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Master's Thesis, International Marketing Management

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BRAND RELATIONSHIPS OF GENERATION Z

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ABSTRACT

Generation Z is a powerful generational group that represents the main shopping power of the future. This thesis examines Generation Z's consumer behavior through the scope of brands relationships, by analyzing Gen Z'ers' perceptions, values and attitudes through semi-structured pair interviews and conducting an in-depth review of existent literature. The main focus is on gaining an understanding of the characteristics of Gen Z'ers' brand relationships, while the effects of internal factors and external influences are also considered. An extensive description of Generation Z's media consumption habits is also provided. Findings highlight consumption driven by personal values, and recommendations of friends and family are found to have the most notable external impact on brand preferences. Online environments have an important role across different areas of life, and Generation Z's advanced information literacy skills require transparent and ethical business practices from brands of the present day.

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Z-sukupolvi on vaikutusvaltainen sukupolviryhmä, joka edustaa tulevaisuuden keskeistä ostovoimaa. Tämä tutkielma tarkastelee z-sukupolven kuluttajakäyttäytymistä brändisuhteiden käsitteen kautta analysoimalla z-sukupolven edustajien käsityksiä, arvoja ja asenteita puolistrukturoitujen parihaastatteluiden ja perusteellisen kirjallisuuskatsauksen avulla. Painopisteenä on ymmärtää z-sukupolven brändisuhteiden erityispiirteitä, ja tarkastella myös sisäisten osatekijöiden ja ulkoisten vaikutteiden vaikutuksia. Tutkimus sisältää myös kattavan kuvauksen z-sukupolven median käyttötavoista. Tutkimustulokset korostavat erityisesti henkilökohtaisten arvojen vaikutusta kulutukseen, ja ystävien ja perheen suosituksilla on huomattavin ulkoinen vaikutus brändipreferensseihin. Online-ympäristöt ovat tärkeässä asemassa monilla eri elämänalueilla, ja z-sukupolven korkeatasoisista tiedonhakutaidoista johtuen nykypäivän brändien liiketoiminnalta vaaditaan läpinäkyvyyttä ja eettisyyttä.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Generation Z – consisting of those born between 1995 and 2010 (Kotler, Bowen & Makens 2014; Ismail, Nguyen, Chen, Melewar & Mohamad 2021) – is the largest generation in history (New York Post 2020). They are a powerful generational group that present companies with new expectations and increasing pressure (Coman, Yuan & Tsai 2022) and influence how other generations view brands (Francis & Hoefel 2018). While marketers have already become increasingly interested in researching the motivations and perceptions of Generation Z in the recent years (McColl, Ritch & Hamilton 2021), academic research is still lacking data on the very basic aspects of Generation Z. Only few international empirical studies consider Generation Z (Duffett 2016), and there is not enough evidence on what drives their consumption habits (Djafarova & Foots 2022).

This thesis aims at gaining insights on Generation Z's consumer behavior through the scope of brand relationships (sometimes referred to as consumer-brand relationships). The study provides an overall understanding of Generation Z's generational characteristics through researching their values, consumption habits, media usage and most affecting external influences, among other related aspects. These insights are then connected to the factors and reasons behind Generation Z's brand relationships by examining what kinds of brands are preferred and which are, conversely, avoided.

In this study, Generation Z will be commonly referred to as *Gen Z* and members of the generation will be referred to as *Gen Z'ers*, both of which are terms commonly used in literature.

This study is conducted as a company commission for Yleisradio Oy (later referred to as Yle), which plays a role in setting the further scope and limitations of the study. The main research interest of the company is to gain insights on young consumers' relationships with brands, with the goal of improving those brands that are targeted towards young consumer groups. While 'young consumers' is somewhat undefined as a group, further discussions on the research scope set the limitation on Gen Z, i.e. those who are currently aged

between 12 and 27 according to the definition of Kotler et al. (2014) and Ismail et al. (2021). The definition of Generation Z is further addressed in sub-chapter 2.1.

1.1 Research questions

As mentioned, significant research gaps remain in Gen Z literature, while the generational group is gaining a growing amount of research interest from both academics and marketers. This scarcity of existing research findings adds to the relevance and value of this thesis. Furthermore, the research scope creates new research data and expands knowledge on the context of brand relationships, as well as the further context of Finnish Gen Z'ers.

The main research question is formed around the primary study scope, which aims to examine the characteristics of Gen Z'ers' brand relationships. This scope includes, but is not limited to, gaining an understanding of Gen Z'ers' brand preferences, central consumption drivers, brand perception formation, and expectations towards companies. Based on the central goals of this study, the main research question is:

> *RQ1: What are the central characteristics of Gen Z'ers' brand relationships?*

Furthermore, the study aims to examine distinguishable elements that contribute to Gen Z'ers' brand relationships. While these elements are numerous, the scope is delimited to two aspects that have a role in brand relationship forming: internal factors and external influences. Accordingly, the following sub-questions are added to support and extend the main research question:

> *RQ2: How do internal factors, including values and personal identities, affect Gen Z'ers' brand relationships?*

> *RQ3: Which external influences, including celebrities and influencers, affect Gen Z'ers' brand relationships the most?*

Regarding RQ2 and RQ3, the additional mentions of values and personal identities for internal factors, and celebrities and influencers for external influences, are reasoned by existent literature findings. The context of *values* and *personal identities* are added, as these two aspects include several viewpoints that distinctively separate Gen Z from other generations. For instance, Gen Z'ers are found to be the most likely to make purchases based on ethical values (Djafarova & Foots 2022), and they are claimed to be different from prior generations through their "special way of self-expression" (Tolstikova, Ignatjeva, Kondratenko & Pletnev 2020). Adding the context of *celebrities* and *influencers* is justified, as over half of Gen Z'ers reportedly state to have made a purchase because of an influencer or a celebrity (Bradley 2018); expansion of the internet has increased the importance of celebrities in the 21st century (Chung & Cho 2017); and marketers are encouraged to utilize online influencers particularly when targeting Gen Z (Djafarova & Foots 2022).

Lastly, the fourth and final research question directly adds the media context into the structure of this study, as e.g. social media is proven to have a particularly important role in Gen Z'ers lives (see Adobe 2018; Pew Research Center 2018). Media consumption can also be used as a tool for consumers to attend to their relationships with brands through communication, and as such, examining the media context strengthens the overall understanding of Gen Z's consumer-brand relationships. Additionally, the media context increases the research findings' relevance to the commissioner company, which operates in the field of media.

RQ4: What are Generation Z's media consumption habits like?

1.2 Key concepts and theoretical framework

The key concepts addressed in this study are presented in Table 1. alongside their definitions, as follows:

Table 1. Key concepts with definitions

Concept	Definition
Generation Z	Those born between 1995 and 2010, with age limitation based on "formative experiences, such as new technological developments and socioeconomic trends" that define the generation (Kotler et al. 2014; Ismail et al. 2021).
generational theory	A theory built on the belief that members within a particular generational group possess similar attitudes and beliefs due to sharing the same life experiences (Meriac, Woehr & Banister 2010). These experiences affect expectations and behaviors, which differ from other generational groups (Lancaster & Stillman 2002; Dries, Pepermans & De Kerpel 2008).
brand relationships	A concept that determines brands as an active partner in the relationship that exists between a consumer and a brand. This includes an indication that a consumer values interaction from the brand and cares about the brand's perception of them. (Blackston 2000) The relationship can be maintained with socio-emotive attachments, such as love; cognitive beliefs, such as interdependence; and behavioral ties, such as brand partner quality (Fournier 1998). Can also be thought of as an extension of brand personality (Blackston 2000).
social media	Internet-based technology that enables sharing ideas, thoughts and information on virtual networks and communities (Dollarhide 2021).
traditional media	Media channels preceding the internet, including radio, TV, print and billboards (Shah 2020).
values	*personal values:* Commonly "rather stable broad life goals that are important to people in their lives and guide their perception, judgements, and behavior" (Rokeach 1973). *corporate values:* A set of beliefs that align with the company's identity and personality, and affect its behaviors; a summary of what the company stands for (Dorskind 2019).
personal identity	Can be defined in several ways based on context. In psychology, refers to an individual's self-image, i.e. their beliefs about what kind of a person they are and how they differ from others. (Olson 2016)
celebrity endorsement (CE)	A publicly recognized individual using their recognition "on behalf of a consumer good by appearing with it in an advertisement" (McCracken 1989, 310). An agreement between a celebrity and an entity (such as a brand) to use the recognition of the publicly known individual to promote the entity (Bergkvist & Zhou 2016, 644).
influencers	Individuals who have built a sizeable network of followers and enjoy

	trust as trendsetters in one or multiple niches (De Veirman, Cauberghe & Hudders 2016). They have a special identity of simultaneously being famous and an ordinary individual (Jin, Muqaddan & Ryu 2019).

Regarding the key concepts, it should be noted that when discussing values, the term is primarily and commonly used in this thesis to describe *personal values*. However, a few sections of the thesis distinguishably address the values of brands and companies, e.g. through interview questions. In these contexts, the term 'values' is used to describe *corporate values*. The switch is clearly informed within the text whenever applicable.

The main contents of the theoretical framework can be divided into the two broader concepts of *generational theory* and *branding theory*. Both concepts are further introduced in the Literature review chapter (see 2.1 for generational theory and 2.2 for branding theory). The summarized theoretical framework of the thesis is pictured below in Figure 1:

Figure 1. Theoretical framework of the thesis

The framework presents the concepts addressed in the research questions. At its core, the framework includes the consumer-brand relationships, which are interactively affected by both the Gen Z consumers and the brands themselves. Gen Z'ers' internal factors (which include their values and personal identities) and external influences (which include their own social contacts as well as celebrities and influencers) both affect the brand relationships from the Gen Z consumer's side. Additionally, the framework addresses Gen Z's media consumption habits, including both social and traditional media. While media consumption is a partial element to affect brand relationships – at minimum, in keeping up the relationship – it is not parallel with the more central impacts of Gen Z's internal factors and external influences.

1.3 Summary of the literature review

As the literature review of this thesis is conducted as extended (see the foreword in chapter 2. for details), this sub-chapter only summarizes the main topics of the literature review. The primary aim is to justify the reasoning for conducting this study. The central concepts of the study consist of Gen Z and brand relationships, which are both introduced in greater detail in chapter 2. Gen Z falls under the broader concept of generational theory, which is introduced among the key concepts of the study as well as the literature review.

The reasoning for conducting this study on the scope of Gen Z can be justified by the research gaps in existent Gen Z literature. Academics widely agree that Gen Z literature still lacks data on the very basic aspects, such as insights on what drives Gen Z'ers' consumption or what their expectations are towards brands (Coman et al. 2022; Djafarova & Foots 2022). Additionally, in recent years, a growing interest has emerged among marketers to research Gen Z'ers' motivations and perceptions (McColl et al. 2021). This distinct interest is rational, since Gen Z represents the main shopping power of the future as the largest generation in history (New York Post 2020; Coman et al. 2022). These aspects present a significant need for new data on the topic. This study aims at finding new research data on Gen Z's behaviors and perceptions, which attributes to both academic literature and marketing research.

Furthermore, the context of the study focuses on the concept of brand relationships, sometimes referred to as consumer-brand relationships. This is also an area of research worth examining, as literature on brand relationship literature continues to receive very limited research attention (Shin, Eastman & Li 2022). Overall, brand management has become an essential task for all companies (Kornberger 2010) and developing brand relationships with consumers plays a significant role for brand success and is an important factor for the long-term prosperity of brands (Veloutsou & Moutinho 2009). As such, studying the concept of brand relationships is of high relevance.

With these elements considered, researching the main concepts of this study is justified by two aspects. First, the scope is relevant due to existent literature lacking research data and presenting clear research gaps. Secondly, literature on Gen Z and literature on brand relationships present notable interest from both academics and companies to further research and increase understanding on these concepts.

