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# The break-up: Why consumers end their love relationships with brands

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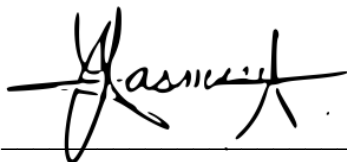
This master's thesis was written during the spring semester of 2015 as a part of the master's programme of International Marketing and Brand Management at Lund University. These ten weeks of conducting research has truly been an interesting journey, challenging us both intellectually and in practice. As this journey now has reached its end, we would like to take the opportunity to thank those who contributed to the completion of this thesis.

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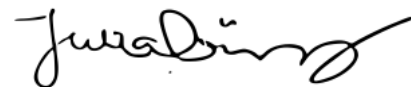
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## ABSTRACT

**Title:** The break-up: Why consumers end their love relationships with brands

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**Key Words:** Consumer-brand relationships, Brand love, Dissolution, Identity, Termination, Self-extension.

**Purpose:** Consumers are forming deep love relationships with brands to a degree that involves the incorporation of the brand's symbolic attributes to their own self-concept. However, though deep, these bonds are not indestructible. With that said, this thesis aims to investigate the consumer-brand love relationship with specific regard to the dissolution of these deep bonds.

**Methodology:** In-depth semi-structured phenomenological interviews were conducted. An interpretive qualitative approach allowed for the gathering of consumers' subjectively lived experiences.

**Theoretical Perspective:** Consumer-brand relationships (Fournier, 1998), Brand love (Albert et al., 2008; Batra et al., 2012; Carroll & Ahuvia, 2006), Consumer-brand relationship dissolution (Fajer & Schouten, 1995), The extended self (Ahuvia, 2005; Belk, 1988), Symbolic interactionism (Solomon, 1983).

**Empirical Foundation:** The empirical data is gathered from ten in-depth interviews with individuals who have experienced love towards a brand that they no longer consume.

**Conclusions:** The analysis shows that the elements of self-identification and sense of belonging were connected to the brand love relationships of the participants interviewed. Furthermore, the findings show that these deep relationships are often terminated when the brand no longer fits into the individual's self-perception, along with when the mass consumption of the brand leads to dilution of the individual's identification with the brand.

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# 1. INTRODUCTION

*“The people, and things, we love have a strong influence on our sense of who we are, on our self.” (Ahuvia, 2005, p. 171)*

The concept of love is a rather complex one, which depending on the context, can be used to both indicate a social relationship and a state of emotion (Heinrich, Albrecht & Bauer, 2012). Though its complexity is rather evident, the notion is used to describe a variety of relationships that individuals partake in, be those the ones they have with their partners or parents to those they have with objects and brands they feel deeply connected to. In fact, the term is arguably applied to possessions and objects as regularly as it is to other individuals (Ahuvia, 2005). Though the term love has been applied to material subjects, the complexity of love remains apparent no matter the context, as it is experienced subjectively by all. In line with the above quote, the notion of love, regardless of its application, implies strong influence on an individual's self concept, with the things and people that an individual loves directly impacting their self perception (Ahuvia, 2005). According to Aron, Aron, Tudor and Nelson (1991), interpersonal love involves a merging of one's identity and their loved other. More specifically, when one partakes in a close relationship, the other is in turn included in one's understanding of his or herself (Aron et al., 1991). Within the field of consumer research, a consumer's identity is often connected to the notion of love, with loved items serving as both a means of expressing oneself, as well as a transformation tool for the achievement of the desired self (Ahuvia, 2005). As Belk (1988) put it, “we cannot hope to understand consumer behavior without first gaining some understanding of the meanings that consumers attach to possessions” (p. 139). An individual consumes an immeasurable amount of objects and/or brands throughout his or her life, so it is not surprising that the few objects/brands that the individual chooses to form a close relationship to, would then in some way impact the way in which that individual views him or herself (Ahuvia, 2005). This notion becomes even more interesting as it seems that a greater importance is beginning to be placed on the development of these higher-level relationships.

The ever-increasing competitive market of today has led to a greater emphasis being placed on the importance of close relationships between brands and their consumers, with management

focused literature emphasizing emotions as a tool for the development and maintenance of such relationships (Heinrich, et al., 2012; Roberts, 2005). The concept of brand satisfaction was for a long period the main objective in terms of marketing strategy; however, today's marketplace has made it necessary for marketing strategy to move beyond the notion of purely "satisfying" the consumer (Carroll & Ahuvia, 2006, p. 79). Moreover, the concept of love, specifically, has worked its way into the realm of consumer research, as work on the consumer-brand relationship has begun to include this notion to describe a type of consumer-brand relationships, one that surpasses the mere feeling of liking (Fournier, 1998). It can be observed that consumers are experiencing feelings similar to those of love towards brands, bringing alive the notion of the consumer-brand love relationship (Carroll & Ahuvia, 2006). While a plethora of research on consumers' love for objects and/or possessions can be found, Carroll and Ahuvia (2006), argue that the emotions of love that consumers develop for brands have been rather untouched. In their research, they present their findings on brand love, defining brand love as "as the degree of passionate emotional attachment a satisfied consumer has for a particular trade name" (Ahuvia & Carroll, 2006, p. 81). However, detailed research on the consumer-brand love relationship in the academic field of consumer research seems to still be in its infancy stages (Heinrich et al., 2012).

Though relatively new, the concept of brand love is not without its criticisms. At its core, much of the groundwork of the construct is rooted in theories of interpersonal love (Batra, Ahuvia & Bagozzi, 2012). Though the parallels between interpersonal relationships and consumer-brand relationships cannot be ignored, Batra et al. (2012), argue that theories and conceptualizations of interpersonal love should not be in their entirety connected to examples of brand love. In regards to this, brand love needs to be examined from the ground up, built on the foundation of how consumers experience their love towards brands in order to draw any connections. Though similarities between brand love and interpersonal love can be found, it is important to make the distinction in order to gain a valid understanding of the concept (Batra et al., 2012). Moreover, research on the termination of these strong consumer-brand relationships remains rather scant (Hemetsberger, Kittinger-Rosanelli & Friedmann, 2009). Though a rising number of academics and practitioners are acknowledging these strong emotional bonds between consumers and brands, not much research seems to be focusing on the circumstances by which these relationships dissolve and eventually end (Albert, Merunka & Valette-Florence, 2008; Ahuvia,

2005; Batra et al., 2012). Similar to Batra et al.'s (2012), criticisms of brand love, much of the work on the termination of the consumer-brand relationship is rooted in interpersonal theory (Fajer & Schouten, 1995; Russell & Schau, 2014). Though such foundations can help lay the groundwork for the termination process, it is important to examine the dissolution of these relationships in their entirety. More specifically, if the brand love relationship involves a level of self-identification to the brands one is involved with, it is important to look at these relationships specifically to greater understand the implications the dissolution process of these deeply emotional relationships has on a consumer's self-concept (Batra et al., 2012; Carroll & Ahuvia, 2006). If the brands that an individual loves has a strong impact on the their sense of self, the riding of those brands from a consumer's life potentially also plays a sufficient role in that said consumer's identity. As mentioned, love is a rather complex notion and even the love one experiences for a brand remains rather nuanced and particular to that individual. The complexity of this social relationship and/or emotional state then directly affects consumers' lived experiences. It is important to understand the different ways in which consumers experience brand love, and how their unique experiences play into the termination of their relationships.

In the following section a review of prior literature on the consumer-brand relationship will be presented with a specific emphasis placed on the topic of brand love and furthermore, consumer-brand relationship dissolution. Later, a discussion regarding the formulation of the research problem will be presented, laying the groundwork for the purpose of this thesis.

## **1.2 Literature Review**

Today's relevancy of the consumer-brand relationship cannot be ignored, as brands begin to play increasingly vital roles in consumer's lives, often becoming so close that they resemble those of human relationships (Heinrich et al., 2012). The consumer-brand relationship is a dynamic "psychological and cultural" phenomenon that needs to be "carefully created, nurtured and judiciously leveraged if [it] is to thrive" (Fournier, Breazeale & Fetscherin, 2012, p. 1). In a sense, Fournier (1998), grounded the notion of the consumer-brand relationship, providing a framework for understanding and conceptualizing the relationship that consumers share with brands. Her findings proposed six dimensions of brand relationship quality that yield strength

and durability over time, namely: behavioral interdependence, personal commitment, love/passion, attachment, intimacy, and partner quality (Fournier, 1998). More specifically, the love or passion that a consumer experiences towards a brand will in turn serve as a measurement of the affective depth of such a relationship (Fournier, 1998). Built on the groundwork of Fournier (1998), Aaker, Fournier and Brasel (2004), developed upon prior work on consumer-brand relationships through their longitudinal examination of the relation between brand relationships and brand personalities. Findings implied that consumers were more likely to develop friend-like relationships to brands that were perceived as sincere and more short-lived “flings” with brands found to be seen as exciting (Aaker et al., 2004). Hence, there lies an interest in further examining the factors that cause consumers to develop strong emotional connections to brands, those that surpass friend-like relationships in order to understand the significance of these higher-order relationships.

As mentioned, the maintenance of the consumer-brand relationship should not be taken for granted. In research by Albert and Merunka (2013), they argue for the importance of brand trust in consumer-brand love relationships in which they draw a parallel to interpersonal relationships, where trust in one partner is essential for the relationship’s survival. When consumers experience trust for a brand, feelings of love are more likely to follow (Albert & Merunka, 2013). The implementation of interpersonal literature and frameworks has become more common among researchers aiming to contribute to consumer-brand relationship literature as a means of greater understanding the emotional aspects that constitute the relationship (Swaminathan & Dommer, 2012). In order to strengthen the consumer-brand relationship, and the feelings of love, Albert and Merunka (2013), suggest three levels of brand trust, namely, honesty, reliability and altruism. The levels of honesty and reliability mainly affect brand love, since altruism refers to the brand’s willingness to take the consumers’ interests into account, whereas consumers oftentimes do not perceive reciprocity in the consumer-brand relationship (Albert & Merunka, 2013). Batra et al. (2012), further discuss the lack of reciprocity in consumer-brand relationships, where they argue for brands’ inability to love back, setting consumer-brand relationships apart from interpersonal relationships. Their research also implies that brand love is found to be of less importance than interpersonal love, putting a bridge between the two forms of relationships (Batra et al., 2012). As the relationships consumers form with brands are rather unique in their



character, varying depending on brand preferences and level of attachment, they cannot be explained without a deeper investigation. Although consumer-brand relationships are built on a similar foundation as interpersonal ones, the brand's inability to love back cannot be ignored, making the relationship rather one-directional (Batra et al., 2012). Moreover, the consumer-brand relationship usually involves some kind of monetary exchange, whereas the interpersonal relationship generally does not (Swaminathan & Dommer, 2012). Though these key distinguishing factors need to be acknowledged, the interpersonal frameworks that have helped lay much of the groundwork for the consumer-brand relationship should not be dismissed.

As the importance of the emotional foundation of relationships has grown in relevance within literature, Sternberg's (1986) triangular theory of love rooted in social psychology, has gained a great deal of attention, within both the interpersonal and consumer-brand relationship context. This theory is built on the premise that interpersonal love consists of three dimensions, namely intimacy, passion and decision/commitment. The strength of these three dimensions will determine the amount of love one experiences, whereas a relationship with only one dimension present is bound weaker than one with all (Sternberg, 1986). Shimp and Madden (1988), introduce eight possible types of love through various combinations of Sternberg's (1986) love triangle (e.g. romantic love, companionate love). Furthermore, Sternberg's (1986) triangular theory of love was used as the foundation of Shimp and Madden's (1988) model of consumer-object love, putting forth the components of liking, yearning and decision/commitment as the basis of a consumer's relationship with an object (e.g. brand) (Carroll & Ahuvia, 2006). Ahuvia (2005b), investigated consumer's mental images of interpersonal love (i.e. prototype of love) with their description of love objects and acknowledged more similarities than differences between the two (Ahuvia, 2005b; Albert, Merunka & Valette-Florence, 2008). However, it is again important to note that love is a complex phenomenon, which cannot be truly captured by a sole interpersonal theory. Albert et al. (2008), point out that choosing a single interpersonal theory to explain love towards a brand would in fact be "theoretically constraining" (p. 1064). Rather, the dynamic concept, which greatly varies depending on the cultural context, must remain exploratory in nature, later being interpreted with theory in mind (Albert et al., 2008).

Other than interpersonal love theories, much of the work on love within the consumer context has been conceptualized through consumers' proclamations of love towards the brands in their lives (Albert et al., 2008; Carroll & Ahuvia, 2006; Fournier, 1998). Moreover, when defining brand love, Carroll & Ahuvia (2006), explain that the concept is expressed by a passion-, an attachment-, positive evaluation and emotions-, and ultimately declaration of love for the brand. Aside from the academic field of research on brand love, Roberts (2005), introduced "Lovemarks" a book that addresses the managerial implications of consumer loyalty beyond reason. According to Roberts (2005), *lovemarks*, consisting of mystery, sensuality and intimacy, are what binds consumers to commit to long-term relationships with particular brands. Ahuvia and Carroll (2006), further emphasize the correlation between brand love and achieving brand loyalty and positive word-of mouth. Furthermore, from a practical stance, knowledge of brand love as a phenomenon is expected to bring a better understanding and prediction of post-purchase behavior (Ahuvia & Carroll, 2006).

It is important to distinguish between brand love and satisfaction, claiming that while brand love is a state of satisfaction, it is rooted in a much stronger affective bond. While brand satisfaction is a transaction-specific outcome, brand love on the other hand, is considered to be the outcome of a long-term relationship of commitment to the brand (Ahuvia & Carroll, 2006). Brand love, furthermore, includes an integration of the brand into the self-identity, where a willingness to declare love for the brand is present (Ahuvia & Carroll, 2006). According to Ahuvia (1993), a consumer experiences the feeling of love when the brand has reached a desired and high level of integration with the consumer's self-identity.

It can be noted that as the consumer-brand relationship deepens, so do the factors of personal identification with the brand and incorporation of the brand into one's social network. Fajer and Schouten (1995), regard these relationships as high-order relationships, which require severe alterations in consumers' roles, preferences and/or mechanical failures to lead to the demise of the relationship. At its core, brand love implies an immensely strong consumer brand relationship, making the consumers highly devoted and loyal by nature. However, like other relationships, these can also end (Hemetsberger et al., 2009). Prior research has shown that the greater the loyalty in relationships, the more intricate the disengagement process will inevitably

be (Fajer & Schouten, 1995). Hemetsberger et al. (2009), suggest that the deterioration of highly committed relationships probably requires the aid of strong triggers, along the lines of severe transgressions from the brand or fleeting phases from the consumer.. Moreover, as these relations strongly influence consumers' self concept, the ending of such relationships is potentially very relevant in regards to consumers' periods of personal transformation and/or phases of transition. Prior research has associated phases of transition to the ending of a consumer-brand relationship; however, the circumstances that jeopardize the consumer-brand love relationship remain rather undeveloped (Hemetsberger et al., 2009). In general, research on relationship dissolution has mainly been within the field of interpersonal literature, with little attention being given to the dissolution process within the consumer-brand relationship sphere (Swaminathan & Dommer, 2012). Nevertheless, if consumers are continuously developing these highly committed relationships with brands, some of which are arguably highly related to their core sense of self, it is of value to gain a greater understanding of the dynamics at play in the dissolution process of these high-order relationships.

