Love You Right Back

An Explorative Study of the Active Role of the Brand in the Consumer-Brand Relationship

- MASTER THESIS -

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ABSTRACT

TITLE:	Love You Right Back – An exploratory Study of the Active Role of the Brand in the Consumer-Brand Relationship
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KEYWORDS:	Brand Love, Consumer-Brand Relationship, Science and Technology Studies, Interpellation, Self-Extension
THESIS PURPOSE:	The purpose of this study is to explore the active role of the brand in consumer-brand love relationships by conceptualizing brand love from the human emotion through the action of the brand. Herein, we apply an alternative theoretical lense of Science Technology Studies (STS) to be able to capture how brands reciprocate love, i.e. 'love back'.
METHODOLOGY:	Phemenological in-depth interviews with daily participant observations to confirm consumption behaviour and brand usage
THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVE:	Brand Love (Albert et al., 2008, Batra et al., 2012, Carroll & Ahuvia, 2006), Consumer-Brand Relationships (Fournier, 1988), Extension of the self (Belk, 1988), Symbolic Interactionism (Solomon, 1983), Science and Technology Studies (Latour, 2005), Interpellation (Law, 2000), is applied.
EMPIRICAL DATA:	Eight long semi-structured interviews with 3 Swedish and 5 German female participants. Herein, gender qualification was recognized.
CONCLUSION:	In order to capture the role of the active brand in the consumer-brand relationship, the concept of interpellation, extended self and symbolic interactionism were adapted. The analysis shows how the brand 'loves back' in a heterogeneous manner by acting back in different ways depending on the individual relationship. However, a common denominator of three themes was identified: Stabilizer, Reminder and Gratifier. Brands thereby trigger love-like emotions within the consumer that are directly associated with it and thus are perceived to 'love back'.

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1. INTRODUCTION

This initial chapter emphasizes the significance and relevance of the chosen research topic, how the concepts of brand love are rooted in current research, and the limitations identified. Based on the limitations, the chapter also provides an insight into how we aim to contribute to the existing literature, expressed in terms of purpose and research question.

1.1 Background

A feeling of Love

> "Love is bigger than you are. You can invite love, but you cannot dictate how, when, and where love expresses itself. You can choose to surrender to love, or not, but in the end love strikes like lightning, unpredictable and irrefutable. [...] Love does not come with conditions, stipulations, addendums, or codes. Like the sun, love radiates independently of our fears and desires." (Anapol, 2011).

The notion of love is an interesting concept, yet complex and ambiguous since all of us perceive love in an individual way based on previous life experiences. When one begins to think about the intense emotional feeling of love, and discuss the topic with fellow humans, it becomes evident that love is a highly diverse concept, both with regards to human response as well as the direction of the emotional bond (Koehn, 2011). Thus, the quotation above is merely one way of expressing the notion of love that may, or may not, be shared among us. The thing about love that captures our attention is that I can claim to love a person, an activity or even an object. Admittedly, you can feel love towards anyone or anything, ranging from inanimate things and abstract entities, to living persons and actions (Heinrich, Albrecht & Bauer, 2012). Hence, it appears to be difficult to find one single characterization of love that summarizes this emotional status. Just like the author Irving Singer puts it; "For me, love is something that can happen in any number of different, pluralistic ways (Singer, 2009, p. 75). Henceforth, it seems as if the answers are found separately in every individual's mind, body and soul depending on how one makes sense of the notion and feeling of love. Interestingly enough, the notion of love recently also spread to a number of academic circles

including the ones of consumer research and brand management. Perhaps this is not a surprising movement, given that brands are omnipresent in consumers' everyday life and occupy an increasingly salient place in consumers' minds (Albert, Merunka & Valette-Florence, 2008).

For years, satisfaction and brand loyalty have been key objectives of brand management strategy, as well as a key field of interest to consumer research (Carroll & Ahuvia, 2006; Kim, Morris & Swait, 2008). However, there have been attempts to move beyond satisfaction to explain differences in strategic consumer behaviour. Latest research has shed prominent light on the emotional attachments that consumers can develop toward brands (Patwardhan & Balasubramanian, 2013), as well as on consumer-brand love relationships (Heinrich et al., 2012). Thereby, research has shown that consumers can experience 'love-like' feelings towards a brand (Carroll & Ahuvia, 2006) and become emotionally attached, describing their feelings by using the term love (Ortiz & Harrison, 2011). As academic and practical findings suggest that simply satisfying consumers might no longer be sufficient for success in today's competitive marketplace, brand love is regarded as an even stronger subject than brand loyalty (Carroll & Ahuvia, 2006).

Research has shown that brand love is a meaningful mode of consumer satisfaction that is linked to desirable post-consumption behaviour as well as to various other opportunities (Carroll & Ahuvia, 2006). Brand love can lead to positive word-of-mouth and brand loyalty (Carroll & Ahuvia 2006), subsequently increasing consumers' willingness to pay a price premium and to forgive potential brand failures (Heinrich et al., 2012). These findings are important for academics to better understand consumer behaviour and for marketers to create value through brand relationships. However, creating and maintaining brand relationships is a difficult task (Fournier, Breazeale & Fetscherin, 2012).

1.2 Literature Review

The Concept of Love

Several sciences, mainly sociology and psychoanalysis, seek to study the concept of love. As noted, love is quite an ambiguous term that is defined and explored by different researchers in several ways. Aron, Aron, Tudor and Nelson (1991, p. 26), define love as the "the

constellation of behaviours, cognitions and emotions associated with the desire to enter or maintain a close relationship with a specific other person". Later, Aron and Aron (1996) go further and describe love as being interrelated with third parties and thus not being solely romantic. This makes the feeling of love also applicable to family members and friends (Heinrich et al., 2012). Another important theory of love is that of Sternberg's (1986). The researcher proposes a triangular theory, where interpersonal love can be interpreted to be aligned with three different components: passion, intimacy and commitment. Variations of the three components can lead to eight types of love, depending on the presence or absence of each component (Albert et al., 2008).

However, the concept of love has not only caught immense research attention in sociology and psychology, but recently also in consumer research (Albert & Merunka, 2013). As the concept of love may relate to both a social relationship, as well as to an emotional state of feelings and emotions, love can take different forms. Therefore, people can develop feelings of love to living beings as well as to objects, such as brands (Heinrich et al., 2012). The marketing literature has applied the idea of love in consumer research with two distinct approaches, interpersonal and non-interpersonal love theories. The main distinction between the two is that the prior applies person-to-person love criteria to person-object relationships, whereas the latter does not compare love between the two. In order to understand the topic of brand love, the difference between the two approaches is essential to recognize.

Interpersonal Love Theories in Consumer Research

Shimp and Madden (1988), being the first who conceptualized love in consumption contexts, started to research two-way relationships between consumers and objects by adapting Sternberg's (1986) triangular theory of love. The researchers found that consumer-object relationships arise from combinations of different psychological processes such as motivation, emotion, and cognition (Shimp & Madden, 1988). Studying these relationships, they propose a structure of consumer-object relationships similar to Sternberg's (1986) interpersonal love theory, suggesting that the consumer-object relationship is based on dimensions of liking, yearning and commitment (Sarkar, 2011). Shimp and Madden's research is important to recognize as they were the first to study interpersonal relationships in the consumer-object context and thus laid a foundation for further research on the concept of consumer-object love.

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Furthermore, Ahuvia (1993) conducted the first empirical study on consumption activities and consumers' ability to love products by bringing together consumption behaviour research and psychology literature. Thereby, the author adapted Aron and Aron's (1986) self-inclusion theory of love, which suggests that people need to become part of another to feel loved. Ahuvia's (2005a) empirical investigations show that when a brand reaches a high level of integration with the consumer's sense of self, consumers can actually feel love for a brand. Later, Ahuvia (2005b) also compared consumers' mental model of interpersonal love with their description of object love and found fundamental similarities between interpersonal love and love in consumer contexts. This thinking has received additional support from the works of Whang, Allen, Sahourym and Zhang (2004) and Thomson, MacInnis and Park (2005).

Investigating consumer-brand relationships, Fournier (1998) also adapts interpersonal elements. She demonstrates that brands can actually function as relationship partners for consumers. Thereby she provides a construct of six brand relationship types including love and passion, defined as a richer, deeper, and more long-lasting feeling than simple liking. Therefore, similar to Shimp and Madden (1988) and Ahuvia (1993), Fournier (1998) by the same token stresses love as a key element of consumer-brand relationships. However, Fournier (1998) also clarifies that love is not the only dimension of the consumer-brand relationship and therefore she includes additional dimensions such as self-connection, commitment, interdependence, brand partner quality, and intimacy. Fournier's framework of emotional dimensions has further inspired other researchers (Carroll and Ahuvia; 2006; Albert et al., 2008; Batra, Ahuvia & Bagozzi, 2012) to make additional empirical contributions to the identified dimensions of brand love.

Even though the main literature on consumer-brand love relationships (Shimp & Madden, 1988; Ahuvia, 1993, 2005a, 2005b; Fournier, 1998) focuses on interpersonal theories, some researchers (Carroll & Ahuvia, 2006; Albert et al., 2008 and Batra et al., 2012) argue that brand love is a different form of love than interpersonal love. Hence, the question if brand love can be measured analogous to interpersonal love is hotly debated (Carroll & Ahuvia, 2006). Previous research on consumer-brand relationship suggests that brands can function as a relationship partner in a similar way as humans can. However, differences between consumer-brand and interpersonal relationships do exist. Significant differences include that consumer-brand relationships involve a monetary exchange (Swaminathan & Dommer,

2012). Moreover, brands cannot be conceived as 'human-like' as they cannot reciprocate consumer's love like humans can (Batra et al., 2012). Therefore, brand love is different from interpersonal love in the sense that it is unidirectional, whereas interpersonal love is bidirectional (Fetscherin & Conway Dato-on, 2012). Hence, consumer research using a non-interpersonal approach towards love has lately gained stronger attention among academic researchers.

Non-Interpersonal Love Theories in Consumer Research

Carroll and Ahuvia (2006) propose a construct of brand love similar to the literature on the love prototype (Ahuvia, 2005b) including characteristics such as passion for the brand, brand attachment, positive evaluation of the brand, positive emotions in response to the brand, and declarations of love toward the brand. The authors claim that many aspects of brand love will not be fully analogous to interpersonal love (Carroll & Ahuvia, 2006), and therefore their study does not explicitly refer to it (Albert & Merunka, 2013). Overall, the authors define band love as "the degree of passionate emotional attachment a satisfied consumer has for a particular trade name" (Carroll and Ahuvia, 2006, p. 81) and as a result it represents a useful predictor of loyalty and positive word-of-mouth. However, as their measurement of love is unidimensional, rather than multidimensional as usually with love, they may fail to reveal the complexity of the research phenomenon (Albert & Merunka, 2013).

Albert et al. (2008) claim that due to the complexity of the phenomenon, no single interpersonal theory may capture all emotions derived from love. Thus, the authors conducted an exploratory study including interpersonal as well as non-interpersonal dimensions of love. With the help of various methods, Albert et al. (2008) found eleven dimensions that underlie brand love: passion, a long- duration relationship, self-congruity, dreams, memories, pleasure, attraction, uniqueness, beauty, trust (satisfaction), and a willingness to state this love. Further, they state that brand love is a culturally determined phenomenon (Albert et al., 2008). However, overall, the authors fail to understand how consumers experience the concept of brand love (Batra et al., 2012).

Later, Batra et al. (2012) agree with Albert et al. (2008) in that no single interpersonal theory can capture the complex phenomenon of love and argue that conceptualizations of interpersonal love should not be applied directly to brand love. Rather, the authors criticize

brand love research for initially being based on theory of interpersonal love. If brand love is not analogous to the particular theory of interpersonal love being used, difficulties in the later study might emerge (Bengtsson & Östberg, 2011, p. 71). Moreover, to overcome limitations of previous studies, Batra et al. (2012) have built their research on an understanding of how consumers experience the phenomenon of love. They conceptualize brand love from the ground up. Further, to better capture the construct of brand love, Batra et al. (2012) highlight a multidimensional approach. The authors include ten elements in their brand love prototype based on a qualitative research study. They embrace dimensions that go beyond emotional branding theories and thus add a new perspective based on functional perceptions, such as the quality of the brand, wellbeing, good price, as well as emotional bonding and attachment (Batra et al., 2012).

Apart from academia, among practitioners the book *Lovemarks* by Roberts (2005) has caught immense attention whereby the author addresses the managerial issue of why consumers tend to buy certain bands with fervent loyalty. Robert's idea is based on the traditional brand literature assumption that emotions transform brands into something greater. Roberts (2005, p.15) describes lovemarks as the charismatic brands that people love and get emotional about. Distinct qualities of lovemarks, compared to brands, include Mystery, Sensuality and Intimacy (Roberts, 2005, p.15). It is the powerful attraction of lovemarks that produces "loyalty beyond reason", which Roberts (2005, p.15) defines as loyalty that binds long-term relationships. By creating and actively managing emotional attachment to the brand an indelible relationship, between the brand and the consumer, can be created.

