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## The Power of Experiences

A study of how experiential marketing influences consumer-brand relationships

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**In recent years consumers have become increasingly critical towards marketing messages. This has resulted in more alternative forms of marketing gaining ground, and particularly events have become a popular way for firms to create awareness and add value to brands.**

When brands use events and other kinds of stylised experiences as a marketing tool, it can be done for a variety of reasons. More often than so it is grounded in an ambition to create a sense of relationship with customers and potential customers, and thereby lay the grounds for brand-loyalty. The Danish newspaper Politiken has a long history of using experiences strategically as marketing initiatives as a way of supporting their trademark “the living newspaper”. One of these experiential marketing initiatives is Politiken’s Audience Award on the Danish film festival CPH:DOX, which has been put under scrutiny in this study, with aim of examining how experiences influence consumer-brand relationships. The study provides a holistic account of the phenomenon, as both the participants’ evaluation of the event, based on interviews with ten event participants, and Politiken’s intentions were included in the study object. This due to my dual role as both marketing project manager at Politiken and academic researcher.

The study offers insights into how experiences influence the way event participants evaluate the brand and thereby also defines the level of control the firm has over the evaluations the experiences lead to. To be exact, it is found that events serve as platforms through which the firms can influence the participants’ experiences and evaluations. However, the way the participants make sense of the experiences and thereby their evaluation of the brand was found to be a direct result of their pre-existing brand evaluations and sense of relationship with the brand. Therefore the brand’s level of control in the context of events is limited to making suggestions or propositions of value. This was exemplified in the examined case, where Politiken uses the event and collaboration with CPH:DOX to emphasise its cultural profile. The way the participants make sense of this, and thereby the concrete effects of the event, is however beyond the control of the brand.

# Abstract

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## **The power of experiences**

### **A study of how experiential marketing influences consumers-brand relationships**

Experiential marketing is a popular strategic communication endeavour, the goal of which is to create experiences that engage consumers and adds value to the brand. The consumers make sense of these experiences and thus their brand-relationship is affected. The purpose of the thesis is to gain deeper insights into how value is created on the basis of experiential marketing, and this is done through in-depth examination of Politiken's Audience Award on CPH:DOX. Due to my professional involvement in the case, marketing action research is employed as a primary method. This created the opportunity to provide more holistic accounts and insights into the case and the work with experiential marketing. On the basis hereof, as well as qualitative interviews with ten event-participants, the study offers insights into how the participants co-create value on the basis of the experience and as such defines the level of control the brand has.

*Keywords:* experiential marketing, value co-creation, value proposition, relationship marketing, marketing action research

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# Sammenfatning

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## Effekten af oplevelser

### Et studie af hvordan oplevelsesmarketing påvirker kunders brandrelationer

Oplevelsesmarketing er en populær strategisk kommunikationsindsats, hvis mål er at skabe oplevelser, som engagerer kunderne og tilfører værdi til et brand. Kunderne skaber mening ud fra disse oplevelser, og derved påvirkes deres brandrelation. Formålet med dette speciale er at opnå større indsigt i hvordan værdi bliver skabt på baggrund af oplevelsesmarkedsføringen, hvilket er gjort med udgangspunkt i Politikens Publikumspris på den danske filmfestival CPH:DOX. Grundet min professionelle involvering i det undersøgte case, er marketing aktionsforskning anvendt som primær metode. Dette skabte mulighed for at opnå en større og mere holistisk indsigt i caset og arbejdet med oplevelsesmarketing. På baggrund heraf samt kvalitative interviews med ti eventdeltagere, tilbyder studiet indsigt i hvordan deltagerne skaber værdi sammen med brandet på baggrund af oplevelserne. Og derved defineres det, hvilken grad af kontrol brandet har over påvirkningen af kundernes brandrelationer.

*Nøgleord:* Oplevelsesmarketing, value co-creation, value propositions, relations markedsføring, marketing aktionsforskning

*Antal tegn (inkl. mellemrum): 119.293*

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# Preface

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I would like to express my deepest gratitude to those who have helped me along the way during the process of writing my master's thesis. First of all, I would like to thank the interview participants for investing time in helping me, and effectively making this study possible.

Second of all, I would like to thank Bent Steeg Larsen, the head of Politiken's analytical department, for sharing his detailed knowledge of Politiken's readers, and for his guidance. The same goes for my managers at Politiken, Poul Skøtt and Astrid Jørgensen, for their support and flexibility, without which I would never have managed to write my thesis while working full time.

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Thank you!

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Annemette Tolstrup', with a long horizontal flourish extending to the right.

Annemette Tolstrup

# 1. Introduction

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In today's highly saturated marketing environment consumers are becoming increasingly insensitive to traditional marketing messages, and marketers often find themselves having trouble breaking through the clutter of mediated messages. This challenge has fostered the rise of the relational paradigm in brand management, which focuses on the creation of deep interpersonal connections between consumer and brand (Thompson, Rindfleisch & Arsel, 2006). The relational approach is consumer-oriented, and sees brand value as being created in the exchange between the consumer and the brand (Heding, Knudtzen & Bjerre, 2016). The relational approach has received considerable attention since the late 1990s, as it has been found to generate brand loyalty (Fournier, 1998; Heding et al. 2016; Thompson et al. 2006).

According to the relational approach to branding, the marketing practitioner has very limited control over the brand as the job instead entails governing and facilitating ways for the consumers to engage with the brand as a way of influencing value co-creation (Heding et al. 2016). This expanded view of the marketing professional's role has primed the notion that 'everything is media' (Moor, 2007), and has resulted in larger focus being put on symbolic interventions such as experiential marketing (Moor, 2007; Zarantonello & Schmitt, 2013) as a way for marketing practitioners to proactively form relational bonds with the consumers. As such the strategic work with experiential marketing can be placed within the category of strategic marketing communication, as the purpose is retaining and attracting customers (Hallahan et al. 2007). However, despite common consensus that experiential marketing facilitates the creation of relational bonds between the brand and the consumer (e.g. Brakus, Schmitt & Zarantonello, 2009; Thompson, 2007, Zarantonello & Schmitt, 2013), the deeper analytical and yet fundamental question of *how* experiential marketing influence consumer-brand relationship is surprisingly neglected in existing literature. Previous research of the topic has primarily been concerned with providing quantitative accounts through measuring the effects of experiential marketing (e.g. Zarantonello & Schmitt, 2013), and mapping out different strategies for influencing consumer-brand relationships (e.g. Crowther & Donlan, 2011). While the findings of these studies are in many ways relevant for especially practitioners working in fast



paced marketing departments in which tangible guidelines are preferable, I would argue that these types of studies do not provide sufficient insight into how the consumers make sense of experiences created by the brand and thus how their relationship with the brand is affected.

As the concept of consumer-brand relationship has its grounds in phenomenology, which focuses on consumer sense making (Heding et al. 2016), I argue that in order to fully comprehend the effects of experiential marketing on consumer-brand relationships, it must be examined from a consumer sense making perspective. As such this thesis has originated from the gap in current research and thus offers a highly relevant supplementary perspective to the field of experiential marketing as facilitator for the creation and development of relationships between brands and consumers.

The thesis examines the experiential marketing efforts of the Danish news media company Politiken. Politiken has a long history of working with experiential marketing as a way of engaging and creating strong relationships with its consumers, and as a means of supporting the trademark ‘the living newspaper’<sup>1</sup>. This trademark is an expression of Politiken’s vision to be more than a newspaper and also be a societal and a cultural institution. This effectively means that Politiken’s experiential marketing efforts are designed to support the overriding vision of the organisation and can thus be described as a strategic communication endeavour (c.f. Hallahan et al. 2007). Due to the qualitative investigative nature of this study, a single case of experiential marketing has been selected for in-depth examination. The selected case is Politiken’s Audience Award at the Danish documentary film festival, CPH:DOX.

## **1.1 Purpose**

The purpose of this study is to develop an in-depth understanding of how experiential marketing influences consumer-brand relationships. I examine the chosen experiential marketing case employing a phenomenological approach and thereby put focus on the consumer sense making. The study aims at providing exhaustive knowledge about how the event participants’ co-create value on the basis of Politiken’s Audience Award at CPH:DOX and how this affects their relationship with the brand. On the basis of these findings, I aim to make generalisations

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<sup>1</sup> Translated from Danish. The original trademark of Politiken is “Den levende avis”

that can contribute to existing theories of experiential marketing and thus expand on the current understanding of the power of experiences as a branding initiative.

To support the purpose of the thesis, the following research questions have been formulated:

1. What determines the consumers' willingness to take part in value co-creation in the chosen experiential marketing case?
2. How does the experiential marketing initiative influence the consumers' value co-creation and thus their brand relationship?

Finally, after having provided answers to the two research questions, I will discuss the findings and make managerial implications that are of use for both Politiken and other organisations, and thus make conclusions regarding the level of control the brand has, and thereby define the possibilities of experiential marketing.

## **1.2 Approach to the study object**

This study is characterised by me not simply researching the case as an outside source, but rather I am deeply involved in both the organisation and the particular case. The reason being that I am employed as Marketing Project Manager at Politiken, which means that I am responsible for the media partnership with CPH:DOX and the experiential marketing initiatives carried out in this context. This has played a large role in the methodological considerations, and as such the study was conducted as a marketing action research project, which enabled me to benefit from my active involvement in the study object. I will go into detail with the implications of doing marketing action research in Chapter 4, Methodology and research design.

## 2. About Politiken

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Politiken is a Danish newspaper, which was founded in Copenhagen in 1884 (Politiken, n.d.). It is the largest newspaper in Denmark with 1,2 million readers per week, spread over the printed newspaper and the digital platform, politiken.dk (Index Danmark/Gallup, 2016). The newspaper emanates from a social-liberal tradition, and is especially known for its cultural profile and active participation in cultural and political activities. It's core target audience is the segment defined as 'modern community oriented' (Politiken, n.d.) and in fact more than half of Politiken's readers belong to this segment, compared to only 22 % of the general population in Denmark being defined as such (Index Danmark/Gallup, 2016). The modern community oriented segment is described as people who very often consume culture and who have a high level of social responsibility and openness and tolerance towards the outside world. This segment also consists of a large majority of people with a higher academic education (Kompas Segmenter, n.d.). Geographically Politiken is located in the heart of Copenhagen in the building commonly known as The House of Politiken.

Politiken is currently struggling with the general downward trend in print media and the difficulties of encouraging readers to pay for online news media. Since the year 2000 the average age of Politiken's print readers has risen from 45 years to a whopping 56 years in 2016 (Index Danmark/Gallup, 2016), implying that Politiken has difficulties getting new paying customers from the younger audiences. In attempt to overcome the challenges brought on by this development, Politiken introduced a new strategic focus and a new vision in the beginning of 2017, which was made public in April 2017. This vision builds on the roots and the legacy of Politiken and further develops the characteristics of the brand. The two points most relevant for this study are quoted here:

- *"Within three core areas Politiken must at all times deliver challenging, engaging and trustworthy journalism: Culture, Debate and Society"* (Jensen, 2017)
- *"Politiken is more than a newspaper. We are a societal institution. We are a cultural institution. We are: The living newspaper"* (Jensen, 2017)

As such the vision is not particularly ground breaking, as Politiken has a long history of being engaged in various cultural and political activities. However, the difference lies in the increased focus on achieving and maintaining the status of being the living newspaper. The notion of being the living newspaper has for several years been supported by marketing initiatives such as sponsorships and media partnerships with relevant organisations, with the aim of branding of the newspaper towards potential customers. The partnership with CPH:DOX is an example of this. The new strategic vision is in other words in line with the existing way of working strategically with branding at Politiken, but can however be seen as increasing the demands in this area. For this very reason Politiken's Audience Award on CPH:DOX is highly relevant to examine as a case of experiential marketing, not just due to the gap in existing research, as described in the introduction, but also due to its significance for the organisation.