The findings of this study will contribute to the overall academic literature on generational theory, in the context of Gen Z; and to branding literature, in the context of brand relationships. The study also provides novel data on the combined research topic of Gen Z's brand relationships, which has not been extensively addressed in existent literature. The literature review examines and underlays the selected research topics with prior research data. Some findings of academic authors may be complemented by research conducted by e.g. marketers and consulting firms when necessary, as academic literature is still widely lacking data on Gen Z. However, the main focus of the literature review remains on academic literature.

1.4 Background of the commissioner company

This thesis is carried out as a company commission for Yle. One of the aims of this study is to provide relevant findings to the commissioner company: the literature review addresses the context of traditional media facing a turning point with social media, and interviews include questions that regard Yle's brand. However, the scope of the thesis is to research the phenomenon of Gen Z's brand relationships on a general level. As such, this

thesis will contribute to the overall academic literature on generational theory and Gen Z in the context of brand relationships.

Yleisradio Oy, commonly referred to as Yle, is a Finnish public service media company founded in 1926 (Yle 2020a). The company's purpose is to produce value for the Finnish people and society by strengthening democracy and culture (Yle 2022a). Services include four TV channels, six radio channels and several online channels, such as Yle Areena, yle.fi and Uutisvahti. Content is produced in a total of thirteen languages, including e.g. Finnish, Swedish, English, plain Finnish and Swedish, three Sámi languages, Karelian and sign language. (Yle 2020a) The company supports individuals' possibilities to participate by providing a versatile range of information, opinions and debates. It also creates, develops and maintains the Finnish culture and art, and helps preserve the Finnish cultural heritage. (Yle 2022a)

The company is 99,9 % state-owned and has been funded by a special Yle tax since the beginning of 2013 (Yle 2020a). All content is funded by the Yle tax instead of e.g. advertising or subscription fees, which allows the company to remain free of commercial obligations (Yle 2022a), as well as financially and politically independent (Yle 2020a). Yle is a member organization of the European Broadcasting Union (EBU) that aims at securing the future of public service media. Examples of other public service broadcasters that are member organizations of EBU are the BBC in the United Kingdom and SVT in Sweden. (EBU 2022) Yle's – as well as other European broadcasters' – responsibilities include promoting equality and inclusion, in addition to providing trustworthy media to fight societal issues such as disinformation (Yle 2022a).

Yle had 2 942 permanent employees in 2021. The net turnover was € 499,9 million and total costs were € 508,3 million in the financial period of 2021, resulting in € 5,7 million in losses. The guidelines of Yle's Administrative Council allow varying in annual performance, but annual fluctuations must compensate each other to ensure that financials of the company remain balanced in the long-term. In 2021, the COVID-19 pandemic still had a significant impact on Yle's operations, e.g. by requiring special arrangements in productions. (Yle 2022b)

Yle's slogan is "For all of us, for each of us" ("Kaikille yhteinen, jokaiselle oma"), which has also been a part of its company strategy since 2020 (Yle 2020c). It is included in Yle's public service mission to represent all Finns and to ensure diverse media offerings to everyone, including those living in sparsely populated areas (Yle 2022a). Services include a uniquely wide offering to special groups, and contents are available to everyone without extra charge (Yle 2020b). Annual surveys show that consumers consider Yle to be an important part of Finnish culture and society (Yle 2022a).

1.5 Research methods

In addition to conducting an in-depth study of existent literature insights in the literature review, the empirical part of this thesis will include qualitative research in the form of *semi-structured interviews*. Given that the research questions address issues that are relatively practical and based on real-life behaviors, it suits the purposes of the interviews to allow attendees to freely discuss their perceptions and experiences on the given topics. Still, the structure that is presented by the method allows comparisons across different interviews.

Furthermore, the semi-structured interviews will be conducted as pair interviews, which fall under the category of *group interviews*. The method is effective for examining collective opinions, experiences and memories, which are all relevant for the generational scope of the study. Additionally, the social factor that allows attendees to feel more relaxed, expand on their answers, and justify their opinions during the interview is also appreciated.

Both research methods are introduced in the Methodology chapter (see chapter 3.) along with further reasoning for selecting these methods.

1.6 Delimitations

This study has several delimitations to ensure sufficiently narrowed down data for more accurate findings. Firstly, the study is delimited regarding generational comparability. Examination of Gen Z's brand relationships is exploratory and focused on finding Gen Z'ers generational characteristics, rather than measuring comparative differences with other generations. While the literature review includes some insights that directly compare Gen Z behavior with other generations, the primarily focus remains on the Gen Z centric scope.

Among all elements that contribute to the overall scope of brand relationship characteristics, the study only aims at examining those that are selected. For external influences, these elements include interviewees' own social contacts, as well as celebrities and online influencers. Broader external factors, e.g. the interviewee's field of studies or work, lie outside the scope. Additionally, examination of internet-based influences is focused on distinguishable parties, such as celebrities or influencers. The overall effects that internet environments have on Gen Z'ers' brand relationships do not gain particular attention. The internal factors – which include e.g. values and personal identities – are not separately delimited as they are based on each interviewee's own perception.

Furthermore, the study does not consider the impact of each interviewee's background or current living environment. While interviewee selection criteria will include consideration of versatility (see sub-chapter 4.2 for further details), comparison and correlation between interviewees' personal profiles lie outside the scope of this thesis. The interviewee selection criteria are mainly based on the Gen Z scope of the thesis, with age being the central element of comparison and conclusions.

Regarding delimitations from the commissioner company's viewpoint, the study is primarily exploratory. This means that the study scope is on gathering relevant academic data that aligns with the selected research goals. As such, this thesis is *not* conducted as a case study that would systematically consider the research topics from the viewpoint of the commissioner. However, the commissioner company is addressed when applicable.

1.7 Study structure

This study consists of seven main chapters, many of which are divided into specified sub-chapters to add structure and clarity for the different parts of the research. First, the Introduction chapter addresses the background and reasoning for conducting this research, including an introduction of the research questions, key concepts and commissioner company. The research scope and research questions are also presented.

The second chapter includes an extended literature review, as the commissioner company requested to gain additional insights on existent Gen Z research. The literature review is divided by different research themes – including studies on the topic of Generation Z, branding, celebrity endorsement and influencers, and digital media – to provide literature data relevant to the research questions. The findings of the literature review lay groundwork for the latter parts of this thesis, but also provide additional value to the commissioner company as such.

Following the literature review, the third chapter provides a theoretical background for the chosen research methods of semi-structured interviews and group interviews. The selection criteria for choosing the methods for this thesis are also presented. The fourth chapter introduces the circumstances of the actualized empirical part of this thesis by going through the interview process and contents, as well as presenting the background profiles of the participating interviewees.

Next, the Analysis chapter provides an in-depth examination of the collected interview data. The analysis consists of five different sub-chapter themes, which are divided to align with the division of the research questions as well as the structure of the literature review. Analysis aims at finding similar patterns – such as common attitudes, values and preferences – between the interview findings across the different age groups.

Lastly, the Discussion and conclusions chapter combines and examines the central similarities and differences between interview data and literature findings. The Discussion and conclusions chapter also readdresses the research questions in light of the new-found

research results, and presents the main points made for managerial implications, further research and limitations of the study.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

This chapter includes relevant findings from extant literature to lay groundwork and provide a general framework for the thesis. It should be noted that the commissioner company wishes to gain further insights on literature Gen Z and branding, in addition to the empirical research. Thus, this thesis includes a somewhat extended literature review that aims at broadening knowledge on the research topics.

What should be adopted as the basic assumption is that scholars widely agree academic research is still lacking data on Generation Z. Only few international empirical studies consider Generation Z (Duffett 2016), and there is not enough evidence on what the members of Generation Z expect from brands (Coman et al. 2022) or what drives their consumption habits (Djafarova & Foots 2022). However, in recent years marketers have become increasingly interested in researching the motivations and perceptions of Generation Z (McColl et al. 2021). Thus, some findings of academic authors will be complemented by research conducted by e.g. marketers and consulting firms, while the main focus of the literature review still remains on academic literature sources.

In light of the Gen Z centric research questions, research on Generation Z will receive the biggest share of the following literature review. Literature on branding, celebrity endorsement and the media industry are also reviewed, within the limits of what is relevant for the overall scope of the thesis. Lastly, the synthesis sub-chapter (2.5) combines and compares findings on Generation Z with the branding and media contexts to further highlight which classic theories and conceptions can be applied to Generation Z.

2.1 Generation Z

According to generational theory, developed by W. Strauss and N. Howe in 1991, members within a particular generational group possess similar attitudes and beliefs due to sharing the same life experiences (Meriac et al. 2010). These experiences affect expectations and behaviors, which differ from other generational groups (Lancaster & Stillman 2002; Dries et al. 2008) and cause different generational cohorts to develop

distinguishable characteristics and values (Kupperschmidt 2000; Schewe & Meredith 2004). Strauss and Howe's (1991) theory focuses on American and Western history and associates cycles of generational personalities, dubbed archetypes, with historical events. Generational theory suggests that reflecting these cycles is a "way to predict consumer attitudes and lifestyles", as well as major changes that society can expect to happen in the following decade or century (Strauss & Howe 1991).

Generation Z is the largest generational group in history, representing 32 % of the current world population (New York Post 2020). They outnumber Millennials by over one million (Dabija, Bejan & Dinu 2019) and with their spending power reaching USD 143 billion, they represent the main shopping power of the future (Kim & Austin 2019; Coman et al. 2022). Members of Generation Z also influence how other generations view brands (Francis & Hoefel 2018) and have a high influence on the consumption habits of their parents (Van Den Bergh & Behrer 2016, 11). They are a powerful generational group that present companies with new expectations and increasing pressure (Coman et al. 2022). This broad influential effect places a high importance on researching Generation Z.

The limitation that determines where Generation Z begins and where it ends varies between different sources. For instance, McCridle (2016a) defines them as individuals born *between 1995 and 2009*; Williams and Page (2011) as those born *between 1994 and 2010*; Coman et al**.** (2022) as those born *between 1997 and 2012*; Bradley (2018) as those born *after 1996*; and Dimock (2018) as those born *after 1997*. Kotler et al. (2014) and Ismail et al. (2021) define them as those born *between 1995 and 2010*, basing their limitation on "formative experiences, such as new technological developments and socioeconomic trends" that define the generation (Kotler et al. 2014; Ismail et al. 2021). Tolstikova et al. (2020) state that the beginning date for Generation Z varies between 1991 and 2001 in different parts of the world, determined by differing levels of technology development. This thesis adopts the definition of Kotler et al. (2014) and Ismail et al. (2021), defining members of Generation Z as individuals born between 1995 and 2010.

In addition to Generation Z, this generation is also known as *Generation Next, iGeneration* and *Plurals* (Duffett 2016); *post-Millennials*, implying the switch from Millennials born between 1981 and 1995 (Dimock 2018); and *Gen Tech* and *Generation online* (Tolstikova

et al. 2020). Tolstikova et al. (2020) also state that no other generation has possessed as many names as Generation Z. In literature, Generation Z is commonly abbreviated to *Gen Z*, while members of the generation are abbreviated to *Gen Z'ers*.

2.1.1 Generational characteristics

In literature, Gen Z'ers are often referred to as 'digital natives'. The term was popularized by M. Prensky in 2001 to describe those who have been born with existent digital technologies, as opposed to 'digital immigrants' who have encountered such technologies at a later age (Prensky 2001). Gen Z'ers are highly skilled in using technology due to authentically learning from a young age how to operate it on their own (Tarab 2020, 131-156). As Gen Z'ers have never known a time without the internet, they are very dependent on technology (Johnston 2018). Furthermore, members of Gen Z do not distinguish the digital world from the physical one, but rather sees the two as a "cohesive, multidimensional realm" (Chamberlain 2017). Tolstikova et al**.** (2020) agree with this view, summarizing Gen Z's key characteristics with the term 'phygital' which refers to the union of physical and digital realities. Unlike for prior generations, there is no separation between social media and real life: for Gen Z, social media is real life (Bradley 2018). Additionally, smartphones are not used merely as tools but rather as digital extensions of the individual's self, as some of the most significant moments in life are lived out in online environments (Chamberlain 2017).