Although we agree with the researchers using non-interpersonal approaches to brand love, saying that consumer-brand relationships differ from person-to-person relationships, there are limitations that need to be carefully considered. The non-interpersonal studies recognize brand love as a unidirectional concept, which we however regard as a simplification of the notion of love. Hence, the question arises if the brand needs to reciprocate love in order for a love relationship to be created. We argue that, in order for love to exist, both parties in the relationship must be active and thus able to give love. Interpersonal theories for instance, pre-assume this reciprocal exchange in terms of the meanings that consumers add to their lives by using a specific brand (Fournier, 1998), or simply by providing a feeling of satisfaction (Carroll & Ahuvia, 2006). Thereby, interpersonal brand love theorists automatically refer to brands as active relationships partners. However, the missing link appears to be the

explanation of how the brand act or respond as a relationship partner, which we consider as a current limitation of interpersonal brand love theories. Therefore, this study attempts to contribute to existing brand love literature by examining the active role of brands to enrich and complement existing interpersonal theories and to still maintain the multidimensional and complex nature of the phenomenon proposed by non-interpersonal theories.

1.3 Problem discussion

Apparently, we can feel love towards anyone or anything. However, the question is, does the brand 'love back' in such a reciprocal way as in a person-to-person relationship? The role of the active object has so far not been covered in existing academic literature relating to brand love, which reinforces the relevance of this study. In fact, brand love research is still in an infancy state, not only because little is yet known and understood about the multidimensional nature of consumer-brand relationships (Heinrich et al., 2012). The infancy state also relates to the fact that this interdisciplinary field of study still fails to take into account the active role of the brand. The emphasis on brand love in terms of emotional stimuli and consequently emotional response fails to fully comprehend brands as an equally significant relationship partner as the human being.

Henceforth, both the academic circle of brand management as well as the one of consumer culture theory (CCT) provides a limited perspective of the topic. On the one hand, in the context of brand love, brand management is criticized for its simplicity when regarding consumers' cognitive psychological perspective in terms of consumers' reactions toward brands (Bengtsson & Östberg, 2011, p.35). Subsequently, within this perspective there is currently a limited emphasis on how consumers create meaning in the social and cultural context in which a brand is consumed. Bengtsson and Östberg (2011, p.35) exemplify by using brand identity as an illustration of the limitations. Brand identity is according to the authors a simplified view of the values that consumers' are expected to experience and appreciate when consuming a certain brand. However, value and meanings are created in the interaction between consumers, brands and society (Solomon, 1983). A brand has not an inherent value and meaning in itself, it is the consumers that attribute value according to their perception of the world and their own self-concept (Fournier, 1998; Bengtsson & Östberg, 2011, p. 69). Consumers are not passive recipients, they are active creators of meaning when

consuming, or choosing not to consume, a brand. On the other hand, this criticism still lacks an emphasis on the role of the active brand. Even though consumers are assumed to be active in the perspective of CCT, what about the brand? If brands are passive, then how can they reciprocate to the feelings of love that is directed towards them, which is a crucial assumption of a love relationship?

Admittedly, the purpose of traditional brand management literature is to find general principles that can be applied to building a strong brand foundation (Bengtsson & Östberg, 2011, p.132). On the contrary, the primary purpose of CCT-studies is to closely examine the meanings produced by consumers and how they attribute meaning to artefacts. Thus, the missing link when investigating the consumer-brand relationship seems to be the equally active role of the brand. Therefore, by illuminating this specific aspect of the phenomenon we aim to contribute to a richer description of the consumer-brand relationship.

1.4 Problem Formulation and Purpose of the Study

As noted, brand relationship theory has largely progressed through the adaption of interpersonal theories, and to some extent through non-interpersonal theories as its counterpart. However, as the person-person relationship discipline is deep and complex, further concepts and frameworks can be applied to highlight its multidimensional nature (Breazeale & Fournier, 2012). Due to the lack of emphasis on the object itself, we propose an alternative and yet complementary way to approach consumer-brand relationships. By doing so, spotlight is directed on the brand by investigating how this relationship partner reciprocates the consumers' love. Hence, our research question is:

How do brands reciprocate to the feelings of love expressed by the consumer, i.e. 'love back', in the consumer-brand relationship?

Thus, the purpose of this explorative study is to use an alternative perspective of Science and Technology Studies (STS), in terms of interpellation (Law, 2000) to be able to actually capture how brands act back on human beings. This active role of the brand has not yet been covered in literature and hence our main aim is to enrich consumer-brand relationship insights. Therefore, we use interpersonal relationship theories as well as non-interpersonal to

gain an initial understanding of brand love in consumer-brand relationships. Overall, we adapt Batra et al. 's (2012) view that suggests that the topic of brand love must be conceptualized from the consumer's point-of-view. Herein, we aspire to deepen existing knowledge of consumer research and brand love theories in order to cover the current theoretical gap.

2. THEORETICAL FOUNDATION

This chapter highlights the chosen theories that are used to analyze the empirical material obtained. It includes theories on the psychology of love and interpersonal relationships, as we aim to conceptualize brand love from the human emotion through the action of the brand. Further, theories on object love are presented. Afterwards, the concept of the 'social' is presented in order to introduce the reader to an alternative theoretical perspective of STS and the concept of interpellation. Lastly, CCT concepts including the extended self and symbolic interactionism are treated.

As we have applied different theories derived from various fields of studies, we have illustrated the concepts used in figure 1. First of all, the theoretical framework provides a background to the psychology of love to recognize its multidimensional and subjective nature. Secondly, we move on to the inner parts by exemplifying object love, as a springboard to the concept of brand love in specific. Lastly, and most importantly, the inner core of the circle highlights the two major theoretical foundations that we will draw upon, namely STS and CCT, when arguing for how brands act back on consumers in the consumer-brand relationship. We will begin with STS theories by introducing interpellation as a concept to explain how objects act back. Further, CCT theories of the extended self and symbolic interactionism will be illustrated to enable an analysis of how brands act back on the consumer.
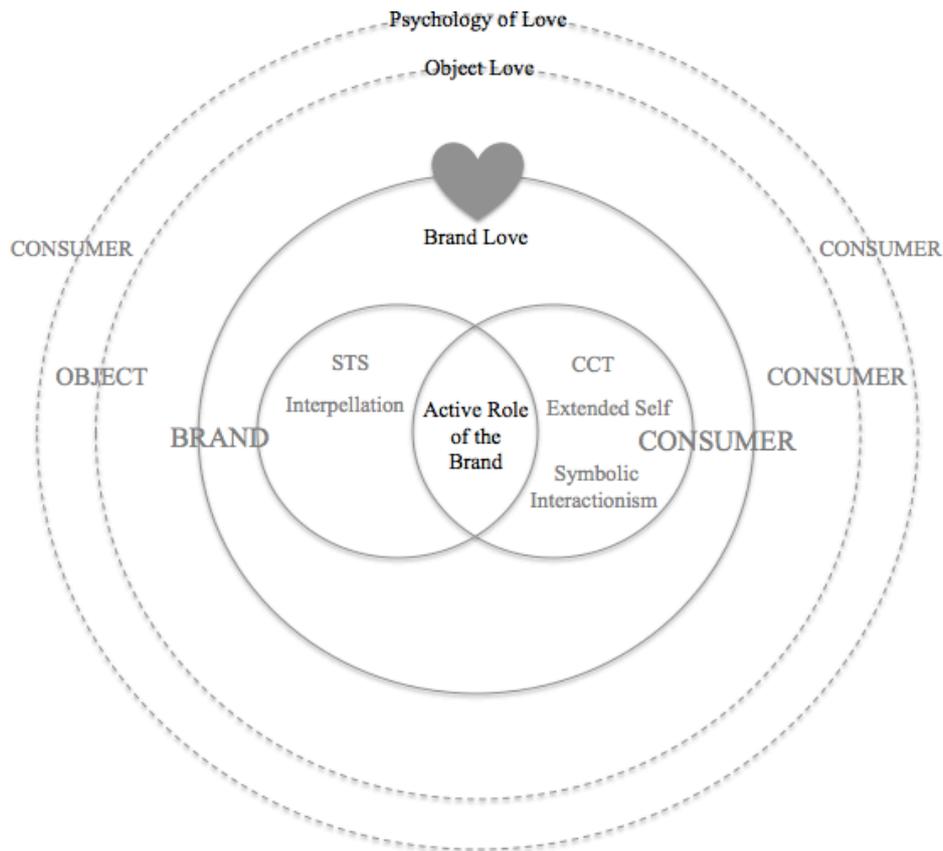
FIGURE 1 THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK OF THE RECIPROCAL CONSUMER-BRAND RELATIONSHIP
(BÄCKSTRÖM & KLAESER, 2014)

2.1 The Psychology of Love

Love is a complex and deep phenomenon that has been of research interest to several sciences. To explain the concept of love, some researchers end up with a single definition of love, while others end up with a typology. However, as love is experienced in diverse ways by different people, one must distinguish between love as an abstract construct and love as a subjective experience. Thus, no single definition of love yet exists (Ahuvia, 1993). In psychology literature various definitions of love include characteristics like affection, attachment, intimacy, caring, intense longing, and passion, depending on the type of interpersonal love being investigated; romantic love, compassionate love or altruistic love (Batra et al., 2012). In order to understand the feeling of love, Aron and Aron (1996) used the inclusion of another into the self. Thereby, they refer to three principles: (1) people extend themselves, (2) people include others within themselves through intimate or close

relationships and (3) people seek situations associated to an experience of extension of the self. Sternberg (1997) further emphasizes intimacy, passion and decision/ commitment as three major components of love. Intimacy thereby relates to closeness and bondedness, while passion stands for physical attraction and desire. The final dimension of decision/ commitment describes the conscious decision to love another person, as well as the commitment to keep the love relationship alive. The combination of these components can lead to eight different forms of love varying from non-love, to the most complete form, consummate love, depending on how extensively each component is present (Pichler & Hemetsberger, 2007).

Moreover, Fournier (1998) defines four general underlying conditions for relationships in the interpersonal domain. Firstly, relationships are purposive. They add and structure meanings in a person's life. Thereby, three sources of meaning including psychological, socio-cultural, and relational are identified as shaping the significance of the relationship for the person. Secondly, relationships are multiplex phenomena that range across several dimensions, take different forms and thus provide a range of possible benefits to their participants. Therefore, relationship research must be sensitive to variations in form. Thirdly, relationships are dynamic. They evolve and change over time, in response to a series of interactions or to changes in the environment. Lastly, relationships involve reciprocal exchange between active partners (Fournier, 1998). The notion of reciprocity and exchange is also supported by Kernberg (1995). The author states, before love can grow out of a romantic relationship between two individuals, both persons must have the ability to fall in love. Thereby, they must be ready to idealize the partner and be willing to enter into an emotional relationship. Once these conditions are fulfilled, love can evolve towards an altruistic act of loving, where being able to give is more important than taking. Thus, in order for a love relation to exist, both individuals must have the ability to give love to one another (Pichler & Hemetsberger, 2007).

Subsequently, our study is based on the above-mentioned interpersonal relational arguments and we furthermore assume that for brand love to exist both actors in the relationship must be perceived as active partners.

2.2 Object Love

According to Richins (1997 cited in Ahuvia, 2005a), love is a common consumption related emotion. Therefore, the term love is used as often with objects and activities as with humans. However, several questions regarding the consumer-object love relationship remain. Can consumers experience real feelings of love for an object or a brand? And is the feeling similar to a feeling of love for a person? And particularly, can objects reciprocate the feeling of love expressed by the consumer? (Albert et al., 2008).

People are more complex and responsive than objects are. Therefore, compared to interpersonal love relationships, object love is rather unidirectional (Ahuvia, 1993). However, one could also question how bilateral interpersonal relationships really are, since research on couples' beliefs about their relationship shows that each individual's perception differs from that of their partner's. It often seems as if they are in two complete different relationships (Sternberg, 1987). To explain this, Sternberg (1987) argues that the other person to whom we relate is as much our conception of the other, as he or she exists in reality. Therefore, whether or not objects can return love is one's perception of the other's feelings toward oneself (Ahuvia, 1993). However, on the other hand, Sternberg (1987) also states that one's perception of the other's feelings toward oneself is a matter of satisfaction. Therefore, as objects are rarely felt to reciprocate our love, the experience of object love differs from interpersonal love (Ahuvia, 1993).

According to Rozanski, Baum and Wolfsen (1999 cited in Pichler & Hemetsberger, 2007) and Fournier (1998) in order to be loved, an object must fulfil the 'personification qualification' criterion, which then enables an object to be perceived as an active partner who can reciprocate love. However, studying brands as love objects is even more complex due to their intangible nature. According to Fournier (1998), brands may have animistic characteristics but are not vital entities. Moreover, brands are intangible and thus have no objective existence as such. Lastly, the brand cannot act, feel or think, except through marketing activities executed by the marketing manager (Fournier, 1998). Further, as mentioned by Kernberg (1995), an altruistic act of loving is a strong element of interpersonal love. However, according to Batra et al. (2012, p. 5) this is not the case for brand love, as "consumers are more concerned with what the brand can do for them, rather than what they

can do for the brand". Therefore, thinking of the brand not as a passive object of marketing transactions but rather as an active contributing member of the consumer-brand relationship needs additional research.

Although it seems as if researchers are aware of brands' inability to reciprocate love in an active manner, brand love studies deriving from interpersonal theories simply assume brands to reciprocate love (Carroll & Ahuvia, 2006; Fournier, 1998). Non-interpersonal brand love studies, on the contrary, define brand love relationships to be unidirectional of nature and thus suggest brands to be unable to reciprocate love. However, the question arises if those relationships can then be referred to love relationships at all. Herein, the discussion of the theories' constructs becomes relevant as social sciences have one way of addressing objects, brands and symbols as opposed to natural sciences influenced approaches. Therefore, it is crucial to define what the 'social' may refer to depending on what science that is considered.