# 3. Literature review and theoretical framework

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In this section I will present previous research on the theories that have been selected to examine consumers' value co-creation and brand relations in an experiential marketing context. This is done with the purpose of providing an overview of existing literature and shed light on how the different theories can be combined to support the overarching purpose of the study. As such it serves as the theoretical framework for this thesis.

## 3.1 Brand relationships

In the early 1990's a paradigm shift in marketing literature and practice occurred, and the marketing mix paradigm, which had been the dominant for almost 40 years, was slowly starting to be replaced by a new marketing paradigm which focused on the relation between consumer and brand (Grönroos, 1994). This paradigm shift meant that rather than short-term exchanges being the only focus in marketing, relationship principles were starting to get recognition (Fournier, 1998). However, even though the relationship metaphor per definition requires two active participants, the focus remained on the firm for the first decade, with the consumer's perspective being more or less disregarded (Heding et al. 2016). In 1998, Susan Fournier stressed the importance of taking into account the consumer and as such she elaborated further on the relational approach. To be exact, she created a conceptual framework for characterising consumer-brand relationships and thus provided more nuanced insights into the phenomenon. Despite having been published almost 20 years ago, Fournier's (1998) conceptualisation and typology of consumer-brand relationships remains one of the most referenced, and is still a key reading within the brand relationship paradigm (Heding et al. 2016). For this reason the fundamental ideas presented by Fournier (1998), will form the basis of the theoretical framework regarding brand relationships in this thesis, and will be elaborated on and nuanced using more current theoretical additions to the field.

According to the brand relationship approach as presented by Fournier (1998), the brand's position as a relationship partner, is based on a dyadic foundation, i.e. the relationship partners, that being the brand and the consumer, both collectively define and affect the relationship. This effectively means that the brand is not merely a passive object of marketing transactions, but rather an active relationship partner (Fournier, 1998). In her seminal article from 1998, Fournier argued that one of the more effective ways of legitimising the brand as a relationship partner is to simulate an interpersonal relationship by enhancing ways by which the brand is personalised or has human-like traits, what is also defined as anthropomorphism (Fournier, 1998). This stance has, however, since been challenged by several scholars. E.g. Csaba and Bengtsson (2006) who argue that the basic idea that a brand must have human characteristics in order for consumers to be able to relate to it is generally speaking derived from a management perspective on branding dealing with how marketers can lay the grounds for consumer identification and interaction. In some of her later work, Fournier herself dismisses the idea of anthropomorphising being the only way of legitimising the brand as a relationship partner, and instead puts focus on the brand meanings.

*“We do not need to qualify the “human” quality of the brand character as a means of identifying the brand’s relationship potential: all brands – anthropomorphized or not – “act” through the device of marketing mix decisions, which allow relationship inferences to form”* (Fournier, 2009, p. 7)

Although several scholars agree that brands need not have human-like traits in order for relational bonds to form, Fournier and Alvares offer additional nuances in the matter in an article from 2016. They argue that anthropomorphism is not merely a concept of brand personification, but rather the attributing of human agency to a brand and thus takes the concept of personalisation from human traits to the intention and actions of a given brand, which gives the consumers a sense of the brand as acting intentionally (Alvares & Fournier, 2016). They argue that the active agency of anthropomorphised resemble interpersonal interactions, which lays the ground for stronger and deeper relationships to form (Alvares & Fournier, 2016, p. 132).

### ***3.1.1 Meaning provision***

Relationships, whether interpersonal or between consumers and brands, are purposive and either add or structure meaning in the lives of the consumers. This idea of meaning provision is a central point in Fournier's (1998) understanding of relationships between brands and con-

sumers. *“What matters in the construction of brand relationship is not simply what managers intend for them or what brand images “contain” in the culture (...) but what consumers do with brands to add meaning to their lives”* (Fournier, 1998, p. 367). With this statement, Fournier points to the importance of taking into account the consumer’s perspective, a perspective that had until then been grossly overlooked. However, despite being praised as an innovative and highly called for approach to branding (Heding et al. 2016), the consumer-centric approach, which allows for a holistic understanding of how meaning is created by the consumer in the communication process, remains downgraded in literature concerning marketing communication (Finne & Grönroos, 2009).

The notion that brand relationships are essentially providers of meaning, calls for a more nuanced overview of what different purposes these sources of meaning serve for the consumers engaged in them. Like many other subsequent researchers (e.g. Csaba & Bengtsson, 2006; Reimann & Aron, 2008; Thompson, MacInnis & Park, 2005), Fournier (1998) is primarily concerned with the psychological context, the focus of which is on the consumers’ identity projects. These can exist on different levels, from dealing with concrete purposes and thus function as meaning regarding current and specific concerns to more profound existential concerns that are highly central to the consumers’ concept of self. Reimann and Aron (2008) have advanced on the notion of brands serving as psychological sources of meaning and argue that brands can in fact function as identity, in the sense that the brand’s identity can merge with the consumers’ perspectives and identities over time.

### **The different types and modes of relationships**

When examining the relationships consumers form with brands, it is only natural to discuss how and if the type of brand has an impact, as it has been suggested that the level of inclusion in the self, is directly connected to whether the brand represent high or low involvement products. Studies point to the fact is, that the higher involvement that is required by the product, the better the foundation for strong relationships being formed with the consumers (e.g. Reinmann & Aron, 2008; Thompson et al. 2006). However, Fournier takes a contradictory standpoint, *“Meaningful relationships are qualified not along symbolic versus functional category lines, or in terms of high versus low involvement classes, but by the perceived ego significance of the chosen brand”* (Fournier, 1998, p. 366). As explained by Fournier, the characterisation of the relationship has little to do with the products offered by the brand, as the type and strength of the relationship has more to do with the needs and purposes experienced by the consumer than with the product category. Sääksjärvi, Hellén, Gummerus & Grönroos

(2007) further expand on this by presenting two types of relationships: product-level relationship and firm-level relationship. The first of which is driven by attractiveness and involvement of the product, and not of the brand as a whole. The latter, firm-level relationship, is what can be described as brand relationship and here the product class plays a very little role, as it is the identification and involvement with the brand as a whole that is central. The nature of the relationship is furthermore argued by Sääksjärvi et al. (2007) to affect the potential for relational bonds to form, as it influences consumers' willingness to interact with the brand. Two modes of relationship are suggested: active and passive. A passive relational mode is typical for product-level relationships and occurs when the brand's product is experienced as being of consistently high quality and the consumer sees no need to interact with the brand (Sääksjärvi et al. 2007). An active relational mode, on the other hand, is characterised by the consumers seeking contact with the brand, and often exist in firm-level relationships (Sääksjärvi et al. 2007). This way of looking at consumer-brand relationships nuances the relationship metaphor by suggesting that they exist in a variety of forms and modes, and that this has a direct effect on the consumers' willingness to participate in brand related experiences.

### ***3.1.2 Co-creation of value***

As it has been established earlier in this section, brand relationships are based on a dyadic foundation, implying that both relationship partners contribute equally in a continuous meaning-based exchange process (Fournier, 1998). This dyadic approach has in subsequent literature been advanced and defined as a process of value co-creation, and is thus the very core of a more current view of brand relationships (Falkheimer & Heide, 2014; Heding et al. 2016). The notion of value co-creation derives from the concept of Service Dominant logic, in short SD logic (Grönroos, 2012; Ramaswamy, 2011), which was introduced by Vargo and Lusch in their seminal article *Evolving to a New Dominant Logic for Marketing* from 2004. The concept of value creation was however not new, as it has been the main focus in Nordic service management and marketing for quite a few years (e.g. Grönroos, 1994; 1997). But it wasn't until presented under the term SD logic by Vargo & Lusch (2004) that the value creation perspective had an actual break through in marketing literature of more relational character. In order to provide an in depth description of the concept of value co-creation that is central in brand relationships, I will briefly describe the basics of SD logic and its theories regarding value co-creation.



According to SD logic, a shift in marketing logic occurred in the beginning of the 2000's, which moved the focus away from a goods-dominant view and onto a service-dominant view, the emphasis now being on intangibility, exchange processes and relationships (Vargo & Lusch, 2004). Vargo and Lusch (2004) argue that one of the premises of this service centred view, is that it is inherently consumer oriented and relational, and thus emphasising the fundamental resemblance between brand relationship perspective and SD logic. This connection is effectively the reason why principles of SD logic have merged with the concept of brand relationships in the later years, and why it can be regarded as the expansion of the relational perspective (Gummesson, 2017). In the following I will give a thorough account of the concept of value co-creation in the context of brand relationships and thus relate it to the focus of this thesis.

Management literature tends to use the term 'co-creation' interchangeably and metaphorically to describe the idea of the active consumer and as a way of expressing the need for firms to recognise the role of the consumer (Grönroos, 2012). However, this simplistic explanation of the concept is more or less unfeasible, as it doesn't provide the proficient tools to fully understand why and how the consumers make meaning of and co-create value and thereby lacks insight into the role of the firm. In order to fully comprehend the nuances of value co-creation, Osborne and Ballantyne (2012) argue that it is necessary to have a consumer-centric mind set to brand relationships. As seen from a consumer-centric perspective, value is not something that is presented by the firm but rather value is created in dialogue (Osborne & Ballantyne, 2012). However, the concept of dialogue is somewhat complicated, and the source of much misperception, as dialogical is often confused with dialectical, meaning that instead of the relationship being defined by the participants speaking *between* one another, they merely speak *to* one another (Varey & Ballantyne, 2006). While dialectical is the simple exchange of information or communication, dialogical is the process in which value is created. Several researchers see the dialogue as a fundamental prerequisite for value co-creation in a relationship between consumers and brands (e.g. Grönroos, 1994, 2012; Osborne & Ballantyne, 2012; Prahalad & Ramaswamy, 2004). Here it is relevant to mention, that value co-creation is a concept that is viewed rather differently by different researchers. For instance, Varey and Ballantyne (2006) argue that brands are generally speaking not dialogical, and as they see dialogue as a basic condition, genuine value co-creation does not take place very often. Prahalad & Ramaswamy (2004) on the other hand, present a different view of the con-

cept of dialogue as a fundamental premise for value co-creation. They take a very consumer-centric standpoint, and argue that consumers are highly active in this regard and it is effectively up to them to decide whether to engage in an actual meaning based dialogue with the brand (Prahalad & Ramaswamy, 2004). As such, rather than a brand being defined as either dialogical or dialectical in its communication with the consumers, they see it as solely dependent on the consumers' experience of the interaction with the brand (Prahalad & Ramaswamy, 2004). This is a rather important point, both because it expands on the notion that relationships between brand and consumers are dyadic, or dialogical, as it suggests that those are not fixed terms. It also opens up for a relevant discussion of what determines whether consumers experience a brand as dialogical or not. I will return to this in the analysis, when the sense making perspective that I employ in this study allows me examine it further.

In addition to the concept of dialogue as a basic condition for value co-creation, it is also relevant to examine exactly how consumers co-create meaning when interacting with a brand. As described by Fournier, "*consumers do not choose brands, they choose lives*" (Fournier, 1998, p. 367), implying that consumers choose to interact with brands based on their ability to aid and give meaning to the consumers' lives. As such value co-creation is based on the consumers' personal preferences and needs. Vargo and Lusch (2004) argue that brands offer a set of meanings, also defined as value propositions, which the consumers use to co-create value, and on the basis hereof they either build on an existing relationship or determine whether the brand is relevant to form a relationship with. As such the concept of value co-creation, offers some relevant nuance to how relationships between brands and consumers are developed.