Thus, Gen Z'ers express unforeseen levels of internet consumption: for instance, Gen Z'ers spend nearly 11 hours amidst online material every day (Adobe 2018), watch an average of 68 videos a day (Chamberlain 2017), and over 90 % of them consume brand content on social media (Bradley 2018). 95 % of Gen Z teenagers have access to a smartphone and 45 % state to be online 'almost constantly' (Pew Research Center 2018). Gen Z'ers are available 24 hours a day and also expect it from others (Viljakainen 2011, 49).

Gen Z is described to be conscientious, hardworking, conscious of the future and slightly anxious (Williams 2015). They are significantly creative (E&Y 2015) and persistently adaptive (Madden 2017). Overall, there are many superlatives that are associated with Gen

Z in comparison to prior generations. A study conducted by Google (2016) refers to Gen Z as the most connected, informed and empathetic generation. They are the most likely to opt for ethical purchases (Djafarova & Foots 2022) and to be involved with sustainability issues (Barton, Morath, Quiring & Theofilou 2021). Gen Z is thought to be the most global generation, as the internet has made social trends, fashion and communication more global than ever before (McCridle 2016b). Gen Z'ers are the most open and accepting towards sexual orientation and multiculturalism (Kane 2017), and members of Gen Z are themselves racially and ethnically more diverse than prior generations (Parker & Igielnik 2020). They are also likely to become the most highly educated generation yet: in comparison to prior generations, Gen Z'ers possess higher high school graduation rates and are more likely to attend university (Pew Research Centre 2018). Furthermore, higher education levels affect Gen Z's generational value system, as higher education is found to strengthen values, principles and moral development (Alkhayyal, Labib, Alsulaiman & Abdelhadi 2019). Gen Z's high education level also promotes their development of strong attitudes regarding environmental and ethical issues (Djafarova & Foots 2022).

The Annie Casey Foundation's (2021a) summary of Gen Z's core characteristics complements the research findings of academic authors. Gen Z'ers are said to perceive (racial) diversity as the norm, and they are more accepting of different religions, ethnic groups and sexual orientations than older generations. Due to witnessing their parents struggle with the consequences of the Great Recession, Gen Z'ers are very financial-minded, pragmatic and security seeking – this greatly differs from Millennials, who grew up in during an economic boom. Their pragmatism and fast information searching skills result in a tendency to evaluate different options before making a well-informed purchase decision. A more negative core characteristic of Gen Z is the commonness of mental health challenges, which has led to Gen Z sometimes being called the 'loneliest generation'. High screentime causes many to suffer from a lack of meaningful real-life relationships; comparison on social media causes anxiety; and increasing political activism causes stress due to being exposed to surrounding societal issues, such as climate change and hate crimes. (Annie Casey Foundation 2021a)

According to Van Den Bergh & Behrer (2016, 213), Gen Z expresses an individualistic 'I have to make it' mindset, which is not unique to just their generational group – these

characteristics are similar with the Silent Generation who came of age during the Great Depression in the 1930's, as well as Gen X who grew up midst the recession of late 1980's and early 1990's. Williams (2015) agrees with this view, stating that being exposed to financial troubles and safety uncertainties is likely to cause Gen Z to be more similar with the Silent Generation than they are with Millennials – despite the fact that Gen Z and Millennials share generational experiences of technology advancements and multiculturalism.

To distinguish Gen Z's central characteristics from other existent generations, a survey conducted by Francis and Hoefel (2018) summarizes the central behavioral and consumption factors of Generation Z, Y, X and baby boomers as follows:

Table 2. Behavioral and consumption characteristics of generations across 1940-2010 (after Francis & Hoefel 2018)

	Baby boomers born 1940-59	**Generation X** born 1960-79	**Generation Y** born 1980-94	**Generation Z** born 1995-2010
Behavior	- Idealism - Revolutionary - Collectivist	- Materialistic - Competitive - Individualistic	- Globalist - Questioning - Oriented to self	- Undefined identity - Dialoguer - "Communaholic" - Realistic
Consumption	- Ideology - Vinyl and movies	- Status - Brands and cars - Luxury articles	- Experiences - Festivals and travel - Flagships	- Uniqueness - Unlimited - Ethical

Francis and Hoefel's (2018) survey found four core behaviors of Gen Z, namely: a desire towards individual expression and label avoidance; strong belief in dialogue to improve the world; avoidance of identifying with just one cause, and; a tendency to be highly analytical and pragmatic in decision-making. All behavior and consumption can be summarized in Gen Z'ers 'search for truth' – e.g. being able to express their own individual truth and understanding different truths through dialogue. (Francis & Hoefel 2018)

2.1.2 Internal factors

Values

Gen Z'ers central values include respecting others, responsibility and hedonism, as well as being sincere and honest (Williams, Page, Petrosky & Hernandez 2010). According to Tolstikova et al. (2020), self-expression is the single most important value for Gen Z'ers – this is further discussed later in this sub-chapter. Gen Z'ers are thought to have harder values than the preceding generation Millennials (also known as Gen Y, born 1980-1994), as they lived their sensitive period during recession (Ziemann 2014). They express savings mindedness (Schlossberg 2016) and are highly frugal due being exposed to several global recessions caused by financial crashes (Fromm & Read 2018). In comparison, Millennials – who are sometimes referred to as the "Me Generation" – were born in an era of economic boom, which made them more idealistic, less approving of opinions differing from their own, and more concentrated on themselves (Francis & Hoefel 2018) than members of Gen Z. Gen Z's savings mindedness might strengthen even more due to the recent COVID-19 pandemic (Shin et al. 2022) as it caused Gen Z'ers' employment rates to take a bigger hit than other generations' (Parker & Igielnik 2020).

Out of all present generations, Gen Z is characterized as being the most interested in sustainable lifestyles (Dabija & Bejan 2017). According to Djafarova and Foots (2022), among the main drivers for this is that Gen Z is highly aware of society's existing ethical issues and wish to do as much as they can to at their current life stage to have positive influence on the world. Gen Z'ers are highly aware of the consequences of their actions, as they acknowledge their decisions can have an effect on the environment or future generations' ability to access natural resources (Dabija & Pop 2013). They express a strong awareness of ethical and environmental issues, which at its root derives from their unlimited access to online information and exposure to social media (Djafarova & Foots 2022).

In the last few decades, environmental and societal issues have received an increasing amount of media coverage (Djafarova & Foots 2022). Accordingly, empirical research has also shown an increase in the number of consumers who are drawn to the values of ethical

consumerism (Han, Moon & Hyun 2019). However, even though ethical values have gained momentum among consumers in the recent years, the change has not been as apparent in terms of concrete consumer behavior or purchase decision (Park & Lin 2018). This inconsistency between consumers' values and purchasing behavior is referred to with terms such as the *attitude–behavior gap* (e.g. Boulstridge & Carrigan 2000) or the *CSR-consumer paradox* (e.g. Janssen & Vanhamme 2015), and it is also found to apply to members of Gen Z. Naderi and Van Steenburg (2018) summarize this phenomenon by stating that Gen Z is "more attitudinally green than behaviorally green". Gen Z's environmental values will be discussed in greater detail among their consumption habits in the sub-chapter 2.1.4.

In addition to environmental issues, Gen Z'ers are highly interested in social responsibility (Dabija & Pop 2013). Due to being constantly exposed to a globalized world online, they are socially aware, justice-oriented and extremely informed of global issues (Johnston 2018). Gen Z'ers are significantly aware of issues regarding diversity and race (Pichler, Kohli & Granitz 2021), and they are more likely to engage in promoting social issues than prior generations (Annie Casey Foundation 2021b). Furthermore, in consequence of the improvements in societal issues, Gen Z has faced increasing exposure to e.g. incrementing terrorism, hate crimes against sexual minorities and the Black Lives Matter movement (Bitterman & Hess 2020). This type of exposure has made Gen Z'ers highly aware of real-life societal issues from a young age (Witt & Baird 2018). Gen Z expresses advancing expectations for the way companies' responsibility is perceived (Coman et al. 2022) and believes that companies should publicly stand for diversity, gender and racial justice, civil rights, and climate change prevention (Pichler et al. 2021).

Personal identity

In a study that surveyed 400 Gen Z teenagers, Google (2016) found that "being yourself, embracing what you love, rejecting what you don't and being kind to others" are central sentiments for what is perceived as 'cool'. Gen Z'ers are different from prior generations through their "special way of self-expression", which is mainly expressed on digital platforms and aims to create a positive image of oneself in their selected environment (Tolstikova et al. 2020). According to Francis and Hoefel (2018), members of Gen Z desire

to express themselves freely and experiment with their identity, rather than being labelled through only a singular stereotype. They are label-avoidant and "comfortable with having multiple ways of being themselves". This also makes them more open and understanding towards different kinds of people. (Francis & Hoefel 2018) In an international survey of 15 500 Gen Z respondents, OC&C Strategy Consultants (2019) found that Gen Z prioritizes uniqueness more than other generations do. Gen Z'ers express a strong desire to stand out from the crowd in the present era where social media gives everyone a platform. Almost ¼ of respondents place high importance on having unique viewpoints, as well as unique views on style and hobbies. (OC&C 2019)

While personal branding has traditionally been a common practise for e.g. politicians and entertainers, many individuals from different backgrounds and company positions are now branding themselves (Baltezarevic & Milovanovic 2014). Personal branding refers to managing one's reputation, looks and skills in a similar manner that a marketing team would use to brand a commercial product (Wright 2009). For Gen Z, social media is a tool for personal branding (Finch 2015) and many Gen Z'ers state to have several different accounts within the same social media platform, such as separate private and public accounts on Instagram (OC&C 2019). As they have seen Millennials making their mistakes on social media by posting too openly, Gen Z'ers acknowledge their online personal brand and find it important to give out the best impression possible (Williams 2015). On a personal level they seek acceptance, whereas on a professional level they feel pressured to stand out from the crowd (Finch 2015). Ultimately, Gen Z'ers develop personal brands online as a tool to differentiate oneself in the increasingly competitive market (Vitelar 2019). An important part of Gen Z's online activities is their own image on social media (Djafarova & Foots 2022), which they wish to keep clean and positive so that it opposes no risks to their future career opportunities (Jacobsen & Barnes 2020). Thus, in the employment context, the high importance Gen Z'ers place on their online image might be viewed as rational rather than egoistic. They acknowledge the permanent consequences their online behavior may hold, and for that reason wish to present themselves in a way that will not have a negative effect on e.g. their future career prospects.

2.1.3 External influences

In light of the research questions, external influences are among the most important research topics of this thesis. This sub-chapter examines literature particularly from the *Gen Z viewpoint*, as well as addressing those external factors that characteristically affect young consumers. Other areas of the research topic are continued in the context of celebrities and influencers in a latter literature review sub-chapter (see 2.3).

According to Sahay and Sharma (2010), young consumers' brand relationships are highly affected by their peers and family. Peers' acceptance and recommendations of a certain brand influence young consumers' purchasing behavior (Sahay & Sharma 2010), though several studies suggest that parents still remain as the dominating factor to influence teenagers' lifestyles and consumption (e.g. Martin & Bush 2000). However, these findings should be viewed as common assumptions among young consumers, as they do not address Gen Z in particular. This is due to academic research still being very scarce on Gen Z characteristics (Dabija et al. 2019). Comparison between Gen Z and theoretical literature regarding the external influences that affect young consumers' brand relationships will be continued in the synthesis chapter (2.5).

Gen Z is found to be influenced by their friends and celebrities more than older generations (OC&C 2019). Gen Z'ers care about how others perceive them, which results in their online identity being a great influence on their consumption habits (Autumn Fair 2019). According to a report by Yes Lifecycle Marketing, over 80 % of Gen Z members are influenced by social media in their purchasing decisions, as opposed to 74 % of preceding Millennials (Kirkpatrick & Adams 2017). Additionally, paid advertisements affect purchasing decisions and what brands are perceived as "cool" (Bradley 2018).