2.3 Concept of the 'Social'

The 'social' as a phenomenon of study can have different meanings to different authors. In the broadest sense, the social can be defined as an association, including anything that might be associated together, such as plants, material artefacts and humans. In a narrower sense, the social primarily refers to human aggregates and thus splits the world into a social half of humans and a natural-material half (Dolwick, 2009). The social in its purest sense can be referred to as social structures. Within this meaning of the social, plants, animals, or material artefacts are either ignored or considered to be irrelevant for sociological inquiry (Dolwick, 2009).

With the exception of a few social theorists (Deleuze & Guattari, 1972/2000; Latour, 2005; Callon, 1986; Law, 1986, all cited in Dolwick, 2009), most researchers provide either a view of the 'social' that is devoid of active non-humans, or tend to push non-humans over to the sidelines of human social action. Karl Marx (cited in Dolwick, 2009), for instance, reduced material objects to merely *tokens of capital* by treating them as commodities or fetishes. Even though he included material resources to the economic infrastructure, he considered material objects to lack the ability to be more than just commodities. Durkheim (1895/ 1982 cited in Dolwick, 2009) also views material objects as integrated within the social. Yet,

things remain passive as they lack the prerequisites to release social energy. Therefore, Durkheim provides a one-sided view of the world, where humans act on things, but not with, through or in response to them. Similar to this, Bourdieu (1977 cited in Dolwick, 2009) views material objects as things that are used by people as possessions or commodities, but not more.

The main problem with those approaches is that things, or material objects, are depicted as tokens and symbols only, and thus seem to lack the capacity to act on humans or in other ways (Dolwick, 2009). However, to Latour (2000), the social world cannot explain away the *natural-material world* and therefore he proposes a theory in which he suggests that objects can act back upon humans.

2.4 Science and Technology Studies (STS)

"Social scientists tend to look for the understanding of human life in the internal psychic processes of the individual or in the patterns of relationship between people; rarely do they consider the role of material objects." (Csikszentmihalyi and Rochberg-Halton, 1981, p. 1)

Similar to the scientific flaw described above is the arguments proposed by Latour (2000). In his article *When Things Strike Back*, Latour (2000) argues that the stream of sociology is too narrow compared to other social sciences such as psychology and anthropology, leading to a misunderstanding of how this research field explains an artefact. Therefore, Latour propose that STS can be used as an alternative approach to understand how objects can be examined and explained in the societal setting. The author further emphasizes that "social sciences imitate the natural sciences in a way that render them unable to profit from the type of objectivity found in the natural sciences" (Latour, 2000, p. 107). Thereby, STS can be used as a challenging, and yet complementary, way for social sciences to approach and imitate natural sciences. As a result, this provides an additional theoretical lens to view society from, acting as a counterpart to sociology. Latour also clarifies that STS so far has been shadowed on the social science arena because it is considered to be ungraspable. What it all boils down to is the discussion of what the 'social' is made up by, causing tension between social sciences and STS. This science war has thus put STS in the shadow at the expense of the social sciences on which light is constantly shed. However, the STS-influenced academic

circle highlight the significance of extending the research field of social sciences, so that the term social in some sense may be revaluated (Knorr-Cetina, 1999, p. 26).

Hence, the challenge in social sciences is to "grasp natural and material objects" (Latour, 2000, p. 108) and as a result Latour argues that social sciences imitates the natural sciences in a wrong-headed way instead of simultaneously take into account natural science. The core of the critique is expressed in a key passage stating that:

> "Sociologists easily convinced themselves that to explain rituals, faiths, apparitions or miracles, that is, transcendent objects to which the actors attribute the origin of some action, it was perfectly possible (if not always simple) to replace the contents of these objects by the functions of society, which they were both hiding and impersonating. Those types of objects were called fetishes, that is, place holders for something else." (Latour, 2000, p. 109).

Thus, according to the author, social sciences do not explain the objects, but rather destroy or ignore them. Therefore, Latour's contribution is the rejuvenation of the very meaning of the words *social* and *science* by providing an alternative way to approach objects. The author argues that objects should be treated as real objects that derive from society, an explanation inspired by the natural sciences. This means that we go beyond the idea of replacing the concept of brand love with interpersonal and non-interpersonal theories, which leaves us with STS as an interesting theoretical lens to view the reciprocation of brands from. STS enables us to view objectivity in the sense that objects are able, i.e. brands can act back on humans.

Subsequently, this alternative view encapsulates how we translate the phenomenon of brand love, and it can be argued that interpersonal and non-interpersonal perspectives are not reflecting society accurately. Using the perspective of STS would further fertilize the brand love field of CCT and Brand Management in the sense that social does not necessarily mean that the phenomenon can be explained by solely using society as a source. Hence, the purpose is to provide another social explanation to the phenomenon of brand love to explore yet unknown structures. Thereby, STS provides a way to critically address the social and symbolic dimensions of brands.

2.4.1 The Nature of Symbols: Objects act back on Humans

Theories on objects as active participants in social processes are gaining increased attention. Even in social sciences such as organizational studies this interest can be traced (Rennstam, 2012), where objects are regarded according to Latour's (1991) definition of material as *making society durable*. In the context of organizational studies, objects ability to *remain* contributes to its function as an organizer of social relationships (Latour, 2005). Rennstam (2012, p. 1074) translates the objects' ability to remain into being equivalent to the relationships being stored in the objects because of its ability to "stay in place for a while and remind us here and now what happened there and then". Furthermore, as well as humans ascribe meaning to objects (Fournier, 1998) demonstrating their "built in affordances" (Engeström & Blackler, 2005, p. 310), objects are also able to resist human attempts of sense making. Rennstam (2012, p. 1074) describes this by using the analogy of a bicycle; "a bicycle 'affords' certain practices and resists others". Therefore, objects can on the one hand be seen solely as constructions of humans as done in the interpersonal perspective on brand love. On the other hand, if taking into account that this process occurs simultaneously with objects being able to resist or afford, another dimension reveal itself; the dimension of objects being able to act back in the consumer-brand relationship.

Furthermore, one can distinguish between different types of objects in terms of *technical objects* and *objects of knowledge* (Rennstam, 2012; Knorr-Cetina 1997; McGivern & Dopson, 2010). The type of object is determined by its use, and hence the prior type presents stable objects that are used as tools and instruments. The latter mentioned, which are the focus in this study, are knowledge driven and characterized by its instability and dynamic character (Rennstam, 2012). The dynamic character reflects the perpetual process of being defined (Knorr-Cetina, 1997) and hence they do not represent predetermined criteria of symbolic interpretations and ascribed meanings. This is crucial in the context of the consumer-brand relationships as this relationship is continuously developing (Fournier, 1998).

As opposed to the interpersonal perspective on brand love in consumer-brand relations, the STS influenced perspective accentuates the interactive relationship in the sense that the consumer tries to make sense of the brand by giving it a meaning while the brand itself

simultaneously acts back (Latour, 2000). However, when dealing with brands as objects an additional complexity emerges. Due to the intangible nature of the brand, it seems hard to define them as knowledge objects. This is in particular critical when analyzing service brands because "there is no difference between the internal and the external" (Kapferer, 2012, p.73) which means that it is not an item that matters; it is what is behind the brand that is of significance. However, in contrast to service brands, product brands represent a slightly more tangible character and thereby this type of brand will hereinafter be dealt with. Nevertheless, the intangibility of brands still needs to be kept in mind, as it remains crucial when analyzing the empirical data collected. Since it is the brand in terms of the product that acts back, and not solely a product or a component in itself (Rennstam, 2012), this distinction is highly significant. The intangible brand can allow practices and meaning, but cannot resist in the same sense as Latour (2000) describes 'striking back'. In the consumer-brand relationship, the interaction presented by Latour (2000) rather refers to both parties in the relationship, the consumer and the brand, being able to affect each other. Thereby, STS, particularly the concept of interpellation, represents an alternative view to apply on the consumer-brand relationship.

2.4.2 Interactionist Approach to the Agency of Objects

Due to the above complexities, an interactionist approach to the agency of objects is adapted. This implies that brands intervene with humans, actively affecting the social relationship (Latour, 2005). Hence, the interactionist point of view demonstrated earlier by Latour (2000) entails physical interaction between the partners in the relationship (Latour, 2005). In turn, this accordingly signifies that the agency of an object may transform over time (McGivern & Dopson, 2010) and that it is pluralistic in the sense that different people interact differently with the same brand (Fournier, 1998; Ewenstein & Whyte, 2009). In order to understand the interaction of the active partners, the concept of interpellation is demonstrated below.

2.4.3 Interpellation: Objects as active Relationship Partners

The connection between artefacts and humans is explored by Law (2000). He argues that different representations of objects appeal differently to persons, by provoking and inviting

to action (Law, 2000). Hence, objects can be seen to interpellate people. When becoming interpellated by objects "humans are constituted as subjects in specific regimes of meaning" and as a result individuals find themselves in a position where they are expected to act in a certain way (Landström, 2006, p.35). Thus, in this view an object is seen to act back when it is exposed to certain treatments.

To exemplify Law's discussion on interpellation and how objects make people become subjects, Michel (2000) brings to light the object of a car. A car can be viewed as an artefact that constructs a subject. Thereby the author argues that the physical experience of being in a car "relaxes us, it removes us from the stresses of everyday life, but it also makes us feel godlike, powerful, all too ready exercise our territorial imperatives" Michel (2000, p. 89). However, when taking intangible objects of brands into account the concept becomes even more complex as the consumer is in a semiotic position (Lindström, 2006) in which symbols are simultaneously interpreted. This once again implies that the consumer-brand relationship is highly individual as each person may interpret and ascribe meaning to the brand in diverse ways. Therefore, Lindström (2006, p. 36) also highlights the concept of love for artefacts by concluding; "Loved artefacts become successfully integrated in the life of societies, unloved ones fail". In the human relationship with artefacts, Law's (2001) discussion of interpellation identifies thus identifies pleasure as an important dimension. To attract humans to a brand, pleasure and emotional attachment are important factors for loved artefacts. Hence, in the context of consumer-brand relationships, brands exert the power to stimulate consumer action, and in this case initiate a love relationship. Moreover, by using branded products, the brand can invite to a feeling of pleasure and therefore interpellate consumers.

2.5 Consumer Culture Theory (CCT)

> "CCT explores the heterogeneous distribution of meanings and the multiplicity of overlapping cultural groupings that exist within the broader socio-historic frame of globalization and market capitalism." (Arnould & Thomspon, 2005, p.869).

As the quotation above demonstrates, and as was mentioned in the introduction, the purpose of CCT studies is to examine the meanings produced by consumers. CCT research hence

reflects the "hedonic, aesthetic, and ritualistic dimensions of consumption; consumer identity projects; and marketplace cultures" (Witkowski, 2013, p.5).

All in all, CCT deals with the symbolic, experimental, ideological and socio-cultural angles of consumption when attempting to explain marketplace behaviour (Arnould & Thompson, 2005). In our study the main light is shed on the hedonic dimensions as well as consumer identity issues by presenting the theoretical concepts of the extension of the self and symbolic interactonism, which are demonstrated below.

2.5.1 The Extension of the Self through Symbols

A somewhat different approach to the concept of interpellation as to how objects act back on humans is Belk's (1988) reasoning behind the extended self.

> "It seems an inescapable fact of modern life that we learn, define, and remind ourselves of who we are by our possessions." (Belk, 1988, p. 160).

As the quotation above illuminates, objects play a significant part in our lives as a way for us to identify ourselves and signal to others how we want to be perceived. The idea of the extended self, advocated by Belk (1988), is an attempt to explain consumer behaviour in terms of the relationship between the self-concept and in this case the brand choices made by consumers. The author demonstrates that "possessions are an important component of sense of self" (Belk, 1988, p. 139) as we want to, deliberately or unconsciously, benefit from the perceived characteristics of brands. Yet, important to note is that possessions not only refer to objects and brands, but it may also refer to group possessions as well as persons and places. However, as this thesis's focal point is the role of the active brand, only the consumer-brand connection will hereinafter be addressed.

Belk (1988) not only reports on how consumers may exert control over objects, but also the other way around in terms of control *by* objects. Thereby, a three-way perspective on the relationship is given (person-object-person). "That is, we may impose our identities on possessions and possessions may impose their identities on us" (Belk, 1988, p. 141). In this sense, the author argues that objects act as an expression to confirm our identities. As a striking example he gives the loss of possessions being equal to the loss, or lessening, of

one's self. Aligned with this, McLeod (1984) also found that the process of grief when losing a possession is similar to the grief experienced when losing a loved one. Hence, losing an object that defines who you are does not only deprive you of the utilitarian benefits of consumption, but it may also loosen or confuse your sense of self.

Another significant finding of Belk's (1988), that coincides with our empirical data presented in the following section, is that the more you invest in an object in terms of money, energy, efforts, and time, the more integrated it will become into the self. Hence, objects "literally can extend self as when a tool […] allows us to do things of which we would otherwise be incapable" (Belk, 1988, p. 145). This quotation draws upon the concept of interpellation in the sense that a tool allows some human action while resisting other as described in 2.4.1 (Engeström & Blackler, 2005; Rennstam, 2012).