### ***3.1.3 Culture as a source of meaning***

In the majority of the literature that has been quoted this far, two contradicting perspectives have been presented: consumer-centric and firm-centric. However, if one is to form a comprehensive understanding of brands and creation of value and meaning within the relational paradigm, Allen, Fournier & Miller (2008) argue that all sources of meaning must be considered. They explain, "*If a brand is first and foremost a repository of meaning for consumers to use in living their own lives (Fournier, 1998; McCracken, 1986), then today's challenge is to understand more deeply the multiple sources and dynamic nature of that meaning*" (Allen et al. 2008, p. 782). Said three meaning makers are as follows: firms, consumers and culture. As it has been mentioned regularly throughout this thesis, the sender perspective is predominant

in most marketing and management literature. The consumer perspective has been elaborated on in the sections above, and it is thus only ‘culture’ that is yet to be discussed.

Early contributions to the academic field of meaning making is presented by McCracken (1986), who defines culture as the original source of meaning, implying that the culture is what consumers use to divide up and make sense of the world. To put it in other words, culture is residing in all products, and co-creation of value thereby entails some sort of adaptation of the cultural meanings that the product inhabits (McCracken, 1986). Although it is very initial and operates on a product-level rather than brand-level, McCracken’s work is still very much relevant. Succeeding scholars have however developed and altered it since to fit more current marketing paradigms and views of branding. For example Arnould and Thompson (2005) put emphasis on the sociocultural influences on the consumers’ creation of meaning, which they do under the label Consumer Culture Theory. As they explain, “*The corollary premise is that the marketplace has become a preeminent source of mythic and symbolic resources through which people (...) construct narratives of identity*” (Arnould & Thompson, 2005, p. 871). Holt (2002) seconds this opinion, and explains that nowadays consumers look for brands to contribute to their identity projects and notions of self, which effectively means that brands become a sort of cultural resource or expressive culture for the consumer.

Culture was not originally regarded as a source of meaning according to the relational approach, and in fact cultural branding and relationship branding continues to be viewed as two separate paradigms by some researchers (e.g. Heding et al. 2016). However, with the brand relational approach being developed and expanded over time, new perspectives merge into it. One of those is culture. While Fournier did not mention culture in her seminal article from 1998, she has since been one of the researchers arguing that culture is an important source of meaning (Allen et al. 2008). As I have argued in the previous section, the concept of value co-creation, is the further expansion of the relational approach and the root of how consumers relate to brands. Here it is particularly the concept of value propositions that is relevant. Much like the notion that brands can be seen as cultural resources which the consumers use to make meaning of their lives (Holt, 2002), Arnould (2006) argues that culture should be seen as a value proposition on the basis of which consumers co-create value. And although they did not initially share this opinion, Lusch and Vargo concur with this view in an article from 2006. As such, it is argued in more current literature regarding brand relationships and value co-

creation, that culture should be seen as a value proposition on the basis of which consumers co-create value.

## **3.2 Experiential marketing**

As it has been argued, brand value is co-created in a dialogical process between the consumer and the brand. One approach to the concept of consumer value co-creation considers the source of value to be experiences (Prahalad & Ramaswamy, 2004), and the strategic use of experiences as a marketing tool is defined as experiential marketing (Schmitt, 1999). Experiential marketing, however, is a field that has primarily been examined by positivistic researchers, and current literature does not offer sufficient nuance into how the consumers make sense of experiences and how they influence the value co-creation process. Therefore, in order to examine the concept of experiential marketing from a brand relational perspective, I will start by presenting a general definition and presentation of the term ‘experiential marketing’ to serve as background. I will then move on to describing in more detail how the role of experiences can be seen in a value co-creation process between the brand and the consumer.

### ***3.2.1 Defining experiential marketing and brand experiences***

The term experiential marketing was coined by Bernd Schmitt in 1999 in the seminal article, *Experiential Marketing*. The concept derives from the same paradigmatic shift in marketing that has been described earlier in this section, namely the shift away from a focus on the product and functionality and onto a focus on brands and the meanings they convey. Included in this paradigmatic shift was a changed view of consumers. Moving away from them being seen as rational decision-makers, they were now regarded as rational emotional creatures that were concerned with not only functionality but also achieving pleasurable and meaningful experiences (Schmitt 1999). This fostered the rise of experiential marketing as a marketing concept, which is concerned with the experiences that brands provide its consumers, and more concretely, “*Experiences provide sensory, emotional, cognitive, behavioural, and relational values that replace functional value*” (Schmitt, 1999, p. 57). Before going into detail regarding the effects of experiential marketing, a more general definition of the term ‘experience’ is in order. Here Schmitt & Zarantonello (2013) offer valuable insights. They argue that “*One of the key ideas of experiential marketing is that value does not only reside in the objects of pur-*

*chase (...) Value also lies in the hedonic and experiential elements surrounding the product and service, and in the experience of consumption itself*" (Schmitt & Zarantonello, 2013, p. 26). As such experiential marketing is a holistic term that deals with all elements that bear some kind of experiential dimension. In this thesis however, I entail a brand relational approach and as such it is solely experiences that can be defined as brand experiences that are of interest. Brand experiences can be defined as "*subjective, internal consumer responses (sensations, feelings, and cognitions) and behavioral responses evoked by brand-related stimuli that are part of a brand's design and identity, packaging, communications, and environments*" (Brakus et al. 2009, p. 53). To put it in other words, brand experiences occur from all types of interactions that a consumer has with a given brand. In this regard it is also relevant to mention that brand experiences are not evaluative judgments about the brand, but rather sensations, cognitions and behavioral responses created by brand-related incitements (Brakus et al. 2009). Experiential marketing is a field that has solely been studied with a positivistic approach, and as such the focus has been on effects that can be measured quantitatively. This effectively means, that the focus of existing literature has been on the responses evoked by experiential marketing with the purpose of drawing general conclusions regarding the effects rather than offering insight into how the experiences affect brand evaluation. I argue that the positivistic angle that has been prevailing in the academic field of experiential marketing is problematic, as the very idea of experiential marketing is argued to be the creation of value through experiences. And according to the relational approach I employ in this thesis, the concept of value is not quantifiable but rather is created in a dialogical and subjective process of between the consumer and the brand. As such I will take a somewhat unorthodox approach to experiential marketing in this study, and examine it qualitatively with a relational approach to branding. In the following I will elaborate on how the concept of experiential marketing can be viewed from a brand relational perspective.

### ***3.2.2 Brand experiences as a facilitator for value co-creation***

As argued by Vargo and Lusch (2004) service is the key element in value co-creation processes. They define service as "*the application of specialized competences (knowledge and skills) through deeds, processes and performances for another entity than the entity itself*" (Vargo & Lusch, 2004, p. 2). This notion of services defining value co-creation has, however, been challenged by several scholars, who find that other brand interactions are more central in the co-creation of value than initially described in the SD logic (Lusch & Vargo, 2006). This

view is amongst others presented by Prahalad and Ramaswamy (2004), who argue that value is a function of human experiences, implying that the market place becomes a forum for co-creation experiences. In their later works, Vargo & Lusch (2008) have acknowledged that experience is in fact a more contemporarily specific and descriptive term and closer to the meaning they intended in their initial article. As such they argue that brand experiences is the key element in value co-creation, and thus important in the context of brand relationships.

With brand experiences being defined as including all sensory, emotional, cognitive, behavioral and relational elements surrounding the brand, consumers are effectively participating in an on-going value co-creating process, as all encounters with the brand in essence include some sort of experience. As such consumers' ability to co-create is developed, reinforced, or altered as a result of their ongoing series of experiences (Payne, Storbacka, Frow & Knox, 2008), and thus establishing value co-creation as a process. Naturally not all experiences have the same amount of influence on the consumer's willingness and opportunity to co-create value with the brand. A rough division of experiences is presented by Payne et al. (2008) and includes two categories: normal day-to-day service experiences and peak experiences, the latter being argued as having a greater impact on consumer value co-creation than the former. A similar distinction is presented by Schmitt and Zarantonello (2013), who use the term 'extraordinary experiences'. They explain that "*While ordinary experiences are routine and are part of everyday life, extraordinary experiences are intense and stylized*" (Schmitt & Zarantonello, 2013, p. 45). Based on these definitions of respectively peak experiences and extraordinary experiences, I argue that they can be seen as an expression of the same concept, and I will thus use the term extraordinary experiences moving forward, as I find it adequate for this framework.

### ***3.2.3 Extraordinary experiences as platforms of engagement***

Extraordinary experiences come in a variety of forms, but one of the most popular and thus commonly used categories are events (Zarantonello & Schmitt, 2013). Events, in a marketing context, can be described as platforms of engagement (Ramaswamy, 2011) that provide an opportunity for dialogue and intimacy between the brand and the consumer (Crowther & Dolan, 2011). If this is connected to the concept of value co-creation, I argue that events can be seen as creating the basis for value co-creation as it facilitates interaction and dialogue between the consumer and the brand. This notion of dialogue that I have earlier described as

essential for value co-creation (Lusch & Vargo, 2006) per definition requires two active participants that both show intent, which is often problematic, as brands cannot in the same way as humans show intent. However, as argued by Smith and Hanover (2016) events can be said to create a solution to this, as the extraordinary experience places the brand in a new and different context and as such it has the potential to be experienced as showing intent in a much more palpable way than in normal day-to-day interactions. If connected to the concept of anthropomorphism, as presented by Alvarez and Fournier (2016), it can be argued that extraordinary experiences, such as events, create the opportunity for the brand to be experienced as being engaging and as showing a sense of action.

Additionally it is argued by several researchers (e.g. Brakus et al. 2009; Schmitt & Zarantonello, 2013) that extraordinary brand experiences do not require a motivational state, and can as such occur even when the consumer does not have a preexisting personal connection to the brand. When approached from a relational perspective on branding, however, I argue that this is too simplistic a statement, as neither of the researchers referenced above have examined how the consumers make sense of the experience due to the positivistic nature of their studies. However, I do argue that the idea of extraordinary experiences not requiring the same level of motivation from the consumers as normal day-to-day brand interactions is still relevant. The reason being that in normal day-to-day actions the brand is arguably rather passive, and as such it is up to the consumers to seek interaction with the brand through purchase or use. An event, on the other hand, places the brand in a new context that fosters interaction with the consumer (Smith & Hanover, 2016), and thereby it can be suggested to require less of a motivational state than normal day-to-day interactions. Drawing on this notion, extraordinary experiences can be seen as an effective relational tool as it has the potential to facilitate value co-creation for consumers with different levels of motivation towards the brand. In this regard it is also relevant to examine how the experience affects the participants' willingness to take part in a process of value co-creation. Hultén (2011) argue that the design of the event has an impact, and presents the term multi sensory brand experiences as a way of encouraging value co-creation. A multi sensory brand experience is defined as an experience where more than one of the five senses contribute to the sensory experience (Hultén, 2011), and it is argued, that multi sensory experiences lead to value co-creation on a deeper and more profound level. I will examine and challenge this theory in the analysis, as I examine how the event participants make sense of the brand experience, and how the sensory elements at the event affected their co-creation of value.

## 4. Methodology and research design

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Methodology is defined as the way the researcher conducts his or her studies and thereby refers to the epistemological perspective (Heide & Simonsson, 2014). The epistemological assumption prescribes certain guidelines for conducting research, i.e. method of study, as the underlying understanding of how knowledge is constructed has a direct impact on the techniques and data collection tools of the study (Prasad, 2005).