### **1.3 Problem Discussion & Formulation**

We have thus far illustrated that consumers are developing close relationships to brands, oftentimes identifying so deeply with the brands that they then grow to become of relevance to the individual's' self-concept (Johnson, Mataer & Thompson, 2011). Brands not only serve as tools of self-expression, but also as a means of attracting and belonging to other social groups (Belk, 1988; Swaminathan & Dommer, 2012). Consumers are seemingly using their lived experiences with brands to symbolically narrate their senses of self to others, along with possibly themselves (Belk, 1988; Kleine, Kleine & Allen, 1995; Levy, 1959). As they do so, their experiences with brands are affected by sociality, with the sociocultural environment which the consumers are a part of directly impacting the termination of their brand love relationships (Russell & Schau, 2014). The symbolic meanings and values that the brands represent are created and communicated through social interactions between consumers, brands and society (Solomon, 1983). Hence, meanings are established through social interactions, where individuals' interpretations and contact with other social entities affect how the brands in question are perceived. With the interplay between one's identity and their brand relationships

present, the brand love relationship arguably becomes of greater relevance as these relationships indicate a level of strong emotional attachment and devotion (Carroll & Ahuvia, 2006).

Though the notion of our loved ones becoming a core part of our identity has been examined in prior research, the field of consumer-brand relationship literature, although acknowledging the phenomena, has failed on developing an understanding of the implications such a phenomenon has on the demise of the strong consumer-brand relationship (Aaron et al., 1991; Ahuvia, 2005; Belk, 1988; Fournier, 1998). The majority of the work on brand love focuses on the development and maintenance of these relationships; however, understanding the dissolution process can ultimately aid in the betterment of future deep consumer-brand relationships (Ahuvia, 2005; Carroll & Ahuvia, 2006; Albert & Merunka, 2008). Moreover, as mentioned, it is of importance to examine the dissolution of brand love relationships from the ground up rather than adapted from interpersonal literature, when aiming to truly understand consumers' lived experiences (Batra et al., 2012; Russell & Schau, 2014). Just as one cannot ignore the importance of the factors that help develop and deepen the consumer-brand relationship, the factors which lead to the drifting and dissolution of the relationship should be acknowledged to understand why these deep connections are weakened, along with what the termination of the relationship has to say about the individual's personal and social self (Fajer & Schouten, 1995; Hemetsberger et al., 2009; Russell & Schau, 2014).

Furthermore, if the competitive market of today is resulting in businesses investing time and resources on the establishment of these deeply loyal consumer-brand relationships, it is of necessity for them to understand the circumstances by which consumers decide to end these relationships (Carroll & Ahuvia, 2006; Heinrich et al., 2012). Within the consumer research sphere, and more specifically in regards to consumer-brand love theories, the importance of these strong relationships for consumers' identity projects, social-categorizations, and definitions are rather undisputed; however, it seems that the field of consumer research has refrained from examining the dissolution process of these deep relationships in close relation to such aspects (Batra et al., 2012; Fournier, 1998; Hemetsberger et al., 2009; Swaminathan & Dommer, 2012).

This thesis aims to explore the termination processes of the consumer-brand love relationship, in order to both gain a greater understanding of the dissolution of brand love, along with the connections the termination process of this deep relationship has to a consumer's self-identity (Batra et al., 2012; Belk, 1988; Fajer & Schouten, 1995; Russell & Schau, 2014). Moreover, as mentioned, the majority of prior work on the termination of the consumer-brand relationship, along with work on brand love is rooted in interpersonal love theories (Batra et al., 2012; Fajer & Schouten, 1995). As Batra et al. (2012), have alluded to, there is a necessity to examine such concepts from a consumer research perspective, focusing on the consumer-brand relationship as the foundation, rather than using prior interpersonal relationship work to fit the consumer context. Furthermore, Fajer and Schouten's (1995) work on consumer-brand relationship termination, which was largely adapted from interpersonal termination theories, mentions the shortcomings present in using the interpersonal relationship metaphor when aiming to understand the consumer-brand relationship, as the differences between the two cannot be ignored. With that in mind, this thesis aims to contribute to the field of consumer research, by examining consumers subjectively lived brand love termination experiences, rather than applying interpersonal termination theories to that of consumer-brand relations, with the intention of adding to the overall conceptualization of brand love. This thesis first and foremost, seeks to examine why consumers terminate their consumer-brand love relationships, and furthermore, the role that their self-identity has on the dissolution process, as identity is undoubtedly a key factor of the brand love relationship (Ahuvia, 2005; Batra et. al, 2012). Therefore, the guiding research question is two fold, starting with the overall aim of understanding:

*Why consumers choose to terminate their brand love relationships*

And subsequently:

*How does the consumer's self-identity factor into the termination process of the consumer-brand love relationship?*

## **2. THEORETICAL FOUNDATION**

*In this chapter the theoretical foundation will be presented, where the sensitizing concepts included will help establish the conceptual framework for empirical analysis. Theories on object love, and more specifically brand love, will be presented to help conceptualize the feeling of love within the consumer-brand relationship sphere. Moreover, the termination process greatly adapted from prior interpersonal work, along with consumer-brand adaptations, will be treated to further understand the social dynamics at play in regards to the dissolution of consumer-brand relationships. In order to understand the social dynamics present, the concepts of the extended self and symbolic interactionism will ultimately be introduced.*

### **2.1 Love For Objects**

It is by now quite evident that consumers are developing relationships with the objects that they consume, with the term love often being applied to such relationships (Ahuvia, 2005; Shimp & Madden, 1988). Consumers are using the term to define their thoughts and feelings towards an object or a brand that they hold superior, often providing such objects with human-like characteristics (Ortiz & Harrison, 2011). Lastovicka & Sirianni (2011) found that some consumers create relationships with objects that distort the division between a human relationship and that with an object. A study conducted by Schultz, Kleine and Kernan (1989) revealed that love is the second most used word by consumers when asked about their feelings regarding possessions, which they felt emotionally attached to (Lastovicka & Sirianni, 2011). Furthermore, Lastovicka & Sirianni (2011) allude to the possibility of consumers creating lifestyles centered on objects/possessions.

It can be noted that similar to people, the objects that an individual loves greatly affects their sense of self (Ahuvia, 2005). According to Belk (1988), possessions aid in the management of an individual's identity; the objects they consume work in defining those individuals' senses of self. Consumers consistently obtain an immense number of objects, however, there are few that they identify as ones that they "love." That being said, it seems rather apparent that these loved objects contribute to the consumer's grasp of himself or herself as an individual (Ahuvia, 2005).

These loved objects not only serve as a representation of oneself, but also help in the resolve of identity conflicts consumers face. When an individual's identity narrative faces a conflict, the loved objects can be seen to both symbolically defend and support the individual's identity (Ahuvia, 2005). It should be acknowledged that a person's identity is made up of many aspects and that not all of those aspects are loved; however, objects that are loved, form a category within the consumer's self identity (Ahuvia, 2005). It can be observed that consumers nurture the objects that they love by spending "time, energy, and financial resources" on such objects (Lastovicka & Sirianni, 2011, p. 324). The nurturing behavior is often reinforced with the consumer choosing to purchase objects that are complementary to the loved object (Lastovicka & Sirianni, 2011). This can in a way be seen as a precursor to the notion of brand love.

## **2.2 Brand Love**

As mentioned earlier, consumers are inevitably developing strong relationships to brands that greatly resemble interpersonal relationships, which has led to the establishment of the phenomenon, brand love (Ahuvia & Carroll, 2006; Fournier, 1998). By conceptualizing the consumer-brand love relationship, a greater knowledge of the underlying motives for developing these strong bonds can be obtained and can moreover aid in the explanation of how such affective relationships end.

In order to conceptualize brand love, which will be used as a theoretical foundation to analyze and interpret the collected data, Batra et al.'s (2012) ten elements of the brand love prototype will be used as the structure to elaborate on the consumer-brand relationship along with prior research. As their article, *Brand Love*, is built on the notion that previous work addressing interpersonal love relationship does not fully apply to consumer-brand relationships, they present two qualitative studies examining this phenomenon where the brand love prototype represents an outcome (Batra et al., 2012).

### *Great quality/qualities:*

Unlike in interpersonal love relationships, the notion of unconditional love is unlikely to be present in the consumer-brand love relationship. Consumers are more so likely to consider the

loved brand to be the best one available, oftentimes listing perceived attractive qualities to explain their love for the brand, such as quality, performance, design and such (Batra et al, 2012). Lower priced items are oftentimes referred to as value for money within the emotions of love whereas, luxury items that consumers fantasize about owning are arguably perceived as more special and attractive due to their higher price (Batra et al, 2012).

*Strong held values and existential meaning:*

In order for consumers to develop love-like relationships with brands, there is oftentimes a need to connect on a higher and deeper level, often involving some sort of “self-actualization, existential meaning or cultural identity” (Batra et al., 2012, p.4). Brands, such as Apple, that appeal to deeply held values, are oftentimes considered to represent creativity and independence, and are more likely become loved brands (Batra et al, 2012).

*Intrinsic rewards:*

Brand love is the outcome of intrinsic and extrinsic rewards, where both drivers need to be present in order for the love to flourish. A loved brand can provide intrinsic rewards when it caters to the consumer’s psychological state, such as happiness, when associated to the use of the product. Thus, if a brand only provides extrinsic rewards, consumers may experience that they never loved the brand but rather used it to get something else that they did love (Batra et al, 2012).

*Self-identity:*

As discussed in previous sections, consumers have a tendency to identify with things in which they love. More specifically, consumers oftentimes identify with loved brands and incorporate them into their daily lives to express and enhance existing and/or desired identities (Batra et al, 2012; Belk, 1988). As mentioned earlier, identity is a fluid concept that is likely to change and alternate throughout a lifetime, which means that the brands and possessions used to communicate a sense of self may change in accordance with different lifetime phases (Breazeale & Ponder, 2012). Furthermore, the congruity between the consumer’s self-image and the product/brand image is likely to have a positive effect on brand love (Albert & Merunka, 2008).



*Positive affect:*

When consuming loved brands, the experience is normally tied to positive feelings of emotion, such as affection. As previously mentioned, Ahuvia and Carroll (2006) further emphasize positive emotions and evaluation along with declaration of love as main aspects of brand love. Albert and Merunka (2008) mention pleasure as an aspect of love towards a brand, implying that pleasure for a brand fosters affection and love. It can also be noted that pleasure has a positive effect on the duration of the brand love relationship (Albert & Merunka, 2008).

*Passionate desire and sense of natural fit:*

Consumers oftentimes experience a natural fit between themselves and their loved brands (Batra et al, 2012). This feeling is usually expressed as a strong desire for the brand, but also expands to passion for the brand (Albert et al., 2008). The experienced passion for the brand is furthermore considered to be a motivating factor for purchasing decisions and the core of the affective consumer-brand relationship (Yim, Tse and Chan, 2008, cited in Heinrich, et al., 2012). This “right fit” between the consumer and the brand in combination with the perceived passion can even be expressed by some consumers as “love at first sight” when being introduced to the brand (Batra et al., 2012, p. 4).

*Emotional bonding and anticipated heartbreak:*

It can be noted that consumers develop strong feelings towards brands that they love, with the relationship oftentimes involving a connection to a higher degree (Batra et al., 2012; Fournier, 1998). In addition to these strong connections towards loved brands, consumers are likely to feel a strong desire to keep their loved objects close. Consumers can even undergo phases of separation loss when they experience loved possessions being distanced from them. This strong emotional attachment can often be tied to the perceived uniqueness of the brand, i.e when consumers perceived the loved brand as irreplaceable the connections and the possible loss were greater (Batra et al., 2012; Belk, 1988).

*Willingness to invest:*

When consumers experience love for a brand, they are more likely to invest time, money and energy into the relationship. These investments will in turn strengthen the consumer-brand

relationship, as they represent a higher commitment and thus a stronger linkage to consumers' self-identity. As loved brands oftentimes are seen as rather irreplaceable, consumers tend to be rather price insensitive. Moreover, when brand love is present, consumers are more likely to pay a premium price but also more willing to forgive mistakes by the brand. Redden and Steiner (2000, cited in Heinrich, et al., 2012) found a connection between displays of commitment and brand love when they investigated the consumer-brand relationship. They observed that highly committed consumers worship and obsess over the brands.

#### *Frequent thought and use:*

When Fournier (1988) arguably laid the groundwork for the concept of brand love, she specifically emphasised frequent engagement in order for the brand to serve as a “relationship partner” (Batra et al., 2012; Fournier, 1998, p. 344). In order for the brand love relationship to flourish and reach a strong level, it requires consumers to actively talk about the brand, think about the brand and engage with it. Consumers that experience love for a brand often dream about their respective brands, which implies that the brand has a dominant presence in the minds of the consumers (Albert & Merunka, 2008). Moreover, it has been observed that brands offering hedonic benefits tend to be more loved by consumers (Carroll & Ahuvia, 2006).

#### *Length of use:*

The length of the relationship between the consumer and the brand has proven to have a positive effect on brand love. This history of engagement will in turn serve to give the brand a greater importance in the lives of the consumers and their identities. This history of loyalty is likely to reflect and impact future behavior and commitment to the brand (Batra et al, 2012). It can also be noted that longer consumer-brand relationships may generate nostalgic emotions that lead consumers to becoming more brand loyal. These positive emotional feelings may ultimately strengthen the experienced brand love (Fetscherin & Conway Dato-on, 2012).

### **2.3 The Termination Process**

As termination is a core concept of this thesis, it is important to gain a better understanding of the various dynamics at play in the termination process. As mentioned, the field of relationship

dissolution in the context of consumer-brand relationship literature remains rather scant (Swaminathan & Dommer, 2012). However, there is no denying that consumers often end their relationships with brands, many times switching and changing their preferences over time (Hemetsberger et al., 2009). Fournier (1998) alluded to the dynamic perspective of the consumer-brand relationship, highlighting the continuous process of relationship development. More specifically, Levinger's (1983) five-phase model was used to identify the phases of this development, namely, initiation, growth, maintenance, deterioration and dissolution (cited in Fournier, 1998). Clearly, the phases of deterioration and dissolution are not without consideration. Just as the development of these relationships holds great importance, so do the factors that lead to them drifting apart (Fajer & Schouten, 1995). With regard to deterioration and dissolution, Fournier (1998) presents the stress model and the entropy model. The stress model proposes that factors, which are not exclusive to the relationship, (i.e. environmental stresses, partner-oriented stresses, and dyadic/relational stresses) influence the end of the relationship. The entropy model explains that the relationship comes to end as a result of a lack of active maintenance of the relationship, leading to a steady deterioration and dissolution process (Fournier, 1998). It is yet again important to note that though the consumer-brand relationship and interpersonal relationships remain distinct in nature, their resemblance needs to be humbly acknowledged in order to better understand some of the parallels made throughout research (Fournier, 1994).