2.5.2 Symbolic Interactionism

The concept of symbolic interactionism, which is somewhat similar to the extended self, is originally derived from social psychology and sociology (Solomon, 1983). Solomon's (1983, p. 320) definition of the theory is: "Symbolic interactionism focuses on the process by which individuals understand their world. It assumes that people interpret the actions of others rather than simply reacting to them". Hence, it is not solely about the situation itself but rather about the meaning that is created and accordingly interpreted in a specific interactive context. It is an "investigation not only of the social world but also of the contextualized processes by which human beings construct and engage with their social worlds" (Milliken & Schreiber, 2012, p. 686). Thus, to bridge this over to brands, the meaning of the brand becomes the result of the individual's interpretation of the other's reaction in relation to his/her consumption (Bengtsson & Östberg, pp. 62). In this sense, "others are an important mirror through which we can see ourselves" (Belk, 1988, p. 146). Thus, brands intangible nature becomes representations of social objects that facilitate both verbal and nonverbal communication (Milliken & Schreiber, 2012). Humans interpret brands in the environment based on other people's intentions and actions, wherein the interpreted response may be based on a shared or conflicting understanding. Hence, symbols are derived from social meanings that are modified as people interact with one another (Blumer, 1962, pp. 179).

However, the notion of 'social' depends on what scientific standpoint that is taken, as debated in section 2.3.

3. METHODOLOGY

This chapter demonstrates the chosen scientific approach with regards to the research project that constitutes the foundation of this study. This section will further reveal the practical method applied as well as ethical considerations that guarantee the credibility and trustworthiness of the research that has been carried out.

3.1 Scientific starting Point

Before all else, one may consider the characterization of the ontological and epistemological commitments in order to explain the research position for this thesis. The relationship between theory and research is important to consider in order to reassure the credibility of a sound research being carried out (Bryman & Bell, p.7). The choice of research methods is in fact tied together with the epistemological and ontological endeavours. This insight can offer some initial guidance whether to adapt a qualitative or quantitative approach. The distinction between the two commitments is somewhat blurry because it depends on, for instance, if one examines the methodological notion of it or the purely philosophical (Easterby-Smith, Thorpe & Jackson, 2012; Bryman & Bell, 2011). Hence, it is not necessarily the same notion depending on the context in which it is applied (Bryman & Bell, 2011, p. 7; Krauss, 2005). However, according to Bryman and Bell (2011, pp.15) the main difference between the two is that ontology deals with how we articulate the structure of the world whereas epistemology rather concerns how we make sense of and accordingly interpret the reality that surrounds us.

Subsequently, with the purpose to investigate consumers' perception of the brand love relationship and how brands act back on humans, a constructionist ontological stance is chosen. From a constructionist ontological perspective, the social reality is built up from the perceptions and actions of its social entities (Bryman and Bell, 2011, pp. 22), which in this case refer to consumers and brands. A constructionist ontological perspective will help us to understand consumers' perceptions and experiences of (brand) love relationships. This will then not only help us to explore consumer brand relationships from the ground up, but also

to understand the complex structures of consumer-brand relationships and its various dimensions (Easterby-Smith et al., 2008, p.59). Further, as relationships are in a constant state of alteration (Fournier, 1998), the constructivist path represents a methodological fit since it reflects the dynamic social reality and its reliance on individuals' way of shaping it (Bryman and Bell, 2011, pp. 22).

Similar to the constructivist ontological view, epistemology takes into account that brand love is socially constructed and that the meaning of love is understood by the individuals that consume that specific brand (Bryman & Bell, 2011, p. 27). Herein, with regards to the explorative research question, an interpretative stance is taken. With the aim of enriching the limited existing literature on the role of the active brand as a relationship partner, emphasis is put on inputs from consumers and their experiences of how they ascribe meanings to brands. Thereby, an interpretative epistemological stance helps the researchers to gain access to consumers' sense making and to interpret their experiences from their point-of-view (Bryman and Bell, 2007, p.20). After all, an important assumption in CCT is that the world is socially constructed and hence the focal points are the socio-cultural, experience-based, symbolic and ideological aspects of consumption (Arnould & Thompson, 2005). McCracken (1986, p. 71) aligns with this and specifically emphasizes "Consumer goods have a significance that goes beyond their utilitarian character and commercial value". Thus, to understand the symbolic meaning of brands we need to delve in the consumer's understanding of the world, particularly the relationship ingredients and interactive patterns.

3.2 Research Strategy

In line with the chosen research philosophy and the aspiration to explore and increase the knowledge of the active role of the brand in consumer-brand relationships, a qualitative approach is adapted. According to Kozinets (2002), qualitative methods are notably useful when the researcher aims to gain insights into the symbolic world in terms of desires, meanings, needs and choices being made. For that reason, quantitative research methods are excluded as we aim explore a new phenomenon rather than describing an already identified phenomenon by measuring its frequency.

Moreover, the notion of love is to be approached by studying each individual's initiative in the consumer-brand relationship and thereby spotlight the nuances of the active brand to be able to provide legitimate insights. Therefore, an inductive approach is employed which implies that new theories are generated based on empirical findings (Bryman & Bell, 2011, p. 14). Due to the nature of the research question, an inductive approach is preferred since it coincides with our aim to investigate how brand love is reflected in consumer-brand relationships. Since the aim is to open-mindedly explore rather than pre-establish hypotheses and measure it according to a deductive approach, an inductive approach represents a better fit. However, the critical role of the researcher in terms of co-production of theory needs to be carefully considered (Bryman & Bell, 2011, p. 531; Miller, 2000, p. 43). When we collect data we need to be aware of our frame of mind, i.e. the cognitive structures that directly affect our attitudes and behaviour (Christensen & Olson, 2002). These mental structures are psychological phenomena that one is more or less aware of. Regardless of being a researcher or not, all of us are framed by previous experiences and knowledge that reflects the way one interprets, reasons and behaves with regards to the environment around us. As a result, our responsibility as researchers is to take into consideration the limitations with the chosen methodology, and to apply critical thinking through the whole process. Also, this explains why we can never be fully inductive as the authors in this case have previous knowledge of branding. However, we have limited experience of the STS and CCT context in which the meaning of the brand is applied, and thus this limitation is of minor importance for jeopardizing the trustworthiness of the study.

In addition, by adapting an interpretative stance we are influenced by the reflexive, sceptical and humble ways of approaching the empirical findings (Dupuis, 1999; Poggenpoel & Myburgh, 2003; Alvesson, 2003b). The first one refers to the researchers' presence in the moment of data collection, as well as later in the analysis and interpretation of empirical findings, by viewing the same data from different angles. To be reflexive require the researchers to take a look in the mirror simultaneously as data is being collected, in order to improve awareness of the framing process previously described. Secondly, the sceptical notion is applied as we critically view the truth(s) that is (are) being produced and reinforced by us. This is relevant for the data collection as well as in the analysis of the empirical material obtained, and it means that we are constantly addressing our implicit assumptions in relation to the end result. In this case it is advantageous that we are two individuals in the team that can identify, and remind each other of, unconscious behaviour that we fail

recognize ourselves. Thirdly, the humble point of view concerns the researchers' way of approaching the knowledge gained, meaning to continuously challenge the frame of mind and the certainty of assumptions being made. Subsequently, all three approaches are important to take into account for the trustworthiness and credibility of sound academic research. Hence, the ability of the researcher to switch perspectives and accordingly avoid closing one's mind is crucial to the research process. Because even though certain symptoms of the phenomena by definition are not central to the relationship between the consumer and the brand, it might still be relevant for the individual being interviewed. Thus it may be revealed to be critical even if existing theory does not currently highlight it. Thereby, we are transparent with our theoretical pre-understandings as literature functions primarily as a reference point, and the empirical findings as the main characters in this thesis. By looking at the empirical findings by using multiple perspectives we let the data speak for itself, rather than deriving it solely from expected pre-defined theories.

3.3 Research Method

Aligned with the inductive approach, phenomenological in-depth interviews will be carried out. In human scientific research and qualitative studies, interviews are seen as an effective way to gain knowledge of individuals, groups and organizations (Alvesson, 2003a). It coincides with our explorative aim because this approach provides a thick description and interpretation of the phenomenon without being too superficial. However, Silverman (1993, p. 91) argues that the interviewer exerts social control over the participant in the interview setting by shaping the conversation, even with the use of open-ended questions. Hence, he believes that the participant's responses are not authentic, but rather mere reproductions of what she/he thinks are expected of her/him to answer. Nevertheless, a phenomenologist acknowledges the fact that, in a position as a researcher, she/he cannot be fully detached from her/his "presuppositions and that the researcher should not pretend otherwise" (Groenewald, 2004, p. 7). The aim of a phenomenological study is thus to gather data about individuals' sense-making, meaning participants' interpretation of the phenomenon being studied, which fits well together with the earlier described scientific standpoint (Groenewald, 2004; Bryman & Bell, 2011, p. 18). Herein, the researchers' aim is to grasp and understand the perceptions that are being conveyed by the interviewees that constitute the primary data collected in this study.

Indeed, this method entails an interpretative epistemological challenge for the researcher that needs to be addressed and highlighted for ethical and credibility reasons (Alvesson, 2003a). Bryman and Bell (2011, p. 19) demonstrate that a phenomenological method includes both double interpretation as well as a third interpretation level. This multidimensional interpretation signifies that the researcher first needs to provide an understanding of interviewees' perceptions, and then at a later step in the research analysis process connect these interpretations with secondary data in terms of existing academic theories and concepts (Bryman & Bell, 2011, p. 20). Although this tertiary phenomenological interpretation loop can be regarded as a weakness, seen through the perspective of the researchers' awareness of her/his frame of mind, we believe that he strengths of the chosen method outweighs the potential weakness. The possibility to actually discover new interesting patterns that have not been illustrated before is far more important than applying a quantitative approach where one assumes that attitudes and behaviour is measurable with the use of for example a questionnaire.

As a result, we continuously tried to be as open-minded as possible by not letting personal values and previous experiences influence interviewees' perceptions of the questions being asked. Since we wished the participants to talk relatively freely about their consumption habits and relation to brands, this minimized the potential damage to steer the respondent in a certain direction. Also, no interview session was closed before the participant could add any further thoughts and/or reflections. Moreover, we aimed to be persistently reflective and thus employed an iterative approach. The iterative approach includes a constant interaction between data collection and data analysis (Bryman and Bell, 2011, p.574). In doing so, we regularly reflected on the data collected, in order to modify the empirical model to be aligned with participants' perception and interpretations (Bryman and Bell, 2007, p. 14).

3.3.1 Designing and Conducting the Interviews

In line with the chosen research strategy and to collect primary data, we chose to conduct long semi-structured face-to-face interviews. Overall, this allowed us to gain key insights from consumers by probing their minds. To further strengthen the credibility of our findings we combined interviews with observations as a form of triangulation, which entails using more than one method to collect data (Eisenhardt, 1989). Therefore, the chosen methodology

included us spending a day together with the participant, a day suggested by them to fit it in their respective schedules. It should be noted that this was a daytime activity that begun approximately at 9am and ended at 4pm. During this day, we performed a recorded semi-structured interview that lasted approximately 1,5 hours. We used semi-structured interviews to gain initial guidance to be able to cover the aspects relating to our research question (Bryman and Bell, 2007, p.479). Semi-structured interviews include an interview guide referring to the topics being covered but most importantly it will give the interviewee a great deal of leeway in how to reply. This gives insights into what the interviewee sees as important (Bryman and Bell, 2007, p.474). The semi-structured interviews were then followed by unstructured discussions throughout the whole day on life related subjects, and we continuously made notes to simplify transcription. Not only did this activity include us visiting their homes, but also gave us consumption insights at for instance the grocery store and the washhouse. However, due to time limitations we were unable to do this at repeated occasions but it still represented a way for us to enhance credibility of the study by letting the interviewees show us the brands they use. Also, what should be noted is that this choice of method affected the selection of participants.

3.3.2 Sampling Method

Indeed, the selection of interviewees is fundamental to maximize possibilities to uncover consumer behaviour insights to enable investigation of the consumer-brand relationship phenomenon (Fournier, 1998). With the given phenomenological approach, a purposive sampling was carried out (Tongco, 2007; Fournier 1998). This was vital in the research project, as the phenomenological inspired data collection required us to have pre-established a trust-based relationship to the participants. For them to be convinced to let us enter their private sphere, and to be their companions for a day, trust was a prerequisite. Therefore, we chose participants in our close acquaintance that had not before been informed about our thesis topic. Additionally, to motivate potential candidates we gave them a gift as a gesture to show our gratitude for their participation.

Also, when applying an explorative phenomenological approach the respondents are expected to have prior experience of the relationship phenomena being examined (Kruger, 1988, p. 150). As all respondents are active and passionate consumers, this expectation was

confirmed before the interviews were conducted. We further followed Guest, Bunce and Johnson's (2006) advice on a minimum of six participants in a qualitative study. This guidance to sample size, combined with the time-consuming interview and observation approach, let us end up with eight interviews in total.

Moreover, gender qualification is recognized by previous research suggesting that women exhibit more and stronger interpersonal relationships and brand involvements (Fournier, 1998). Therefore, we chose women as interviewees since this tends to better suit the purpose of uncovering the relationship phenomenon. The following figure 2 presents our participants, including name, age, residence and employment. The participants have been re-named due to anonymity.