### 4.1 Empirical phenomenology

The overriding purpose of this thesis is to get an in-depth understanding of how experiential marketing influences brand relationships. As such it contrasts with most existing literature about experiential marketing, as the purpose is not to make broad generalisations about the effects, but rather to give an exhaustive account of its influences of experiential marketing from a brand relational and consumer centric perspective. In this study I employ ‘empirical phenomenology’ as the overarching methodological perspective. This perspective is placed within the hermeneutic paradigm, which has a subjective epistemology that emphasises people’s subjective understandings of the world (Presskorn-Thygesen, 2012). It is in other words the notion of meaning creation and sense making that is of interest (Presskorn-Thygesen, 2013). As the very idea behind experiential marketing can be seen as a means of creating situations or settings that facilitate a certain kind of brand experience and evaluation (Schmitt & Zarantonello, 2013), I argue that empirical phenomenology’s notion of sense making is a most relevant way to approach the experiential marketing phenomenon. The reason being that it puts focus on the consumers’ construction of meaning on the basis of e.g. their experiences (Darmer, 2012). The phenomenological perspective supports the brand relational approach that I have in this thesis, as the concept of brand relationships is grounded in phenomenology (Heding et al. 2016). As such it is most relevant for the purpose of this thesis.

As mentioned, the epistemological perspective has direct implications on how the study should be conducted. Empirical phenomenology relies solely on qualitative research methods (Heding et al. 2016) as they focus on meaning creation and seek to understand how people



make sense of their experiences (Merriam, 2009). In the following I will describe how the study is conducted.

## **4.2 The overall study design**

This study is designed to provide exhaustive knowledge about the subject and allow me to develop an in-depth holistic understanding of experiential marketing from a relational approach. As such, the study can be defined as inductive, as the phenomenon is examined on its own premises and the findings are used to build new theory (Eksell & Thelander, 2014; Merriam, 2009).

### ***4.2.1 Marketing action research***

The overarching method of study in this thesis is marketing action research, which is a term adapted from Perry and Gummesson (2004). As I am not only the researcher, examining and evaluating a chosen case, but also a central part of the team creating experiential marketing initiative, I am concerned with conducting research that can contribute with relevant academic findings, as well as improving the professional practice of the organisation. According to Zuber-Skerritt and Perry (2002), action research makes this possible. In contrast to mainstream research, where the researcher is detached from the phenomenon being studied, the researcher is deeply involved as an agent of change in action research (Gummesson, 2001). In my case, I take on the role as academic researcher while also acting as Marketing Project Manager who is responsible for the media partnership with CPH:DOX, and is held accountable for it supporting the strategic vision of Politiken. This essentially means that the research is not merely done *about* the project, but also *for* the project (Ballantyne, 2004).

Action research is not a particularly common in marketing research, which Gummesson (2001) argue is primarily due to the strong focus on quantitative study of results rather than processes. Traditional action research focuses on work processes and aims to improve workgroup processes of action, and is done by intensively studying the people in the work group (Perry & Gummesson, 2004). In marketing and in my study in particular, action research as a method instead employed with the purpose of creating what I would define as a more holistic study that encompass all aspects of the case by not only examining the product but also the work process behind it (Perry & Gummesson, 2004). Kates and Robertson (2004)

argue that action research is particularly relevant in marketing when it is used to examine the fit between the project or initiative and the organisation, as it implies a larger emphasis on outside pressures, which support my notion of it being a method for getting a more complete and holistic account of the studied phenomenon. I find marketing action research particularly compelling in my thesis study as it allows me to include the procedural and contextual aspects in the discussion, and as such the marketing case is not merely seen as an isolated instance but is instead evaluated on the basis of the strategic purpose it serves. I deem this is necessary in order to comment on and discuss how experiential marketing can be used as a strategic communication tool, the purpose of which is to support the strategic vision of the organisation. As such it enables me to make a contribution to academic research while also making managerial implications and delimitations on an informed basis.

### **Research design**

This study was inspired by marketing action research, which is characterised by a continuous cycle consisting of four phases: diagnosing, planning, action and evaluation (Coghlan & Brannick, 2005). As the study object of this action research is a case study, the focus is on the case rather than an on-going change process, the thesis research will be conducted as one sole action research cycle, as suggested by Zuber-Skerritt (2002). The action research cycle serves as a fundament for the research, but the phases do not get equal attention in the thesis, as it is the phase of evaluation that is most relevant for academic analysis and discussion. The other elements have however all played crucial roles in the study, which is highlighted in the research model for this study, see Figure 1 on next page.

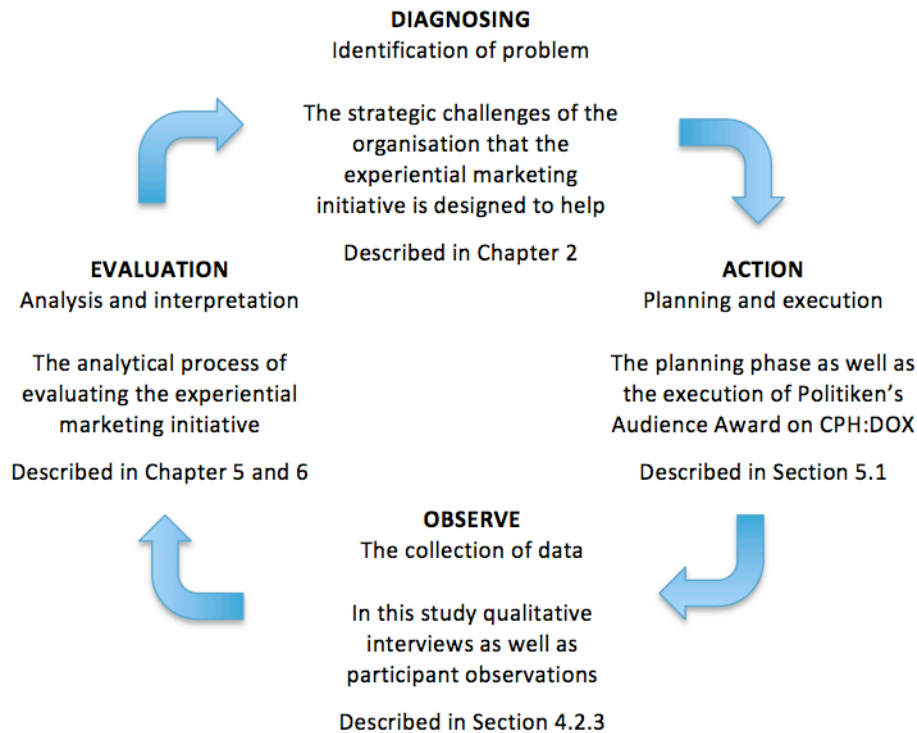


Figure 1  
Based on Coghlan & Brannick (2005)

#### 4.2.2 Case study

As it has been mentioned, the marketing action research is conducted as a case study, which I believe is the most appropriate way to gain an in depth understanding of the phenomenon under scrutiny, namely the effects of Politiken's experiential marketing initiatives. Yin (2009) defines case studies as *"an empirical inquiry that investigates a contemporary phenomenon in depth within its real-life context"* (Yin, 2009, p. 18). Case study research is neither a method nor a methodology, but rather defines the choice of what is being studied, that being a bounded system that can be defined as a case (Stake, 2005). Case study is not common in traditional action research, however, Perry and Gummesson's (2004) term marketing action research is adopted in this thesis, and due to its broad definition and the added focus on external pressures, it can cover both action learning and case study (Perry & Gummesson, 2004.). The case study is conducted as a qualitative case study, which is appropriate when the goal is to get extensive knowledge of a complex phenomenon (Heide & Simonsson, 2014), as it is an intensive, holistic description and analysis of a single phenomenon (Merriam, 2009).

As described in the introduction, the purpose of this thesis is not only to make specific findings that can provide knowledge about the chosen case, but also to make generalisations that

enable me to make both a contribution to academic research and provide managerial implications. Several researchers believe that generalisations are restricted to positivistic studies, and that it is not possible to make generalisations on the basis of qualitative case studies. Flyvbjerg (2006), however, does not see it as black and white and instead argues that there are different types of generalisations. He presents idea of ‘the force of example’ to emphasise the possibilities of generalisations that exist within qualitative case studies, “*formal generalizations is overvalued as a source of scientific development, whereas “the force of example” is underestimated*” (Flyvbjerg, 2006, p. 228)

Yin (2009) seconds this opinion, and claims that case studies are generalizable to theoretical propositions and not to populations or universes, i.e. the case study should be seen as basis for analytical generalisations that expand the findings.

### **Choice of case**

The case that is being studied in this thesis is Politiken’s Audience Award on CPH:DOX. There are a number of reasons why this particular case was chosen. First of all, there was the question of accessibility. As I was project manager of the work with Politiken’s Audience Award, I had complete access to all phases of the project, and according to Yin (2009) accessibility is the main criteria in qualitative case research. Second of all, CPH:DOX took place 16<sup>th</sup> to 26<sup>th</sup> march, which made the timing perfect for this study, as action research should ideally be conducted in real time (Gummesson, 2001), and both the planning, execution and evaluation took place during the thesis semester. On a less practical note, the case of Politiken’s Audience Award was a great case in terms of examining how experiential marketing influences brand relationships, as it had the potential of being a highly engaging project. Politiken have various types of experiential marketing initiatives with varying levels of consumer engagement, and Politiken’s Audience Award is arguably one of the projects with the highest level.

### ***4.2.3 Empirical data***

In this study, two methods of data collection are employed, in order to support the overarching purpose of this study. In case study research, multiple sources of data are preferable as a way of examining the case from different angles and thereby get a more nuanced understanding of it (Merriam, 2009; Yin, 2009). As it has been explained, empirical phenomenology is employed as an overall approach to the studies, which focuses on lived experiences and sense

making. The data in this study is limited to notions of experiences of Politiken's Audience Award. And therefore the empirical data consists of interviews with event participants and participant observations. The interviews were the primary source of data, while the participant observations served as the secondary.

The qualitative interviews were designed as semi-structured interviews, which, rather than dictating concrete questions that must be answered, are characterised as being completed with an open questionnaire that defines themes and topics, see Appendix. The purpose of this form of interview was to get a detailed account of the interview participants' experiences, understandings and sense making in relation to Politiken's Audience Award (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2008). Brand relationship and value co-creation are abstract terms, and as such the interview participants were not asked direct questions regarding this. Rather, they were asked questions that were designed to provide an indication of the nature of their relationship with Politiken and their level of value co-creation at the event. The semi-structured interviews were supported by visual elicitation, which entailed that visual elements from the audience award were presented during the interview as an instrument to gain deeper knowledge of the case (Thelander, 2014). The experiential marketing dimensions of Politiken's Audience Award are grounded on a strong visual identity, which was created with the strategic purpose of creating a coherent brand experience and heighten participant engagement at the event. And as such, the visual elements play a significant role in the experiential marketing case, which made it a relevant method to guide the conversation.

In addition to the semi-structured interviews, participant observation was included as a secondary method of data collection. The observations were conducted at two out of the ten audience award screenings, and focus was on the behaviour of the participants. The reason for including participant observations was twofold. First of all, in a case study, the data must make it possible to obtain an in-depth insight into the studied phenomena, which can be done through combining data collection methods (Merriam, 2009). To be more specific, the combination of the two chosen methods is relevant as basis for comparison (Bottorff, 2004), and to secure internal validity in the study, i.e. securing that the research findings matched the reality (Merriam, 2009). Secondly, the case that is being examined in this study dealt with a string of physical events, and as such it was deemed necessary to understand the events as they unfolded (Bottorff, 2004; Yin, 2009).

### **Data collection of interviews**

In order to address the purpose of this study, interview participants were selected using purposeful sampling, and thus making sure that the participants were relevant to the study by focusing on validity, meaningfulness and insightfulness, or what Patton (1990) describes as “*information-rich cases*” (Patton, 1990, p. 169). The experiential marketing effort was a strategic communication tool, and therefore designed to support the overall strategic vision of Politiken. For this reason the main criteria in the purposeful sampling was, that the participants all belonged to Politiken’s target audience and their ideologies were aligned with those of Politiken. The Gallup Compass (Kompas Segmenter, n.d.) was a helpful tool in this regard, as it gives a detailed account of the target audience and thereby provides tangible guidelines for the more ideological aspects of the purposeful sampling. The respondents were all defined as belonging to the modern community oriented segment, as described in Chapter 2. Additionally the participants were also all in the same age group and relatively young (25-34 years), as this particular group is one that Politiken is struggling to reach and as such this study examines experiential marketing as a strategic communication tool used by Politiken to reach the younger audiences.