Online environments have a significant effect on Gen Z's consumption. 2/5 of 16-24-year-old Gen Z respondents claim to trust online discussions about brands more than they trust more official sources, such as newspapers or company websites (Kantar TNS 2017). According to Bradley (2018), Gen Z's purchasing decisions are affected by online content. Gen Z'ers evaluate broad amounts of information before making a purchase (Francis & Hoefel 2018), and even when shopping in physical stores they search for inspiration and

information online with their smartphones (Statista 2018). Having grown up with Google, Gen Z'ers are significantly faster in searching for new information and find what they need with fewer search attempts than previous generations (Van Den Bergh & Behrer 2016).

A study by Djafarova and Foots (2022) is among the few academic papers that focus on Gen Z's consumer behavior. They found that influencers' and friends' recommendations affect Gen Z's purchases in the context of ethical consumption. Regarding which influencers are listened to, young users prefer engaging with those who express behaviors similar to themselves. Peers' and employees' opinions also affect Gen Z'ers activity online, where they wish their social image to be perceived as positive and unoffensive. (Djafarova & Foots 2022) The Annie Casey Foundation (2021a) found that Gen Z'ers are more likely to trust brand and product recommendations from real-life users rather than paid celebrity endorsers. Francis and Hoefel (2018) state that, in general, consumers are becoming more aware of brands using paid influencers, and are thus more likely to prefer "closer connections" of online personas, such as Instagram influencers with 5 000-20 000 followers.

Some findings also suggest slight differences between males and females. For instance, a study conducted by Google (2016) found that male Gen Z respondents were more likely to determine their preferred brands based on trends and their friends, whereas female respondents placed higher importance on how the brand makes them feel. However, research suggests that female consumers are commonly more responsive to celebrity endorsement than males (Howard 2002) and particularly among adolescent consumers, females partake in social media activities more than males, which affects their attitudes (Walter 2014).

2.1.4 Consumption habits and company demands

In general, Gen Z'ers are described to be "high but fickle spenders" who do not develop strong loyalty to brands (Arya 2019). It is believed that Gen Z'ers' low level of commitment results from being exposed to a constant stream of information, which causes difficulty in decision-making (Siltala 2013, 167). According to a report conducted by the

National Retail Federation of USA, 52 % of Gen Z'ers do not hesitate to quickly switch from one brand to another in case they are not satisfied (Arya 2019). This tendency is compliant with Gen Z'ers short attention span of just eight seconds, which is four seconds lower than that of the Millennials (Arya 2019). This is also reflected on Gen Z's perception of companies' marketing content online: time is a valued asset for Gen Z, and the decision of whether a piece of content is worthy of it is determined within seconds (Bradley 2018).

Gen Z'ers are more likely than prior generations to prefer brands that offer unique content specifically created for them (Chamberlain 2017). Gen Z'ers use consumption as an expression of their individual identity (rather than, for instance, selecting brands that fit in with surrounding norms), and they are willing to pay premium prices for brands that allow them to accentuate their individuality (Francis & Hoefel 2018). They have an overall preference on being entertained (Bezbaruah & Trivedi 2020), which Madden (2017) dubs as a "constant need to be entertained". Gen Z's consumption habits are centered around wanting experiences (Arya 2019). Nearly 1/5 of Gen Z'ers prefer experiences over products, which shows an increase from the preceding Millennials (OC&C 2019). Access and collaborative consumption are preferred over ownership (Francis & Hoefel 2018).

Gen Z sees consumption as an issue of ethical concerns (Francis & Hoefel 2018) and expects companies to provide a stronger meaning that aligns with their individual values (Schlossberg 2016). Choudhary (2020) suggests that with their increasing spending power and widespread online information access, young consumers are turning their awareness of environmental issues into green and conscientious purchasing decisions. According to Dabija, Bejan and Puscas (2020), Gen Z'ers prefer retailers that make contribution to societal issues, such as protecting the environment, preserving natural resources and ensuring employee welfare. Young consumers are more likely to prefer companies that execute sustainable practices, as they are typically express higher concern about environmental protection and pollution reduction (Jain, Reshma & Jagani 2014; Epuran, Bratucu, Barbulescu, Neacșu & Madar 2018). On a global scale, Gen Z believes that companies should benefit or positively affect the environment (Djafarova & Foots 2022). Kirmani and Khan (2016) state that young consumers willingly spend higher amounts on green products as long as the purchase gives them a feeling of making a contribution to decreasing pollution. Thus, Kirmani and Khan's (2016) finding suggests that the *feeling* of

environmental friendliness is more central for Gen Z than the actual effect the purchase has on the environment. Bianchi, Reyes and Devenin (2020) also state that a "feel-good feeling" is an important driver behind Gen Z's ethical purchases. These findings are compatible with Naderi and Van Steenburg's (2018) study, which suggest that, in fact, Gen Z is green *attitudinally* rather than behaviorally.

Though some research findings suggest that Gen Z prefers brands that are perceived to have a positive environmental impact (e.g. Schroth 2019), literature is still lacking evidence for the true motivations that drive Gen Z'ers' ethical consumption (Djafarova & Foots 2022). Djafarova and Foots (2022) studied Gen Z's attitudes towards ethical consumption and found that frugality and high prices are the most significant barriers hindering Gen Z'ers' ethical consumption. Their current stage of life limits being able to make truly ethical purchases, but there is a strong future desire among Gen Z to opt for high-value ethical goods. Additionally, there are other generational trends that express Gen Z's interest towards ethical consumption, such as recycling, diet choices and reduced consumption of clothing. (Djafarova & Foots 2022) Naderi and Van Steenburg (2018) suggest that Gen Z'ers – like older generational groups – prefer traditional factors such as quality and affordability, whereas environmentally friendly products may be associated with lower performance and higher costs.

Regarding other societal issues, brands' neutrality is no longer an option as Gen Z'ers expect brands to take a stand on socio-political topics (Fromm 2021). There is a general trend among consumers to demand companies to take a stance, or even action, on controversial societal issues such as climate change or racial injustice (Austin, Gaither & Gaither 2019). Maicon (2020) summarizes this by stating that for brands, "purpose is no longer enough". Brands are increasingly expected to address socio-political issues that are important to consumers and their value systems (Christie 2020) to such an extent that inaction may result in boycotting the brand (Coman et al. 2022). There has been a switch in consumers' brand demands from traditional CSR to Corporate Social Advocacy (CSA), which can be described as a form of brand activism for companies to address complex social and political issues (Dodd & Supa 2014). Gen Z does appear to conform with this common trend: global reports have found that 57 % of Gen Z'ers prefer brands that take action on societal issues and 37 % are willing to pay more money to brands that support

causes that are important to them (Barton et al. 2021). Gen Z'ers also expect companies to stand for those issues they are concerned about, and furthermore, issues that exceed mere self-interest and are viewed as important for the society (Barton et al. 2021; Kitterman 2022). For instance, Gen Z consumers expect beauty brands to promote social matters such as inclusivity and diversity in their practices (Biondi 2021). For Gen Z, companies are required to be "part of the solution" – this demand is no longer about mere responsibilities but about companies possessing money and power, which could be used to improve these issues (Coman et al. 2022). However, Coman et al. (2022) point out that while academic research has shown that Gen Z'ers appear to prefer companies that address important societal issues, there is still not enough evidence on what Gen Z truly expects from brands.

One particular factor that authors express differing opinions on is whether or not 'fit' is important for Gen Z consumers, regarding companies addressing societal issues. In the CSA (Corporate Social Advocacy) context, *fit* refers to the perceived compatibility between the supported cause and the company's overall brand image, as well as the public expectations regarding the value system of the brand (Lim & Young 2021, 4). In their empirical study, Coman et al. (2022) found that perceived fit was viewed as *the least* important factor for Gen Z respondents, regarding the decision of which issues companies should advocate. This is a surprising finding in comparison to the more classic CSR context, where fit was found to be an important factor for company success (Ki & Lee 2020; Becker-Olsen, Cudmore & Hill 2006). However, according to the findings of Francis and Hoefel (2018), companies should clearly define which particular topics they stand for, and only promote topics and causes that the company has something to say about – actions must match the brand's ideals.

According to Fromm (2021), trust is an important factor for Gen Z and insincere brands are detected fast. As Gen Z'ers have become extremely skilled in finding and verifying the information they need, it is critical for brands to be transparent and upfront in their actions (Fromm 2021). However, some marketers are expressing opposing opinions: according to Chamberlain (2017), Millennials are more likely to be concerned about brands' authenticity and transparency, while Gen Z'ers place greater importance on relevant and original content and prefer to be entertained.

2.2 Branding

In the present day, we live in a 'brand society' where all companies are required to manage their brand and preserve their reputation (Kornberger 2010). Emphasizing the unique parts of the organization is crucial for building a strong brand (Van Riel & Fombrun 2007) and the need for differentiation is perceived as one of the central purposes for branding, by both scholars and practitioners (Antorini & Schultz 2005, 57).

In this chapter, a few theoretical concepts from branding literature are reviewed, particularly to gain insights on brand relationships. As the concepts of branding are ultimately researched to better understand the consumer-brand relationships of Gen Z, some of the following findings from branding literature will be further intertwined with the Gen Z context in sub-chapter 2.5 Synthesis.

2.2.1 Brand theory

Brand relationships

Brand relationships, sometimes referred to as consumer-brand relationships, require interdependence between the two partners – the consumer and the brand – that both collectively define and affect the relationship (Hinde 1979). Brands seek activities that animate, humanize or personalize the brand (Fournier 1998) as consumers are known to consistently link human personality qualities with inanimate brand objects (Aaker 1997). According to Fournier (1998), consumers establish relationships with brands to create meaning for building their own identities. Developing consumer–brand relationships plays a significant role for brand success and is an important factor for the long-term prosperity of brands (Veloutsou & Moutinho 2009). Consumer-brand relationship literature continues to receive very limited research attention (Shin et al. 2022) – though Gómez-Suárez, Martínez-Ruiz and Martinez-Caraballo (2017) state that the study of consumer-brand relationships is trending among marketing research.

The concept of brand relationships was originally defined in 1992 by M. Blackston, who was the first to determine brands as active partners in a consumer-brand relationship. Blackston (2000) indicated that consumers care about the brands' perception of them, and that the type of interaction from the brand holds value to the consumer. According to Blackston (2000), brand relationships can be thought of as an extension of brand personality – a concept later generalized by Aaker (1997). According to Fournier (1998), strong and lasting consumer-brand relationships can be preserved with socio-emotive attachments (referring to love and passion, as well as self-connection), cognitive beliefs (interdependence and commitment) and behavioral ties (brand partner quality and intimacy). Additionally, trust is a key concept in long-term consumer-brand relationships (Garbarino & Johnson 1999)

Communication

Consumers are expressing a preference towards more authentic brand communications in the cluttered environment of the present day (Sasser & Kilgour 2014). In relationship marketing literature, well-timed communication lays important groundwork for the development of trust and promotes the formation of a committed consumer-brand relationship (Morgan & Hunt 1994). To form strong consumer relationships, it is critical for communication to be two-way and perceived as open (Anderson & Weitz 1992). Social media has enabled companies to establish a dialogue with millions of consumers (Duffett 2016), and brand interaction in social media platforms is found to increase positive cognitive attitude responses (Labrecque 2014).

In the context of consumer communication in social media, the concept of parasocial interaction (PSI) has an important role for developing positive relationship outcomes between consumers and brands (Labrecque 2014). PSI refers to an illusionary consumer experience, where consumers engage in interaction with personas – meaning the mediated representations of e.g. celebrities or characters – as if the opponent was actually present and engaging in a mutual relationship (Labrecque 2014). Essentially, PSI causes the consumer to feel as if the mediated opponent is directly talking to them in a two-way conversation (Rubin, Perse & Powell 1985). The concept of PSI appears in communications literature to offer an explanation for consumers' relationships with e.g.

radio and television (Horton & Wohl 1956), but it can also be used in online communication through mediated personas, such as brands (Labrecque 2014). Insights on generating PSI in present-day online environments are further discussed in the following sub-chapter (2.2.2).