	Age	City	Job
Jule	24	Stockholm	Marketing student
Marlen	26	Bonn	Event Manager
Victoria	26	Cologne	Actress/ Several Part-time jobs
Anna	25	Cologne	Hairdresser/ Part-time student
Charlotte	27	Cologne	Currently unemployed
Julia	27	Cologne	Design student
Lily	51	Halmstad	Social Worker
Lina	23	Lund	Law student

FIGURE 2 TABLE OF RESPONDENTS

3.4 Data Analysis and Transcription

With the interpretative stance taken, implying that the world is a construction made by humans, our aspiration is to illustrate the perceptions, values and meanings ascribed by humans. Thereby, consumers' interpretations of their relationship to consumption, particularly to brands, constitute the foundation of the data analysis. To enable us to succeed with such an aspiration, we embraced a narrative data analysis approach. This signifies that emphasis is put on the stories told by the consumers about their lives, significant events, and

critical episodes, that by any means have affected their consumption behaviour (Bryman & Bell, 2011, p. 531). As we deliberately asked participants to recount stories we gained rich interview data that we combined with the unstructured discussions and observations made throughout the day spent with the participants. By delving into consumers' past life experiences, we were able to analyze implicit values, attitudes and beliefs that were hidden in the stories told (Alvesson, 2003b; Ollerenshaw & Creswell, 2004).

In addition, choosing a narrative approach to account for participants' lived experiences also reinforces a certain way of analyzing the data collected (Ollerenshaw & Creswell, 2004). In doing so, we chose to adapt a quote-driven analysis. Herein, to let the empirical findings and narratives speak for themselves we chose to apply In vivo coding (Castro, Kellisan, Bond & Kopak, 2010) to further emphasize the unrefined language of respondents'.

Furthermore, in accordance with the interpretative stance, two dimensions of interpretation became relevant. In the first dimension, interviews were considered individually and collectively to identify behavioural and personality tendencies, in such a way that a holistic understanding of the consumer within the consumer-brand relationship emerged. Thereby, background information regarding the respondent's interpersonal and non-interpersonal relationships were considered. Herein, topics including love as a subjective experience, love in the (interpersonal) relationship and love towards things other than humans are presented as a springboard to the second dimension of interpretation. In this, a cross-person analysis was conducted with the aim to find patterns and themes regarding how brands act back on the consumer. Here, three coding themes were identified in how brands reciprocate love; functioning as a Stabilizer, Reminder, and Gratifier. Also, as transcribing the interviews is time consuming, and due to the fact that an iterative approach was applied, the transcription and analysis was an ongoing activity in this research project. This allowed us to be systematically reflexive in that we constantly modified our ways of coding (Bryman and Bell, 2007, p.491).

Moreover, as we attempt to analyze the consumer-brand relationship using a different theoretical lens inspired by STS, we avoided being pre-framed by interpersonal and non-interpersonal perspectives as theories were applied to the empirical findings. Hence, we coded the empirical findings using an alternative perspective while using previous research as relevant background information of the dimensions of brand love. Therefore, the links

between our empirical findings, existing theoretical insights, and the applied STS-perspective, contributes to a new complementary comprehension of the social phenomenon. However, our investigation differs in the sense of recognizing how the brand actively acts back on the consumer, which is still missing in the interpersonal perspective of consumer-brand relationships today.

3.5 Trustworthiness in Qualitative Research

Because the issues of validity and reliability cannot be used to the same extent in qualitative research as in naturalistic work, there are other ways to ensure the trustworthiness of a research project (Shenton, 2004). However, to distance the qualitative trustworthiness criteria from the one of the positivist paradigm, another type terminology is used. For that reason, Guba's (1981) construct of four criteria can be used to reflect the trustworthiness in a similar manner as in positivistic research:

(1) Credibility
(2) Transferability
(3) Dependability
(4) Confirmability

Firstly, credibility is about capturing the phenomena under scrutiny with the research methods employed. Therefore, we based our semi-structured interviews on previously established interpersonal and non-interpersonal brand love theories as a point of reference, and then combined this with open questions on the concept of love as such to coincide with the phenomenological approach. Additionally, random sampling is suggested to ensure the credibility (Shenton, 2004). However, in this specific case we aspired to go in depth with the notion of love as well as the love for brands, and in order for the informants to be willing to let us enter their private mental and physical sphere pre-established trust was necessary. Therefore, random sampling could not be applied. Also, when employing a research strategy that includes observation one might consider the risk of participants acting in a certain way just because they are under supervision. However, we recruited passionate female consumers as informants that were more than willing to share their life stories on their past and current consumption behaviour. This, combined with letting us have a look ourselves in their homes,

enabled us to confirm their statements and narratives in order to capture how brands were integrated in their lives.

Secondly, transferability corresponds to the generalisability of positivistic research. Since the number of participants is far less when one deals with qualitative work, the findings cannot be applicable to the population as a whole. Instead, it signifies that the results may be transferable to other situations and hence the description of the contextual factors of the study ought to be covered thoroughly as done in this chapter (Guba, 1981). Ulver-Sneistrup (2008, p.85) further states that "CCT assumes that individuals and groups share standardized […] cultural scripts in more or less patterned ways", which implies that the discoveries made in this explorative research may be transferred to other groups of people as well. See further research section for more suggestions of adaptations of the study to make it even more transferable.

Thirdly, the dependability issue addresses a detailed coverage on the processes that have been carried out, to allow another researcher to repeat the work. The research design is herein of utter importance, and is accounted for in section 2.3.

Lastly, confirmability deals with "the qualitative investigator's comparable concern to objectivity" (Shenton, 2004, p. 72). To account for the participants' experiences and ideas, their narratives are highlighted in the upcoming chapter using In vivo coding. This means that we have made use of exact responses of the participants when we analyzed the collected data (Castro et al., 2010).

3.6 Ethical considerations

Ethical matters and practices are essential to take into account when performing a research project (Easterby-Smith et al., 2012, p. 95; DiCissio-Bloom & Crabtree, 2006; Eysenbach & Till, 2001). To diminish an unethical conduct of research we deliberately took into consideration potential unethical issues addressed by Bryman and Bell (2011, p. 122). The authors convey four significant ethical considerations, namely *deception, lack of informed consent, invasion of privacy* and *harm to participants* (Bryman & Bell, 2011, p. 128).

Firstly, the researcher must never *deceive* the participants in any way by letting them think that the aim of the study is anything other than what it actually is (Bryman & Bell, 2011, p. 136). Consequently, we provided crucial information to the respondents from the very beginning, but without revealing that we specifically examined the meaning of brands to avoid pre-framing them and accordingly influence them to answer in a particular way (Bengtsson & Östberg, 2011, p. 139). Nevertheless, since the consumption of brands is widely spread, this functioned as a springboard into presenting the topic of investigation as "a study about consumers and their consumption habits".

Secondly, the issue concerning *lack of informed consent* relates to giving the respondents the opportunity to consciously and actively decide whether they want to participate or not based on a correct set of information provided by us (Bryman & Bell, 2011, p. 132). Hence, we consequently informed the participants that the paper was to be published on the University website and that they could be anonymous if they wished so. Lastly, the ethical considerations of *invasion of privacy* and *harm to participants* were carefully treated and the interviews were held in their private sphere. We also gave them the opportunity to get access to the end results of the investigation.

4. EMPIRICAL FINDINGS AND DATA ANALYSIS

Throughout the data analysis we have identified three main themes on how brands reciprocate love in the consumer-brand relationship; the brand as a Stabilizer, Reminder, and Gratifier. These are rooted in the background stories of our respondents, explaining why we have transcribed and analyzed our respondents' implicit definition of love, as well as conditions for interpersonal relationships. Before revealing the role of the active brand in the consumer-brand love relationship, we will account for the respondents' love towards things, other than humans, to draw parallels on how brands 'love back'.

4.1 Love - a Subjective Experience

As per the foregoing theoretical foundation and the illustration in Figure 1, we will start of analyzing the notion of love, leading to a step-wise (love → object love → brand love) analysis that is built from the ground up.

Similar to Ahuvia (1993), the empirical findings suggest that love is a subjective experience that cannot be described in one single definition. To underline this finding, we will present the respondents' feelings when talking about love to illustrate some of their implicit definitions of love. This is considered to be important for the later analysis, as we aim to conceptualize brand love from the consumer's point of view, when scrutinizing the role of the active brand.

To begin with, according to Jule: "love is huge" and "encompasses many things". When describing the feeling of love, she relates love not only to her partner, but also to her family and friends.

> Jule: I think love is present everywhere. It is not only with my partner, but also with my family and friends, the people that daily surround me.

This is similar to what Aron and Aron (1996) argue when conceptualizing love, in that love is not automatically romantic in all cases. Similar to Jule's statement, another participant,

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Marlen also relates love to something all-encompassing. However, she describes the feeling of love towards her partner as a different one compared to her family and friends. When Marlen was about to define love she used words like "trust", "respect", "loyalty" and "mutual appreciation", words that were also repeatedly used in the later interviews by other respondents.

Comparable to Marlen, Victoria argues that every love relationship you have, no matter if it is to your partner or to a family member, "is something unique" and thus not comparable. Overall, Victoria defines love as something: "exceptional and intimate that you share with one special person". Therefore, Victoria's definition of love reveals her desire to enter a close relationship with one special other person, which is similar to the definition of love by Aron et al. (1991). Other than that, Victoria also captures the love towards herself:

> Victoria: Love for me is the most important thing in the world […] not only the love towards others but also towards myself.

Referring back to the words used by Marlen, we come to Julia's implicit definition of love. Julia also uses the words "loyalty", "respect" and "trust" in reference to love. According to her, love means to be able to: "rely on my partner in all situations in life" and to be able to "count on a person, no matter what".

> Julia: Love means loyalty, no matter what happens in life. If I have an accident tomorrow or get sick, that my partner will be there.

Similar to Julia, another participant, Lily, describes love as: "a mutual process of giving and taking" and to: "rely on the partner in times of sickness as well as in health". Here, once again "loyalty" and "trust" are important feelings referred to the notion of love. Moreover, similar to Jule and Marlen, Lily describes love as something all-encompassing which includes the love towards her husband as well as the love to her other family members. She describes this love with words such as "warmth", "unconditional", "compassion", "attachment" and "physical closeness".

So far, love has been only related to positive feelings, like warmth, closeness, intimacy, compassion, desire, and attraction. On the contrary, Charlotte describes the feeling of love as something: "wonderful on the one hand, but something really bad on the other hand". She

generally associates love with negative feelings. Even in good times, love to her is comparable to a "torture", no matter if related to the partner or family and friends. However, similar to Lily and Anna, Charlotte also describes love as something unconditional.

> Charlotte: Love is that you want to do everything for the other person, also when you know that it is not right for you, no matter how it will end up for you.

To sum up, love is often described as something all-encompassing that includes not only the partner, but also family members and friends. Even though love is described as a subjective experience (Ahuvia, 1993), some words were used repeatedly, which enabled us to define keywords such as trust, loyalty and respect. Other than that, respondents describe love with words like intimacy, compassion and physical closeness. These characteristics of love are similar to the ones used in psychology literature (Batra et al., 2012), whereby mainly intimacy and passion are mentioned as major components of love (Sternberg, 1997). Except for one participant, all respondents related positive feelings towards the notion of love. This background information, in terms of the positive feelings that our respondents have in association with love, will help us to analyze how the brand 'loves back' in the consumer-brand relationship. This information will support the analysis in the sense that the loved brand is mainly referred to act back in a positive way, because love is largely regarded as something affirmative.

4.2 Love in the (interpersonal) Relationship

As explained in the theoretical foundation on the concept of love, according to Fournier (1998) interpersonal relationships are based on four conditions. First of all, relationships are purposive and shall add meaning to a person's life. Secondly, relationships are multiplex phenomena that can take different forms. Thirdly, relationships are dynamic and can change and evolve over time. Fourthly, and most importantly as we aim to study how brands act back on humans in consumer-brand relationships, it involves a reciprocal exchange between active partners. In the following we will describe and analyze those narratives that can be compared to Fournier's (1998) four conditions of relationships.

Similar to Fournier (1998), Jule describes relationships as something dynamic: "it evolves over time from friendship to love". According to Jule, one of the most important prerequisites to enter a love relationship is trust and therefore she describes her relationships usually evolving from friends to lovers. While being in a relationship, Jule describes: "appreciation", "loyalty" and "support" to be most significant. Thus, similar to Fournier (1998), to Jule, relationships involve a reciprocal exchange, even when it is just about small things.

> Jule: I think that giving and taking in a relationship is quite important. What you give is what you get back. But that is not only with love relationships. It is with everything. The more I give, the more I get back.

Charlotte also describes reciprocal exchange, or rather the notion of giving and taking, in a relationship to be important. She describes herself a person who: "loves to give" and to whom "giving is often more important than taking". This is also reflected by Kernberg (1995) who states that love sometimes can develop into an altruistic act of loving, where being able to give is more important than to take. However, at the same time, Charlotte also notes that sometimes: "it can be frustrating when you notice, how much you give and how less you get in return". Therefore, it is highly important to her to know that she is loved back. We find this notion quite interesting due to her former experiences of rejection. She is the only respondent who claims to: "never fall in love", because the only time she did, she was "rejected". The same feeling of rejection she described having with her parents. Her dad was never home due to work, while her mother was in sorrow since her sister died and therefore "forgetting that she [the mother] had two children left". As a result, Charlotte got everything she needed: "financially, but not emotionally". This is why it is crucial for her to know that she is loved by the person's she gives love to, as she fears the feeling of rejection.

Furthermore, Lily adds to the reciprocal discussion by saying that "giving and taking must be balanced".

> Lily: It is a mutual process of giving and taking, both partners are involved on the same terms […]. A strong relationship is built on a mutual understanding of each other's wants and needs.

Overall, the empirical findings agree with the notion that relationships are built on reciprocal conditions and that love relationships involve a balanced giving and taking. Thereby, the

empirical findings underline our argument, that in order for a love relationship to exist, regardless of an interpersonal context or person-to-brand related context, both partners in the relationship must be active and thus able to reciprocate love in a certain way.

