare reactions. This would help present a more detailed and focused result.

2. Focus on the role of social responsibility that fashion retail stores are participating in. With this topic, formulating surveys and interviews will allow detailed information to see if this type of philanthropy actually is a success and worth a company's time. Knowing how consumers actually feel towards their ideology vs. what they have envisioned they will feel – is going to help brands to gain social acceptance.
3. Social media is very popular, but there is a group of consumers that stick to the traditional media. Seeing how fashion brands communicate to these groups would be interesting to figure out. Understanding this group's mindset is important when planning an advertising campaign.

These recommendations are for extended studies that will revolve around the topic of consumers' emotional connection to fashion retail brands.

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Interviewees Background Information

Anne Salter: Anne works for the fashion department store, Stockmann in Helsinki Finland as a Men's Casual Brands Buyer. She deals with brands such as, Tommy Hilfiger and Marco Polo. She is responsible for purchasing clothing for men 30 years old and over. Stockmann is an upscale department store which carries many brands and wide range of products. The store's target market is all consumers from teenagers to seniors.

Anna Rhoades: Anna used to work for the company Kesko. She was in charge of purchasing for both Anttila Oy and Citymarket Oy in Helsinki Finland, before moving away from Finland. She was a buyer for women's lingerie, nightwear and swimwear (private labels). The target customers for Anttila are mostly 30-60 year old women, where Citymarket customers are mostly families with children. Either store is not known to be a trendsetter with the fashion trends, however their buyers and in-house designers are following the current trends and getting information about the following trends of the next season.

Naz Amarchi-Cuevas: Naz is currently the Senior Licenser at Rovio in Helsinki Finland. She has been in the consumer industry for over 24 years. She has a background working in manufacturing, buying and merchandising. She has worked in licensing for Marvel and Microsoft during her time with a video game accessories company. She moved from gaming into working in production at Warner Brothers where she represented Latin America. Fast forwarding to her current position at Rovio, she handles connections with their current and new customers. With her diverse background in consumer products, Naz had many opinions about the connection consumers have with brands.

Interviewee 1: 25 year old female student from Germany. Originally from Canada and has lived in Finland for 3 years before moving to Germany and has resided there for past 2 years.

Interviewee 2: 22 year old female employed student living in Southern California, USA. She is a Californian Native.

Interviewee 3: 47 year old employed wife of 3 and grandmother of 1, originally from Finland before moving to California, USA.

Interviewee 4: 45 year old employed woman originally from Vietnam before moving to California as a young child. She now lives in Northern California, USA.

Interviewee 5: 25 year old employed female living in California, USA. She is a native California with a Finnish cultural background.

Questions for Naz Amarchi-Cuevas, Anna Rhoades, Anne Salter

1. Name
2. Background Information
 - a. Where do you work
 - b. What is your position within the company?
3. Who are your target customers?
 - a. Who do you think is shopping in your stores?
 - b. Who does your company think is shopping in your stores?
4. Do you feel your company is ahead with fashion trends or following fashion trends?
5. Who is your competitor that shares the same customer base as you?
 - a. Do you feel they express similar characteristics as your store?

Consumer Behavior

1. What aspects in your stores influence customer buying behavior?
 - a. What has them shopping in your stores?
 - b. Who is the ideal opinion leader your store reaches out too, and how reliable are they for your success to spread your brand?
2. Do you feel that consumers are blindly connecting to belong in the "now" and to feel relevant?
 - a. Do you feel that maybe some groups of consumers have "blinders" and when the advertisers say, "buy this, buy that, this is new, this is hot, and this will make you cool", do you feel maybe some don't think for themselves

Purchase Decision Making

3. Thinking of any fashion retail store besides your own, which retail store do you feel is expressing the customer in a positive way through their use of store image, merchandising and advertising campaigns?