Prior interpersonal work on the dissolution process, along with some specific to the person-brand relationship, can aid in a better understanding of the termination of deeply rooted consumer-brand love relationships (Aaker et al. 2004; Fajer & Schouten, 1995; Fournier 1998). Within consumer research, Fajer and Schouten (1995) placed a focus on both the breakdown and dissolution of the relationships between people and brands, emphasizing the practical importance understanding these phases of the relationship has for marketers in regards to customer retention, once again using interpersonal relationship as their starting point (Fajer & Schouten, 1995). Similar to interpersonal break-ups, a number of factors, such as attitudes, actions and underlying relationship flaws, may contribute to the break-up of the person-brand relationship (Fajer & Schouten, 1995). In any case, the break-up may be instigated by either the consumer or the brand; however, consumer-initiated termination (e.g. brand switching, brand spurning) is more

nuanced and much more likely than brand-initiated termination (Fajer & Schouten, 1995). Furthermore, Fajer and Schouten (1995) adapted Ducks' (1982) interpersonal work on relationship dissolution to create a framework to better understand the process of termination within the consumer sphere. More specifically, Duck's (1982) four underlying reasons of relationship dissolution were implemented, namely, *pre-existing doom*, *mechanical failure*, *process loss*, and *sudden death* (Fajer & Schouten, 1995, p. 664). They then identify patterns of termination that may result from underlying shortcomings of the relationship such as, the brand no longer being available to the consumer, the brand being replaced by a more suited or liked brand, and/or the brand doing or showing an aspect which leads to the consumer alienating him- or herself (Fajer & Schouten, 1995).

Fajer and Schouten (1995) also adapted Duck's (1982) interpersonal dissolution process to the consumer brand context, explaining that the process generally follows the pattern of *breakdown* → *decline* → *disengagement* → *dissolution* (p. 665). The breakdown portion of the process results when the brand fails to meet consumers' expectations in regards to performance, if the consumers' "needs or liking criteria" changes, or if an alternative brand proves superior (Fajer & Schouten, 1995, p. 665). Decline comes next in the process and refers to a decrease of liking or loyalty, potentially leading to the consumer classifying the relationship as one of lesser regard. Disengagement can refer to consumers speaking negatively about the brand and/or seeking out relationships with other brands. Finally, dissolution refers to the complete termination of the relationship, which could be either brand- or consumer- initiated. Each stage varies in intensity and significance as the level of loyalty to the brand varies (Fajer & Schouten, 1995). As this thesis aims to examine the brand love relationship (i.e. a relationship that implies immense loyalty) the precursor level of loyalty examined will be classified as exceptionally high.

As brand love relationships do involve a level of self-identification to the brand, it is important to acknowledge the possible outcomes of consumer-brand relationships that imply a level of engagement with the consumer's self-concept or image. Prior research indicates that consumers are more likely to feel negativity towards a brand they no longer consume if the brand was related to their sense of self (Johnson et al., 2011). Belk (1988) alludes to the notion that if a possession is seen as a component of one's sense of self, the loss of that possession should

inevitably signify a “loss or lessening of self” (p. 142). It has also been noted that the loss of possession could ignite emotions similar to those associated with the loss of a loved one (McLeod, 1984 cited in Belk 1988). If the consumer has deep feelings of attachment for the lost object, he or she will experience sorrow and emotional grief; however, it can be observed that a rebuilding phase begins after the loss, where in which the individual reconstructs his or her self identity (Russell & Schau, 2014). Though these authors tend to refer to such losses as involuntary, La Branche, (1973) mentions that the loss of an object that one perceives as inconsistent with a self-image is happily discarded. Other research shows that a changing brand personality could aid in the distancing of the brand and the consumer (Hemetsberger et al., 2009). As mentioned before, the definition of brand love implies a deep, devoted relationship, one in which the consumer identifies with the brand. Ending such relationships is not regarded as a spontaneous move, but more likely a process, which leads to termination (Hemetsberger et al., 2009).

Johnson et al., (2011) extended upon consumer-brand relationship quality theory through the exploration of negative outlooks towards once highly regarded brands, with findings indicating various patterns of the dissolution process. Patterns include both critical incidents and series of “not-quite-critical-incidents” leading to the dissolution of the relationship (Johnson et al., 2011, p.121). However, the pattern of “not-quite-critical-incidents” remained rather unexplored as their research focused on specific critical incidents which lead to the demise of the relationship, as the gradual decline of a strong consumer-brand relationship is often more difficult to detect. Nevertheless, it is just as important to examine these gradual erosion processes as it can help “identify failing purchase patterns among once-loyal consumers,” which is more in line with the empirics that this thesis will analyze in a later chapter (Johnson et al., 2011, p.122).

### ***2.3.1 Transitory phases***

In relation to the termination process, it can be observed that transitory phases in an individual’s life, where in which they move into new roles, also leads to a modification of their consumption habits, such as brands they choose to consume (Mathur, Moschis, & Lee, 2006). Mathur et al. (2006), examine two different theoretical perspectives to gain a better understanding of the

changes that consumers experience, those being the role transition perspective and the stress perspective. Similar to Fournier's (1998), stress model, the stress perspective relies on the "environmental, social or internal demands" which lead to the individual changing his or her behaviors (Thoits 1995 cited in Mathur et al., 2006, p.130). Role transitions imply that an individual rids oneself of an old role, changes a role, or takes on a new role. When doing so, the individual's behavior changes. As possessions are a big part of an individual's sense of self, the ridding of possessions can signify a role transition (Belk, 1988; Mathur et al., 2006).

In accordance to the role transition perspective and the importance of symbolic acts of consumption in regards to changes of one's self-concept, special attention needs to be placed on the rites of passage which individuals partake in. Schouten (1991) adapted Van Gennep's (1960) three phases of role transition in the consumer context, namely the separation phase, the transition phase and the incorporation phase (Cited in Schouten, 1991). Schouten (1991) explains that in more current society, individuals use "symbolic acts of disposition and acquisition" to bring about their personal rites of passage, in an attempt of constructing their new self-concepts (p. 49). The separation phase occurs when an individual no longer engages with their "social role or status" often being triggered by some type of external stress or internal influence, causing the individual to not associate with a certain part of their self (Schouten, 1991, p. 49). The ridding of a possession that signifies an aspect of the self can symbolically finalize the separation process. A period of transition then follows, where in which the individual reconstructs their sense of self in accordance with their new role. Ultimately, the individual goes through the incorporation phase, where their new role is then incorporated into their sense of self. This can occur as the new brands that an individual consumes begin to symbolically represent their sense of self (Schouten, 1991). The separation process in particular, along with the phases that follow, can aid in the better understanding of the reasons which consumers choose to terminate their once highly coveted love brands, the brands which they once arguably greatly identified with.

## **2.4 Extension of the self**

The connection between one's self identity and the brands/objects, which they consume, has been alluded to countless amounts of times thus far. However, the ties between consumption

habits and the construction of one's identity cannot be ignored, particularly when higher-order consumer-brand relationships are of concern. The notion of the self can be conceptualized as an individual's self perception of who and what that individual is, oftentimes used interchangeably with the word identity, as both concepts allude to the core understanding of who the individual is (Aledin, 2012). However, there is some discrepancy between the distinctions as some may argue that an individual can have various identities, but rather only one self (Weigert et al. 1986 cited in Aledin, 2012). Similar to how Belk (1988) has referenced the notion of the self, this thesis uses the terms self and identity interchangeably, as a means of describing how an individual perceives "who he or she is" (Ahuvia, 2005, p. 172). In many ways love objects help symbolically form and reinforce a consumer's identity narrative. Belk (1988) essentially pioneered the notion of objects and possessions becoming an extension of one's self, explaining that consumers utilize their possessions in order to express their identities to others. Their possessions are in turn simultaneously defining and reinforcing their senses of self (Belk, 1988).

The self is a constantly changing, subjective evaluation of an individual formed by that said individual. Belk (1988) explains that the individual has a core self, which grows to include the items which the individual consumes. These items are then a part of the individual's extended self (Ahuvia, 2005). Fournier (1998) also highlights self-connection as a central aspect of the consumer-brand relationship, where she puts an emphasis on the brand's ability to deliver on identity aspects. In line with prior research on the consumer-brand relationship, Albert and Merunka (2013) argue for the role of identification as a contributing factor to the love relationship (Batra et al, 2012; Carroll & Ahuvia, 2006). It can be observed that the strongest bonds individuals form often tend to be with the individuals and objects that fortify their own self-perceptions. With that said, it becomes rather apparent that brands a consumer uses to exemplify their own identity will inevitably lead to a deep relationship, one which is quite difficult to breakdown (Belk, 1988; Breazealen & Fetscherin, 2012).

Identification not only plays an important role between the consumer and the brand, but also in terms of identifying with other typical brand consumers, opinion leaders and so forth. Largely, the objects that are deemed as a part of the extended self are utilized to identify with groups which are associated to the objects, playing into the individual's group identity (Belk, 1988). The

clothing that an individual wears to the various other things they choose to consume are a means for the individual to differentiate his- or herself from another; however, it can to the same degree signify belongingness with others, with possessions serving as a means of group identification (Belk, 1988). Essentially, the objects serve as either a distancing or merging tool between the individual's identity and the identity of others.

Furthermore, Ahuvia (2005), found that loved items are used as a self transformation tool, not only with the maintenance and development of the desired self, but also in times of identity conflicts. In line with Belk's (1988) idea of possessions expressing the self-identity, Ahuvia (2005) addresses the role of loved possessions in regards to the resolution of the identity issues consumers experience in their daily lives. He states that love objects can help demarcate a margin between the consumer's sense of self and the identity that the consumer discards. Also, such objects can aid in symbolically backing up an identity when clashing parts of one's self is present, aiding in a resolve to an identity conflict (Ahuvia, 2005). As the identity is rather fragile, with identity conflicts posing a threat to one's self, it often needs reinforcement. With that said, the parts of an individual's identity which he or she values the most, tend to be the ones which the individual cares to greater symbolically emphasize (Aledin, 2012). As mentioned, Batra et al. (2012), explain that a fundamental concept of brand love is the self-brand integration process, where in which, the consumer identifies with their loved brand. Research indicates that individuals tend to strongly identify with the objects that they love, using their loved brands as a means of conveying both their current and desired identity (Batra et al., 2012; Belk, 1988). The riding of a love brand would then potentially serve as the resolve to an identity conflict, arguably in accordance to the resolve of a separation and transition phase for the consumer (Ahuvia, 2005; Schouten, 1991).

## **2.5 Symbolic Interactionism**

As this thesis seeks to investigate the consumer-brand love relationship that individuals form with brands, it is important to understand the fundamentals of how and why consumers integrate brands into their daily lives and the symbolic meanings that they represent. Derived from the fields of psychology and sociology, symbolic interactionism addresses how individuals make



sense of their world and how interactions with others, along with their actions affect interpretations and meanings (Solomon, 1983). As its title indicates, this perspective places an emphasis on the use of symbols and more specifically how consumers through the use of material cues interpret their social environment. It centers on the notion that individuals subjectively evaluate their social environment (Sanders, 1987). Though symbols are the outcome of social interactions, they simultaneously shape social interactions and consumers' social realities (Milliken & Schreiber, 2012). In research by Kinch (1967) he argues that symbolic interactionism addresses three fundamental aspects, namely:

- 1) *A consumer's self-concept is based on perceptions of the responses of others.*
- 2) *A consumer's self-concept functions to direct behavior.*
- 3) *A consumer's perception of the responses of others to some degree reflects those responses (cited in Solomon, 1983, p.320).*

Along with Kinch's (1967) arguments, research addressing this perspective tends to highlight the social nature of the self (Solomon, 1983). One's sense of self is oftentimes influenced by social interactions and by estimates of other individuals' perceptions (Strykler, 1968 cited in Solomon 1983). Thus, the self-identity is under constant alteration as the social environment and the social roles present tend to change over time (Solomon, 1983). The mind is furthermore considered to constitute a core concept of symbolic interactionism, as it internally serves as a communication tool by which the individual symbolically interacts with his or her own self (Milliken & Schreiber, 2012). Through the social interactions that consumers partake in, definitions, meanings, symbols and perspectives of others are internalized (Milliken & Schreiber, 2012). In line with the concept of the extended self, brands can be viewed as symbols that individuals incorporate into their lives to communicate their self-identity (Alvarez & Fournier, 2013). As individuals go through different phases in their lives, the brands that are used to express a sense of self tend to vary accordingly and as one phase ends, the termination of the consumer-brand relationship is likely to follow. Over time, the "symbolic meanings in environment change and evolve" and as individuals are reliant on these symbols in means of defining their social realities, their self-definitions, the individual needs to adapt their self-definition in accordance to the symbolic changes around them (Claxton & Murray, 1994, p.423).

There is no denying the personal and symbolic aspects of consumption and how they are greater outweighing functional benefits when making purchasing decisions (Levy, 1959). According to Levy (1959), “people buy things not only for what they can do, but for what they mean,” further emphasizing the symbolic meanings associated to consumption (p.118). As previously mentioned, symbols can aid as a categorisation tool as individuals’ consumption oftentimes reflects a social position in society and its belonging (Levy, 1959). It has further been noted that the meanings that individuals interpret from social interactions can be ascribed to objects that consumers engage with (Milliken & Schreiber, 2012). Possessions like clothing, jewelry, automobiles and such, are argued to predict characteristics and behaviors of others and are oftentimes connected to self-attribution (Solomon, 1983). That being said, it is important to investigate the underlying aspects of consumption in order to better understand the love relationship that consumers form with brands, and more specifically, the changes that ultimately lead consumers to terminate this bond.

### **3. METHODOLOGY**

*This section will begin by presenting the ontological and epistemological assumptions at the core of this thesis, paving the way for the methodology of choice. Furthermore, the specific individual methods and techniques carried out will be discussed. Lastly, the limitations, along with the ethical considerations and precautions taken to insure the trustworthiness of this thesis will be outlined.*

#### **3.1 Scientific Stance**

When aiming to appoint an appropriate research method, it is important to consider the philosophical stance that will be taken in order to determine what data needs to be collected and its purpose, along with how the data should be interpreted to answer the research question (Easterby-Smith, Thorpe & Jackson, 2012). Furthermore, one must also take ontological and epistemological considerations into account to lay the foundation for the research method of choice (Easterby-Smith et al., 2012). While ontology deals with the nature of reality, and more specifically an individual's role in the construct of the social world, epistemology, focuses on how individuals interpret reality and how knowledge of the social world is attained (Bryman & Bell, 2011).