4.3 The Love towards Things, other than Humans

This part of the analysis refers to the section of object love, presented in the theoretical foundation after the psychology of love. Overall, this chapter will function as a springboard to the following chapter discussing how brands act back on consumers.

During the interviews, each respondent was asked to talk about one thing, (e.g. object, activity, animal) other than a person, that they feel love to. Herein, they were asked to elaborate on this love relationship.

One of the most interesting narratives is the one of Charlotte's. She generally associates negative feelings with love and claims to neither fall in love with another person, nor to be willing to enter an emotional love relationship with another person. However, when it comes to loved things, she is able to state a few with certainty. The first thing that comes to her mind when talking about loved things is her leather jacket right beside her:

> Charlotte: My leather jacket, I love it more than anything. It is 10 years old and it was love at first sight. It is a good jacket, which gives me a good feeling, accompanies me and with which I feel comfortable, no matter where I am.

Another love object, probably the more striking one, is of the brand Steiff. It is a stuffed animal, a white rabbit that has accompanied Charlotte ever since she was a child, and that she has named *Hasifreund*. Herein, Charlotte has personalized her loved object, which enables her to perceive the stuffed animal as an active relationship partner that may reciprocate love, according to the 'personification qualification' criterion mentioned earlier by Fournier (1988) and Rozanski et al. (1999). Charlotte got the stuffed animal from her parents and since that very day, it has never left her side. It has accompanied her on every vacation and it still sits on her bed, "day by day, night by night". This stuffed rabbit is truly important to her, as it gives her: "a feeling of security". She describes that the smell reminds her of: "home and

herself" as well as of past memories. Even with this brand, nuances of an all-encompassing relationship are highlighted:

> Charlotte: Hasifreund is my partner, best friend, my love. He is always there, never lets me down and I can always rely on him. He gives me what I want without asking for it because, in this moment he is present, he is just there.

Other loved objects that Charlotte names include her old Backstreet Boys CDs that she used to listen to when she was a child: "I generally love things that make me think of my past or of past memories from my childhood, times before my sister died". Things from her past can hence refers to the good memories of her childhood before her sister died, as well as to her fear of being rejected. Charlotte has experienced rejection several times in her young life, not only with her ex-partner, but also with her parents. However, objects that Charlotte chooses by herself simply do not reject love. Quite the contrary, objects feel to approve her love in the sense that the love towards objects seems controllable, as objects are present when needed to give love. This finding is also supported by the interview with Anna, who states that consumption items can: "make you happy in the moment you need it" and give love: "when you long for it". Moreover, based on the notion of Ahuvia (1993), arguing whether or not objects can return love, it is a perception of the other's feelings towards oneself. Charlotte perceives her leather jacket, stuffed animal and CDs to reciprocate unconditional love at all times when there is a need to feel loved.

Another interesting narrative is the one of Victoria's, describing her love towards acting. To become an actress has always been her dream. As a child and young adolescent she never had to fight for something because she simply had the luxury to get what she asked for object-wise. However, when it comes to acting, this is different and possibly also the reason why it is so important to her. When talking about acting, Victoria describes the love relationship towards acting as something fulfilling and reciprocal:

> Victoria: Acting makes me complete. The love I give, always comes back to me. The more emotions I put into it, the more love and emotions I get out of it. Therefore I can influence how much love I get back. The more I give, the more I get back. This is not the same with persons.

The ability to influence how much Victoria gets out of her relationship towards acting reveals her desire to control the feeling of love. However, interpersonal love is something that cannot be controlled, as we simply cannot influence the other person's feelings towards us. Charlotte and Anna also describe the love towards things as something controllable, even though it is expressed indirectly. However, the ability to get love in return when needed also shows their desire to control the feeling of love, similar to Victoria's story. Another capturing comment made by Victoria is: "The more I give the more I get back" which is in accordance with Belk's (1988) argument stating the more we invest in an object, the more integrated it will become into our self. In this way, the object can extend our self by acting back on us as it allows, or even resists, to do things (Rennstam, 2012; Belk, 1988). It is the extension of the self that becomes an act of love that enables us to receive something in return for the efforts that we invest.

As previously mentioned by Heinrich et al. (2012), the concept of love may relate to both, a social relationship as well as to an emotional state of feelings, and thus it can take different forms. Admittedly, people can feel love towards anyone or anything, including objects or activities, as shown in this section. Overall, respondents emphasize their love relationship towards things as something unconditional, by receiving love whenever they are in need of it. Thereby, Belk's (1988) statement that consumers may exert control over objects is supported, as most respondents perceive love towards things as controllable. This feeling of control is mainly reflected through the respondents' amounts of investments into those things, in terms of money, time and emotions. They state that the more love they put into those things, the more love they receive in return. Therefore, the amount of love that is reciprocated by things appears to be controllable through own behaviour or investments. Thereby, loved things also become integrated into the respondents' sense of self, noted by Belk (1988) in the extension of the self. Moreover, the investments in terms of energy, time and emotions are important parts of the consumer-object relationship, as underlined by Shimp and Madden (1988). Additionally, most respondents reveal that they have seldom, or even never, experienced a feeling of rejection when loving things. Overall, throughout the analysis three key motives have been identified including control, self-extension and approval (as opposite of rejection) in terms of how things act back. These in turn contribute to the three main themes of how brands 'love back', expressed as functions of Stabilizer, Reminder and Gratifier.

4.3 Brands' reciprocation of Love towards Consumers

In order to conceptualize how brands act back and reciprocate love, we combined three concepts falling under the theories of STS and CCT, as presented in Figure 3. The figure is derived from Figure 1 presented in the theoretical foundation. Herein, we have moved to the inner core of the circle, reaching the concepts of interpellation, the extended self and symbolic interactionism. This is the theoretical framework on which we analyze the empirical data of how brands 'love back'.
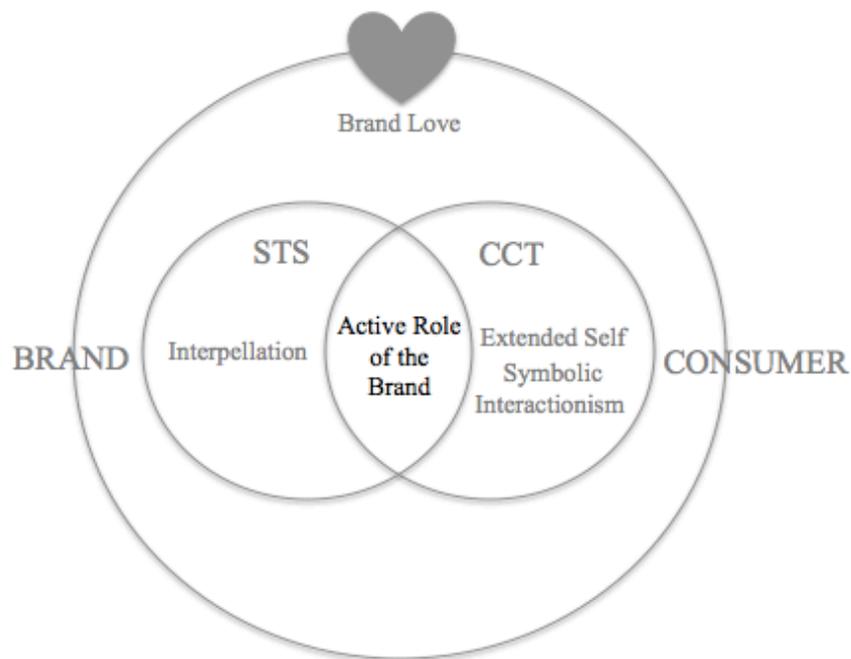

FIGURE 3 THE ACTIVE ROLE OF THE BRAND IN THE CONSUMER-BRAND RELATIONSHIP
(BÄCKSTRÖM & KLAESER, 2014)

As we revealed to the respondents that our study was about their consumption behaviour, they were asked to describe those brands that they use on a daily basis, including how, when, where and why they use them. By employing a discovery-oriented approach, we aspired to explore the brands that are important to our participants, and further to what brands they have established and maintained a particular relationship. After talking generally about the brands, we kindly asked the respondents to describe one, to which they have a special relationship, in

depth. Thereby, the word "love" was rather used loosely in relation to brands, which made it easier to spot those brands that our respondents have a special relationship to. In the following section, we will account for the comments in our respondents' narratives that provide important information on how brands act back on the consumer as an active relationship partner. Three main themes are explored on how brands reciprocate love: Stabilizer, Reminder and Gratifier. All three themes will be analyzed and discussed in depth based on the narratives on which backgrounds have already been given.

4.4 The Brand as a Stabilizer

Our empirical findings suggest that brands act back on consumers in the consumer-brand relationship by functioning as a stabilizer. Thereby, brands interpellate in two ways according to Law's (2000) definition. Firstly, the brand stabilizes the relationship by providing a feeling of ability to control the love relationship. Secondly, the brand appears to stabilize the relationship by providing a feeling of security when inviting to recall past positive experiences.

Starting off with the first, brands interpellate in the sense that they give the consumer a feeling of control. Herein, we can draw important parallels to the previous section about loved things. Many of our respondents reveal fears of rejection and signs of vulnerability in relation to interpersonal love, due to the inability to fully influence their partner's feelings. However, fears of rejection and vulnerability have not been mentioned by our respondents when talking about brands that they love. Rather, our respondents reveal the ability to influence how much love they can receive in return; "The more you give, the more you get back" (Victoria), and when they receive love in return; "The moment you use the brand, it gives you a feeling of happiness" (Anna). Therefore, aligned with Law's (2000) definition of interpellation, the consumer finds herself/himself in a subjective position when becoming interpellated. This means that she/he is expected to act, or feel, in a certain way. Thus, when the brand functions as a stabilizer, it interpellates by inviting the consumer to invest, in terms of emotions, time, money and efforts. This act of investment is motivated by a feeling of empowerment through the perceived ability to control the relationship. Narratives underlying this form of interpellation include the one of Anna's, describing her feelings towards brands in general, as well as the ones of Victoria's and Charlotte's described earlier.

According to Anna, brands have the ability to "make you happy" for a very short moment.

> Anna: For instance, when I bought new shoes, or clothes, this can basically be any brand, those things can make you happy for that special moment, when you bought them or worn them for the first time. However, this form of happiness usually tends to fade away after a while.

> Anna: Consuming in general is comparable to the feeling of falling in love. In the moment you buy those things, or use them for the first time, you get that special feeling of joy that you do not want to stop. Like when you are freshly in love.

Describing brands as being able to give love, or at least moments of joy in specific moments, makes the love towards brands somewhat controllable in terms of timing. Whenever Anna feels to receive love or a feeling of joy, she uses brands that she likes: "When I use Aveda, it makes me happy, as the cream stimulates my senses". Overall, the consumed brand, in this case Aveda, acts back on Anna by functioning as a stabilizer in the sense of controllability when Anna wants to feel happy and receive love.

The ability to control love towards brands in terms of timing is also underlined by Charlotte, describing her relationship towards her stuffed animal. Even though it is more the object rather than the brand itself that acts back, parallels to how brands interpellate might be drawn. Charlotte states that:

> Charlotte: Hasifreund gives you what you need without asking for it. In the moment that you need love from him, he is present.

Thereby, her possession acts back as a stabilizer through providing her with a feeling of controllability of love relationships in terms of timing (Belk, 1988). Overall, when it comes to Charlotte's narrative, the Steiff brand interpellates by functioning as a stabilizer in many ways. For instance, Hasifreund acts back as a stabilizer through creating a constant in Charlotte's life, which represents a missing link in her interpersonal relationships towards her partner and parents. Moreover, the brand also acts back as a stabilizer by providing her a feeling of security. However, not in terms of quality, mentioned in the following section, but

rather in terms of past memories. Thereby the brand reciprocates by reminding her of positive past memories referring to times before her sister passed away.

Although Victoria does not talk about a brand, but rather her love towards an activity, it still provides us with significant nuances of the interpellation concept. We conclude, that similar to Victoria's previous notion about the activity of acting, brands may also act back by providing consumers with the perceived ability to influence the amount of love that they receive in return. Thereby, the more the consumer invests in terms of money, time, energy, and emotions, the more she will get back from the brand. This process is related to Belk's (1988) notion of the extended self. However, compared to the activity of acting, the brand not only acts back through extending the self, but also in form of a stabilizer in terms of controllability. Love in this context feels somewhat controllable, as the amount of love and positive emotions that we receive in return can be controlled through our own behaviour.

In its second form as a stabilizer, the brand interpellates the consumer in the sense that it reciprocates love by providing a feeling of security. Herein, security is referred to past positive experiences related to the consumption of the brand. Simply put, when buying a known brand the consumer knows what she gets. Hence, the brand operates by inviting the consumer to loyal behaviour and to the act of repurchasing the brand. To support this form of interpellation we will present several narratives.

Charlotte has several favourite brands that she uses on a daily basis. However, there is one specific brand that she used the word love for: "I love Benefit make-up". Charlotte has used Benefit products for several years and since the first day that she bought her first Benefit product, she has used the brand daily.

> Charlotte: I think with Benefit you get good value for a reasonable price. I like to invest more money in it, because the brand delivers what it promises. Other than that, I simply feel that the brand fits me.

As can be seen, Charlotte is satisfied with the quality of the products. Thereby, Benefit interpellates Charlotte through a feeling of certainty, as she knows that her expectations are to be fulfilled. Therefore, the brand acts back as a stabilizer through providing a feeling of security.