Emotions

Research suggests that marketing practitioners emphasize the importance of emotional attachment consumers express towards a brand (Japutra, Ekinci & Simkin 2016), as brand attachment is widely based on consumers' emotions, e.g. passion (Park, MacInnis, Priester, Eisingerich & Iacobucci 2010; Thomson, MacInnis & Park 2005). Brands today aim to evoke emotions such as joy, surprise or amusement (Valette-Florence & Valette-Florence 2020). The concept of *brand love* refers to the most intense positive emotions that consumers express towards brands, and "brand lovers" are found to be more loyal, more likely to talk positively about the brand and more resistant towards negative information (Batra, Ahuvia & Bagozzi 2012). This makes consumers who love the brand to be of particular interest for companies (Batra et al. 2012).

In relationship marketing literature, research often determines that the development of affective, hedonic and emotional elements are dominant factors for consumer-brand relationships (e.g. Heilbrunn 2003). Younger consumers are more likely to be emotionally involved with brands and to have the dimensions of love and passion included in their brand relationships (Sahay & Sharma 2010), whereas older consumers are more likely to be rational and base brand relationships on functional factors (Ji 2008; Montgomery 2005). Evoking emotions in the internet era can increase brand awareness – consumers willingly share online marketing content when it evokes emotions such as surprise and joy; in summary, when the final emotional tone is pleasant (Dafonte-Gómez 2014, 4). This is called *viral marketing*, which refers to creating emotion-provoking content that consumers willingly share with others (Aguilera-Moyano, Baños-González & Ramírez-Perdiguero 2015). According to Ramírez-de-la-Piscina-Martínez (2013), the viral marketing technique is useful in many contexts, also outside of the business world.

In addition to evoking positive emotions, brands should acknowledge the effect of consumers' negative emotions. *Brand hate* refers to a set of negative emotions that are strongly associated with negative behavioral outcomes, such as complaining, negative WOM, reduced support towards the brand and boycotting (Zarantonello, Romani, Grappi & Bagozzi 2016). Grégoire, Tripp and Legoux (2009) define brand hate as consumers' desire to revenge (i.e. "customers' need to punish and cause harm to firms for the damages they have caused") and desire to avoid (i.e. "customers' need to withdraw themselves from any interactions with the firm"). According to Hegner, Fetscherin and van Delzen (2017), brand hate can be caused by the customer's dissatisfaction or bad experiences with the brand in the past; a conflict between the brand image and one's self-image, or; ideologically unacceptable organizational behavior, such as legal or moral wrongdoings.

People are more likely to remember negative events than positive ones (Hegner et al. 2017) and to talk and write about negative experiences than equally positive ones (Baumeister, Bratslavsky, Finkenauer & Vohs 2001). This tendency is increasingly relevant for companies, as consumers of the present day are able to voice their negative feelings instantly and globally on social media (Grégoire et al. 2009). The number of brand hate websites is increasing, and literature on anti-brand communities shows that consumers come together in "hate groups" to express negative feelings towards brands, and even to plan and take action against the hated brand (Krishnamurthy & Kucuk 2009). It has been found that the most loved brands are more likely to attract anti-brand websites (Kucuk 2008).

Brand personalities

Brand personality, which refers to a combination of human characteristics associated with a certain brand (Aaker 1997), is perceived to be a central factor in differentiating a brand from its competitors (Halliday 1996). Brand personality is found to be a very important precursor of consumers' brand trust, which further develops into brand commitment (Valette-Florence & Valette-Florence 2020). The perception a consumer has of a brand's personality traits can be developed or influenced by any contact between the consumer and the brand, both direct and indirect (Plummer 1985). Brand personality perception can also stem from the people who are associated with the brand, such as employees, endorsers or

CEO, whose personality traits are directly transferred to the brand (McCracken 1989). The work of J. L. Aaker (1997) is widely known among brand personality literature, as her research conducted a consistent, measurable framework for brand personality dimensions, generalizable across product categories. The five dimensions of brand personality (which their explanatory qualities) are *sincerity* (down-to-earth, honest, wholesome, cheerful), *excitement* (daring, spirited, imaginative, up-to-date), *competence* (reliable, intelligent, successful), *sophistication* (upper-class, charming) and *ruggedness* (outdoorsy, tough). These dimensions enable researchers to compare brand personalities across different product categories and to determine benchmark personality brands. (Aaker 1997)

Kim, Baek and Martin (2010) extend Aaker's framework to the context of news media brand personality and distinguish five personality dimensions: *trustworthiness* (referring to credibility), *dynamism* (being energetic, edgy and imaginative – which are important traits to younger consumers), *sincerity* (family-oriented, friendly, sentimental), *sophistication* (glamorous, charming, feminine, smooth) and *toughness* (rough, partially aggressive). These dimensions are relevant for news media companies, as such companies' credibility among consumers is found to be affected by brand image (Fichter & Klaus 2008). It is more likely for news organizations with well-defined brand personalities to attract audiences that possess the same personalities (Kim et al. 2010), and branding is found to have the ability to increase media companies' revenues and audience (Chang, Lee & Lee 2004).

2.2.2 Brands in the present day

In the present consumer-centric era, consumers have constant access to endless information sources and an ability to decide which content they want to access (Aguilera-Moyano et al. 2015). Thus, companies have shifted their focus on *pull* marketing, where consumers are free to decide themselves whether or not they wish to view the content of the brand – as opposed to the more traditional *push* marketing, where consumers are forced to view intrusive and aggressive advertising messages (Aguilera-Moyano et al. 2015). Push marketing is no longer effective in a world where consumers are constantly overwhelmed by information overload and have the possibility of removing intrusive advertising

messages from their lives (Canter, Asmussen, Michels, Butler & Thompson 2013). Pull marketing is also beneficial as it allows consumers to engage in a dialogue with brands and to control their company relationships (Aguilera-Moyano et al. 2015). 70 % of consumers state that they prefer to learn about a company's offering through e.g. blog-based content (i.e. pull marketing) rather than through traditional advertising (MGDA 2014).

Companies are switching to marketing where consumer engagement is the central driver for decision-making (Aguilera-Moyano et al. 2015). Consumers are demonstrating lower levels of brand loyalty (E&Y 2011), which forces companies to find new ways to engage their customers (Japutra et al. 2018). Accordingly, Aguilera-Moyano et al. (2015) suggest that brands should focus their efforts on creating relevant and engaging content to attract consumers, and brand communication methods should be formed to establish a dialogue with consumers.

In the present day, social media provides a useful channel for direct interaction between brands and consumers, which also enhances the formation of brand communities (Scarpi 2010), establishing and strengthening relationships, and gaining better understanding of consumer demands (Kozinets 2002). Social media has significantly changed consumer-brand relationships, as social media platforms allow consumers to become active players, and even originators, in the creation of brand stories (Gensler, Völckner, Liu-Thompkins & Wiertz 2013). However, this has also implied advancements in consumers' expectations towards brands, as research indicates that over half of consumers expect brands to respond to consumer comments (Mickens 2012). Generating feelings of parasocial interaction (PSI) in social media channels might find an answer for this new requirement: Labrecque (2014) found that brands can establish consumers' sense of PSI with communication messages that indicate the brand is listening and responding. Even though individual one-to-one responses to consumer messages is ideal, it is unlikely to be realistic with increasing social media activity (Labrecque 2014). Thus, brands are increasingly responding to this demand by utilizing new technologies, e.g. software that creates personalized automated responses to consumer messages (e.g. Zebida 2012). Labrecque (2014) found that PSI and feelings of connection with the brand can be generated even with automated responses to consumer comments – as long as the consumer remains unaware that the response is automated.

Consumers of today desire positive experiences out of their brand relationships (Gambetti & Grafigna 2010) and expect experiences from brands rather than 'buy me, buy me' advertisements (Abramovich 2018). In the academic study of Aguilera-Moyano et al. (2015), over 86 % of the 29 interviewed marketing professionals agree that the role of experiences is central for the value of a brand.

According to Mäkinen, Kahri and Kahri (2010), the internet has also made brands very public in our era. Companies are actively discussed on social media, and discussions that were previously had in closer personal social circles are now had globally. Recommendations, accusations and dissatisfaction are shared publicly, and online likes and shares affect brand image. (Mäkinen, Kahri & Kahri 2010)

2.3 Celebrity endorsement and influencers

This sub-chapter resumes the research topic of external influences. While the prior sub-chapter 2.1.3 focused on the Gen Z context (including the context of social contacts, such as family and friends), the scope is now shifted to the impact that celebrities and influencers hold on Gen Z'ers' brand relationships. This chapter introduces the definition of both concepts, as well as addressing their role in the present day.

The celebrity phenomenon has gained significant popularity in the last three decades (Moraes, Gountas, Gountas & Sharma 2019), which makes celebrities' multidimensional influence on consumers' decision-making a crucial topic for academics and marketers to explore (Gamson 1994; Rowlands 2008). Expansion of the internet as well as widespread social media usage have presented a new powerful media channel, which has increased celebrities' importance in the 21st century (Bird 2011; Chung & Cho 2017). Furthermore, 57 % of Gen Z'ers state they have made a purchase because of an influencer or celebrity (Bradley 2018) and marketers are encouraged to utilize digital influencers in their communication campaigns particularly when targeting Gen Z consumers (Djafarova & Foots 2022). These findings make exploring the phenomenon of influencers and celebrity endorsement (CE) significantly relevant for this thesis.

Firstly, *celebrities* are defined as well-known personalities, who the majority of a certain group of people recognize (Schlecht 2003) and who commonly have a big influence on consumers when endorsing products (Alsmadi 2006). *Celebrity endorsement* (CE) is defined as a publicly recognized individual using their recognition *"on behalf of a consumer good by appearing with it in an advertisement"* (McCracken 1989, 310). CE can be defined as an agreement between a celebrity and an entity (such as a brand) to use the recognition of the publicly known individual to promote the entity (Bergkvist & Zhou 2016, 644). *Influencers* are defined as individuals who have built a sizeable network of followers and enjoy trust as trendsetters in one or multiple niches (De Veirman et al. 2016); they also have a special identity of simultaneously being famous and an ordinary individual (Jin et al. 2019). A term that sometimes overlaps with the definition of 'influencers' is *micro-celebrities*, who are defined as everyday internet users whose textual and visual narration of their life and lifestyle accumulate a following on blogs or social media accounts, while monetizing their following with integrated ad posts or paid event appearances (Abidin 2016, 3). For instance, an Instagram celebrity could be described as an influencer or a micro-celebrity (Jin et al. 2019).

2.3.1 Celebrity endorsement (CE)

CE is used to attract attention, increase brand awareness and help brands differentiate from competitors in the cluttered media space (Friedman & Friedman 1979). One of the key drivers for CE usage is to create a link between the endorsed brand and the desirable image or lifestyle of the celebrity (Suegker 2003). Consumers often adopt some values and behaviors of admired celebrities to their own lives (Frazer & Brown 2002), including their brand preferences. Celebrities' behavior and lifestyles are imitated to strengthen the consumer's personal self-esteem, as celebrities are viewed as role models for success (Alsmadi 2006). The power of celebrity endorsers is thought to be summarized in three key factors: attention (which helps the brand stand out), credibility (which increases a sense of trust towards the brand) and persuasion (which encourages the targeted consumer groups to embrace the brand) (Alsmadi 2006).

One issue that remains is that while consumers might be drawn to content involving celebrity endorsers, they might not be interested enough in actually being involved with the brand itself (Ilicic & Webster 2014). Consumers may generally be interested in CE while the interest is not enough to affect brand choice behavior (Alsmadi 2006). Additionally, brands should ensure selecting endorsers and marketing methods that do not eclipse the brand. *Eclipsing* refers to the celebrity endorser overshadowing the brand and weakening the link between the celebrity and the brand (Keel & Nataraajan 2012) by being the focal point of the advertisement and receiving a large majority of screen time in comparison to the brand itself (Ilicic & Webster 2014). Even if the eclipsing endorser manages to engage the target audience, eclipsing is found to lower consumer attitudes towards the brand and, naturally, to lower the effectiveness of the celebrity endorser (Ilicic & Webster 2014). Furthermore, the risk of the endorser gaining negative publicity always opposes a risk for the endorsed brand when CE is concerned (Louie, Kulik & Johnson 2001).