As this research aims to uncover findings related to brand love and aspects that lead consumers to terminating their deep relationships to the brand, a constructionist ontological position is employed. A constructionist ontological stance highlights how social actors play an active role in constructing and reconstructing social meanings and experiences, which is aligned with consumers' active participation in the consumer-brand relationship, where consumers and brands represent the social actors of this research (Bryman & Bell, 2011). Consumers' experiences, such as the termination of their consumer-brand love relationships, are "socially constructed" by social actors and not objective (Easterby-Smith et al., 2012, p.64). With that said, the constructionist position allows for the taking into account the individual consumer experiences within the specific relationships examined. It also falls in line with the notion that the social world and its categories develop through interaction.

Due to the exploratory focus of this thesis, a scientific approach that allows subjective meanings and values to be shared is deemed appropriate. In regards to this, an interpretive position is taken in terms of epistemology, allowing for the better exploration of consumers' experiences with beloved brands and their experiences of the termination process (Bryman & Bell, 2011). Interpretivism places a focus on the importance of understanding the subjective nature of human behaviors and their social actions rather than aiming to explain the behavior in its totality. Consumers' knowledge of factors which lead to the termination of their brand love relationships can only truly be obtained through their understandings of this social action (Bryman & Bell, 2011). Also, due to the perceived research gap on the termination of brand love relationships, an interpretive approach provides better opportunities to delve deep into the unknown, to uncover and provide better insights of a social phenomenon (Bryman & Bell, 2011). Through the understanding of consumers' perceptions, their social actions can then be further interpreted (Bryman & Bell, 2011).

### **3.2 Research Strategy**

In accordance with the philosophical foundation in place and the aim of providing knowledge in regards to the termination of the consumer brand love relationship, a qualitative approach is employed. A qualitative approach "relies primarily on human perception and understanding" and seeks to explore patterns, meanings and symbols rather than to measure data in regards to a set hypothesis (Stake, 2010, p. 11; Bryman & Bell, 2011). The guiding research question of this thesis is greater interested in gaining personal knowledge and deep insight in how consumers experience relationship termination rather than obtaining objective measurements or analyzing possible hypotheses, which would fall greater in line with a quantitative approach (Stake, 2010). Moreover, the goal is not to discover a concrete cause-and-effect explanation, but rather to generate in-depth interpretive and subjective data (Stake, 2010; McCracken, 1988). This further reinstates the explorative nature of this study, which aims to explore a phenomenon that lacks much previous research.

As mentioned, previous consumer research tends to focus on the factors that develop, constitute and sustain brand love rather than on those that lead to its termination (Albert & Merunka, 2008; Batra et al., 2012; Carroll & Ahuvia, 2006; Hemetsberger et al., 2009). The exploratory nature and unfamiliarity of this research makes it important to not have any pre-set expectations, as unknown factors might then be overlooked (Bryman & Bell, 2011; McCracken, 1988). That being said, this thesis takes an inductive approach, with the aim of using the empirical findings to provide new insight within the consumer-brand relationship and the concept of brand love in regards to termination (Bryman & Bell, 2011). In accordance with the inductive approach, this thesis aims to draw interpretations from the findings, as consumers' lived experiences are examined to better understand the end of their consumer-brand relationships (Bryman & Bell, 2011).

A pure inductive approach is arguably difficult to achieve, due to the existing, preconceived knowledge of the researchers (Bryman & Bell, 2011). It should be noted that though inductive and deductive approaches do differ in process, a research strategy often entails degrees of each (Bryman & Bell, 2011). With that said, this thesis, though inductive, is iterative in nature, as there was a constant interplay between theory and empirics, causing a hint of a deductive element. Although a theoretical framework did aid in the strategy and exploratory process, the approach was nevertheless inductive, as the research topic was approached with the intention of open-mindedness regarding theoretical knowledge rather than with the intent of testing theory.

### **3.3 Research Method**

Phenomenological in-depth interviews are deemed the appropriate research method of choice given the philosophical foundation and exploratory inductive approach chosen (Thompson, Pollio, & Locander, 1989). A phenomenological philosophy aims to provide qualitative evidence based on individuals' subjective experiences and meanings, which is why this approach has been appointed to our research (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000; Mayoh & Onwuegbuzie, 2015; Thompson, et al., 1989). Within phenomenology, two different focuses are present, one that is more descriptive in its nature and the other more interpretive. As the findings will be based on qualitative data, where the interest is in the context of what and how experiences are expressed

and shared, an interpretive stance is taken, oftentimes referred to as a hermeneutic phenomenological approach (Mayoh & Onwuegbuzie, 2015; Thompson et al., 1989).

Interviews have been selected as the method of choice as they are often used when seeking “unique information or interpretation[s] held by the person interviewed” (Stake, 2010, p.95). Moreover, qualitative interviews allow for an emphasis to be placed on the “interviewee’s point of view,” along with the opportunity of understanding what the interviewee deems significant (Bryman & Bell, 2011, p.466; Thompson, et al., 1989). Considering the exploratory nature of the research question, which highlights the unique instances of consumer-brand relationship termination, it is of utmost importance to employ a method that allows for a deep investigation in order to potentially identify new dimensions of the concepts examined (Easterby-Smith et al., 2012; McCracken, 1988). Furthermore, the chosen method permits deep, detailed participant responses, which is desired when the topics are as nuanced and deep as relationships and relationship dissolution (Bryman & Bell, 2011). The chosen method also allows for flexibility, as it leaves room for the possibility of discovering new dimensions to the general research topic, as it encouraged the exploration of unique consumer experiences (Easterby-Smith et al., 2012).

Though some disadvantages with using a qualitative research method exists, such as not providing generalizable data and the gathering of subjective data, it was better suited for this thesis’ research question the aim has always been to explore and gain an understanding of relationship characteristics, rather than measuring and answering a specific question (Bryman & Bell, 2011). The method, and the data this thesis sought to collect, falls greater in line with a romanticist position, as the interviews were designed to mimic a more authentic interaction, aiming to establish a feeling of trust, with the main goal of understanding the interviewee’s experiences (Alvesson, 2003).

With a more romanticist position in mind, phenomenological in-depth interviews are even further acknowledged as the most suitable method. A phenomenological approach aims to understand a person’s behavior through their interpretations of the social world (Bryman & Bell, 2011). Phenomenological interviews are in-depth and are used to obtain a personal account of a certain experience (Thompson, Locander & Pollio, 1989). Interviews are often highly criticized due to the rather unavoidable presence of an interviewer’s personal bias and his or her inability to

disconnect their presence and knowledge from the interview. Nevertheless, a phenomenological stance recognizes the researchers inability to detach his or her assumptions and urges the researcher not to try to do so (Alvesson, 2003; Groenewald, 2004). However, as will be motioned, precautions have been taken to minimize bias to the best of the interviewers' abilities, permitting the interviewee to speak freely and with minimal influence.

### **3.3.1 Phenomenological interviews**

As previously mentioned, phenomenological in-depth interviews are deemed the best method of choice. More specifically, a face-to-face semi-structured design was employed to reap the benefits of the phenomenological, and interpretive stance taken, as it was of utmost importance to keep an open dialogue, inviting the uncovering of new and/or unique findings (Easterby-Smith et al., 2012). Phenomenological interviews are built to promote a conversational dialogue and are greater adapted to the mood of the interview (i.e. potential noise, stress, topics, tensions), as opposed to a strict linear session centered on questions and responses (Bryman & Bell, 2011; Thompson et al., 1989). The semi-structured approach was chosen to allow for a more natural discussion, as it can aid in the refrainment of the interviewer appearing to hold a hierarchical position during the interview (Thompson et al., 1989). Since the consumer-brand love relationship implies a strong, deep experience, a sense of equality and normality with the interviewer during the interview seemed to help warrant a better environment for the interviewee. Moreover, a less structured approach could aid in the interviewee feeling more comfortable and as a result, greater inclined to share personal opinions and experiences (Easterby-Smith et al., 2012). An entirely unstructured interview may be perceived better suited with phenomenological approach, as it is even more conversation based and hardly relies on the interviewer's interaction in regards to questions and topics mentioned, however, a semi-structured approach with a phenomenological lense was better suited with the time-frame, as it was important to attain as relevant of information as possible (Bryman & Bell, 2011).

The interviews were held in relatively private and quiet settings, such as the interviewee's home or a quiet café, in an attempt of maximizing the interviewee's comfort when sharing personal feelings and experiences (Bryman & Bell, 2011). An interview guide that consisted of questions and topics was used to aid in the semi-structured interviews (Appendix 1). Nevertheless, a

conversational feel was still implemented, permitting the interviewee to answer freely. Also, the questions presented in the guide did not necessarily follow a linear format, allowing for the possibility of addressing questions and topics that were not in the interview guide to be brought up if the conversation permitted. This once again created a setting for more natural conversation (Bryman & Bell, 2011). The guide also helped insure that the interviews touched upon necessary topics regardless of who was being interviewed or the lead interviewer. As mentioned, this was important given that the time limit only allowed for a certain amount of interviews to be conducted (Bryman & Bell, 2011).

Precaution was also taken when regarding the ways in which questions were worded in order to avoid asking leading questions. A great emphasis was placed on being attentive and listening thoroughly throughout the interview (Bryman & Bell, 2011). Though a strict linear format was disregarded, taking into deep consideration conversation flow, a degree of order was implemented in regards to general topic areas in the interview guide (Bryman & Bell, 2011). Towards the end of the interview more hypothetical questions/topics regarding brands that participants claimed to currently “love” were presented if time and conversation allowed. These hypothetical scenarios consisted of topics in lieu of aspects that could lead to the participant to end the purchasing and/or using of the said brand. Given that such topics were hypothetical in nature and not current real life experiences, they were saved for the end in order to not prime the participant during the interview process. However, such topics were brought up if allowed because the information had potential relevance and significance. Furthermore, an interview guide that was structured in this way, allowed for greater flexibility in the interviews, while still providing topics of interest given the research question (Bryman & Bell, 2011). In line with the hermeneutic phenomenological stance, the questions asked were adapted to fit the terminology of the participants in order to invite them to share their experiences as freely as possible and lead the course of interview (Thompson, Pollio & Locander, 1994).

The participants were asked permission to be voice-recorded prior to the start of the interview in order to allow for more sufficient data analysis. The recordings were then transcribed to ensure that they were correctly phrased, allowing for better interpretation. More specifically, audio-recordings were important given the interpretive stance, since it is necessary to as closely capture



how the interviewees expressed and shared their experiences as possible (Bryman & Bell, 2011). This approach made it possible for the interviewer to actively participate in the interview, in terms of both interaction and interpretation. Taking notes throughout the interview could have preoccupied the interviewers from such participation (Bryman & Bell, 2011).

### **3.4 Sampling Method**

It was important to take into consideration the sampling method of choice in order to amplify the possibility of obtaining insightful data given the purpose of the research (Bryman & Bell, 2011). Moreover, the limited time frame needed to be considered when choosing a method that would maximize the likelihood of receiving sufficient data. Since the research investigates consumer-brand relationships, with the aim of uncovering aspects of consumer behavior, the complexity and possible sensitivity of the topic was also acknowledged (Bryman & Bell, 2011). As it may be rather personal for participants to open up about their emotions and experiences, it was important to seek out the right participants. Furthermore, the research question implies that the participants needed to have once “loved” a brand, which they have ended association with and/or use of. With these important aspects in mind, a purposive sampling method was employed (Bryman & Bell, 2011). Such a method allowed for the systematic and strategic seeking of participants that fit the research criteria. Given the authors’ knowledge of the research area, it was important to actively seek out individuals who had experiences in line with the research question (Marshall, 2006).

With a longer time frame, it may have been feasible to conduct interviews with a variety of participants, uncovering in the interview whether or not they have had experiences that are in accordance with the research question; however, for the sake of productivity, a purposive sampling method was deemed most appropriate (Marshall, 1996). To achieve this, an advertisement for individuals who had stopped using or purchasing a brand, which they once considered very highly was fourth targeting the authors’ social network. Though this resulted in a nonprobability sample, which is not generalizable, the qualitative nature of the study does not aim to collect generalizable data, but rather to explore and provide insights regarding a particular phenomenon (Bryman & Bell, 2011; McCracken, 1988). As the sample of individuals were not

selected to represent some part of the larger world, but rather to examine a complex culture, character or logic, the sample could arguably be rather small (McCracken, 1988). According to McCracken (1988), it is of higher relevance and importance to work with fewer individuals and conduct longer interviews than superficially work with many. In this thesis ten in-depth interviews were deemed an appropriate sample size. The number of participants were not strictly predetermined but rather, the sample size was determined as the process progressed. Furthermore, staying true to the iterative nature of this thesis allowed for the data obtained to guide the number of subjects interviewed (Marshall, 1996). It was found that around the eighth interview, theoretical saturation seemed to have been reached as new “categories, themes [and] explanations” stopped appearing at that time (Bryman & Bell, 2011; Marshall, 1996, p. 523). Nevertheless, ten interviews were conducted in order to help better assure that theoretical saturation had been achieved. This number was also achievable given the time frame.

| <b>Interviewee</b> | <b>Interview length</b> |
|--------------------|-------------------------|
| <b>Erik</b>        | 0:30:43                 |
| <b>Hanna</b>       | 0:30:32                 |
| <b>Sara</b>        | 0:32:38                 |
| <b>Jessica</b>     | 0:56:40                 |
| <b>Tina</b>        | 0:51:06                 |
| <b>Becky</b>       | 0:40:41                 |
| <b>Derek</b>       | 1:05:02                 |
| <b>Michael</b>     | 0:39:33                 |
| <b>Brad</b>        | 0:35:30                 |
| <b>Lisa</b>        | 1:03:05                 |

### **3.5 Data Collection & Analysis**

The data gathered as the foundation for the analysis consist of both primary and secondary data. While secondary data is already established, primary data is unique in its nature, collected for a specific purpose (Easterby-Smith et al., 2012). The secondary data derives from prior research and theories gathered from scientific journals and books (Easterby-Smith et al., 2012). The primary data has been generated from the ten qualitative interviews that were conducted.