Similar to Charlotte who is loyal to Benefit, Lily describes being strongly loyal to two brands in particular, Nike and Kanebo. Identical to Charlotte, the main reason for Lily to become loyal is the quality of the brand: "Kanebo is my ultimate cosmetics brand. I have tried other skin brands, but none works as well as Kanebo does. I see results, it works on my wrinkles and makes my skin moisturized". Moreover, Lily states:

> Lily: I prefer to buy old brands that I have used before, like Kanebo and Nike. They work for me, so why should I stop using them? They make me happy and satisfied, and to be disappointed when you buy a product is not a delightful experience. Then you have to spend time on complaining, finding the receipt, go back to the store and the anger, this is the worst feeling. Being angry and disappointed, it is a total waste of energy and time. Therefore, I rather go with the safe cards, my old reliable brands.

Herein, Nike and Kanebo interpellate Lily by inviting her to repurchase the brands. The brand acts back by functioning as a stabilizer, providing a feeling of security by reinforcing positive past experiences. This form of interpellation is further underlined by Julia stating:

> Julia: I use Mac cosmetics daily since seven years, as their products provide the best quality. For instance, I would say, I could never live without their concealer or powder anymore. These two make-up products perfectly match my skin, so why should I look for other products? Therefore, I will continue using those two.

4.5 The Brand as a Reminder

Further, our empirical findings suggest that brands can act back on the consumer by functioning as a reminder in two ways. Firstly, as a reminder of past memories and experiences and secondly, as reminder of identity.

In its first type, the brand acts back on the consumer in form of a reminder in the sense that it stores memories from the past (Rennstam, 2012). Herein, the brand operates through interpellation (Law, 2000) by inviting the consumer to interact as it recalls those past memories and experiences. This type of interpellation in the consumer-brand relationship is illustrated in Jule's case describing her love towards Spotify.

> Jule: Oh yes, and there is Spotify. I love Spotify. And Spotify is a brand that I definitely use daily.

Jule started using Spotify in 2006, when this innovative music platform initially entered the Swedish market. She recalls that her brother had to send her an invitation to get an account. Getting an account with an invitation made her a proud brand user, a feeling that has lasted until today. She uses Spotify on her Smartphone, when she is on the run, or on her laptop when she is at home. Jule has created various Spotify tracking lists that she is also able to exchange with her friends.

> Jule: I feel that it adds value to my life, especially because I have added so many tracks along the way. Those songs have accompanied me for so long and there are stories behind many of them as I have shared tracks with my friends.

Thus, the brand appears to interpellate (Law, 2000) Jule not only in the sense that it encourages a recall of past memories, but also a recognition of present feelings, since the specific songs have particular meanings. Moreover, Spotify can also be seen to interpellate on the functional level, as it gives her feedback by accepting the attempts to add more tracks and to share those with friends, resulting in a sense of community. This, in turn, enables emotions to be triggered as the music tracks are derived from special instances in Jule's life.

Similar to Jule and Spotify, the Steiff brand seems to interpellate Charlotte in the sense that it encourages a recall of past memories as analyzed earlier. Therefore, the brand acts back as a reminder of memories retrieving good times, mainly from before her sister died. This in turn, triggers positive emotions and love-like feelings, as well as feelings of security.

In its second form, the brand acts back on the consumer by functioning as a reminder of identity in the sense that using a specific brand confirms the consumer's identity. This form can be referred back to Belk's (1988) notion of the extended self. We consider the extended self as a different approach to the concept of interpellation, though both deal with a three-way affection (person-brand-person). Seen through Belk's (1988) perspective, the brand appears to interpellate by inviting the consumer to express her identity and in turn feel satisfaction and pleasure. This type of interpellation can be seen in most of our respondents' narratives.

Starting off with the first narrative, we refer back to Jule's narrative concerning Spotify. The brand does not only interpellate Jule when functioning as a reminder by recalling past memories, but it also interpellates by extending herself. "Spotify is fun an innovative" highlights Jule's appreciation for Spotify. Moreover, this is a description that is strikingly similar to her illustration of herself and the activities that she is engaged in.

> Jule: I was always interested in startups due to my own startup. So I followed Spotify from their launch until today. It is really interesting for me to see their growth process, as I can compare it to my own startup.

Spotify's function as a reminder is also reflected through inspiration and stimulation because it appeals to Jule's sense of self. The identification factor is further supported by the following statement.

> Jule: I can mirror myself through the Spotify brand because it was a young guy who started the company out of nothing.

Therefore, Spotify acts back on Jule as a reminder in the sense of encouraging her to build associations with her inner self.

Comparable to the love relationship between Jule and Spotify, Apple acts back on Victoria in a similar manner. In the broadest sense, when talking about the brand Apple, Victoria describes herself to be able to identify with Apple's founder Steve Jobs in terms of creativity and an immense strive for achieving your dreams in life. Victoria also sticks to her dreams by working hard to become an actress. Other than that, she describes herself as a "creative person", not only engaged in acting, but also in photography, as well as in music. When further talking about Apple, Victoria states:

> Victoria: I feel attached to Apple because I like the design. I use it daily because my cell phone is from Apple. Apple is a hype among young people. Maybe that is why I choose the brand. People using Apple are considered to be creative people. I am a creative person. I am an actress. I like photography and music.

Through being able to identify with the brand, as well as with the founder of the brand, Apple acts on Victoria by functioning as a reminder of her own identity and how she aims to be

perceived by other people, aligned with the symbolic interactionist notion. Because she wants to be perceived as creative, Victoria uses Apple to indicate this characteristic to her surroundings (Solomon, 1983).

Overall, Victoria highly values the love towards herself and: "staying true to oneself". To her it is most important to: "find out who you are and what you want from life to be able to fight for what you want". In these terms Victoria identifies with Steve Jobs. Moreover, she states that she probably: "won't be able to live without Apple products anymore", as these simply belong to her life. This also underlines the identity aspect of the extended self as losing the brand is equivalent to confusing one's identity (Belk, 1988).

This fear of loss, or the inability to live without the loved brand, is also mentioned in Anna's case when talking about her relationship towards Aveda:

> Anna: I definitely would miss the brand or the products if they were not there. So I could not think of living without that brand anymore.

Similar to Apple, Aveda acts on Anna by functioning as a reminder to confirm her identity. A loss of the brand appears to put her sense of self at risk because she wants to be perceived as a healthy, good and environmentally friendly person. Since she also sells the products there is a need for her to be perceived in that way by her customers. This aligns with the symbolic interactionist approach in that Anna adjusts her consumption habits of Aveda because she assumes the reactions and responses of her consumers as a seller of the products.

> Anna: I like the philosophy of Aveda, because it is natural beauty products, takes care of the environment and combats against child labour. So using Aveda does not only make me feel good or look good but also gives me a feeling that I support or do something good for the society.

The quotation above demonstrates that the brand invites to conscious thinking, which makes Anna feel: "environmentally and socially responsible". By consuming the brand she: "can make a difference" and in that way the brand appears to inspire her to become: "a better person". In this way, the brand interpellates (Law, 2000) Anna by inviting her to act in form of becoming more environmentally friendly and conscious about the products she uses, as

well as to think about what happens in the world around her. Moreover, the brand invites her to act by encouraging other people to reason the way she does.

A similar brand to Aveda in our participants' narratives is Body Shop, described by Lina. During the interview, Lina starts to describe her love towards nature that has evolved over the last couple of years. She describes her relationship towards nature as being very emotional because to her nature symbolizes something overwhelming that gives her various emotions: "When it is sunny, it can make you happy, when it is raining, it can make you feel depressed". The brand that she feels having the closest relationship to, and even uses the word "love" for, is Body Shop.

> Lina: I love Body Shop because I like their products. Other than that they are kind to nature and do not do any animal testing. It just feels like a good brand.

In the consumer-brand relationship, Body Shop acts back on Lina by functioning as a reminder to confirm her healthy and environmentally friendly identity. Thereby, the brand appears to interpellate Lina to act by encouraging her to buy environmentally friendly products, thus being able to return the love to "Mother nature". This is further underlined by Lina's organic preferences when buying food in the supermarket. Doing good, by purchasing brands whose philosophy she can identify with, triggers positive emotions and love-like feelings. As love is associated with a positive feeling, these brands in the broadest sense seem to be able to reciprocate love.

Moreover, Marlen's narrative is an interesting one because it can be contrasted to the previous informants in that she thinks: "Brands are replaceable". However, when discussing the brands that she uses on a daily basis, another picture reveals itself. Even though she claims not to be able to feel love for a brand, we still could identify a consumption pattern of preferable brands underlining our form of interpellation described in this section:

> Marlen: I use Mac cosmetics daily because it makes me feel special. Mac is a brand that I like to spend my money on.

Furthermore, when discussing the brands that Marlen uses daily, she reveals: "I like brands that I can use to express myself with" which the following paragraph further implies:

> Marlen: For instance with clothes, I spend my money on brands that I usually could not afford but still buy them because they are unique and they make me feel special. This is more important to me than buying mainstream clothes from Zara. It makes me feel special when other girls come and talk to me about my clothes, asking where I got them. The same with my Mac products. For instance, I like when I am in club in front of a mirror using my Mac lipstick and then a girl asks me about the colour number. This makes me feel special. I like to stand out of the crowd. This, I think, refers back to my parents and my childhood, as they have always educated us that every single person is someone special and that it is important not to follow the mainstream, but to be yourself and express that.

Although Marlen does not recognize her emotions towards brands, the findings still suggest that the brand acts back on her in terms of providing inspiration and happiness, as well as a way to express her individuality. It invites her to the feeling of "being special", which also can be related to Belk's (1988) theory on the extension of the self. Thereby, Mac interpellates Marlen by confirming her identity of: "being someone special" who does not "follow the crowd". This encourages her to buy products from Mac. In turn, it enables positive emotions to be triggered that seem similar to the feelings of love, which highlights the reciprocation of love.

4.6 The Brand as a Gratifier

Throughout the interviews, our respondents also revealed how they use their brands. However, as brands are of intangible nature they are mainly described in product quality terms. As a result, our participants tended to refer to brands that fell under the product categories of cosmetics, clothing, or food. Therefore, mainly brands that provide products involving a physical closeness throughout their usage were described. This physical closeness provides our respondents with positive feelings, triggering emotions like happiness and pleasure that are delivered through the use of branded products. These positive emotions are then referred back to the brand. Therefore, according to Law's (2000) definition, the brand appears to interpellate by inviting the consumer to action, to use the brand. Herein, the brand delivers a feeling of pleasure, as we have coined the word *Gratifier*. The brand as a Gratifier is easiest understood in reference to the feeling of pleasure, which is named by Law (2001) as an important dimension of human relationships with artefacts. For instance, consumers may feel emotions of pleasure in the form of relaxation like in the case of the Aveda facial cream

or in the form of complete happiness, like described in the case of the Mini car. These examples will be explained in depth in the following.

When approaching Anna's bathroom cabinet, Anna names two brands that she uses daily. One is Benefit make-up, but other than simply showing us the products, she did not reveal any passionate emotions. However, a stronger emotional reaction is shown when she starts talking about the Aveda brand, which she has repurchased for the last two years.

> Anna: I love Aveda for cosmetics and hair care. There is no product that is better. It gives me a feeling of joy and makes my skin and hair look good.

Her quotation shows the importance of the high quality products, as well as the emotion of pleasure that is triggered when using Aveda products. By using the products from the brand, Anna receives a feeling of happiness as it stimulates her senses in terms of smell and touch. Aveda appears to interpellate Anna by inviting her to action, to use its products as those deliver a pleasurable experience.

As previously mentioned, Charlotte names several brands that she loves. The brands Benefit and Mini are two significant examples of interpellation when the brands' function as a Gratifier is to be analyzed. Starting off with Benefit, Charlotte describes her love towards Benefit like this:

> Charlotte: I am a cosmopolitan girl, who likes to go out, to have fun, go shopping and to dress up. This is what I think Benefit stands for as well. Moreover, Benefit makes my life more beautiful. It is a fun and colourful brand.

Overall, Charlotte receives a feeling of happiness when consuming Benefit. In Charlotte's case, happiness appears to be a feeling that she seeks in order to compensate for her grieving past as her sister passed away at an early age. As a result, she feels that she needs to fill her life with "joy" and consuming Benefit seems to be one way of achieving it. Thus, Benefit can be seen to interpellate Charlotte in a similar way as Aveda interpellates Anna. Benefit acts on Charlotte by inviting her to act, to use the products, which stimulates her senses and provides her with a feeling of joy. Thereby, the feeling of pleasure makes Charlotte perceive her love to be approved, while she does not have to fear rejection. Moreover, using the products and

thus receiving a feeling of pleasure encourages her to live in the present, rather than wanting to live in past memories, as she states earlier in the interview.

Other than that, using Benefit also acts as a reminder in the sense that it confirms her identity of being a cosmopolitan girl who likes to go out and have fun. According to herself, she does not want to be perceived as a sad girl even though she still struggles with her sister's death. Charlotte appears to mirror herself through the way she thinks that other people perceive her (Milliken & Schreiber, 2012). Herein, Benefit interpellates Charlotte in the form of giving her feedback by confirming her positive identity, as previously mentioned in the analysis.

Another brand that Charlotte describes with feelings of love, is Mini. She drives her car everyday and it is evident that she is passionate about it:

> Charlotte: Another brand I use daily is my Mini. I love my Mini because I am a Minigirl. It fits to me (…). I like how Mini looks. It has cute little round headlights and looks like a girl's car. I like to drive it as it is a fun car that can make you enjoy life. I also gave it a name. It is called Knubert.