The interview participants were primarily identified through my own personal network. This enabled me to make sure that qualifying criteria were met, and that the participants were in fact information-rich participants. I did not include any of my close personal friends or family members as interview participants in the study, but instead stuck to my peripheral network, which I did to avoid biases or personal feelings affecting the interviews. Ten participants were interviewed for this study. This number was chosen due to the scope of the thesis and rather than having a larger sample, I prioritised including participant observation as a secondary data source. Additionally, as the purpose was to create in depth understandings of the case rather than make generalisations, as argued by Patton (1990, p. 185): “*The validity, meaningfulness, and insight generated from qualitative inquiry have more to do with the information-richness of the cases selected (...) than with the sample size*”.

#### **4.2.4 Ethical considerations**

As with any research project, there are certain ethical considerations that must be addressed. The theme of this study dealt with low sensitivity issues, as it did not touch upon themes related to the respondents professional lives, families or similar. However, even so it is neces-

sary to actively consider the ethical dimensions when the study includes the personal accounts of people as the main source of empirical data. In this study I was particularly concerned with making sure that all the respondents were able to give their consent on an informed basis, and as such the purpose of the interview was described to them both before hand and at the beginning of the interview. Secondly all the respondents were given the opportunity to read through the transcripts to ensure that their answers were transcribed correctly. Lastly, to avoid any risks of the respondents being held personally accountable for their opinions, I have secured their anonymity by using fictional names in this thesis, as proposed by Kvale & Brinkmann (2008).

#### ***4.2.5 Involvement, subjectivity and reflexivity***

While there are some undeniable advantages of conducting marketing action research, there are also some significant implications concerning researcher subjectivity and involvement that must be addressed. In action research the researcher is much more involved and subjective than in other types of research. Additionally, I have an empirical phenomenological approach to the study, which is concerned with the meaning creation of the participants while also taking into account the researcher's subjectivity as part of the analysis and interpretation. I do however argue that my active involvement in the project is to a large extent an advantage, as it allows me to make use of my contextual knowledge and as such can provide sufficient nuance to the analysis. However, with that being said, I do find it is important to take some precautions to ensure that my involvement does not create biases that pollute the findings. According to Gummesson (2001) the researcher can be consciously detached and reflective. In the following I have elaborated on the concrete measures I have taken in this regard.

The active measures I have taken to minimise biases affect all stages of the study, starting with the semi-structured interview, which is used to understand the subject from the interview participant's own perspective without the interviewer's agenda overpowering the conversation (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2008). Secondly, in the initial phase of the analysis, categories were constructed on basis of the interview data, the purpose of which was to find analytical themes based solely on the interviews. Kvale & Brinkmann (2008) describe this categorisation process as 'meaning condensing', which is a tool within an empirical phenomenological approach that is designed to allow for the interview participants' statements to set the agenda, and thereby reduce the influence of my own existing presumptions (Merriam, 2009). This

phase is extremely important as it forms the basis for the following analysis and interpretation. Additionally, in the analytical process I actively discussed the findings with my thesis supervisor as well as a colleague who was not involved in the work with the audience award. I did so to ensure that my professional involvement in the project did not influence my interpretations, and as such this was done to secure validity of the study.

All the interviews for this study were conducted in Danish, and as such the quotes presented in the text have been translated from Danish to English. Cassinger (2014) argues that the translator's own personal values and worldviews will shape the translations, and as such cannot be detached from it. This of course implies that my already high degree of involvement in the study object is problematized further as the initial data processing involves translation from one language to another. To minimise the issues related to this, I have consciously asked follow up questions to verify my interpretations of the respondents statements, and creating the grounds for translations as close to the original meaning as possible.

### **4.3 Analytical process**

Due to the focus on the consumers' sense making and creation of value, the analytical process in this thesis is inspired by the framework for qualitative analysis in consumer research that is created by Spiggle (1994). According to this researchers can complete analysis and interpretation of data in either a linear or in a circular way, the latter being of relevance when the context is deemed important to the study object. As such I employ a circular method for data analysis and interpretation in this study, which can also be characterised as a hermeneutical framework. The hermeneutical framework differs from most marketing literature, which, as I have argued several times throughout this thesis, is predominantly firm-centric and quantitative in its empirical approach. However, a hermeneutical framework is arguably very relevant in marketing,

*“The marketing relevance of hermeneutic interpretation derives from the straight-forward point that “marketers need models to analyse and interpret how consumers perceive products in relation to themselves””* (Thompson, 1997, p. 439)

The basic concept of the hermeneutic framework for analysis is that it puts emphasises on text *and* context, and thereby provides a coherent interpretation of sense making in the case (Merriam, 2009), and supports the ambition to provide a holistic in-depth account of the case. It



also supports the marketing action research method by not merely being concerned with the empirical data, but also allowing for the contextual and procedural elements to be included in the analyses.

## 5. Analysis

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Experiential marketing is about creating experiences for the consumer that evoke sensory, behavioural and cognitive responses. When approached from a relational perspective, the question that emerges is that of how these responses influence the value co-creation processes of the consumer and thus how this influences their relationships with the brand. This is explored in the case of Politiken's Audience Award on CPH:DOX. The structure of the analysis is guided by the research questions presented in the introduction. However, this study is conducted as an action research study, implying that all phases of the project are included as a part of the study. As such the first section of the analysis is dedicated to briefly introduce how Politiken's Audience Award was planned as an experiential marketing initiative, and thereby establish and create the foundation for the analysis and interpretation. In the second section of the analysis, the focus is placed on the participants and is dedicated to analysing the underlying reasons for their interest and willingness to take part in a process of value co-creation at the event. While the third focuses on answering the question of how the experiences created by Politiken and the responses evoked by said experiences affect the consumers' value co-creation and thus their relationship.

### **5.1 Politiken's Audience Award: planning and action**

This study is designed as an action research project, implying that current theories of consumer-brand relationship and experiential marketing, as presented in the theoretical framework, were used in the planning phase in attempt to realise the strategic goals. In the following I will elaborate on how this was done.

Politiken's partnership with CPH:DOX exists for two main reasons. First of all it serves the strategic vision of establishing Politiken as 'the living newspaper' through participating in real life activities. Secondly the partnership was initiated due to understanding of there being a significant overlap between CPH:DOX's and Politiken's target audiences, and as such it is deemed a valuable branding platform for Politiken. This can be backed up by statistics, as more than 65% of Politiken's readers express that it is important to them to keep up with cul-

ture, as opposed to 34% of the general population in Denmark (Index Danmark/Gallup, 2016), and thus supporting the notion of the cultural event CPH:DOX being of interest to readers and potential readers of Politiken. Furthermore the strategic vision prescribes a focus on culture, which the partnership with CPH:DOX supports.

### ***5.1.1 Value proposition***

At the very core of Politiken's Audience Award and Politiken's partnership with CPH:DOX in general, lies the objective of creating associations between CPH:DOX and Politiken and thereby affect the way Politiken appears in the eyes of the consumers. If this is translated into a relational perspective on branding, it can be said that the partnership creates a forum for value propositions to be shaped and communicated. The value propositions that are intended are especially revolving around the notion of a strong cultural focus and particularly more intellectual types of culture, as exemplified with documentary films. However, it is also the notion of Politiken being including and showing interest in its readers, as established through the audience award, and thus position Politiken as more than a newspaper but as 'the living newspaper'.

### ***5.1.2 The concept of dialogue***

Politiken's Audience Award was designed with the objective of increasing engagement, as it is fully up to the participants to determine the winner and therefore requires active participation. As such the objective for the audience award was to engage the participants as much as possible, and thereby encourage active value co-creation. According to Varey and Ballantyne (2006), the premise of profound value co-creation is the concept of dialogue, i.e. both the brand and the consumer are active participants, and on the basis hereof the audience award was designed as a dialogical initiative. The dialogical characteristics of the audience award, namely the voting aspect, was emphasised in the communication. The visual elements of the communication were based on Politiken's iconic hearts that are used in all reviews, and in the advertisement a negative Politiken review was changed, and thereby urging the audience to participate and review the film, see images below.



Left: Poster from the event



Right: Ballot, front and back

The recurrent phrase of Politiken's Audience Award was, *now it's your turn to hand out hearts*, and thus emphasising the concept of dialogue through the use of direct communication. Additionally the voting elements were all physical, i.e. paper ballot and red pen, and physical ballot boxes, all of which were in line with the visual identity of the audience award. The goal of this was to create as coherent an experience as possible, and thereby increase the participants' reflectiveness and as such lead to deep level cognitive responses. This was believed would make the participants more engaged in the audience award and thus make them willing to co-create value.

## 5.2 What determines consumers' willingness to co-create value? Elements within the control of Politiken

As it has been explained, Politiken's Audience Award was designed to encourage the participants to co-create value. In this section of the analysis, I will employ a consumer-centric

focus, and analyse the empirical data to examine the underlying reasons for the participants' willingness to take part in value co-creation. I will begin with examining the aspects within the control of Politiken, here defined as the sensory elements, which cover the physical, and the visual communicational elements that constitute the experience. In section 5.3, I will put focus on the elements that are beyond the control of Politiken, that instead involve the participants' personal and subjective motivations. As such section 5.2 and 5.3 seek to answer the research question of what determines the participants' willingness to take part in value co-creation at the event, and will also create the basis for the further analysis.

### ***5.2.1 Sensory elements***

Politiken's Audience Award was created as a multi-sensory brand experience, as it was made up by several physical and visual elements that were carefully planned to create a consistent experience. When asked to evaluate the concept as a whole, the respondents highlighted and stressed the impact of the physical sensory elements and pinpointed their influence on making it a complete and coherent experience. One of the respondents described this focusing on the action of *giving hearts*, and thus both emphasised the act of filling out the hearts on the ballot, while also commenting on the importance of it being Politiken's iconic hearts, that the audience use in the voting process.

*"In stead of just entering it in on an iPad or raising your hand, it becomes more a part of the experience that you're actually giving hearts. It sort of becomes a coherent experience"* (Peter)

To put it in other words, the multi-sensory experience fostered positive sensory responses amongst the interview participants, and made them evaluate it as a coherent experience. With the notion of the experience being multi-sensory, it is implied that it consists of a range of details that are designed to create a cohesive experience. During an interview, another respondent commented on the significance of the details in the experience:

*"The pen also coloured red, so when you coloured in the hearts, they actually became red. I know it sounds stupid, but it was just such a thing that made me really want to do it"* (Sara)

As exemplified in the quote above, the respondents expressed that even the smallest details played a role in the experience and thus affected their desire to participate actively. Later in the interview the same participant mentioned the red pen again and expressed that in her mind it contributed to creating a *"complete experience"* (Sara). Hereby stressing how the interplay

between the different sensory elements affected her overall assessment and willingness to participate actively in the experience, as well as making her more reflective. In this part of the interviewing process, the visual interview method proved particularly helpful. The visual elements helped guide the conversation, and served as a supportive tool for the respondents to express which responses the sensory elements evoked. E.g. when describing the importance of the red pen, as exemplified in the quote above, the respondent Sara grabbed the pen and coloured in the hearts on the ballot while explaining its effect on her. Hultén (2011) argues that multi-sensory experiences lead to value co-creation on a more profound and deep level. Although the statement put forward by Hultén is arguably too simplistic, as I would say that an experience being multi-sensory can not in itself determine the participants' level of value co-creation, there is however still some truth in it. This study shows that the coherent experience created by stimulations of multiple senses was presented by the interview participants as an important reason for them wanting to take part in the experience as well as making them more reflective about the responses it evoked. I argue that this notion of interest in participating as well as being more reflective lays the ground for the respondents' willingness to participate in a process of value co-creation based on the experience.