Due to the chosen research method and the interpretive stance taken, consumer's meanings, values and lived experiences constitute the foundation for the analysis. When gathering and interpreting the data, an iterative strategy was appointed as a continuous back and forth process from theory to primary data took place in order to better interpret and make sense of the findings (Bryman & Bell, 2011). As it was important to make sure that brand love was present in the interviews, the iterative strategy allowed for a deeper investigation of the findings, along with the possibility of new emerging ideas and their connection to theory before proceeding further with the gathering of data. In accordance with this, the transcription work was done continuously as this allowed for a greater reflection on the findings and the reevaluation of the topics and questions covered throughout the data collection process.

As this thesis aimed to uncover subjective, cultural viewpoints and personal consumer experiences, a hermeneutic circle approach was appointed when analyzing the empirical data (Thompson et al., 1994). This hermeneutic approach allowed to greater interpret the cultural narratives of the interviewees that underlie their lived experiences with brands that they have felt deeply connected to (i.e. loved) and how they experienced the dissolution of these deep relationships (Thompson et al., 1994). As this thesis investigates consumers' experiences with loved brands, a rather complex and subjective topic, there is a strong need to assess and interpret each participant's experiences differently due to the nuances present. Furthermore, as this topic concerns consumers' relationships to symbols (i.e brands), interpretive symbolic metaphors allowed for the exploration of cultural meanings that constitute the foundation for individuals' self-interpretations. As mentioned earlier, it was important to delve deep into the lives of the interviewees to uncover hidden meanings, perceptions and beliefs that may have influenced their relations to loved brands, which was why questions regarding their background and attitudes were included in the interview guide. Due to this, it was possible to gather rich data that helped narrate the stories told by the participants (Ollerenshaw & Creswell, 2002). In order to develop themes for the analysis, in-vivo coding was employed, focusing on the language of the interviewees to ensure that their experiences, meanings and beliefs were expressed in a correct manner (Bryman & Bell, 2011; Strauss, 1987). In the process of thematizing the findings, certain patterns were identified as the interviews were transcribed and interpreted, which resulted in the following themes: *the brand as a direct connection to one's self-perception*, *the brand as a*

*social connection, termination due to the consumer going through a transitory phase and lastly, the mass consumption of the loved brand leading to a dilution of identification with the brand.* To ensure intercoder reliability, the transcriptions were coded independently to develop a common understanding of the findings and the potential themes. Present discrepancies were furthermore discussed in order to ensure the transcriptions had been assessed correctly (Burla, Knierim, Barth, Liewald, Duetz & Abel, 2008).

### **3.6 Trustworthiness**

To overcome issues regarding the trustworthiness of this thesis, Lincoln and Guba's four criteria of *credibility, transferability, dependability* and *conformability* were employed (Lincoln & Guba, p. 300). In terms of ensuring the thesis' credibility, all interviews were recorded and transcribed to ensure that they were interpreted and presented in a reliable way through the use of exact quotations. Another factor that enhances credibility is the use of a random sample (Bryman & Bell, 2011). However, as this research addresses a rather personal phenomenon (i.e. the brand love relationship and its termination) a purposive sample allowed for the attainment of deeper, more honest answers, which was why this potential advantage was overlooked (Bryman & Bell, 2011). The criterion transferability refers to the ability to transfer the research to another context, where an emphasis is put on a thorough and well-motivated method in order to ensure the fulfillment of this criterion. Within qualitative research, this is achieved when individuals unfamiliar with the study can relate to the results and the data gathered and be able to connect it to their own experiences (Shenton, 2004). By choosing a topic that is fairly relatable and personal to many individuals in combination with conducting in-depth interviews, an emphasis has been put on uncovering the context of the study in order to strengthen the transferability (Shenton, 2004). Dependability is tied to the difficulties in documenting the complete research process and the degree to which theoretical conclusions can be drawn from the empirical data (Bryman & Bell, 2011). Being aware of this potential weakness will aid in the process of conducting trustworthy research. In terms of the credibility, as mentioned in the phenomenological interview section, factors regarding the role of the interviewer have been greatly regarded, such as taking precaution to not allow biased thinking to cloud the presented data. As a way to overcome this potential threat, all interviews have been recorded, transcribed

and in-vivo coded to ensure the credibility of the findings. Moreover, to further strengthen this criterion, an emphasis was put on describing how and why certain interpretations were made and proving that the findings derived from the empirical material. This was achieved by conducting deep interviews containing rich information and quotes that were used to thematize the findings (Tobin & Begley, 2004). In order to avoid misinterpretations and a possible interviewer-effect, two interviewers were present during all interviews and the coding process was completed independently to ensure intercoder reliability (Burla et al., 2008; Bryman & Bell, 2011).

### **3.7 Ethical Considerations**

It is of utmost importance to take into account the ethical aspects that needed to be abided by given the method of choice (Bryman & Bell, 2011). Necessary precautions were taken to avoid “harm to the participants,” “lack of informed consent,” “invasion of privacy,” and “deception” (Bryman & Bell, 2011, p.128). As the interviews were in-depth in nature, a greater need for reassurance was present (Thompson et al., 1989). First and foremost, communication was forthright, gaining informed consent from the participants before conducting the interviews. Each participant received a brief description of the purpose of the study, providing them with information about the topic without revealing too much about what was being investigated. More specifically, the fact that topic of the study regarded their relationship to brands that they are or have been connected to but no longer use, was explained in order to provide them with a fair impression of the topics that would be addressed in the interview, without disclosing too much information as to bias them. Participants were also informed that the data obtained would be used for a master’s thesis at Lund University. Such information was given in order to provide sufficient information to make a comprehensive decision in regards to their participation (Bryman & Bell, 2011).

The phenomenological nature of the interviews implied an importance of established trust between the interviewer and the interviewee, which further allowed for open forthright communication in regards to the topic. Such awareness helped avoid deception (Bryman & Bell, 2011). As mentioned before, participants were also asked if they were willing to have the interview audio-recorded. They were guaranteed anonymity and informed about their ability to

end participation at any point of the process and/or the option to not answer any questions that they did not want to. Sensitivity was taken in all interviews, as different participants may have judged different topics intrusive. Furthermore, participants were appointed fake names in all published information to avoid invasion of privacy (Bryman & Bell, 2011).

### **3.8 Limitations And Critique**

Despite the appropriateness of this method in regards to the exploratory topic and the benefits associated with a qualitative approach, there are some potential limitations that must be evaluated. Conducting qualitative research is not without challenges and as discussed above, many in which are related to the trustworthiness of study (Bryman & Bell, 2011). However, the biggest critique has been aimed towards the lack of producing generalizable data and the inability to draw linear conclusions and parallels (Bryman & Bell, 2011). The small purposive sample and the use of a qualitative method does limit the contribution from being generalizable, however, as the aim of this study is to develop a deeper understanding of a particular phenomenon by gathering subjective and interpretive data, the limitations associated to the methodological choices have been greatly regarded (Bryman & Bell, 2011). In line with the exploratory and interpretive research question, this type of research has received some critique in terms of being too subjective (Bryman & Bell, 2011; Easterby-Smith et al., 2012). The data gathered is very much reliant on the participation of the researcher, where subjective feelings and opinions could potentially be present. The subjectivity of the researcher might also have an affect on the interpretation of the data, as it risks being biased from the researcher's established viewpoints and preconceived knowledge (Bryman & Bell, 2011). Being aware of such dangers however, will aid in the process of gathering trustworthy data.

## 4. FINDINGS AND ANALYSIS

*In this chapter the empirical material gathered from ten semi-structured in-depth interviews will be presented and analyzed to exemplify the concept of brand love and the termination process of such a relationship. The empirical data has been framed against the theoretical foundation, ultimately resulting in the presentation of two broader categories, namely that of the consumers' brand love stories and subsequently, the break-ups that they experienced. Within these categories four main themes have been identified. Within the participant's' brand love relationships, two fundamental themes have surfaced, specifically the brand as a direct connection to one's self-perception and the brand as a social connection to others. Furthermore, two main underlying themes were identified in regards to the break-up of the consumer-brand love relationship, specifically the consumer going through a transitory phase and the mass consumption of the brand leading to a dilution of identification with the brand.*

As previously argued the concept of brand love needs to be examined from the ground up rather than merely applying interpersonal love concepts to consumers' love for brands, which is why an emphasis has been placed on exploring the dimensions of these love relationships. An adaptation of Batra et al.'s (2012), brand love framework aided in the following section of our analysis, with the aim of better understanding the consumers' brand-love relationships and ultimately, the reasons for which these consumers may have terminated their relationships to loved brands. Hence, before presenting the findings on the termination of the consumer-brand love relationship, it is important to understand the roots of this love relationship, which is why a section devoted to the findings, regarding brand love relationships will follow.

### 4.1 The Consumer-brand Relationship Love Story

As the criteria for our sample was for the interviewees to have loved a brand in their past that they no longer consume, all interviews had dimensions of brand love present. How the interviewees experienced the love for the brands varied and the foundation of their love relationships were centered on different reasons and explanations, but nevertheless, they all had experienced feelings of love for brands, which the examples below will help greater

conceptualize. When Lisa was asked about how she would describe a brand love relationship she answered:

Well, for me love for a brand, is the happy feeling you get when you wear their items, or that feeling that you get when you purchase something new from them. Like how I feel for Kate Spade. I just love going into their stores and checking out what's new and then maybe getting something new to add to my collection. I think it is also tied to your past experiences with the brand, like when I think of Kate Spade, I sort of think of all the stuff I've gotten from them over the years.

As the quote implies, Lisa's love for Kate Spade can be viewed as a higher emotional state, where this perceived pleasure of visiting the stores and purchasing the brand, arguably has a positive effect on the love towards the brand (Batra et al., 2012). Furthermore, it seems as her love for Kate Spade is rooted in the history that Lisa has shared with the brand, where nostalgia and the memories connected to Kate Spade may serve to further strengthen the relationship (Batra et al., 2012). The length of use is furthermore something that Batra et al., (2012) point out as a dimension of brand love, where the history of the brand relationship helps shape an individual's identity and future purchase behavior. The length of the relationship is an element of the brand love relationship that Becky emphasized when discussing her love for Nike. She mentions that she always bought Nike growing up and how she has since childhood remained loyal to the brand when purchasing sports items and athletic wear. According to Becky, she cannot fathom ever switching to a competitor brand, which she expresses as:

Umm yeah because I have this fixed idea that all the sport things that I want to buy have to be from Nike. I can buy H&M sportswear but I can't buy like Adidas, Puma, like if I buy a professional brand it has to be Nike, otherwise I can buy sportswear from H&M, Lindex, something like that but professional sportswear has to be Nike both for shoes and the clothes.

Becky's experienced inability to replace the brand Nike has further been emphasized in research by Batra et al. (2012), in which they mention that with the uniqueness of the brand (i.e. the inability to replace it) the emotional attachment seems to be higher, indicating a higher level of love. Furthermore, Jessica, one of interviewees who shares a long history with Harper's Bazaar



and Vogue, represents one of the stronger relationships. A relationship colored by a long and frequent period of usage: “I am buying the same two magazine [brands], they are British, for I think the first that I have are from 2006 and I basically have every number [issue] from those years.” The relationships that Jessica has with British Harper’s Bazaar and Vogue do not only illustrate frequent ones, but also relationships rooted in a deep commitment and loyalty for the two brands, lasting about a decade to date. A high level of investment can be observed as Jessica alludes to all that she has “done” for the relationship, saying: “But then also because I have gone through a lot with them. I can’t really throw them away either because then all the stuff that I have done for them would be, sort-of wasted” (Batra, et al., 2012). When discussing her relationship to Vogue and Harper’s Bazaar, she gave the impression that ending this relationship would cause inconsistency with her previous behaviors and choices. As she mentioned in the above quote, she had gone through a long history with these brands and in the interview she brought up how she had paid to get these magazines shipped from London, England to Lund, Sweden, causing her to spend quite a lot of money to have them with her, once again exemplifying her level of investment in this relationship. She also mentioned that they take up quite the storage space in her apartment, but nevertheless, she could not dream of getting rid of them, and most certainly would “never buy a new magazine [brand] to replace [them].”

One of our interviewees, Erik, shares great devotion for his favorite brands, in particular Comme des Garçons, comparing his relationships to brands with interpersonal relationships, stating that:

It’s like the brands become like your friends in some way and you feel very connected to them, and like if someone would exploit the brand and if the brand would like behave in an unethical way that would affect me a lot more. These [are] brands that I have, that I keep close to myself and if like H&M would do something unethical, which they probably have I wouldn’t care at all, but if some of my favorite brands would do something, something bad I would probably get like mad at them and probably like stop buying them.

As the quote implies, he is arguably invested in the relationships with his loved brands and considers them to a high regard, where a betrayal or misconduct would be taken rather personally, and ultimately would lead to him straying away from the brand and possibly even permanently terminating the relationship. This passion that Erik shares with his favorite brands

has been argued in prior research as being the core of the affective consumer-brand relationship, leading consumers to develop feelings of love towards brands (Batra et al., 2012; Carroll & Ahuvia, 2006). Erik explains his behavior towards the brands that he loves as:

I develop very strong connections to brands because if I find a brand that I really like...I often consume stuff from that brand solely. And when I have created my little family of brands [in air quotations], when I think that I need something new, I immediately think about my or associate my need to these brands.

Erik represents one of the most brand conscious interviewees, undeniably establishing close relationships to brands, referring to them as friends or family. Additionally, a level of inclusivity can be examined as he expresses that he would solely purchase from a handful of brands, which he has developed deep connections to. He explains that when he discovers a brand that he truly loves, he often develops a form of “obsession” stating, “ when I really start liking a brand, I often get obsessed and I want to buy like everything from that brand.” Erik displays a form of investment, which can be regarded as deep level of commitment, similar to that of worshiping the brand (Redden & Steiner, 2000; Heinrich et al., 2012).

Similar to Erik, Becky also found herself developing “obsession-like” behaviors but to the Asos brand that she previously loved. This was a relationship that she started when she was in her teenage years and it continued into her young adult years, maintaining a strong foundation for over half a decade. She discovered their online site through a famous blogger that she at that time seemed to admire, and she explains her strong commitment to this brand as:

I use to go there everyday after school and in the “new in shoes” and “new in clothes” and scan everything and I did shop there quite often sometimes once a month sometimes once every second month and I think I knew every item on the site because I went there everyday. I was like obsessed with it and I had all these “wish lists” and stuff and I’d bookmark all the things that I wanted. Yeah, yeah a bit crazy actually.

Looking back on the relationship with Asos, Becky seems rather shocked that she was so heavily engaged with this brand. However, in prior research, this type of commitment is argued to be one

of the elements signifying brand love (Batra et al., 2012; Fournier, 1998). Batra et al. (2012), emphasize the need for active participation in the relationship in order for brand love to be present. This involves for the consumers to actively talk about the brand, think about it and engage with it (Batra et al., 2012). When further discussing Becky's relationship to Asos, she brings up how she and her friends all stayed updated with the latest arrivals and how the shared interest with her friends seemed to strengthen the relationship. She states "you talked to friends and they knew all the things that were on there so you would say 'oh did you see that new dress?'" Also, she refers to how she and her friends sometimes got together and made bigger orders in order to share the shipping costs. As it can be observed, Becky partook a highly active role in this relationship.