A striking comment in Charlotte's narrative about Mini is that: "it is a fun car that makes you enjoy life". The car enables her to enjoy her present life without feeling "trapped in past memories". Hence, the brand acts back on Charlotte as a Gratifier of positive emotions by providing a sense of pleasure that enables her to appreciate life. Similar to Benefit, Mini interpellates Charlotte on a physical level, as the physical experience of driving a Mini car triggers emotions of happiness. This removes Charlotte's "everyday life stress" and provides her with a "feeling of joy".

Other than that, driving a Mini also acts as a reminder in the sense that it confirms her identity of being a: "city girl". The Mini brand can be seen to invite to a love relationship since it appeals to Charlotte's view of herself. Therefore, in a similar sense as Benefit does, Mini interpellates Charlotte in the form of a reminder by confirming her identity.

Lastly, another narrative supporting interpellation in the form of a Gratifier, is the one of Lily's, describing her love towards organic food brands.

Lily: I am very concerned about the food I eat. I mainly use organic food brands. Since I grew up on a farm where we harvested everything we ate, I am very concerned when going grocery shopping. I would describe the love towards organic food brands stronger compared to my Nikes, since what I eat affects my health. It is important how I feel inside. If I eat proper food, I feel better.

Herein, organic food brands interpellate by inviting Lily to use organic products that deliver a good feeling, as well as a sense of pleasure. Other than that, organic brands act back on Lily in the form of a reminder of past experiences, when living on a farm and being close to nature.

5. CONCLUSION

The consumer-brand love relationship is complex, in particular when taking into account the active role of the brand. We put forward that current interpersonal theories on the topic of brand love provide an incomplete depiction of the consumer-brand relationship, in favour of the human agency. Interpersonal and non-interpersonal theories currently fail to address the role of the active brand and oversimplify the complex consumer-brand relationship. Although brand love has been fruitfully analyzed applying both interpersonal and non-interpersonal theories, it still fails to comprehend and highlight how the brand reciprocates and potentially 'loves back' in the relationship. To enable such a three-way (consumer-brand-consumer, see section 2.5.1) analysis this study integrated a Science and Technology inspired theory of interpellation, which has not, to our knowledge, been done before when scrutinizing the consumer-brand love relationship. This view has yet to make a mark in the brand love literature that currently emphasizes the predominant role of the human.

Additionally, the relationship complexities became evident as the concept of interpellation was applied, in order to capture the active role of the brand. Although the theory of interpellation was the main concept applied, further concepts of the extended self and symbolic interactionism were adapted to analyze and highlight the reciprocation of the brand. The analysis shows how the brand 'loves back' in a heterogeneous manner in the sense that it acts back in different ways depending on the individual relationship. However, a common denominator of three themes was found: the brand as a Stabilizer, Reminder and Gratifier. Thereby, we propose a new way of advancing the brand love field by viewing the active role of the brand presented in Figure 4. Figure 5 further illustrates the active role of the brand in detail.
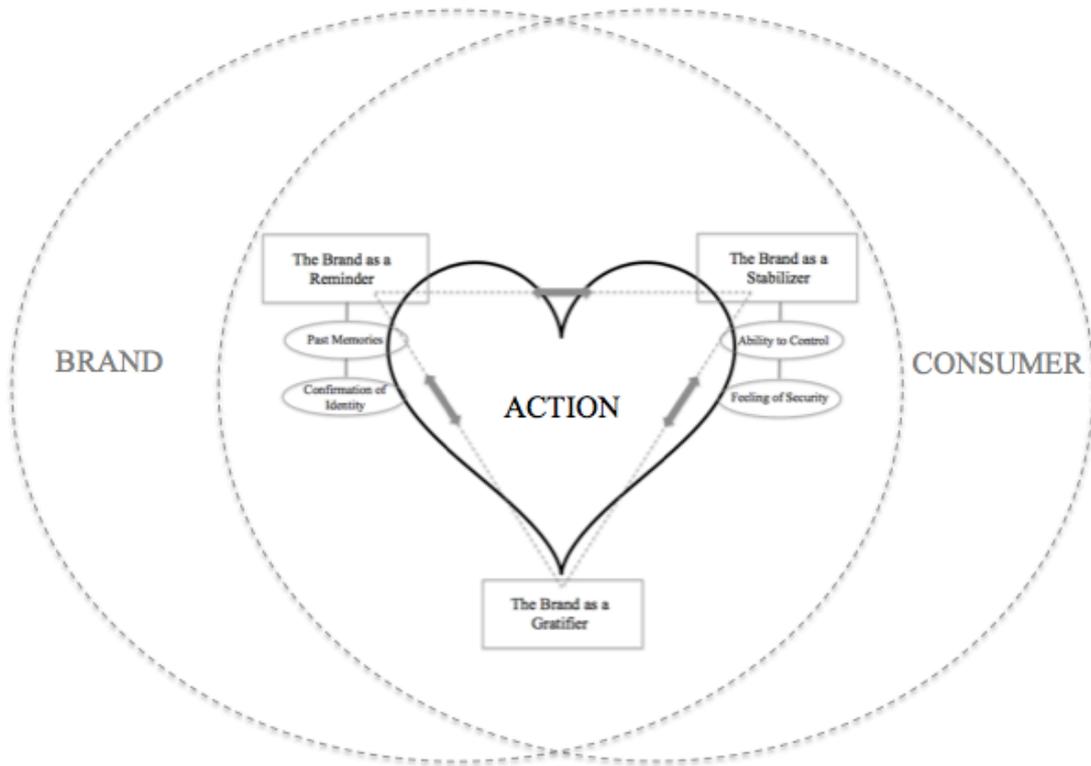
FIGURE 4 THE FUNCTIONS OF THE ACTIVE BRAND IN THE CONSUMER-BRAND RELATIONSHIP
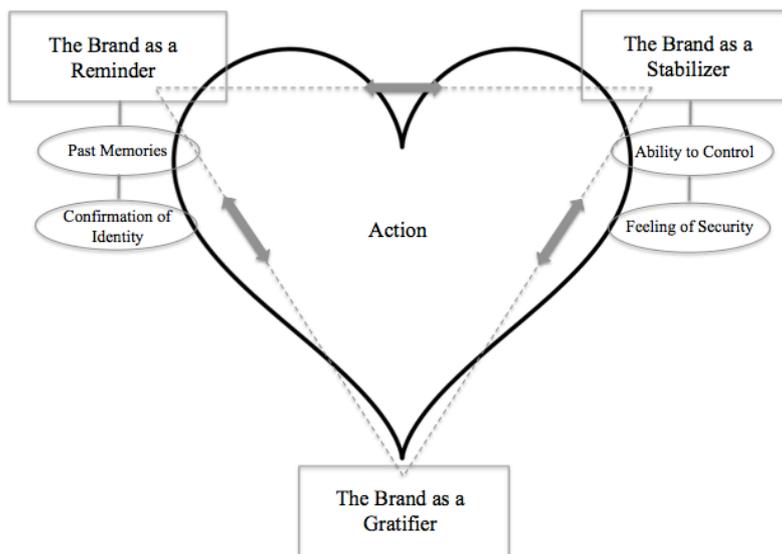(BÄCKSTRÖM & KLAESER, 2014)

FIGURE 5 THE FUNCTIONS OF THE ACTIVE BRAND (BÄCKSTRÖM & KLAESER, 2014)

When it comes to the Brand as a Stabilizer, it appears to be either a question of controllability or security that constitutes the love foundation. Firstly, the consumer feels in *control* of the brand and how it may reciprocate. Herein, the ability to *control* is related to our own behaviour in terms what and how much we invest in the relationship. On the other hand, it also refers to timing in the sense that the consumer is able to choose when to gain love from brands in times of need. Thus, the fear of rejection, occurring in person-person relationships, can be eliminated. Therefore, the findings in this study suggest that behavioural *control* plays a crucial role when analysing how brands interpellate consumers. Herein, according to Law's (2000) definition, the brand interpellates by inviting the consumer to invest, in terms of emotions, time, money and efforts. The act of investment is motivated by the feeling of empowerment that the consumer gains when feeling that she/he is in control of the relationship. Secondly, with reference to the feeling of *security*, the consumer-brand relationship is stabilized through past positive experiences made with the brand. These experiences, which entail positive associations with the brand, invite the consumer to act based on trust and loyalty. As a result repurchasing behaviour occurs.

The role of the Brand as a Reminder entails reciprocation in terms of recalling *past memories*, as well as of confirming the consumer's *identity*. In the former type, the brand acts back on the consumer through interpellation by inviting her/him to interact as it recalls past memories and experiences. The latter type can be referred to the extension of the self as the brand interpellates by reminding the consumer of his or her *identity*. This is further underlined by the findings suggesting that a loss of the brand is equivalent to consumer's confusion or loss of *identity*. Hence, the empirical findings imply that the use of brands is closely connected to how the consumer wants to be perceived by her/his environment. Therefore, the concept of symbolic interactionism becomes relevant in the discussion of the results of interpellation.

Lastly, when it comes to the Brand as a Gratifier, which is a term that we have coined, it appears to be a question if the brand itself, or rather its products represent the active partners in the consumer-brand relationship. Overall, the brand interpellates the consumer by inviting him or her to use its products. The product usage in turn stimulates the consumers' senses by triggering positive emotions that are then automatically referred back to the brand.

As a last notion to the empirical data, the findings of this research suggest that brands are able to reciprocate consumers' feelings of love through acting as a Stabilizer, Reminder and Gratifier. Thereby, brands trigger emotions within the consumer that are associated with the brand. In these terms, brands are perceived to 'love back' in the consumer-brand relationship. This knowledge, partly gained from the theoretical lense of STS and interpellation, contributes to streams of literature in Consumer Culture Theory, particularly consumer identity issues, as well as Brand Management, in particular to brand love and loyalty research.

5.1 Further research and limitations

When reflecting on the results of this study, there are several interesting angles that could add upon the depth of the analysis on the active role of the brand in the consumer-brand relationship. In this view, our research represents a foundation for an alternative way to approach the function of the brand. Applying the STS-perspective in the brand love context has thus opened doors for future exploration to be able to capture how brands act back.

Additionally, when taking the intangibility of brands into account we also came across the theoretical lens of semiotics. Due to the intangible nature of brands we suggest that semiotics would enable a tangible way to overcome a potential limitation of brand love research. Our empirical findings indicate that consumers showed a tendency to talk about the product itself rather than the symbolic meaning of the brand as a way to create and maintain the love relationship. Therefore, semiotics could possibly highlight the specific symbolism of the brand signs to bring concrete measures to the topic and to avoid potential ambiguity caused by the intangible nature of brands.

Another angle in which to approach the topic when discussing the nature of the brand love relationship is the potential similarity or divergence of 'brand hate', or brand rejection. One may question what the dimensions of the opposite are since the anti-branding movement recently has become increasingly spotlighted in academic circles (Hollenbeck & Zinkhan, 2010). Hence, the nature of such a relationship would enable a comparison dimension-wise between the two approaches.

Moreover, it could also be interesting to perform this study in a broader international context and to include multicultural influences on brand love. This study is solely based on a Swedish and German sample, and apart from that it is gender specific since only females were included in the sample of participants. This can be regarded as a limitation and hence we propose that further research could include solely men, or a combination of sexes, to confirm or disapprove Fournier's (1988) assumption that females are more likely to be willing to reveal and express emotions.

Lastly, due to the restricted amount of time we ended up at eight respondents in total, and with more time we could have conducted additional interviews. Also, one could combine qualitative and quantitative methods to enable a greater number of participants than in our case.

5.2 Managerial implications

Brand love goes beyond the notion of loyalty and thus being able to understand the intimate relationship between the consumer and the brand enables practitioners to find new creative ways to engage in loyalty activities. If the research on brand love expands, as presented in the future research section by employing a quantitative approach, it might facilitate significant patterns to be recognized for a larger population, even though love is highly subjective.

To be familiar with the three way concept of brand love (person-object-person), and to add importance particularly to the middle variable of the object (brand), can give additional insights in how consumers perceive the brand to reciprocate, which should not be taken for granted as done in previous interpersonal studies. This, in turn, can empower practitioners to create additional value through brand relationships.

Overall, this study adds upon how we understand consumer-brand relationships. By now, brands are regarded to act back on consumers through the activities of their brand managers (Fournier, 1998). However, this study shows that it is rather the activities and engagement by consumers that will impact the loyalty to brands. This in turn impacts brand managers' strategic communication in that consumers' perceptions and activities need to be the focal point.

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APPENDIX 1

Semi-Structured Interview Guide

(1) Informant's life background

    a. Current work/life/living situation

    b. Childhood/Where and how did you grew up?

    c. Attitude towards work and money

    d. How, when, where, and what do you consume?

(2) Relationship to love/ People they love(d)

    a. How would you describe Love?

    b. Journey of present and past relationships?

(3) How would you define love?

(4) Any things (activities/ objects) other than people you feel love to?

    a. How would you describe that relationship?

    b. Why do you think you love it?

    c. Any objects you feel neutral about? / Why? / Feelings?

(5) How is that love different compared to person-to-person love?

(6) Focus on Brands

    a. Brands you use daily?

    b. How do you use those brands?

    c. Any brand that you have a specific relationship with?

    d. Describe that relationship

    e. History and evolution of that relationship?

    f. Why do you think you love that brand?