Many consumers are known to seek purposeful relationships with celebrities, with attachment levels varying from mild interest to worship (Reeves, Baker & Truluck 2012; Thomson 2006). This consumer-celebrity attachment is found to increase positive attitudes towards the endorsed brand (Ilicic & Webster 2011). However, it is important that the selected celebrity endorser is a good match for the brand (Ilicic & Webster 2014), as matching the brand with a well-matching endorser allows consumers to receive consistent information about the brand (Kamins & Gupta 1994). A mismatch between the brand and the endorser is found to have a negative effect on consumer attitudes towards the brand (Ilicic & Webster 2013).

Shimp (2003, 292-301) determines the effectiveness of a celebrity by five central attributes, which are trustworthiness, expertise, attractiveness, respect and similarity – this framework is often referred to as the 'TEARS model'. There are also other CE selection criteria extant in literature, e.g. those of Erdogan, Baker and Tagg (2001) and Miciak and Shanklin (1994). These criteria include celebrity-audience match-up; celebrity-brand match-up; celebrity credibility and attractiveness (both of which are represented in the TEARS model); cost consideration; working ease or difficulty; saturation factor, and; trouble factor (Erdogan et al. 2001; Miciak & Shanklin 1994).

2.3.2 Social media influencers

Social media influencers (SMIs) are described as independent 3rd party endorsers, who affect consumer attitudes with blogs, tweets and social media (Freberg, Graham, McGaughey & Freberg 2011) According to Lou and Yuan (2019), they are described as content creators who possess expertise in a certain area (such as travel, food or fashion) and a sizable amount of followers that are gained by regularly creating relevant social media content. SMIs can either be individuals who have become "online celebrities" through their social media content; or "traditional celebrities" who have gained a large social media following in consequence of their fame and popularity (McQuarrie, Miller & Phillips 2013). In the present era, SMIs influence consumers all over the world and are often thought of as synonymous to celebrities and tastemakers (Rundin & Colliander 2021). SMIs are found to have a significant influence on their target audience (De Veirman et al. 2017) and many global brands, such as Amazon and Sephora, are increasing their investments in influencer marketing (Rundin & Colliander 2021).

As SMIs are no longer merely promoters but actively take part in companies' product and communications development, they have become effective tools for advertising (Rundin & Colliander 2021). SMIs' effectiveness is also due to them possessing a wide reach and evoking feelings of personal contact with their followers (Colliander & Dahlén 2011). The relevancy that a certain SMI holds for a brand or a company can be determined by e.g. the amount of daily clicks on a blog site, the number of times a post gets shared, or the follower count (Freberg et al. 2011). The number of followers is thought to reveal opinion leadership (Feng 2016), reflect the network size or present the influencer's popularity (Romero, Galuba, Asur & Huberman 2011). However, as online influence is recognized to be about *quality* rather than quantity, these numerical factors should only be viewed as a starting point (Straley 2010). Determining the relevant influencers who possess a strong effect on their target audiences is among the most significant challenges for companies (De Veirman et al. 2017).

2.4 Digital media

Along with the context of this thesis, this sub-chapter briefly introduces the unforeseen changes that traditional media companies have had to face in the internet era. The overall scope will remain on examining and understanding Gen Z's consumer behavior through the occurring changes.

2.4.1 Switch from traditional media

Social media has started to replace traditional media in the 21st century, especially among younger consumers - this behavioral change is both an opportunity and a challenge for companies (Uitz 2012) Though social media has been gaining significant momentum and online channels are now an essential part of marketing, only little academic literature exists to understand the best practices for building consumer-brand relationships on online platforms (Labrecque 2014).

Gen Z are increasingly moving away from traditional media (Patel 2017) and express a growing acceptance of video content, which has earned them the title of the "experiential YouTube generation" (Bezbaruah & Trivedi 2020). According to Abramovich (2018), consumers are expressing a preference on audiovisuals that are not delivered by cable, satellite or over-the-air. This trend is highlighted among Gen Z – young consumers watch internet videos 2,5 times more than they watch TV, with 67 % stating that YouTube is a 'must-have' (Spangler 2016). Additionally, statistics show that 71 % of Gen Z'ers have a Netflix subscription, which makes them the largest generational user group on the platform (Georgiev 2022). Gen Z is also known to highly value dialogue (e.g. Francis & Hoefel 2018) and TV is mainly a channel of one-way communication (Patel 2017).

Online environments present media companies with great opportunities. Unlike traditional media (e.g. magazines, television), digital channels offer significantly greater flexibility in terms of content length, availability, format, and customization at relatively low cost (Malthouse, Haenlein, Skiera, Wege & Zhang 2013). Young consumers are constantly publicly sharing their viewpoints online, which enables brands to engage with them easily

through e.g. hashtags and keywords (Patel 2017) – especially since 34 % state that they want brands to reach out to them and establish engagement on social media platforms (Arthur 2016).

According to report of 1 000 18-21-year-olds, nearly half of Gen Z adults get the majority of their news from social media (such as YouTube and TikTok), while only 12 % get most of their news from TV in comparison of 42 % of other adults (Fromm 2021). Gen Z'ers express a preference towards learning online (Francis & Hoefel 2018). Young consumers are increasingly turning to social media for news (Nee 2019), which might present the downside of traditional media turning digital. According to Nee (2019), the problem is that young consumers prefer to use visual platforms and private messaging apps, while information verification activities are more commonly practiced in Facebook and Twitter among older generations. Young people are particularly vulnerable to believing false information online, as they might not be as motivated to take information verification steps or are completely unaware of the need to do so (Nee 2019). Young consumers' preference on consuming news on visual online platforms and private messaging apps differentiates them from older generations, and they seem to be changing the way news are distributed on online platforms (Anderson & Jiang 2018; Dennis, Martin & Wood 2017). Nee (2019) refers to this change in news consumption by the term *youthquake,* which refers to "a significant cultural, political or social change" caused by the influence or actions of young people (Oxford Dictionaries 2022).

On a more societal scale, digitalization has caused significant changes for mainstream medias due to switching over to the post-truth era. *Post-truth* is a term used to describe how emotions and personal beliefs can "become more influential in shaping public opinion than objective facts" (Nee 2019). The term was originally used by S. Tesich in 1992 and became a central topic around 2016, when a series of underlying socio-political events caused a shift to the new post-truth era (Vihma, Hartikainen, Ikäheimo & Seuri 2018, 9-12). Traditional mainstream medias have lost their position of power as gatekeepers of information, who had the ability to select which opinions get voiced. However, they have now become information hubs that have the ability to affect the tone and content of these discussions, as well as offering structure to how discussions are interpreted. As such, medias are experiencing a switch from authoritarian power to interactional power, which

obliges mainstream medias to renew and reinvent themselves. (Vihma et al. 2018, 203-224) While the effects of the post-truth era are a central topic for media companies operating in the present day, further discussion on the subject lies outside the scope of this thesis.

2.4.2 Staying relevant

Young generations' preference on social media over traditional media expresses a significant generational change (Deloitte 2021). However, there are several practical implications that might aid media companies to reach online audiences and younger consumers. For instance, over 75 % of worldwide video viewing is via smartphones, which increases the importance of vertical video content suitable for mobile devices (Abramovich 2018). Visuality is critically important for Gen Z (Van Den Bergh & Behrer 2016, 214-215), and Baron (2019) states that video content is the key to evoking Gen Z'ers' interest. According to Chamberlain (2017), video – rather than text or voice – is Gen Z's preferred format for communication, sharing and learning.

Gen Z'ers account for the largest generational user group on Youtube, TikTok and Twitter (Deloitte 2021). Youtube, Snapchat, Instagram and Facebook represent Gen Z's key online platforms, while Snapchat is stated to be the most popular for staying connected and Youtube the most popular for consuming long-form content, meaning videos over 10 minutes (Chamberlain 2017). There are found to be more female Gen Z users on Instagram and Snapchat, and more male Gen Z'ers on Facebook (Google 2016). It has been found that younger Gen Z'ers prefer newer social media platforms, including Instagram and Snapchat, while older Gen Z'ers still use Facebook (Criteo 2017). Facebook's dominant role among social media platforms is declining among young users, while it still continues to be a key platform in their social media mix (Vitelar 2019). According to Ruotsalainen (2017), Snapchat is particularly effective for marketing towards young consumers. This is likely to be linked with Snapchat's content type that disappears after 24 hours; according to Abramovich (2018), *ephemeral videos* appeal to young consumers and add to the novelty factor of the content. Ephemeral videos refer to content that is only accessible for a limited time, and marketers are increasingly using this method through e.g. Instagram stories

(Mishra 2019). Interactive videos are also found to increase consumer engagement (Abrahamovich 2018)

Bradley (2018) notes that it is important to know Gen Z's pop culture and to create content that includes Gen Z with young representation. To reach Gen Z, marketers are commonly adapting their practices by ensuring active presence on social media, particularly by responding to consumer comments and chat messages; by acknowledging Gen Z'ers preference of personalized content; and by communicating in "Gen Z's language" with e.g. emojis, memes and visuals (Arya 2019). While marketers have become highly interested in understanding Gen Z's online preferences and brand engagement behaviors, academic research is still lacking theoretical and empirical data on this phenomenon.

2.5 Synthesis

In this sub-chapter, older academic studies are discussed in direct comparison with recent literature findings to tie traditional theories with consumer behavior in the present day. Additionally, a few topics priorly addressed in the literature review are reconsidered in the Gen Z context. The main scope of the synthesis is to find similarities between existent literature and Gen Z characteristics to determine which concepts hold particular value to present-day brands.

This chapter is arranged to align with the research questions. The first four sub-chapters of *Brand awareness*, *Green consumption and status motives*, *Frugality and cost*, and *Attention span* address literature findings that focus on Gen Z'ers' internal factors and/or brand relationships. Secondly, *External influences and self-expression* and *The effect of influencers and CE* address the research topic of external influences. Finally, *Reaching Gen Z'ers online* and *Online communities and personal identity* are linked to the media context.

2.5.1 Brand awareness

Literature suggests that adolescent consumers are increasingly brand conscious (Nelson & McLeod 2005) and express defined preferences between different brands (Lachance, Beaudoin & Robitaille 2003). This notion of young consumers' high brand consciousness is directly applicable to Gen Z consumers. Regardless of their young age, social media and communication technologies allow Gen Z'ers to be highly informed about different companies and their offerings, while also possessing strong personal feelings towards them (Dabija et al. 2020). Gen Z'ers are highly aware of brands and expect marketing to be meaningful and informative (Van den Bergh & Behrer 2016, 11). Schivinski and Dabrowski (2015) found that awareness can be increased with social media brand communications, both user-generated and organizational.

2.5.2 Green consumption and status motives

Gen Z's consumption is found to be strongly connected to their ethical concerns (Francis & Hoefel 2018), as unlimited access to online information and exposure to social media has allowed Gen Z'ers to develop a strong awareness of environmental issues (Djafarova & Foots 2022). Young consumers are expected to turn this environmental awareness to green consumption decisions as their spending power increases (Choudhary 2020). However, there are some variabilities considering Gen Z's green consumption. For instance, Kirmani and Khan (2016) suggest that for Gen Z, the *feeling* of the purchase being environmentally friendly is more important than the actual impact it has on the environment. A "feel-good feeling" is also a significant driver for Gen Z to make ethical consumption decisions (Bianchi et al. 2020). Thus, it seems clear that environmental friendliness and green values are central for Gen Z, but this becomes less apparent when actual consumption behavior is considered.

In social psychology literature, a study by Griskevicius, Tybur and Van den Bergh (2010) found that consumers are far more likely to choose a more low-performing green product than a luxurious non-green alternative when *status motives* are activated. They found that status motives increase consumers' desire to opt for green products only when shopping in

public (in a physical store) where green choices could be noticed by others to affect one's reputation – but not when shopping in private (online and alone). According to Griskevicius et al. (2010), the reason behind this change in behavior is that "voluntary acts of self-sacrifice and the ability to incur costs are associated with status". Research shows that self-sacrifice for the benefit of others elevates the status of the self-sacrificer in that group (Hardy & Van Vugt 2006) – and altruism (e.g. choosing a green product that may be inferior in personal use) has the ability to signal that the person has sufficient time, money and energy "to give away such resources without a negative impact on fitness" (Zahavi & Zahavi 1997). Griskevicius et al. (2010) also observed that the desirability of green products was increased by status motives especially if the green alternative cost more than its non-green counterpart, as inexpensive green products would only undermine the ability to signal one's wealth. In summary, many consumers might opt for green alternatives for *social* reasons rather than environmental (Griskevicius et al. 2010).