The above consumer experiences help exemplify the concept of brand love from the ground up as the interviewees' experiences are examined on a pure consumer-brand basis, rather than rooted in interpersonal love theories. As the consumers shared their brand love relationship stories, it became rather evident that though many of Batra et al's (2012), brand love dimensions can be examined, two fundamental characteristics were overwhelmingly present within the brand love relationships of the participants. The first of which centered on a consumer's immense identification with their love brand. Examples of this level of identification will be presented in the following section.

#### **4.1.1 You make me, me: *The love brand as an identity builder***

As mentioned in the theoretical foundation, a consumer is more inclined to identify with a brand that they love (Albert & Merunka, 2008; Batra et. al, 2012). In accordance with this statement, the empirical findings overwhelmingly indicate that self-identification with a brand is a core element of the consumer-brand love relationship. This can be exemplified through Lisa's description of her relationship with her love brand, Kate Spade, as she put it, "Kate Spade is really like me, you know? With their chic, simplistic bags and jewelry, that's exactly how I like to look, I'm chic but you know like simple." Furthermore, when discussing the love present in the consumer-brand relationship and the strong emotions that follow, many of the interviewees brought up particular items and possessions that they loved or had previously loved as examples

(Belk, 1988). These loved possessions often seemed to serve as an extension of the self as the interviewees felt closely connected to these objects (Ahuvia, 2005; Belk, 1988). For instance, Jessica brought up a ring that she had inherited from her great grandmother as a loved possession: “ It’s a big diamond ring. And I don’t really use it often and I think that is such a thing, you know if someone would come in here and steal all of my things or if my place would burn down, then that is the one thing I can’t replace.” The love for this particular item can be described with feelings equal to interpersonal characteristics, as Jessica brings up the feelings and memories of her great grandmother being closely attached to this item as her main reason for loving it; however, the love is entirely one-sided. According to Lastovicka and Sirianni (2011), consumers tend to create lifestyles and identities around the possessions that they are deeply connected to and that consumers through the use of certain possessions and objects communicate a sense of self (Belk, 1988). This is something that Derek brings up when talking about his loved Evisu sweater that he bought when he was in his teenage years:

It was Evisu...The cool people in school had it...at that point it was my only cool shirt...And it was even cooler because it was from that brand...But I pretty much liked showing it off and saying yeah it’s Evisu. Because it was pretty much one of the top brands at that time.

In line with Belk’s (1988) argument of objects and possessions being greatly incorporated to the extended self, as means of expressing one’s identity to others, Derek seem have to used the brand Evisu as a way to communicate a desired self-image to his classmates. He seemed to be under the impression that the association to this object would attribute him with similar features, in this case “coolness.” In accordance with this perception, Aledin (2012) argue for how the strongest of bonds that consumers establish are oftentimes related to individuals and objects that reinforce their own self-perceptions.

Belk (1988), further implies that if a possession or item is incorporated into the consumer’s self-concept or image, the loss of this possession could signify a lessening of the self, which can be expressed similar to the loss of a loved one (McLeod, 1984 cited in Belk, 1988). In the empirical findings, Jessica opened up about an occurrence where she experienced the loss of a loved possession, her newly purchased Michael Kors bag. She indicates that Michael Kors was a brand that she really loved and had at the time greatly looked forward to purchasing an item from. She

accounts that she followed Michael Kors' Instagram account and reflects on the images that they post as consistent with her desired identity, with the images being "more like the person she wants to be." This was a bag that she had not only saved up money to buy, but it was also from a limited edition line, which made the bag even more special to her. When we asked her about her feelings after this event she stated: "oh, I cried [laughter], and then I sort of, then I realized, 'oh god I'm so silly.' But you know, you don't like that feeling when something is lost." When asking Jessica about how she coped with the experience of losing a loved possession, she refers to it as "sad." She especially grieved this loss because as the item was from a limited edition, she was unable to replace it. This is something that prior research has shed light on, where Russell and Shau (2014) claim that a rebuilding process is bound to occur after such an event. In Jessica's case, this happened when she bought the same bag but in a different color as soon as she had received her insurance money. She justifies her purchase by:

I had seen another model, of a Michael Kors bag and I wanted it. Which I bought, which might sound a bit silly but I think also since I lost the first bag I really wanted the same bag- ish...

This occurrence can serve as a rebuilding phase, where replacing one item with another might have aided in the grieving process and potentially eased the experienced sorrow (Russell & Schau, 2014). When Jessica explained her relationship to this particular bag that she lost, she revealed pride in owning it, that "it was really hard to get" and how she had received admiration from a sales representative at Michael Kors, exclaiming, "oh my god where did you buy it?" As mentioned earlier, the grief of this lost possession can be observed as being tied to Jessica's self-perception, with this particular bag helping Jessica communicate a desired self-identity, making the loss of such a possession even more tragic (Belk, 1988).

As previously mentioned, there is arguably a connection between consumer's identity and the notion of love, where objects and possessions, along with particular brands, often serve to communicate existing or desired self-identities (Ahuvia, 2005; Belk, 1988). As consumers go through different phases of their lives, they tend to develop close relationships to brands that give meaning and enhance their current identities and lifestyles (Breazeale & Ponder, 2012). In this way, consumers seem to surround themselves around brands and items that project a desired self-image in addition to their own perceived image, which is something that has been identified

countless amounts of times in the empirical findings. Lisa explained that her love for the brand Anthropologie probably started because of her desire to emulate a classic and vintage inspired image:

I just use to love that look you know? The look of the vintage-y classy girl...I just really wanted to seem like old-fashion but still classic and Anthropologie had that look.

Erik also describes the use of brands to portray his desired identity when he explained his style which was inspired by the famous TV show, the OC, explaining that his love brand, Penguin helped him achieve his desired Californian, OC-inspired, identity:

We wanted to be those guys like, Seth Cohen, and he wore that brand all the time. And that was the reason...we wanted to be like those people...like our reference group.

In addition Sara explained that her love for the brand Daniel Wellington is greatly connected to her conservative identity, explaining that she wears their classic watches because they enhance her conservative sense of style, and ultimately her perceived self- identity.

The above examples help gain a better understanding of the various means by which the interviewees experienced love towards the objects, and more specifically, the brands in their lives. These examples were deemed important, as the self-identification with a brand seemed to be a key indicator of a brand love relationship. The other underlying element of brand love relationships discovered is the sense of belonging that a love brand provides the consumer. This theme will be further discussed in the following section to help better grasp the elements, which lay the foundation of the brand love relationships experienced by our interviewees.

#### **4.1.2 We belong together: *The love brand as a means of connection***

Findings from our empirical material often indicated that the brands the interviewees developed strong relationships and connections to, serve to strengthen their belongingness to certain social groups and their identity projects. Derek, a 24-year-old student in business administration talks about how he used certain brands and items to show belonging to certain social groups

throughout different phases of his life. When talking about his prior love for the brand Ralph Lauren, a brand that he deeply loved from his teenage to young adult years, he states:

Well most of the people that I went school with had this preppy style, so first of all I think it must have been a way to fit into the crowd, but first of all I had started to read both King magazine and café magazine, two Swedish fashion magazines on a monthly basis and I think at that time they were kind of preppy because that was sort in at that time. So I was dressing quite preppy from like sixteen until must have been twenty-one or something like that.

According to him, the association to Ralph Lauren helped him express a sense of belonging, in this case to the rather unanimous preppy style present at his high school. Coming from a small town in Skåne with few different shopping options available to later starting high school in one of the bigger cities, it seemed rather important for Derek to fit in. When describing his high school he mentions “there were a lot of people that were high pretentious and the school had a rumor to be a bit snobby.” When talking about his high school years, he very much associates them with the brand Ralph Lauren. According to him, most of his friends were pretty much dressed the same at that time, all of them wearing Ralph Lauren. He describes this way of dressing as: “It was like the top thing to have and we were really cool and we thought we were cool when we were wearing it. Big logos and all of that you know this guy riding a pony with a polo stick.” As symbols, such as brands, often serve as categorization tools, as a means of evaluating others and their social positions, the association to certain brands can in turn attribute certain characteristics back to the individual (Belk 1988; Kleine, Kleine & Allen 1995; Levy 1959). In Derek’s case, the association to Ralph Lauren seemed to arguably serve as a way of showing belongingness to the social culture present at his high school and a means of narrating his sense of self to others. What is further interesting is that he brings up the big logos as a style feature of the apparel used at that time, as a big logo is undeniably a strong symbol that immediately displays its belonging (Levy, 1959).

Brad, a 25-year-old finance student, shares one the longest and the most complex relationships to a brand that he used to love, namely the hockey team MIF Redhawks. His love for this brand goes back to when he joined their youth club at the age of five and continued till he was kicked out from their team at the age of 17. As this relationship has been present in some crucial phases

of Brad's life, such as him becoming a young adult and the independence process that comes along with that phase, this brand inevitably represented a big part of his identity projects (Alvarez & Fournier, 2013). When discussing his consumption of this particular brand, he reveals a high commitment, involving "going to their games, wearing their clothes, [and] being a part of the club". He refers to his club as his second home and he expresses great pride to being associated to the club as he states:

Yeah, I mean all of my friends that I had when I grew up were part of that same group. I think that we were considered the top of our uhhh, like top of society, I don't know. Like if somebody knew, you were considered a cool person, a cool guy if you were associated with that team.

It seems as if the association to this club provided Brad with desirable characteristics, such as *coolness* and status, similar to Derek's relationship with Ralph Lauren. The pride that Brad felt towards belonging to MIF became rather evident when he stated, "but I would say the biggest part was just people uhh seeing you as, that you belong there." He furthermore, seemed to enjoy the association to this brand as it served to boost his achievement of getting a spot in their highly competitive team, something that according to Brad required you to start practising at a really early age, preferably around the ages of five or six. This is something that he highlights when talking about how people from the outside perceived individuals associated with this brand as "mostly jealous and look[ing] up to you".

Sara, age 23, who grew up on the countryside, was first introduced to the affinity of brands by her newfound friend from the city of Stockholm when she was around 13-years-old. This newfound friend of hers started wearing these "special brands and clothes" that she expressed great pride in owning, which influenced Sara to do the same. At that time her older sister had also started to get involved with brands, which further influenced Sara's consumption, leading to the beginning of her love relationship to Miss Sixty. Miss Sixty was at that time a brand that Sara considered highly, with it being her first choice of purchase when she had the means to purchase a new item. She purchased the brand for a number of years and describes her love for the brand as being greatly connected to the way it connected her with her desired social group (Belk, 1988). When Sara talks about how this relationship started she mentions:



You wanted to belong, yeah something like that. I remember like, especially that time, it was so important when you saw someone with new jeans and the first thing you did was like “oh turn around” because you wanted to see the pockets, because then you could see the brand, because it was so important.

Furthermore, Erik explains his love for the brand Penguin, along with the brand as a means of helping build his identity, providing him with more of a connection to his desired social circle (Ahuvia, 2005; Belk, 1988). Erik admits that even today he is strongly influenced by people that he considers highly when it comes to purchasing brands and incorporating them into what he refers to as his “family of brands,” he states:

Umm, yeah, and to add brands, umm it’s often if someone is like “oh you should check out this brand,” if I have some friends that are also into the same stuff that I am, then I might find information about it, look at social media and internet web shops and stuff like that and see what kind of celebrities are using the brand and if I feel that this brand is like in connection to my own personality, I think that I might add it to this family.

As this quote implies, Erik is not just influenced by the people that he surrounds himself around, but also by other influential members of society, such as celebrities. According to Levy (1959), symbols such as brands, can be used to display a social position in society and one’s belonging to certain cultures. Similar to this, Erik seems to actively search for brands that are used by higher social groups in order to communicate his position and identity in society (Levy, 1959). We find this to be of great interest, especially as Erik tends to discontinue the brand-love relationship if his loved brand tends to become “too mainstream” or associated to people that he does not relate and identify with, which will be greater discussed in a following section.

It can also be noted that individuals’ identities tend to change over time as they end old phases of their lives to enter new territory, the social groups that they express senses of belonging to and the brands that they engage with tend to change accordingly (Claxton & Murray, 1994). Michael, a 26-year-old finance student at Lund University shares different stories from his life where his loved brands changed in accordance to the community that he at that time felt a sense of belonging to. For example, his love relationship for the brand Filippa K can be associated to the

period in his life where he began spending more time in the city of Stockholm, as opposed to the suburbs, where he grew up.

As it can be observed, these above experiences help exemplify the ways in which consumers use their love brands to connect with other individuals and social groups. The individuals interviewed greatly connected their love for a brand to the brand's ability to aid in their sense of belonging with others. We will later see that this sense of belonging seems to mainly be desired to a certain degree, with individuals not wanting to necessarily belong to the majority of society, but rather to a subset of individuals.

## **4.2 The Consumer-brand Love Relationship Break-up**

As consumers' experiences helped better conceptualize the concept of brand love, indicating self identity and social belongingness as key contributors to their relationships, their accounts of their consumer-brand love relationship break-ups allowed for a better understanding of the brands prior significance, along with the central roles the deep relationships played in the consumers' identities. As mentioned prior, the findings overwhelmingly fall in line with the notion that consumers have a tendency of identifying with the brands they love, consistently incorporating their loved brands in their processes of self expression or enhancement (Batra et al., 2012; Belk, 1988). The following section will introduce a key finding, which indicates that consumers tend to end their brand love relationships when the brand fails to fall in line with their changing and/or new self-perception.

### **4.2.1 It's not you, it's me: *Brand love termination as a transformation tool***

The findings indicate that the majority of the break-ups the individuals experienced were consumer-initiated and largely due to the individual transforming rather than the brand necessarily changing. These consumer-initiated acts of termination often led to the loved brand being replaced by another, more identity-suited brand or to the complete rejection of the brand, as a chapter or phase of the consumer's life came to a close (Fajer & Schouten, 1995). As mentioned, our findings show that a key constituent of brand love was the level at which

consumers identified with the said brands. On the same token, it can be observed that these particular individuals terminated their deep relationships as a means of signifying the ridding of a prior perceived role and/or as a way of transitioning to a different, new role (Marthur et al., 2006). Brad summed up this finding perfectly when he said, “I would say that I have had different brands during time periods of my life and I get a lot into them. I associate myself a lot with them during that time period.” In Hanna’s case, it can be observed that she had a deep love relationship with the shoe brand Vagabond, explaining that she went into the store during every shopping experience and never even considered a different brand when the time came for a new shoe purchase. She thought very highly of the brand and for a number of years purchased all the different types of shoes she owned from that brand; however, she will now no longer purchase anything from the brand as she explains that it is no longer her style:

It is probably not them that [have] changed. It is probably me. Just like getting older and like, liking different brands...It is like those shoes go together with my style at my earlier stages of life, like more sporty, [now I’m] going into the girly stage.