With the sensory elements having been defined as an influencing factor in the consumers' willingness to participate in value co-creation, it of course implies that there are also sensory elements beyond the control of the brand. In the observations I completed, the physical environment was remarkably dissimilar. At the first event, the elements connected to Politiken's Audience Award, such as posters and ballot boxes, were very visible, and the volunteers handing out the ballots were chatty and extrovert, informing the guests of it being a Politiken's Audience Award screening. At this event the majority of the audience stayed behind after the credits had ended. Some discussed the film with their companion and others just sat for themselves carefully filling out the hearts on the ballot (DRIB, Empire Bio, March 23<sup>rd</sup> 2017). At the second event, however, the director of the film was present and participated in a Q&A after the film. Here the audience had an apparent focus on the director and hardly any stayed behind to assess the film and fill out the ballot, and instead it was done rapidly on their way out when they were confronted with the volunteers, or simply not at all. (Beuys, Grand Teatret, March 24<sup>th</sup> 2017). As such my observations indicate that the physical sensory elements influence the participants' willingness to actively participate in the experience.

### 5.2.2 Summary

On the basis of the respondents' statements as well as the observations I completed, I argue that the external factors such as the sensory elements of the experience affect the participants' willingness to take actively part in the experience and the degree to which they reflect over it. This I argue lays the ground for willingness to co-create value on the basis of the stimuli of the event. As such my findings support those of Hultén (2011). Here it is also relevant to note that in a context of experiential marketing, at which the brand is placed in a new context, several unforeseen sensory factors can occur. This limits the brands' level of control over the experience.

## 5.3 What determines consumers' willingness to co-create value? Subjective factors beyond the control of Politiken

*"So yeah, I can feel their [Politiken's] presence but I don't actively consider it in terms of which films I choose to watch (...) it's still a DOX film; it's still DOX I'm at. It's not a Politiken event"* (Andreas)

*"Well, I just think it strengthens the brand, as I already know it. But I also think that in a way you get a more personal relationship with Politiken, because this way you feel that you're talking with Politiken about the film you've just seen, and that Politiken is interested in hearing what you think."* (Lene)

As the two quotes above indicate, the interview participants expressed having had remarkably different responses to the experiences created by Politiken, and as such the nature and level of their value co-creation differed quite a bit. In the previous section, I argued that the sensory and physical elements influence consumers' interest in actively participating in the experience and as such their willingness to co-create value. However, while they have an impact on a more general level, these elements do not alone explain the profoundly different responses expressed by the respondents. As such I argue, that the different responses and thereby levels of value co-creation had little to do with the sensory elements, and was instead largely due to more subjective factors determining how the consumers' made sense of the experience. As I employ a relational perspective to branding in this study, the alleged subjective factors are

analysed from a relational approach. And more specifically I employ the Brand Relationship Quality construct (BRQ) created by Fournier (1998) as an analytical tool. The BRQ serves as a framework for examining the quality and strength of a consumer-brand relationship using three dimensions: socio-emotive attachment, behavioural ties, and supportive cognitive beliefs. Although the BRQ construct is almost 20 years old, it remains the most comprehensive and relevant framework for qualitative measurement of relationship strength, and is as such relevant in this analysis.

While conducting the interviews and during the analytical process, certain crucial similarities became evident in the way the interview participants made sense of and how they co-created value at the event. On the basis of these similarities, three categories were constructed, and they are characterised as follows: identification, shared interests and values, and product commitment. These three categories will be used to structure the analysis.

### ***5.3.1 Category 1: Identification***

The first category that I identified, was formed by respondents expressing high levels of active engagement. This is exemplified in the quote by Lene in the introduction to the section, in which she states that she feels she is *talking with Politiken* when participating in Politiken's Audience Award. This is also expressed by another respondent, when asked how Politiken's Audience Award and general involvement in CPH:DOX affects her view of Politiken.

*“Well it has the effect that I can more easily identify with being in the Politiken segment. I mean, there's more identity in Politiken because it isn't just a newspaper you read, but it's also these cultural events you participate in”* (Sara)

When asked to reflect over Politiken's participation in cultural events, such as CPH:DOX, the respondents immediately related it to their sense of relationship with the brand and with a particular focus on the concept of identification. The quote by Sara above serves as an example of this, as she explains that she identifies strongly with the brand and even uses it to express her sense of self, when she defines herself as being a in the 'Politiken segment'. This notion of identification is one of the key characteristics of this particular group of respondents, who all felt confident using Politiken as a way of describing their personalities, their interests, and worldviews. As expressed by another respondent, *“Well, I think it stands for some culture radical values that I'd like to, or that I think I also stand for myself”* (Lene). Additionally the respondents in this category described themselves as heavy users of Politiken



who read articles from Politiken at least once a day, which they explained was a direct result of their strong connection to Politiken. And more importantly, Politiken was described as being indisputable to them, as none of them could picture themselves as non-readers of Politiken. As explained by one respondent, *“even though many of the articles in Information<sup>2</sup> are maybe more often ones I would choose based on the themes, then there’s just so much associated with Politiken that I could never just read Information”* (Sara). In this regard it is also relevant to mention, that the core product, i.e. the journalism on either print or digital, was not the respondents’ only focus when describing their use and interaction with Politiken, as also Politiken’s events, general presence in Copenhagen and participation in cultural events were valued as being important to them, as explained by one participant, *“I actually don’t see Politiken as a newspaper in the classical sense, I see it just as much as a cultural platform”* (Sofie). As such it is the brand in a more holistic sense that the respondents in this category form a relationship with rather than its core product.

When applying the BRQ framework provided by Fournier (1998) to the respondents’ stories, the high level of identification with Politiken indicates a strong socio-emotive attachment. A strong socio-emotive attachment is characterised by the brand delivering on important identity themes, and thereby it plays an important role in the consumers’ expression of self (Fournier, 1998), it is characteristic for the respondents in this category. Additionally the participants also expressed strong behavioural ties, which were directly related to their socio-emotive attachment. These behavioural ties were defined by a frequent use of Politiken – both the core product, but also other brand-related activities. As such the responses of the respondents in this category can be interpreted as having remarkably strong relational ties with Politiken based on the BRQ construct. Another framework that is relevant in terms of providing an understanding of the quality of the consumer-brand relationship is presented by Grönroos (1997) and further developed by Sääksjärvi et al. (2007). According to this framework, the fact that the respondents did not merely focus on the core product when asked to describe their relationship and view of Politiken, but rather the entity of the brand indicates a relationship on firm-level rather than on product-level (Sääksjärvi et al. 2007). This firm-level relationship was characterised by an appreciation of Politiken engaging in various cultural events and the participants being interested in participating in said events. This indicates what Sääksjärvi et al.

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<sup>2</sup> Information is a Danish newspaper, and one of Politiken’s main competitors.

(2007) defines as an active relational mode, which implies that the consumers are eager to interact with the brand, and as such they are open towards relational marketing initiatives.

### **5.3.2 Category 2: Shared interests and values**

The second category was formed of participants who expressed having a relationship with Politiken that was primarily based on a notion of shared values and interests. This was explained by one of the respondents when asked to elaborate on his thoughts of Politiken being a great fit for him.

*“In terms of the angle and the topics they present, I definitely agree mostly with the values presented in Politiken (...) My impression is that a lot of people often accuse Politiken of having too much of an emotional approach to the material, and that the feelings are always present in a way. But I actually like that the focus is on people.”* (Thomas)

As exemplified in the quote above, the respondents in this category feel that the values they deem inherent in Politiken’s brand are some that they can mirror themselves in, e.g. values such as solidarity and humanism, as described by Thomas. In addition to the notion of shared values, the respondents also stress the importance of shared interests, as described, *“I just think that it’s because Politiken has had, or has, these areas of interest. I mean, what they cover is also largely something that interests me. And that makes you automatically drawn to it”* (Signe). The interests highlighted by the respondents primarily revolve around culture, which is of course related to the interview being about CPH:DOX. As such it is not profound notions of identity concerns or expression of self, but rather more apparent similarities such as values and interests that the respondents share with the brand that was expressed as the underlying reason for their brand relationship. The notions of shared values and interests were also described by the respondents as having a direct affect on the level of interaction and use of Politiken. The respondents all expressed being rather consistent users of Politiken, who read Politiken articles multiple times per week. More importantly, however, they expressed that the feeling of having shared interests and values with Politiken was what made them committed users of the product. As described by one of the respondents who admitted to reading articles from Politiken at least once daily, *“There’s definitely a sense of interest in it, so when you want to know what happens in Copenhagen and especially if it has to do with cultural or the gastronomic scene, which is quite big, then it’s Politiken you must go to”* (Peter). As articulated in this quote, the notion of shared interests and values, means that Politiken is inter-

preted as the natural choice for the respondents when they want to explore said interests. Additionally, the respondents also expressed how they did not just evaluate Politiken based on the values and interests expressed in the journalism, but stressed the importance of Politiken being more than its core product, and described it as a “*Culture community*” (Peter) or “*culture-happening-media*” (Nicolai), the latter being a made up word uttered by one of the respondents in attempt to encompass the multitude of Politiken. To put it in other words, the respondents viewed Politiken, not merely as a newspaper, but as a brand that exists in a variety of forms.

The respondents’ expressed having a strong connection to Politiken that was based on a notion of shared values and interests, and when analysed using Fournier’s (1998) BRQ framework, this indicates that the socio-emotive connection to Politiken is not particularly deep, as the relationship was not explained as delivering on themes of identity. As such the relationship quality is best defined as based on strong behavioural ties, which were characterised by a high degree of experienced relevance due to the notions of shared interest and values. When applying the theories of brand relationship quality as presented by Sääksjärvi et al. (2007), the notion of Politiken being more than its core product to the respondents can be seen as an expression of the respondents’ relation to Politiken not merely being with the product but rather being with the brand in general. And as such, it indicates a firm-level relationship. However, I argue that the distinction between product-level and firm-level is too black and white in this case. While the respondents expressed clear signs of a firm-level relationship, it is the journalistic approach that is at the core of their relationship. As such the relationship contains indications of both product-level and firm-level relationship and thereby places itself somewhere in the middle of the two. Additionally the respondents’ openness and appreciation for Politiken actively participating in cultural events indicates an active relational mode. As exemplified by the positive assessment of Politiken being more than its core product, “*Politiken is living. Meaning that it is out in the real world, beyond its digital and physical platform*” (Peter). The active relationship mode, which indicates a willingness to interact with the brand, is believed to create the foundation for willingness to co-create value.

### 5.3.3 Category 3: Product commitment

*“I’ll say that its well-judged journalism and I think they are placed in the span between the very heavy articles and the very easy Se&Hør-type articles” (Maria)*

When asked to describe on their general view of Politiken, the respondents in the third and last category were very focused on the journalism, i.e. Politiken’s core product. This is expressed in the quote above, in which the respondent Maria describes her view of Politiken, which is solely based on the product and the journalistic angle rather than general brand values. In other words this category is defined by the respondents’ relationship being with the core product rather than the brand Politiken.