Though this phenomenon has not been researched in the Gen Z context, it could be speculated that some behavioral similarities between status motives and Gen Z'ers' consumption habits may exist. Gen Z is known to be the most interested in sustainable lifestyles in comparison to all present generations (Dabija and Bejan 2017), which implies that promoting green values is a present norm for Gen Z'ers. Thus, status motives could be among the important drivers for Gen Z'ers green consumption decisions – though academic findings on the subject are still scarce.

2.5.3 Frugality and cost

Financial resources are found to be an important driver for switching brands (Bijapurkar 2008). Naturally, young consumers generally have lower budgets (Özgen & Boyoglu 2005), which causes them to be more likely to switch to more low-cost brands in consequence to price change (Sahay & Sharma 2010). Despite of being highly conscious of brands, young consumers' frugality causes them to be highly price conscious due to the economic limitations of their current stage of life (Sahay & Sharma 2010). Martin and Bush (2000) found that there is a larger importance for adolescent consumers on finding

cheaper products than there is on staying loyal to high-priced brands or stores that might be recommended by role models.

These findings are highly relevant among Gen Z'ers, who at their core characteristics are described to be highly savings minded (Schlossberg 2016). Gen Z'ers strong frugality stems from their exposure to several global recessions caused by financial crashes (Fromm & Read 2018). The recent COVID-19 pandemic is anticipated by some to increase Gen Z's savings mindedness even further (Shin et al. 2022).

2.5.4 Attention span

Across generations, adolescent consumers are known to have a short attention span (Dulcan 1997) and express fickle-mindedness in their behavior (Nightingale & Wolverton 1993). As Gen Z'ers have a short attention span of just eight seconds (Arya 2019), brands should utilize short and informative messages that disappear after a certain amount of time to best catch their attention. It is important to evoke interest right in the beginning of e.g. a video, as gaining Gen Z'ers attention in the eight second span might form into a lengthier form of interest (Van Den Bergh & Behrer 2016, 214-215). Furthermore, it is clear that Gen Z's attention needs to be caught online rather than offline (Van Den Bergh & Behrer 2016, 214).

According to Williams and Page (2011), seeking instant gratification is a central characteristic of hasty Gen Z'ers. Thus, brands should continuously create relevant and up-to-date content for Gen Z'ers, as they have the ability to absorb new information immediately and are likely to lose interest quickly if not enough engagement is stimulated (Williams 2015).

2.5.5 External influences and self-expression

Social networks consist of one's family and peers (Sahay & Sharma 2010), and networks are found to be an important driver for brands switching (Martin & Bush 2000). Many

studies suggest that the influence of family is still dominating young consumers' consumption preferences, and especially rational consumption habits are adopted from parents (Martin & Bush 2000). However, adolescents and young adults express a desire to move further from parental influence (Sahay & Sharma 2010). Family influence decreases among time spent outside of home, and simultaneously that influence gets transferred to the teen's peers (Feltham 1998). Parents' influence progressively decreases over teenage years, while teens begin to associate themselves with peers and particular social groups rather than their families (Auty & Elliot 2001).

Teenagers experience feelings of insecurity upon transitioning from childhood to adolescence and further to adulthood, which causes them to look up to their friends and adopt their behaviors (Sahay & Sharma 2010). There is a theory (Ji 2008; Montgomery 2005) stating that due to massive physical, social and psychological transitions experienced in adolescence, moving out of parents' influence may create a need for 'emotional anchors'. Brands might offer a solution for this requirement, which makes young consumers more open to new brand relationships – consequently, younger age groups are more likely to be emotionally involved and have a stronger relationship with brands, while older age groups are likely to be more rational and base their brand relationships on functional or utilitarian factors (Ji 2008; Montgomery 2005). This has not been researched in the Gen Z context, and there are somewhat contradicting findings regarding the possible outcomes. On one hand, Gen Z'ers are reported to seek acceptance from others (Finch 2015), but at the same time they are characterized as individuality-seeking rather than desiring to fit in with surrounding norms (Francis & Hoefel 2018). Gen Z'ers seek uniqueness with their self-expression, but still are the most likely among extant generational groups to purchase well-known mainstream brands and wear visibly branded clothing (OC&C 2019).

2.5.6 The effect of influencers and CE

Traditional CE is still viewed as a relevant strategy, but for those consumers who prefer engaging with brands on social media, influencers might be more effective (Jin et al. 2019). This is an important notion regarding targeting Gen Z'ers on online platforms. According to Chamberlain (2017), influencers possess a significantly influential effect for

Gen Z'ers who are more likely to respond to e.g. a content creator's video discussing a certain product or brand, rather than to an undisguised video advertisement. Additionally, 57 % of Gen Z'ers have made a purchase because of an influencer or celebrity (Bradley 2018). Still, Gen Z is found to be less influenced by CE than Millennials (Trivedi 2018). In a study regarding brand content videos, Bezbaruah and Trivedi (2020) found that Gen Z'ers value other factors over the presence of a celebrity, such as credibility and quality of the content. Regarding the selection between celebrities and influencers, it should be acknowledged that Gen Z has a tendency to recognize online influencers more than celebrities, due to spending their time among content creators, Youtubers and vloggers rather than watching TV (Patel 2017). Furthermore, 63 % of Gen Z'ers state to prefer real people over celebrities in advertisements - regardless of the fact that many of said 'real people' are influencers who possess a large following online (Arthur 2016).

Influencers are a central part of Gen Z's social media usage (Djafarova & Rushworth 2017) and might have a particularly important role regarding their ethical consumption. Among Gen Z, social media influencers are viewed as a useful tool for ethical purchasing decision-making (Djafarova & Foots 2022). This might be consequent to the fact that influencers are involved in "buying conversations" – referring to e.g. product recommendations – up to 22,2 times more than average consumers (Berger & Keller 2016). Influencers seem to enjoy a certain level of trust among Gen Z, as their opinions and recommendations are used as guidance for Gen Z'ers consumption decision-making.

2.5.7 Reaching Gen Z'ers online

Adolescent consumers are found to spend significant amounts of time online for the purpose of being entertained rather than seeking for information (Gross 2004; Hopper 2005). According to Yaakop, Anuar and Omar (2013), the future of social media marketing communications can be considered to be creating entertaining content to increase word of mouth among consumers. To reach Gen Z, brand should create 'bite-sized content' and avoid information overload, develop campaigns that are unique and inspirational, and focus on improving the audiences' self-esteem (Bradley 2018). According to Chamberlain (2017), content should be extremely relevant and fresh, and communication on social

media should be two-way by responding to Gen Z's consumer feedback. Duffett (2016) found that social media marketing communication is a particularly suitable tool for reaching Gen Z, as young consumers express positive attitudes towards it.

McCridle (2016c) defines Gen Z as a visual generation. This can be realized in the popularity of YouTube among Gen Z'ers - they prefer watching an informative video about a topic they need information on rather than reading an article (McCridle 2016c). Gen Z'ers prefer to communicate through images rather than text (Prakash-Yadav & Rai 2017) and according to Chamberlain (2017), video is Gen Z's preferred format for communication and finding information. Many brands have responded to Gen Z's visual preferences by using visual effects such as pictures and colors instead of only relying on text (McCridle 2016c).

It is crucial for companies to be accessible online at all times, as technology is seamlessly integrated to Gen Z'ers' lives (Arya 2019). Consequently, well-known brands are increasingly starting to utilize 'phygital' methods – such as ordering food with voice command apps or reserving clothing online before visiting the physical store – to form a single, cohesive experience that allows hasty Gen Z'ers to save as much time as possible (Van Den Bergh & Behrer 2016, 215-216).

The concept of parasocial interaction (PSI) (e.g. Labrecque 2014; Rubin, Perse & Powell 1985) is also likely to be highly relevant among communicating with Gen Z, as engaging with preferred brands in online environments is an important part of Gen Z'ers' lives (Williams 2015). PSI can be generated in social media environments with communication messages that indicate the brand is listening and responding (Labrecque 2014). As individual one-to-one responses to consumer messages might be unrealistic to implement, brands may turn to recent technologies that create personalized automated responses to consumer messages (Zebida 2012) since even automated responses can generate PSI and feelings of connection with the brand (Labrecque 2014).

Duffett (2016) found that teenagers have become highly resistant to traditional marketing. This is applicable to the general shift of companies increasingly focusing on pull marketing, rather than the traditional push marketing (Aguilera-Moyano et al. 2015). The

main driver for this switch is the current era of information overload, which lowers the effectiveness of push marketing messages (Aguilera-Moyano et al. 2015). This references the increase of pull marketing methods, where companies are increasingly creating interesting content that their audiences choose to consume at their own will to be e.g. entertained or informed.

2.5.8 Online communities and personal identity

Though social media is fairly new, social networking as well as recommending, commenting and alerting others about commercial content have always been a part of human nature (Uitz 2012). The internet is used by consumers to connect with others and to both produce and share content (Aguilera-Moyano et al. 2015). Viljakainen (2011, 47-48) states that Gen Z'ers think information is only valuable when it is shared with others and thus, networks are valued and sought after. Furthermore, Gen Z'ers – to whom Francis and Hoefel (2018) refer to as "communaholics" – are found to use social media mainly for connecting and consuming – not for sharing (Google 2016).

Individuals' need to belong to a community is connected with the need for self-presentation (Kurzban, Burton-Chellew & West 2015; Lang & Bradley 2010). It is a natural tendency for people to share such information that "presents them in a positive light" among others (Lee & Ma 2012). Consumption is often used as a tool to express one's belonging to social groups (Auty & Elliot 2001), and involvement in a relationship with a certain brand can result in the brand becoming a part of the individual's social recognition as "the x-brand person" (Sahay & Sharma 2010). Though literature is still lacking findings on Gen Z's consumption habits and drivers, some authors suggest that this theory is applicable to Gen Z'ers: they use consumption as an expression of their individual identity, to a level where premium prices are accepted for brands that allow them to accentuate individuality (Francis & Hoefel 2018).

Seeking status is typically directly connected with the need of promoting one's professional image to enhance their career (Baek, Holton, Harp & Yaschur 2011; Holton, Baek, Coddington & Yaschur 2014). These theoretical impressions are connected to

findings on Gen Z behavior regarding personal identities (sub-chapter 2.1.3). Gen Z'ers use social media as a tool for personal branding (Finch 2015) and find it important to give out the best impression possible in online environments (Williams 2015). The drivers behind this behavior are also linked with Gen Z's professional goals and aspirations towards career opportunities (Jacobsen & Barnes 2020), which complements the findings of Baek et al. (2011) and Holton et al. (2014) on consumers' personal needs.

3. METHODOLOGY

This chapter introduces the selected research methods, which consist of semi-structured interviews and group interviews. The specific interview form used in this study is the friendship pair interview – however, this method is a form of pair interviews, which subsequently are a form of group interviews. Justifications for choosing the research methods are presented at the end of both sub-chapters.

The Methodology chapter focuses on introducing the theoretical background and structure of the chosen research methods. For further information on the contents of the actualized interviews, including the interview process and interviewee profiles, see the following chapter 4.

3.1 Semi-structured interviews

The semi-structured interview is a qualitative research method that consists of a somewhat set agenda, while the interviewer is still free to follow the attendees' train of thought and to make additional clarifying questions about the topics that arise from the discussion (Bell 2009). The interviewer can rephrase the questions and change the form in which they are asked across interviews (Bolderston 2012). Regarding formality, semi-structured interviews are set between fully structured form-based interviews and unstructured theme interviews. However, semi-structured interviews are sometimes referred to as theme interviews, particularly when the interview includes specific questions on set themes but the same exact questions might not be presented to all interviewees. (Saaranen-Kauppinen & Puusniekka 2006a)

Semi-structured interviews can be described as a combination of pre-set questions (which are similar to those in structured interviews) and a free-form examination (which is similar to that in unstructured interviews). The aim is to systematically collect information on the set main themes while still allowing spontaneous questions and discussion on new tangential topics that emerge. Semi-structured interviews are a suitable method for studying matters of which some knowledge exists, but that still require closer investigation.