The Vagabond brand had a fairly established image, one that promoted a cool and comfortable vibe that she greatly desired. The brand itself remains the same and is still highly coveted by many; however, for Hanna the brand has been replaced with shoes from stores such as Zara as she explains that the cool, comfortable “chapter” of her life has come to a close as she now prioritizes looking “cute” over “cool and comfortable.” Furthermore, she explains that she once identified as being rather “sporty,” but now she has transitioned into a “girly stage.” The shoe brands she now chooses to consume help symbolically reinforce her transition into a more “girly” period of her life, with her overtly referring to her shoe consumption as surpassing that of pure functional purpose (Levy, 1991).

The brands individuals consume serve as transitory symbols, as they move in and out of different phases of their lives. As mentioned, when an individual experiences a role transition, their behaviors change, with such behaviors often directly impacting the possessions they associate with (Marthur et al., 2006). Furthermore, the empirical findings suggest that a ridding of an individual’s loved brand signifies a ridding of one’s prior identity. Tina explains that her love relationship with Acne changed as Acne’s luxurious image no longer felt connected to that of her

own. A relationship that for many years felt stable and irreplaceable began to no longer seem important. Tina explains that Acne began to feel “further away” from her own identity, as their “very luxurious” image began to feel “unreachable:”

They became very luxurious and that is something I didn't identify myself with...I think it really depend[s] on where you are in life and what kind of identity you feel and yeah. I feel like they didn't feel like my identity.

She admits that the price point of the brand didn't necessarily change, but as they began to seem more “luxurious,” they also began to not fit into the “simple” perception she had of herself. In this sense, the termination of her relationship with Acne solved an identity conflict, as the brand's luxurious image was conflicting with her own simplistic self-perception (Ahuvia, 2005). As Ahuvia (2005), has mentioned, loved objects serve as a means of resolving the identity conflicts consumers face, helping them symbolically defend and support their identity. Tina's situation falls in line with Ahuvia's (2005) findings as her loved objects from Acne were in fact serving as an identity conflict.

Similarly, for over five years of her life, Lisa had a deep relationship with the clothing and interior brand Anthropologie, going as far as admitting to feeling connected to the brand's sister brands. She explained her relationship as an all consuming one in the sense that she constantly kept up with the brand and almost solely purchased clothing from them:

You know, I just loved everything about Anthropologie and always kept up with their new products. I could pretty much tell exactly how much any item was. I almost didn't even shop from anywhere else for years, which is quite crazy given the price, but I just loved them!

She explained that at the time she could not fathom the relationship coming to an end and even imagined her future home as decorated in the brand's products; however, she now no longer purchases anything from the brand and explains that she “cannot imagine paying” for it anymore:

I don't think I would ever purchase anything from them now. I don't know, its weird, but now I do not see myself as the typical Anthropologie girl at all. You know, they have the whole classy

vintage style down perfectly and I loved that look but now I want to be seen as more classic modern, you know? The vintage-y look no longer is who I am now.

In Lisa's situation, the brand Anthropologie is still a highly coveted one by many; however, for her, it no longer fits with her perception of herself. She explains that she started working for a bigger company and purchased more subdued "modern classy" items, which felt more "business-like." She then explained that though Anthropologie still has really nice items, which are still "classy," they do not fit into the "modern-business" self-perception she currently has, with the brand no longer in line with who she is (Ahuvia, 2005; Belk, 1988). Furthermore, she explains that because she was so deeply connected to the brand, the termination happened rather gradually over time as she began to disengage with the brand, seeking relationships with other, better identity- suited brands (i.e. Zara) (Fajer & Schouten, 1995).

As mentioned, individuals use their interactions with others as means of forming interpretations and meanings (Solomon, 1983). Individuals use symbols (e.g. brands) as a means of subjectively interpreting their social environment, with their self-concept being largely related to the individuals they interact with (Solomon, 1983). Derek very much relates certain brands to different phases of his life, with the individuals whom he surrounds himself with greatly affecting the various phases. "What you are doing at the moment and who you surround yourself with really matter at the moment." As he transitioned from his "preppy" high school to his time in the military service, his style also transitioned from a preppy school boy style to one that greater emulated a rock and roll vibe, directly affecting the brand relationships he had at the time. Derek explains that he was once very much involved in what he refers to as "brat culture," where individuals dressed "really preppy," often resembling characters from the previously popular TV show *Gossip Girl*. However, he explains that in his opinion the culture is a dying one, being observed now mostly during the summer months and associated with certain events (e.g. The tennis week in Båstad) and cities in Sweden (e.g. Gotland). The "brat culture" style often involves khakis, a polo shirt and cap and is often related to brands such as Ralph Lauren. Interestingly enough, Derek recalls his love relationship with Ralph Lauren, a brand that he currently feels very distant to in regards to identity. He explains that he loved Ralph Lauren and possessed numerous polos and shirts from them, wearing them as often as three to four times a

week; however, he explains that he would never purchase an item again, explaining that the entire brand, everything from their logo of the polo horseman to their campaigns, is associated with the “preppy” New England style image, which he no longer feels connected to: “I don’t identify myself with the brand...not [necessarily] what they stand for but what they want people to perceive them as”.

At the time his friends were also heavy consumers of the brand, often consuming it even more than he did, making the brand “really cool at [that] moment.” His social interactions seemed to have directly influenced this period, as the perceptions of his friends helped mold his self perception at the time (Strykler, 1968 cited in Solomon 1983); however, his social reality changed when he joined the military, and even greater so when he started traveling, directly influencing his sense of self (Solomon, 1983). As his role changed from a student at a preppy high school to a member of the military, he went through a period of separation from his once beloved brand Ralph Lauren, later transitioning to no longer consuming the brand as it did not fit into his identity (Fajer & Schouten, 1995; Ahuvia, 2005). Similarly, Erik use to love the brand Penguin, also generally associating it to this “preppy” image. For him, the culture surrounding the show the OC began this love relationship as he aspired to emulate the characters. When his “OC phase” ended so did his relationship to this brand. He says that he would never purchase the brand today; however, not because the brand has done anything wrong or changed in any way: “I don’t have anything negative to say about the brand, it is just that it doesn’t fit my persona right now”.

Sara can also be observed as someone who experienced a rather overt role transition. As her social environment changed, so did the ways in which she subjectively evaluated her surroundings (Solomon, 1983). She used to be very involved with competitive horseback riding, having horses of her own and competing at high levels. At the time she greatly identified with the horseback riding culture and her consumption habits worked to symbolize her lifestyle. She explained that brands were very important when it came to competing and the overall horseback riding culture as “... every time you are going to a competition you are comparing what kind of carriages you have [to] what kind of saddle you have....”

In a way these items served symbols, categorizing the social positions of the horseback riders (Levy, 1959). The one specific brand that she really loved and identified with at that time was Kingsland. She explained that when she ended that period of her life she also cut ties with Kingsland, as she no longer placed the same value on the brand once that phase of her life ended. Her family still has horses and she, herself, occasionally rides horses, but no longer competes. Her brand love relationship with Kingsland was very much tied to that period of her life, with the brands the horse riders consumed serving as status symbols. According to Sara “you kind of have to have money when you have a horse” and that the brands one wore, such as Kingsland, aided in the image of a competitive horseback rider. She explained it as a, “competition on top of the competition...that you should have the most popular and expensive things and brands”.

Now she explains that she has a “distance” to the competitive horse riding culture and finds humor in the thought of spending that sort of money on the once beloved brand, Kingsland. She explains that while she was in her role of a horseback rider she simply “had to have [Kingsland]” but Sara now goes as far as ridiculing her sister, who is still heavily involved in the competitive horse riding culture, for spending that amount on money on “stable clothes” that will “get dirty two days later.” The separation of her relations with Kingsland essentially signified the riding of her old role as a competitive horseback rider (Schouten, 1991).

It can be observed that the ridding of an old brand relationship, followed by the creation of a new brand relationship, signifies a role change or transition has taken place, as we find that consumers use new, more identity-related brand relationships to exemplify their new senses of self. As mentioned earlier, Lisa terminated her relationship with Anthropologie when it no longer fit with her self-perception. She then went on to explain that she in a sense replaced that relationship with Zara:

I started pretty much only shopping at Zara. They were exactly the look I was going for and the style I really like. More modern classy, definitely not like vintage type of clothing.

In Lisa’s situation her transition phase was finalized with an instance of brand switching, as she left behind her old loved brand for a new one, similar to how Hanna changed from Vagabond to Zara, fitting her more “girly” style (Fajer & Schouten, 1995). The brands they switched over to

aided in their transition phases, with them ultimately, reconstructing their self-perception to fit their new roles (Schouten, 1991). Just as these examples helped reinforce the importance of one's identification to a brand for the maintenance of a brand love relationship, the following section will explain how society's mass identification with a particular brand can in fact lead to individuals feeling a lack of identification to the said brand, ultimately leading to the termination of the relationships.

#### **4.2.2 When you're not the only one: *Brand termination as an identity distinguisher***

As mentioned earlier, our findings indicate that a sense of belonging and connectedness seems to be a key constituting element to the brand love relationship; however, interestingly enough, those same elements can often lead to the demise of the brand love relationship. It is not unprecedented that individuals use brands as symbols when shaping their own identity (Solomon, 1983; Belk, 1988). Moreover, these same relationships and symbols can be seen as a way of connecting to others on the grounds of like-mindedness; however, it seems that individuals are inclined to terminate their brand love relationships if the brands that they strongly identify with begin to be identified with by the majority of society. Almost as if the mass-identification with a brand leads to the individual's feeling a lack of identification with the brand rather than the other way around. In order to better understand this finding it is important to remember that the symbols in individuals' lives both serve as identity reinforcement tools as well as differentiation tools (Belk, 1988). To the same degree that individuals use consumption symbols to connect with others, they are also doing so to differentiate from other sets of individuals (Belk, 1988). As more individuals begin to consume a certain brand, the more likely it then becomes that the individuals with which one does not connect with on various other levels, also begin to consume that brand. With that in mind, it becomes a bit easier to understand why certain individuals take solace in their consumption symbols not being consumed by the majority.

As mentioned prior, for many consumers brands serve purposes that surpass those of functionality (Levy, 1959). Erik helps us gain a better understanding of how brands serve in more ways than merely functionality for him as he describes his love for the brand Comme des Garçons, explaining that he possesses products from the brand not "just because of the



functionality of the item” but because “[he] want[s] something more...something extra.” He goes on to explaining that the “something extra” is in a sense tied to his knowledge of the brand and the connectedness he feels with the select few who also consume the brand. He explains that the brand signals that he “knows something that not everyone knows” and if he sees someone else wearing the brand “it feels like [he] can get almost a connection to that person because [he] know[s] [they] have maybe the same interests and feel connected in some way.” He then goes on to say that that connection “signals something special,” that “its positive, a positive feeling.”

Erik’s description of the “something extra” that this brand provides him clearly explains that the brand serves as both a symbolic tool to connect with certain individuals, while simultaneously differentiating himself from those which are not connected to his self perception in the same way (Belk, 1988). As Belk (1988), alluded to, identification with a brand serves as a means of identifying with other typical brand users, merging them with the other consumers. Erik believes that brands, and clothing, in particular, are “the easiest way to create an identity” as it is exposed “immediately to everyone.” He goes on to explain that he does not have a desire for the brands he wears to be recognizable by all of society but rather that:

You want to be connected to a certain part of society and you know that like one out of twenty might recognize that brand, but that is the group [you] want to belong to I think

Erik also explains that he wants to have his “own identity,” his “own life,” saying that he does not want to simply be a “copy of everyone else.” He uses the brands that he identifies with as a means of symbolizing his own unique self-perception. Similarly, one of the main reasons Derek terminated his brand love relationship with Ralph Lauren was because he wanted “to stand out” from the majority. He explains that he uses his clothing to differentiate himself from others. It can be observed that an individual's clothing often serves as a way of calculating their characteristics and behaviors (Solomon, 1983). Derek, though being a business student, explained that he does not desire “the standard business administration guy” image, and that he wants to “dress in a different way,” saying: “it's too easy, it's too safe to dress like that, it's more fun to be creative and do something different.”

He goes on to explain that Ralph Lauren's image is both "standardized" and "mainstream," two qualities, which he says he does not relate to himself, nor qualities, which he desires as part his identity. Furthermore, distancing his sense of self from the undesirable representation of the brand, towards a more desired and unique self (Ahuvia, 2005).

It can be observed that Lisa also distanced herself from her love brand, Michael Kors, as too many people that she did not identify with began purchasing the brand. She explains that "almost all girls" now have something from Michael Kors, which led to the brand no longer representing a solidified image in her mind. Moreover, she no longer felt special owning an item from the brand:

I loved Michael Kors, they are exactly the kind of style I like, you know very classic and timeless, but now every girl has a Michael Kors watch or purse no matter their style it seems. I hate it. I'm embarrassed to even use my Michael Kors stuff now because it's like everyone's thinking "oh look another girl with that Michael Kors bag."

Interestingly enough, the brand being connected to many other individuals, made it lose the characteristics that helped shape Lisa's self identity. The symbols, which the brand represented, could no longer serve as a categorization tool, as they were now consumed by the majority, regardless of individual categorization (Levy, 1959; Solomon, 1983). As Lisa mentioned, she felt that "every girl" now consumes Michael Kors, and as she could not possibly identify with "every girl" there is inevitably a lack of congruity between Lisa's self-image and the now widely adopted image of the brand (Ahuvia, 2005; Albert & Merunka, 2008).

In the same light, Erik explains that a brand becoming too "mainstream," consumed by the majority of individuals, would serve as grounds for termination as he would not want people he does not identify with to consume the brand:

If a brand were to get more mainstream... that could also influence my perception of the brand and could lead to elimination I think because it is like the brand becomes a part of my identity and I don't want my brand to be connected to people I don't like or, that I don't feel connected to.

Tina also recalls when her love brand Acne, started to become very popular, after she had been in a relationship with the brand for quite a while. As the relationship grew in popularity, more individuals with whom she did not identify with started consuming the brand, aiding in it being perceived by her as more luxurious and less simple/understated. Her not really identifying with many of the brand's consumers, in a way, began her distancing process from the brand.

In both Erik and Tina's situations, the termination of the relationship would help solidify their self identity if the brand begins to encompass too many individuals that do not fall in line with their self perception, using the termination process as a means of distancing themselves from the other individuals (Belk, 1988). Erik went as far as to say that if his beloved brand, Comme des Garcons, were to become "mainstream," and easily accessible to all individuals that he would feel betrayed by the brand:

If the brand would start to sell at like H&M and Åhlens in the city...that would give me like a really bad feeling and like almost like I would have been betrayed by the brand. Because it's like a friend and you don't want your friend to betray you.