Consumer Brand Relationship

4. What is your meaning of brand experience? Thinking about consumers and how they experience brands?
5. In your prospective, do retail companies come up with lifestyles for their customers to join or do they cater more to their customer's lifestyle?
6. Why is it important for your company to connect to your customers in an emotional way?
7. Are there ways to measure if your consumers have a positive reaction to your store besides customer surveys?
8. How do you come up with the personality of the store that reaches to your customers that share the same personality?
 - a. Do you believe your store brand has a lot of influence to give your customers that personality?
 - b. Did your customers already share your brands and store's aesthetic.
9. How do you connect new fashion brands to consumers that are in love with your current ones?
10. In your opinion and experience, what is the most effective way to make an emotional connection to fashion buyers?
11. Do you think with social media, people can feel they can be personable with a brand because they can follow them on Instagram, Twitter and Facebook, and interact with them using these platforms?

Customer Loyalty

12. How does your company maintain loyal customers?
13. How are you able to succeed in connecting with consumers?
 - a. Which retail stores do you feel have failed in connecting?
 - b. Which do you feel have succeeded?

Merchandising

14. How does visuals help your retail store set the mood, and does this express the company's characteristics?
 - a. Do you feel they help carry an attachment to your customers?

15. When looking at your own store's physical attributes; clothing, visuals, atmosphere, what emotion do you feel, and is this emotion expected from your consumers?

Physical Aspect of the Retailer

16. How would you describe your retail brand's image?- atmosphere
17. How does the atmosphere of the store help create your store brand?
18. How much research and time does it take to come up with an effective layout?
19. How do you measure the success of the connection made with the physical aspects of the store and the customers?

Questions for the Consumers

1. Name
2. Background Information: Age, Occupation, Location
3. How would you describe your style?

Consumer Behavior

1. Where do you do most of your shopping?
 - a. What is your most frequent retail store and why do you go there often?
2. What is your favorite store(s) and how do they help create your personal style?
 - a. Do they help express how you are? Why and how?
3. When shopping, do you prefer online shopping or in person?
 - a. Do you buy certain things only online/ in store? Why do you prefer one over the other?
4. When shopping, what goes through your mind?
 - a. For example: your mother's voice, need something, want something, no thoughts
5. What makes you buy the clothes you buy?
6. How would you describe your personal brand experience with one of your favorite brands or retail stores?

Purchase Decision Making

7. What helps you decided to go into a fashion retail store?
 - a. What draws you into a fashion retail store?
8. What do these stores do to draw you back to them?
9. When have you felt pleased or regretted your recent purchase decision?
10. Looking back at positive or negative purchasing experiences, what kind of feelings did they give you?

Consumer Brand Relationship

11. Have you ever felt some sort of personal attachment to a particular fashion retail store?
12. Have you ever felt like a retail store understands you and your personality?

- a. How did they do that?
 - b. How did they no do that?
13. When have you ever felt at comfortable with a brand or store?
- a. What was it that made you feel this way?
 - b. What made you not feel this way?
14. Have your ever felt disconnected towards a store?
- i. What did the store do?
 - ii. Example: was it their store image, customer service, etc.
15. Do you feel you connect well to your store's personality and what they stand for?
16. Do you share the same passion and ethics with your store?
- a. Do you know of any platforms that your store stands on?
 - i. Do those platforms have an effect on your perception of the brand?

Consumer Loyalty

17. Do you feel fashion retail stores compete for your loyalty?
- a. What ways do they try to gain your loyalty?
18. Do you follow and connect with your favorite stores via social media, Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, Blogs?
- a. Do you prefer fashion magazines or fashion magazine websites or magazine blog?

Merchandising

19. How do visuals in your favorite fashion store affect your mood?
- a. Does it?
20. Thinking of the atmosphere given in the store, do you feel any emotion?
21. Which stores do you feel try too hard to express their personality onto customers?

Other

22. Anything other opinions you would like to share about how fashion retailers and brands are becoming more personal?