All the respondents in this category came from homes in which Politiken had been the newspaper of choice, and as such they expressed having grown up with Politiken. This history with the brand was expressed as having created a kind of latent relationship with Politiken, which was based on trust and a notion of the brand being reliable. As expressed by one respondent, *“I’ve grown up in a Politiken home, and it’s always been the newspaper that was at my parents’ home. So therefore I just think of it as being very dependable and something you can trust”* (Camilla). Other than connecting positive attributes to Politiken such as trustworthiness, the history and memories with Politiken was also described by the respondents as making Politiken the most natural choice of newspaper to them. The respondents described a use of Politiken’s journalism that had varied in intensity over the past few years, but even so they all thought of it as the most relevant newspaper to them. As such the respondents’ memories of Politiken can be said to have resulted in commitment to the product and thereby a sort of loyalty towards the brand, although not as deep as the commitments expressed by the respondents in the other two categories. Additionally, the respondents emphasised a similarity between their interests and the journalistic approach presented in Politiken, as explained by one of the respondents, when answering the question of why Politiken is her go-to-newspaper, *“Because it’s very broad and because it focuses a lot on culture, which is one of the things I am the most interested in”* (Camilla). As such it is the journalistic angle that is assessed rather than the brand in general.

When approached using the framework presented by Sääksjärvi et al. (2007), the respondents’ focus on the product qualities rather than overall brand values indicates a relationship that is on product-level. One of the consequences of the relationship being product-level rather than

firm-level is that the respondents have not formed socio-emotive attachments to Politiken, as the deep relational level that is distinctive for socio-emotive attachments requires the relationship to be with the brand, i.e. firm-level, and not merely the product (Fournier, 1998). This is also evident in the fact that none of the respondents expressed notions of identification with Politiken, and therefore their relationship is interpreted as not being particularly deep. Instead it is best defined based on what Fournier (1998) describes as behavioural ties. As described in the text, the memories of Politiken being the newspaper of choice in their childhood homes, and the idea of it being of high quality and matching their interests, has resulted in a sense of commitment to Politiken's product, although not particularly deep. This was also emphasised by the fact that the participants' knowledge and interest in other brand related activities was minimal, and as such indicating a passive relational mode. As described by one of the respondents, *"Well, I don't take part in many of these events. I know that they do Friday bars and stuff, like that SKAM Friday bar, but other than that I don't know"* (Andreas). As such the respondents' relationship with Politiken, which is characterised as being on product-level and passive, indicates a low willingness to co-create value, as the very basic foundation for value co-creation is that the participants take active part in the event and reflect over it.

#### ***5.3.4 Concluding analysis and summary***

In the analytical process of examining the effects of the experimental marketing initiatives created by Politiken at CPH:DOX, namely Politiken's Audience Award, it became evident that the respondents had remarkably differently responses to the experiences, and therefore their processes of value co-creation varied. This section of this analysis was dedicated to examining the underlying influences of the participants' willingness to co-create value and provide a context for the third part of the analysis.

In the initial analysis, the respondents were grouped into three different categories. In the first, the respondents expressed having remarkably strong relationships with Politiken on a firm-level, characterised by deep socio-emotional attachments in the form of personal identification and expression of self through the brand. They also expressed an interest in participating in brand-related events, and as such showed indications of an active relational mode, which I argue created the foundation for willingness to co-create value on a deep level. The respondents in the second category expressed having a brand relation that was driven by a sense of shared values and interests with Politiken. Their relationship was first and foremost identified as being on firm-level, although also showing indications of product-level. As ar-

gued, a firm-level relationship often entails a desire to interact with the brand, which was also expressed by the respondents in this category. This desire was however not as strong as the one expressed by the first group, which I argue is directly related to the relationship being driven by shared values and interests rather than delivering on profound notions of identity.. Lastly, the respondents in the third category communicated having relational ties to Politiken that were solely on product-level, which stood in contrast to the respondents in the first two categories. One of the consequences of the relationship being on a product-level was that they saw no reason to invest time in interacting with the brand, and as such the mode of their relationship was interpreted as passive. I argue that this indicates a low willingness to co-create value.

In this section of the analysis, I have examined both the sensory elements that could to a large degree be controlled by Politiken, and the more subjective factors determining how the individual respondents made sense of the experience, which Politiken had no control over. It was found that they both influence the consumers' willingness to co-create value, but especially the subjective factors, defined as the strength of the respondents' pre-existing relationship with Politiken, were a particularly important underlying factor determining the participants' willingness to co-create value with Politiken in an experiential marketing context. In the following parts of the analysis, I will elaborate further on this point when I analyse how Politiken's Audience Award affect the participants' value co-creation. The three categories identified in this section will be used to both structure and nuance the analysis.

## **5.4 How do brand experiences influence consumer value co-creation?**

As it has been explained in the literature review and theoretical foundation, the very core of the relational approach is the concept of value co-creation. As such it is the value co-creation that I will examine in the analysis. It has been suggested by several researchers, (e.g. Arnould, 2006; Holt, 2002; Vargo & Lusch, 2008) that consumer value co-creation occurs on different levels, which will be reflected in this analysis. To make it clear which level I examine, and also emphasise how the levels are connected, I employ the labels 'micro' (consumers' interactions with the brand on a very personal level) and 'macro' (more general societal and cultural constructs of meaning) presented by both Holt (2002) and Arnould & Thompsen (2005). The macro level includes the cultural myths that Politiken creates through the experiential market-

ing effort on CPH:DOX. And the micro level is the level at which profound value co-creation and identification occurs. The micro level can also be described as the psychological context of meaning that is presented by e.g. Fournier (1998). The analysis is of course based on micro-level data, namely phenomenological interviews, but as proposed by Holt (2002) these can in fact be used to investigate macro level constructs.

#### ***5.4.1 Category 1: Identification and micro level co-creation of value***

*“They just take part in some really cool things. CPH:DOX is a really cool initiative (...) so of course Politiken takes part in it (...) They just choose things that make a lot of sense to me”* (Sara).

When asked how they evaluated Politiken’s participation in CPH:DOX, the respondents in the first category emphasised how it supported their view of Politiken as being a brand that is engaged in a lot of cultural initiatives, as explained in the quote above. However, it was especially the concept of the brand showing a sort of conscious action that was articulated. Here described as *they take part on* or *they choose*. As such the respondents in this category had very little focus on the general constructs of meaning and the cultural myths created through Politiken’s collaboration with CPH:DOX. Instead the focus was on the interpretation of Politiken showing a sense of cautious action or intent when they were actively involved in CPH:DOX. As it is also described by one of the respondents, *“I feel that Politiken is my natural companion in the movie theatre”* (Lene). This concept of a brand being experienced as acting consciously is what Alvares and Fournier (2016) characterise as anthropomorphism. In the following I will examine the implications of Politiken being experienced as an anthropomorphised brand, and in particular how it influences the respondents’ value co-creation on the basis of the event.

#### **Anthropomorphism as a foundation for dialogical experiences**

As described in the first section of this analysis, this group of respondents expressed an active relational mode, implying that they seek contact with Politiken and wish to interact with the brand (Sääksjärvi et al. 2007).

*“In a way you get a more personal relationship with Politiken, because this way you feel that you’re talking with Politiken about the film you’ve just seen, and that Politiken is interested in hearing what you think.”* (Lene).

As explained by Lene, the respondents in this category interpreted the audience award not just as a mere concept of voting and judging a film they had just seen, but rather as an interactive experience in which Politiken initiated a dialogue. A dialogue they gladly participated in as it was experienced by the respondents as being based on a sense of interest in their viewpoints. A dialogue per definition requires two active partners, but as described, the respondents saw Politiken as an anthropomorphised brand, i.e. capable of showing human-like intent, and thereby appear as an active partner in a dialogue. As such it is argued, that the fact that the respondents experienced Politiken as an anthropomorphised brand created the foundation for the audience award to be experienced as a dialogical initiative.

When analysing how Politiken's Audience Award urge the respondents in this category to co-create value, it is the concept of dialogue that is particularly relevant. According to Varey and Ballantyne (2006), an experience being dialogical, meaning that both the consumer and the brand is understood as actively communicating between one another, is what lays the ground for deep level co-creation of value. In this regard it is also relevant to note that the dialogical experience is not evaluated in relation to Politiken's core product, i.e. the journalism, but rather to the more general brand values. As stressed by one of the respondents, *"It has the effect that it becomes, well, sympathetic and thereby you'd like to identify yourself with Politiken"* (Sara). As explained in this quote, the respondents' level of value co-creation is based on identity projects, which I have defined as micro-level co-creation in the introduction to this part of the analysis. According to Vargo and Lusch (2004), value co-creation that is related to the consumer's identity concerns and sense of self is the most deep and profound there is.

To sum up, the participants in this category co-create value on micro level, and as such it is the notion of identification and self-expression that is in focus. As emphasised by one of the respondents, when explaining what she expects from Politiken when they take part in a cultural happening like CPH:DOX, *"they just choose things that make a lot of sense to me"* (Sara). This quote also highlights the existing relationship that the respondents in this group had with Politiken. As described in the first section of the analysis, this category was defined by the respondents having strong relational ties to Politiken that was characterised by deep socio-emotive attachments, as well as them experiencing the brand as anthropomorphised. This has arguably created the foundation for the experiential marketing initiatives to be experienced as dialogical and co-creation of value on a micro level to take place. As such the expe-



rience facilitated value co-creation that expanded on the level and nature of their relationship, and thereby the relational bonds were strengthened.

#### **5.4.2 Category 2: *Profound co-creation of value on macro level***

*“I thought it was kind of obvious considering Politiken’s general level of engagement in cultural events, and I think it is two brands that go well together”* (Signe)

When asked what they thought about Politiken’s involvement in CPH:DOX and particularly the engagement in the form of Politiken’s Audience Award, the immediate response of the respondents in this category was that it made a lot of sense to them. As described in the quote above, the notion of it making sense or being obvious was explained by it fitting into their pre-existing views of Politiken as a culturally oriented brand that often takes part in real-life experiences. As such Politiken participating in CPH:DOX was firstly judged on the more general constructs of meanings, or value propositions created through the media partnership.

Earlier in the analysis, this category was defined by an active relationship with Politiken, indicating that they were generally speaking interested in interacting with the brand and open towards relational approaches. This was very evident in the case of Politiken’s Audience Award, as all the respondents participated actively. Not simply did they vote, but they were deeply committed to the experience, as described by one respondent when she heard that the film she had voted for had won, and that she had thereby participated in determining the winner, *“Is it true? (...) That actually makes me feel very good!”* (Signe). Additionally the respondents expressed having paid extra attention to the film and having stayed behind discussing it with their companion, so that they could judge it on a well-considered basis. As described by one of the respondents, *“I also wrote notes on my ballot. Yeah, I really took on the role of film critic”* (Peter). To put it in other words, the respondents actively and willingly accepted the premises of the experiential marketing initiatives while also expressing high levels of conscious engagement, as emphasised by them enthusiastically taking on the role of film critic.

#### **Dialogical experience leading to profound value co-creation**

*“They like participating and they seek dialogue in a way (...) I’ve actually always pictured, or seen Politiken this way”* (Thomas).

As exemplified in the quote above, the participants in this category expressed that they assessed Politiken's Audience Award as a dialogical experience. The reason being that rather than the event being a setting in which experiences could unfold, the event required active participation from the audiences in the voting process. This was evaluated as Politiken seeking dialogue. Varey and Ballantyne (2006) argue that an experience being considered dialogical by the participants is what lays the ground for deep and profound value co-creation. With this group of respondents, the notion of the experience being dialogical was expressed as making them more engaged and heightening their level of reflectiveness. As explained by one of the respondents, *"I think it's funny because it's kind of like it opens a little window into the discussions and reflections that goes on, when you have to give your judgement of a piece of art. Exactly like the critics. (...) So I think it works really well, that it makes you think"* (Thomas). As exemplified by Thomas, the dialogical elements of the audience award, made the respondents participate actively, while also increasing their level of reflectiveness. However, while the dialogical experience led to co-creation of value on a micro level for the participants in the first category, this was not the case here, as the respondents didn't express notions of identification or relate the responses to their sense of self. Instead I argue that the respondents co-created value on a macro level, as they assessed the meanings put forward by Politiken and related it to their general view of Politiken and its worthiness as a relationship partner. As explained by one respondent, who expressed that the audience award affected the way she evaluated Politiken, *"it's kind of like you have these two poles. On the one side I see Politiken's culture as very elitist, but on the other side you have the audience award, which makes it very democratic. Yeah, so they balance each other out so it becomes a bit more democratic and including"* (Signe). As such, the audience award functions as a value proposition by positioning Politiken as being democratic, and on the basis hereof the respondents co-create value on a macro level.