These empirical findings indicate that the consumers use brands to symbolically represent their self-identity and particularly as a way of connecting with others of similar identities, often as a means of reinforcement (Belk, 1988). However, as the above examples have indicated, it seems evident that individuals want to feel a sense of connectedness to both the brand and other brand consumers, while still differentiating from the more general "others." In a sense, it is important for these individuals to use the love brands to simultaneously connect with certain individuals, while differentiating from others (Belk, 1988). The findings show that brand love relationships are often terminated when the mass consumption of the brand leads to a dilution of the brand-image, and subsequently, the consumer's desired identity.

## **5. Conclusions**

*This concluding chapter will begin with a discussion of the thesis' initial intentions, along with the findings, ultimately leading up to the conclusions drawn from the analysis. Furthermore, the conclusions will aid in the presentation of possible future research topics, along with the limitations of this thesis. Finally, managerial implications will be presented in order to exemplify the practicality of the findings.*

### **5.1 Conclusive Discussion**

As the findings have displayed, the consumer-brand love relationship is a rather dynamic one, with many underlying elements, which play key roles in both the maintenance and development of such relationships. This thesis ultimately aimed to further investigate the nuanced facets of these relationships, specifically with the aim of better understanding the reasons for which consumers choose to terminate such deeply rooted bonds. Furthermore, the identity politics present were of high interest, as a connection between prior theory on self-identity and the consumer-brand love relationship could not be ignored. It is rather apparent that self-identity plays a significant role in the construction of the brand love relationship, with prior theory emphasizing an individual's self-connection to loved objects and brands (Ahuvia, 2005; Batra et al., 2012; Belk, 1988; Carroll & Ahuvia, 2006). However, though this notion is rather undisputed, prior consumer research, to the best of the authors' knowledge, seemed to have largely neglected the reasons by which consumers decide to end these deep relationships. Moreover, if the connection to one's self was a key facet of these relationships, the role of one's identity in the termination of the bonds instantly became of interest.

Prior research on the termination process of consumer-brand relationships is greatly rooted in interpersonal theory, with much of the phenomenon being investigated from a purely interpersonal relationship research standpoint, as has been most of the prior work on the concept of brand love (Fajer & Schouten, 1995; Swaminathan & Dommer, 2012). As mentioned, there is a need for brand love theories to be built from the ground up rather than merely adapted from prior interpersonal love work as the two bonds vary greatly in nature (Batra et al., 2012; Fajer &

Schouten, 1995). Though the parallels present between interpersonal relationships and those of consumer-brand relationships cannot be denied, there is an importance to examine this phenomenon from the ground up in order to gain a better understanding of the termination process with a particular focus on the consumer-brand love relationship rather than a mere adaptation.

It is common knowledge that consumers stop consuming particular brands and/or switch to purchasing new brands; however, the consumer-brand love relationship was of particular interest as these relationships are classified as ones involving deep devotion and self-identification (Batra et al., 2012). With that in mind, these relationships are ones that are arguably more difficult to terminate, with the termination process likely having some deeper underlying causes. As this thesis aimed to deeply investigate and explore the lived experiences of the individuals interviewed, the findings remain indicative of these particular individual narratives. Nevertheless, two overarching findings can be observed, as a connection between the two factors which constitute the brand love relationship for the participants and more importantly how those two factors are in fact related to the reasons by which they chose to terminate their brand love relationships were uncovered. First and foremost, it was observed that the brand's connection to one's self-perception along with the brand as a symbolic tool of social belonging were key attributes that led to the brand love relationship. Though other attributions were observed, these attributes were overwhelming present for the individuals interviewed. The elements then seemed to be directly related to the two main findings particular to relationship termination, more specifically, the consumer going through a transformative phase and the dilution of identity when the brand became overly consumed by the public majority. The thematization of these findings can be further exemplified in the diagram below which has been developed by the authors to briefly summarize the findings.

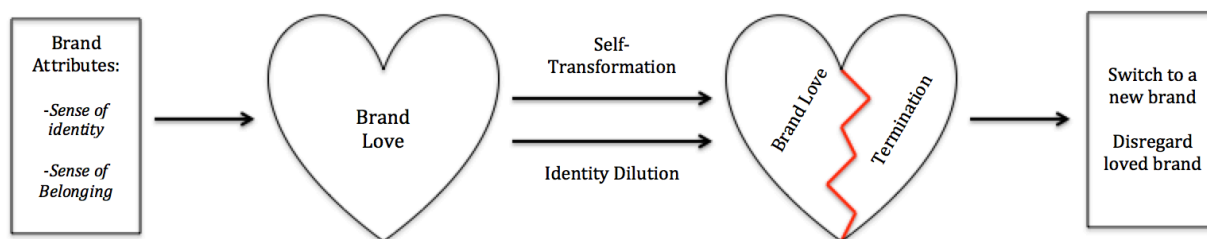


Figure 1. Overview of empirical findings

Out of Batra et al.'s (2012) framework regarding the elements of brand love, the element of self-identity drastically played a role in the formation and maintenance of the participants' brand love relationships. In direct accordance to that finding, it was discovered that individuals choose to terminate their brand love relationships largely as a result of an altering self-concept. These acts of termination were related to a period of transformation, where the individuals transitioned from one life phase/role to another, or rid themselves of an old phase/role entirely. At the point of termination the brand and the consumer were no longer in line with one another. This particular finding falls in line with prior research regarding periods of transformation and furthermore, research on identity alterations and conflicts (Ahuvia, 2005; Mathur et al., 2006; Schouten, 1991).

The second key constituent of brand love relationships that was discovered was the importance placed on the brand as a symbolic social representation, more specifically, the relationship providing the individual with a sense of belongingness and/or connectedness to other individuals/social groups. This was directly connected to the individual's sense of self, as the brand served as a symbol by which the individual extended that sense of self to society (Solomon, 1983). However, it was observed that as the brand grew in popularity, with a substantial amount of society consuming the brand, the individuals felt a diminished sense of belonging to the brand rather than the other way around. Interestingly enough, the individuals seemed to love the brand for its ability to connect them with others who aided in further reinforcing their identity; however, when the brand began to be consumed by individuals who did not necessarily fall in line with an individual's self perception, or if the brand no longer felt socially exclusive, the consumer was inclined to terminate their brand love relationship. To summarize, the mass identification with the brand led to the consumer's own identification being in a sense, diluted, rather than an increased sense of belonging.

This finding indicates that consumers want their love relationships to remain exclusive to themselves as well as the selected portion of society that they seek to identify with. However, in practical terms, specifically for the brands, this finding poses quite the paradox. As Holt (2002) put it, a dialectical relationship between the branding paradigm and consumer culture is present where in which tensions are unavoidable. Consumer culture represents the ideological

infrastructure for the things and ways that individuals consume, which then directly impacts firms' branding agendas. Additionally, the branding paradigm constitutes the groundwork by which firms develop and maintain their brands (Holt, 2002). Consumer culture serves as a means of laying the foundation for which firms then strategize their branding decisions. The interplay between the two entities essentially aids in the production and outcomes of each, with the clashing of the entities driving collective alterations and transitions for both sides (Holt, 2002). As it has been alluded to, companies are working to capitalize on the concept of brand love with the aim of remaining relevant in the ever-competitive market of today (Carroll & Ahuvia, 2006). As competition amongst firms and more specifically, brands, rises, the concept of brand love in practice seeks to create relationships with consumers that breed loyalty beyond compare (Roberts, 2005). Moreover, in theory, the concept constitutes a level of self-conceptualization, amongst other elements, which aid in the devotion of the consumer (Batra et al., 2012).

It should not come as a shock that brands will benefit from these immensely loyal relationships, with the consumers essentially self-conceptualizing with the brands they form these relationships with. Though it is in companies' interests to build and maintain these deep bonds, it remains rather relevant that it is also in their interest to capitalize on the market, obtaining as many devoted fans as possible. With that said, the findings pose quite the paradox. The analysis of the empirical data suggests that individuals love brands, which they feel are representative of their self-identity. However, it can also be observed that these individuals are inclined to end these love relationships, once too many individuals begin to consume their loved brand, with the mass consumption of the brand leading to the direct dilution of that individual's identity. To be put in other terms, if the majority of individuals hold a similar identity, does anyone really possess that particular "identity"? Or even more so, if the individuals which one does not identify with begin using the same brands to symbolically represent themselves, do those brands still fit in that particular individual's self-perception? The empirical findings of this thesis suggest not, which insinuates quite the paradox as companies aim to form these love relationships with consumers, while simultaneously, seeking out the love of many to strive in the competitive market of today.

Prior work on brand love relationships, to the knowledge of the authors, has not touched upon the importance of exclusivity in the brand love relationship, particularly in relation to self-

identity. This could potentially be due the majority of prior work being conceptualized from interpersonal theories, with interpersonal relationships not possessing the same possibility of mass identification, along with the lack of prior attention on the termination of the brand love relationship. Therefore, the knowledge obtained from the empirical findings of this thesis expands upon consumer-brand relationship literature, particularly in regards to brand love theories and the dissolution process of these relationships.

## **5.2 Limitations And Future Research**

Brand love is a fairly new concept that has not yet received too much attention in an academic context, which poses many opportunities for researchers to further explore this phenomenon, especially in regards to the dissolution process. One interesting angle is to investigate how consumers cope with the termination of their relationships to loved brands and the process that follows (Russell & Shau, 2011). This is a topic that prior research has neglected and as there inevitably is a connection between loved brands and self-identity it may be of interest to develop a greater understanding of the implications of this dissolution process. Connecting the dissolution of brand love relationships with interpersonal relationships could be of interest in order to once again make the distinction between the two notions of love to contribute to the literature on brand love. In addition, such a comparison could also yield new parallels between the two relationships. In the empirical material gathered, a connection between brand love and forgiveness was found, implying that individuals are more inclined to forgive brands in which they love. This finding may be of relevance to investigate further, especially in regards to crisis management. Moreover, just as consumers are developing strong relationships with brands in which they love, it may be of relevance to examine the alternate extremes, i.e brand hate, anti-branding and brand avoidance, along with their effects on brands and the consumer-brand relationship (Hollenbeck & Zinkhan, 2006). Moreover, the participants of this thesis to a large degree only referred to love towards brands in the clothing category. It could be of interest to examine the termination of brand love relationships with a particular focus on a different branding sector, such as service brands (Long-Tolbert & Gammoh, 2012). The relationship with service brands can arguably be viewed as more two-sided in nature, which may provide greater



parallels to interpersonal relationships, while still uncovering interesting factors within a different category of the consumer-brand relationship.

Furthermore, it would be interesting to conduct this study in a broader context, using a bigger sample with a greater diversity. As this study was conducted in Sweden, nine out of ten interviewees were Swedish, which may have affected the presented findings. As love is a rather subjective notion that may be colored by cultural aspects, a sample with greater diversity could have provided richer empirical findings. A key limitation of this study is the subjectivity and complexity of the notion of love. As mentioned, love, regardless of the context is highly nuanced and differs for all individuals (Heinrich et al., 2012). With that said, regardless of seeking out participants, who claimed to have once loved a particular brand, the levels of brand love experienced for the various participants undoubtedly greatly varied. Moreover, despite the claim that theoretical saturation was achieved, a greater sample generated from both quantitative and qualitative data might have captured findings that the proposed research method disregarded. Also, the use of a quantitative method, such of that of a survey, could serve as a precursor to a later qualitative study, with the use of a brand love framework as the guiding tool to help with the identification of individuals who display strong characteristics of brand love. With this type of method employed, participants selected to proceed to the following step of the study may be more likely to display desired deeper devotion levels indicative of brand love.

### **5.3 Managerial Implications**

As it has been made evident, the concept of brand love is growing in popularity within the academic sphere and in the field of brand management (Batra et al., 2012; Roberts, 2005). As mentioned, brand love implies a level of loyalty beyond reason, with practitioners aiming to form these deep relationships in order to remain relevant in the highly competitive market of today (Carroll & Ahuvia, 2006). With that said, it is important for managers to explore the dimensions of these strong bonds, in order to gain a better understanding of what constitutes the relationships which they are investing resources in forming and maintaining. The reasons by which individuals choose to terminate a relationship have a number of implications for the reasons by which they initially formed and furthermore, developed the relationship.

The findings of this study imply that managers need to constantly evaluate their ever-changing target audiences, strategically making the decision to either adapt with their consumers' role transitions (e.g. as the target group transitions through life phases) or staying true to their original brand image and proposition regardless of their changing target group. Furthermore, the findings exemplify the importance of monitoring the ways in which the brand is publically perceived in order to remain relevant and beloved by devoted consumers. Lastly, the most vital implication of the findings was the paradox brands face in regards to the creation and maintenance of a brand love relationship. Ideally, firms want to create brands which consumers are deeply connected to (i.e. love), yet they want to appeal to the masses in order to capitalize on the market. However, as our findings suggest, companies need to be aware of the possible consequence related to going "mainstream," particularly when their deeply devoted consumers are of concern (i.e. the ones that greatly identify with the brand). It seems that some brands, such as Apple, are able to counteract this paradox, maintaining many deeply devoted fans, while being consumed by the mass market. However, for the majority of brands, particularly those who lack the iconic image of Apple, it may prove difficult to both maintain a deeply devoted following while appealing to the masses (Holt, 2006). With that said, brand managers need to strategically evaluate the image and following they aim to possess, keeping in mind whether or not the creation of brand love is in fact a priority.

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# APPENDIX 1

## Interview Guide

- 1) Interviewee's General Information
  - a. Age
  - b. Where they are from
    - i. A bit of childhood background
  - c. Current situation (e.g. occupation and/or study)
    - i. Number of years involvement
- 2) Purchasing habits
  - a. How would you describe your relationship to brands?
  - b. Do you consider yourself brand conscious?
  - c. How much does a brand affect your purchase decision?
- 3) Brand love story-
  - a. Have you in your past loved a brand that you are no longer consuming?
    - i. Tell us about your experience with that brand (describe the relationship)
      1. When did you start purchasing it?
      2. How would you have described your relationship with that brand?
      3. How often did you use this brand?
      4. What do you think caused you to "love" that brand?
    - ii. What caused you to stop purchasing and/or using that brand?
    - iii. How did you feel when you stopped purchasing that brand?
    - iv. What feelings do you have when you currently think of the brand?
- 4) Self-extension
  - a. What aspects/features/characteristics of the brand did you feel connected to?
  - b. Do you still feel connected to those aspects/features/characteristics?
- 5) Hypothetical
  - a. Tell us about a brand that you currently love
  - b. Describe the brand in three words
  - c. Do you feel connected to that brand?
  - d. What could cause you to stop purchasing that brand?