To sum up, the respondents in this category took part in value co-creation on a macro level. They did so through assessing the value propositions and cultural myths that were created by Politiken through actively participating in CPH:DOX, and particularly by presenting themselves as a democratic brand when asking the participants to determine the winner of the audience award. The respondents furthermore indicated that they experienced the audience award a dialogical initiative, which is directly connected to their existing relationship with the brand being defined as active. The experience of it being dialogical made the respondents

more willing to actively participate as well as increasing their level of reflection in the process. This I argue lays the ground for profound value co-creation on a macro level.

### ***5.4.3 Category 3: Product level relationship limiting the influence of brand experiences***

*“Actually I feel that I meet them [Politiken] just as much when I sit and read them online as I do now. It doesn’t make a difference that they join me at CPH:DOX. It doesn’t change anything.”* (Camilla)

When asked what it meant to them to meet Politiken, a brand they usually encountered either as digital journalism or as a newspaper, in a real life setting, the respondents in the third category expressed that it did not play that big a role to them. It was expressed that the notion of *meeting* Politiken in the real world, was not something they felt, and that they did in fact hardly notice Politiken at the event. However, when asked more subtle questions regarding Politiken’s presence, and particularly when presented with the visual elements at the interview, it became evident that the respondents had in fact observed that Politiken was present at the event. The respondents simply described that the connection between CPH:DOX and Politiken felt so natural to them, as they saw Politiken as a newspaper with a large focus on culture, that their participation did not spike any confusion and therefore they did not consider it very actively. Furthermore, the interactive elements of Politiken’s Audience Award, namely the voting aspect, did not evoke any deep cognitive responses. When asked about why she voted, one respondent replied, *“Could you have not voted? (...) Well, I don’t know. I just think I do what people ask me to do”* (Camilla). As such, the elements that were designed to create a sense of interaction and dialogue between the participants and Politiken were not evaluated as such. In the first part of this analysis, this category was defined by the respondents being in a passive product-level relationship with Politiken, implying that they had no particular desire to interact with the brand (Sääksjärvi et al. 2007). When connecting this to the respondents’ evaluation of Politiken’s Audience Award, and particularly compared to the respondents in the other two groups, it can be argued to have created the foundation for it being seen as dialogical rather than dialogical. According to the view of value co-creation that is presented by Varey and Ballantyne (2006), consumer-brand interactions must be experienced as dialogical in order for value co-creation to take place. And as such, according to this view, the respondents do not actively engage in a process of value co-creation when participating in Politiken’s Audience Award. However, as argued earlier in the analysis, the concept of value

co-creation should not be regarded as a fixed term, but rather something that exists on different levels and forms.

### **Culture as a source of macro level meaning**

*“I think it will strengthen the brand and reflect on it in the way that it is not only heavy Political topics, but you can also focus on stuff like film and TV, and that it can also have journalistic weight. So in a way it makes it easier to digest.”* (Maria)

When asked about their evaluations of Politiken being a part of CPH:DOX and particularly the engagement in the form of the audience award, the respondents expressed that what they noticed was primarily the general involvement in the film festival as they found that it emphasised Politiken’s cultural profile. The respondents had different levels of prior knowledge about Politiken, and therefore it either confirmed their existing view of Politiken as a cultural newspaper or added to their perception of Politiken’s image, as it is explained in the quote above. As argued in the previous section, cultural myths, i.e. notions of what the brand stands for, should be regarded as a value proposition, which serve as an incentive to value co-creation on macro level (Arnould, 2006; Vargo & Lusch, 2008). As such the respondents co-create value on a macro level based on the cultural meanings that is put forward by Politiken when taking part in CPH:DOX. In addition to the cultural profile, the respondents also emphasised the value proposition of Politiken being a democratic newspaper, as communicated through Politiken’s Audience Award. As described by one of the respondents when explaining how she experienced the audience award, *“it’s very democratic, and it’s kind of how I see Politiken. Not too elitist. There’s room for everyone”* (Camilla). To put it in more tangible terms, the experiential marketing initiatives were solely assessed on a macro level. The participants evaluated the value propositions created by Politiken, here the cultural focus and the notion of it being democratic and including. As such the value that is co-created deals with the assessment of the brand and to some degree in relation to their personal interests. Therefore value co-creation on a macro level, as expressed by the respondents in this category, can be argued to create the foundation for consumers evaluate the brand as a relationship partner. The reason being that consumers choose lives not brands, and therefore the basic condition for consumer-brand relationships to form, is that the brands fit the consumers’ interests and worldviews (Fournier, 1998).

#### ***5.4.4 Summary***

In this part of the analysis, I have analysed the stories and reflections uttered by the respondents with the aim of providing an answer to the question of how the experiential marketing initiative, namely Politiken's Audience Award on CPH:DOX, influence the participants' value co-creation and thus affects their relationship with Politiken. It was found that the experience had evoked remarkably different responses with the participants, and as such their level of engagement and value co-creation varied.

The first category identified in the analysis was characterised by the respondents expressing value co-creation on a micro level, as they made sense of and evaluated the experience in relation to their sense of identity and personal themes. This effectively meant that their value co-creation strengthened their socio-emotive ties to Politiken. In the second category, however, the respondents co-created value on a macro level, implying that it was the notions of how they viewed Politiken and their overall assessment of the brand's values and attributes. The respondents experienced the audience award as dialogical, which increased their levels of reflection and thus resulted in more profound value co-creation on a macro level. Lastly the respondents in third category also expressed that their participation in the audience award led to value co-creation on a macro level, but in contrast to the first two categories, the respondents did not assess the audience award as dialogical but rather dialectical, which I argued was directly connected to the nature of their pre-existing relationship. This effectively meant that their level of engagement in the event was low, and as such their value co-creation not particularly deep.

As this analysis has shown, the respondents had different responses to the experience, which led to different levels and varieties of value co-creation. Here it is particularly relevant to note that the respondents were presented with more or less the same experiences, and therefore it was argued that their experiences were primarily determined by their pre-existing relationships with Politiken. As such the experiential marketing initiative's potential for influencing the participants' value co-creation and thus their relationship with Politiken is largely determined by their pre-existing brand-relationship.

## 6. Discussion and conclusion

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The purpose of this study was to develop an in-depth understanding of experiential marketing from a brand relational perspective, and as such examine how experiential marketing influences consumer value co-creation. In the literature review, I problematized that management literature tends to use the term value co-creation as a way of describing the general idea of the active consumer, without paying attention to how the consumers co-create value and what determines these processes (Grönroos, 2012). This was argued to be particularly problematic in the context of experiential marketing, in which the fundamental idea is that the consumers are active and experiencing the brand. In this thesis I have in other words provided some much needed nuance to the field. This study was conducted with a focus on how the participants co-created value, on the basis of the value propositions put forward at the event. The study was designed as an action research project, both because it was made possible by my professional engagement in the project, but especially because it was believed to provide valuable context, as it allowed me to factor in the strategic intentions of Politiken when analysing and evaluating the responses created by the experience. In this section I will discuss the findings of the analysis, and use them to evaluate the relevance of experiential marketing as a strategic communication tool for Politiken. More importantly, however, I will nuance the findings and make detailed descriptions regarding how experiential marketing influences consumer-brand relationships, and thereby support the overriding purpose of the thesis.

### **6.1 Level of control within experiential marketing**

My findings indicated that Politiken's Audience Award evoked remarkably different responses with the participants, which determined the level and nature of their value co-creation. On the basis hereof I argue that general conclusions regarding the effectiveness of experiential marketing are not possible to make. Instead it should be taken into account that consumers make sense of the value propositions made by the brand differently depending on their pre-existing beliefs and relationship with the brand. As concluded in the first part of the analysis, rather than determining the participants' level of co-creation, firms can influence their willingness to co-create value by providing as coherent and engaging an experience as possible,

e.g. through making the experience multi sensory. The argument being that the more the experience demands conscious reflection, the more engaged the consumers will be and thus serve as incitement to co-create value. The level and nature of this value co-creation is however not within control of the brand.

This limited level of control over the outcomes of course questions how Politiken and other organisations can work strategically with experiential marketing – and even if it is worth investing time and resources in. Here I argue that despite the low level of control, experiential marketing is indeed a most relevant marketing tool. According to a relational approach to branding, value co-creation is a constant and continuous process in which the consumers’ assess and ascribe meaning to the brand. Experiential marketing, defined as extraordinary experiences, create platforms for engagement, which are much more intense than normal day-to-day interactions, and thus create the basis for active and conscious value co-creation. In this context I find it relevant to nuance the concept of ‘control’, because while the brand has limited control over the participants’ value co-creation processes, they do however have a higher degree of ‘influence’ than they do in normal day-to-day interactions. The reason being that with experiential marketing, the brand is placed in a new context, which creates value propositions, e.g. the value proposition of Politiken being a brand with a strong interest in culture as well as being democratic, as propositioned through the audience award on CPH:DOX. Even though the respondents in this study expressed different levels and types of value co-creation, they all described processes of value co-creation that were based on the value propositions made by Politiken. As such Politiken managed to guide and influence the consumers’ value co-creation, which I argue is a higher level of control than is present in normal day-to-day brand interactions. Hereby experiential marketing is arguably a most useful marketing tool from a relational view on branding, despite the firm’s limited level of control. As such the findings of my study provide some much needed nuance to the field of experiential marketing, as it offers insights into how the participant co-create value on the basis of the experiences and as such defines the level and type of control the brand has.

## **6.2 Managerial implications**

This study makes a number of contributions that Politiken as well as other organisations can learn from, as a result of the nuance it provides to the field of experiential marketing. Firstly I argue that experiential marketing should be regarded as a platform or a forum for value prop-

ositions on the basis of which the participants co-create value. This implies that the organisations must act consciously and strategically, and be aware of the value propositions that emerge when the brand is placed in a new context. Secondly, it is important to both accept the premise and take into account that brand experiences create different responses with different people, and as such their value co-creation varies. This effectively limits the brands' degree of control over the effects. As such the experiences must be designed to accommodate participants with varying types and strengths of relationships with the brand. This can e.g. be done through incorporating a dialogical dimension to allow for participants in active relationships to co-create value on a deep and profound level. It should however not be too dominant and thus experienced as intrusive by participants in passive relationships, as this will most likely make them evaluate the brand negatively (Sääksjärvi et al. 2007). As such the managerial implications of this study are based on analytical generalisations, as described by Yin (2009), which expand on the findings by making suggestions rather than aiming at making formal generalisations.

### **6.3 Suggestions for further research**

As the study of this thesis is based on a single case of experiential marketing, I suggest that further research should develop and expand on the findings by examining a larger sample of cases and thus provide more in-depth knowledge of the field. Additionally it is relevant to include a larger interview sample, with the aim of getting an even more nuanced view of the different participants' levels of value co-creation. Here it is particularly interesting to examine the value co-creation of participants who have no pre-existing relationship with the brand behind the experiential marketing initiatives, as this was a consumer group that was not represented in this exact study.

As argued in this thesis, experiential marketing has great potential as a facilitator for value co-creation. However, the effect is to a large extent beyond the control of the firm, and as such, in order to get an in-depth understanding of the field of experiential marketing, it is crucial to examine how consumers make sense of the experiences and how they co-create value. As such this study only scratches the surface and highlights the importance of applying a consumer-centric approach to academic research on experiential marketing.



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