The method is effective for examining attitudes, opinions and behaviors. Benefits include flexibility for the interviewer, sufficient structure to make comparisons between interviews, and a mechanism to redirect discussions that may stray too far from the central themes. (Wilson 2014, 24-26)

The main justification for selecting the research method is based on the form of the semi-structured interview. Considering the scope of the study, it is relevant to collect data that mainly focuses on those topics that are included in preceding observations made from literature – while still allowing interviewees to expand on their answers about opinions and behaviors. Given that the research questions address issues that are relatively practical and based on real-life behaviors, it suits the purposes of the interviews to allow attendees to freely discuss their perceptions and experiences on the given topics. Still, the structure that is presented by the method allows comparisons across different interviews.

3.2 Group interviews

The interviews in this study are conducted as pair interviews, which are a form of group interviews. In group interviews, research topics are discussed with all attendees simultaneously, while also asking further questions from individual attendees. (Hirsjärvi & Hurme 2001, 61-63) Group interviews can be conducted with the help of pre-written discussion themes. The interviewer ensures that all themes are addressed and encourages all attendees to participate in a multi-faceted conversation. The aim is to establish free-form discussion on the given topics. (Eskola & Suoranta 2000, 96-97)

Group interviews are a suitable research method when collective opinions, experiences and memories are relevant for the scope of the study. This interview method can also make observations about the norms and values that are present within the group, or about how attendees conduct a shared view on the discussed topics. In addition to verbal responses, group interview analysis can also acknowledge the non-verbal cues expressed in the interview, such as tone of voice or facial expressions. Benefits of the group interview method include creating a more relaxed setting for the discussion, as well as offering social support to attendees while discussing the research topics with an unknown interviewer.

Members of the interview group may help each other remember things that they might not have mentioned if interviewed alone. Group interviews also allow faster data collection, as multiple attendees are interviewed simultaneously. (Saaranen-Kauppinen & Puusniekka 2006b)

To specify, the pair interviews conducted in this study are held in friendship pairs. This refers to simultaneously interviewing two attendees who know each other well beforehand. Friendship pair interviews can present insights on similar consumption characteristics and world views that the attendees share. (Bulmer & Buschanan-Oliver 2010) Friendship pairs are also an effective method for creating a more natural setting for attendees to discuss the given topics (Banister & Hogg 2004).

The main justification for selecting the research method is based on the benefits that group interviews – and, furthermore, friendship pair interviews – offer. The method is effective for examining collective opinions, experiences and memories, which are all relevant for the generational scope of the study. Additionally, the social factor that allows attendees to feel more relaxed, expand on their answers, and justify their opinions during the interview is also appreciated – especially considering that data is collected from young consumers rather than e.g. specialists of a certain field. The free-form discussion format of group interviews is well suited for examining the shared values, opinions, norms and habits of Gen Z attendees.

4. INTERVIEWS

This chapter continues the interview background introduction of the subsequent chapter by presenting the interview process and contents, as well as the selection criteria and background information of the interviewees.

4.1 Process

The interview process is presented in Figure 2. below:

Planning the interviews
Determining interview questions and interviewee selection criteria

Contacting the commissioner company
Confirming the contents of the interviews

Selecting interviewees
Determining relevant participants, considering versatility

Contacting interviewees
Presenting study background, agreeing on interview time and place

Interviewing
Four pair interviews, all recorded in two formats (video and audio)

Transcription
Writing out interview recordings, ensuring anonymity

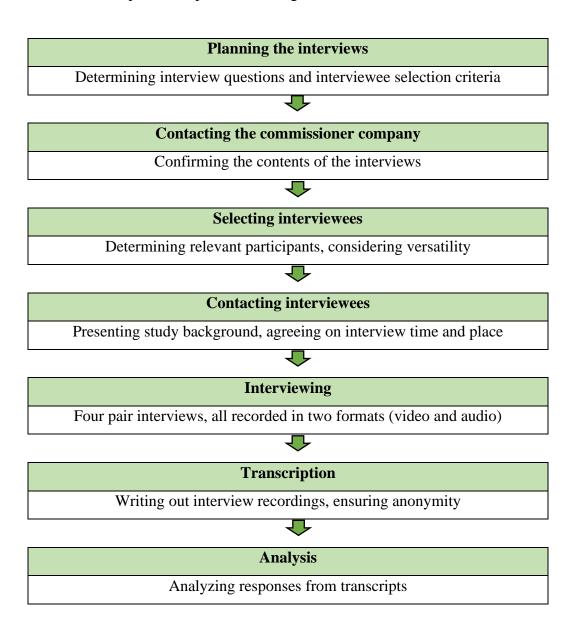| **Analysis** |
| --- |
| Analyzing responses from transcripts |

Figure 2. The interview process

The interview process began by determining the most relevant research methods based on the research goals, as presented in the Methodology chapter.

Secondly, the interviewee selection criteria were outlined. Age was the primary criteria for selecting relevant interviewees, and the age cohort of 18-27-year-olds was the most relevant among Gen Z for the commissioner company. Thus, the age range of 10 years was divided into four age groups 2,5 years apart, as follows:

Age group 1: 18 - 20,5 years old
Age group 2: 20,5 - 23 years old
Age group 3: 23 - 25,5 years old
Age group 4: 25,5 - 27 years old

The aim of dividing interviewee ages into different groups was to ensure that results would include findings evenly from the entire age range. Interviews included one friend pair from each age group, resulting in four interviews and eight interviewees. Ages of the participating interviewees, as well as other selection criteria, is presented in the following sub-chapter 4.2 Interviewee profiles.

After determining selection criteria, the interview structure and questions were planned. The interview structure was based on the structure of the literature review, with the aim of simplifying the later comparison between literature and interview data findings. The contents of the literature review were roughly divided into main areas that could effectively be further examined through interviews. These areas were Gen Z's values, Gen Z's personal identity, Gen Z's external influences (including CE and influencers), and media usage habits (including both digital and traditional media). Accordingly, the structure of the interviews was divided into four main themes: *Identity*, *External influences*, *Values* and *Media*. Even though values and personal identity are combined in the same research question that examines Gen Z consumers' internal factors, findings of the literature review suggest that both personal identity and value systems are significant drivers for Gen Z's consumption behavior. As such, Values and Identity are divided into

two separate interview themes. Questions regarding brand relationships, which are central for the entirety of the thesis, were intertwined into the other four themes. Furthermore, questions about Yle's brand were included in the Media theme.

After determining the main themes, questions were settled. Each theme included 3-5 main questions, which were based on those matters and specified topics that would result in answers that would be the most relevant for the scope of the study and for the commissioner company. A few questions, (e.g. *What is your favorite platform for consuming video content?*) were directly requested by the commissioner company since answers from Gen Z respondents would be highly useful for the company's purposes. For the interview questions, see the Appendices.

As the selected research method was semi-structured interviews (see sub-chapter 3.1), the interview questions were open-ended and conversational. Some follow-up questions were added and some secondary questions were removed between interviews, as allowed by the semi-structured format. After deciding on the interviewee selection criteria and finalizing interview questions, the final form of the interviews was confirmed by the commissioner company before beginning to contact possible interviewees.

Next, interviewees were contacted with a message presenting basic information about the thesis and an explanation of the friend pair interview format. To increase versatility, interviewees were selected from different backgrounds, such as technology, business and international politics. As all participants were either students or recently graduated, these backgrounds refer to participants' field of study (see Table 3. in the following sub-chapter for further details). After accepting the invitation, the time and place of the interviews were agreed on. All four pair interviews were conducted according to plan and answers were recorded for transcription purposes. All other interviews were fully held face-to-face, with the exception of P6 who attended his pair interview through a video call. Finally, the transcripts were written out using the interview recordings.

To ensure that the conducted study and its findings are credible and of high quality, the interview process was contrasted with Tracy's (2010) model of eight criteria than determine excellent qualitative research. According to Tracy (2010), these criteria are the

following, in italics: *worthy topic* and *significant contribution*, which were justified with brands' current relevance of researching Gen Z as well as existent research gaps, both of which were widely presented in academic literature. *Rich rigor*, which refers to the usage of sufficient and appropriate theories, data and samples, among other features – and *resonance*, which refers to influencing and affecting particular audiences through aesthetic representation and transferable findings, were ensured by following the commonly agreed on academic requirements for conducting a high-quality Master's thesis, which offers relevance and value to its readers. *Sincerity*, *credibility* and *ethicality* were included by introducing all parts of this study step by step in a transparent manner. Additionally, all potential biases caused by the company commission are clearly defined whenever applicable, and e.g. interviewees' opinions are truly their own. No measures were taken to guide their answers to a certain direction, which can be seen in the interview transcripts. Lastly, *meaningful coherence,* which refers to reaching the research goals and producing relevant findings, is justified in great detail in the Analysis and Discussion chapters. (Tracy 2010)

4.2 Interviewee profiles

All interviews were held in pairs, consisting of two friends. Those participants who were first contacted and invited to the interviews (P1, P3, P5 and P7) were informed about the pair interview format and asked to bring a friend who would be a maximum of one year younger or older than themselves. With this introduction, all participants voluntarily selected a friend who was the same gender and born in the same year as themselves. All of the participating friend pairs knew each other from school or from university, and the lengths of the participants' friendships were five years for P1 and P2; 12 years for P3 and P4; four years for P5 and P6; and five years for P7 and P8. 50 % of participants are female and 50 % are male.

Regarding the selection criteria of interviewees, age was the primary factor. The final age range of participants was between 18 (born in 2004) and 26 (born in 1996); with P1 and P2 representing the youngest participants, and P7 and P8 representing the oldest. Throughout the analysis, the participants are referred to by their participance number (P1-P8) or by

their age group. In 2022 where the interviews take place, P1 and P2 are 18-year-olds; P3 and P4 are 21; P5 and P6 are 24; and P7 and P8 are 26. Participants were not asked to specify their birth month – participants' ages are based on their birth year alone.

The second most relevant factor was the participants' field of work or studies, with the goal of ensuring that interview findings would not be limited only to those operating in a certain field. Upon being invited to the interview, the contacted participants were asked to bring a friend from a different field than themselves, if possible. Geographical location was not considered to be important for the scope of this study, and all other participants live within the Helsinki Metropolitan Area except P5 and P6, who live in the Pirkanmaa Region. Further details about participants' backgrounds are found in Table 3. below:

Table 3. Interviewee profiles

	Year of birth	Gender	Occupation	Field of studies	Education level	Area of residence
P1	2004	Female	High school student	-	Comprehensive school (*peruskoulu*)	Helsinki Metropolitan Area, the past school year studying abroad
P2	2004	Female	High school student	-	Comprehensive school	Helsinki Metropolitan Area
P3	2001	Male	University student, Bachelor's degree	International politics	High school graduate (*ylioppilas)*	Helsinki Metropolitan Area, the past school year studying abroad

P4	2001	Male	University student, Bachelor's degree	Information technology	High school graduate	Helsinki Metropolitan Area
P5	1998	Male	University student, Bachelor's degree	Automation technology	High school graduate	Pirkanmaa Region
P6	1998	Male	University student, Bachelor's degree	Automation technology	High school graduate	Pirkanmaa Region
P7	1996	Female	Working in ICT	Business	Bachelor's Degree, BBA	Helsinki Metropolitan Area
P8	1996	Female	Working in ICT	Business	Master's Degree, MBA	Helsinki Metropolitan Area

4.3 Contents

The interviews were held in Finnish. It is important to acknowledge that all parts of interviews that are addressed in this thesis, including participants' responses, are translated into English from Finnish. Participants' answers are kept as close to the original form and context as possible, but it should be noted that translated quotations of participants cannot be considered as direct. The official Finnish interview structure, in the same form that it was presented to interviewees, is found in the appendices with the English translations (see Appendices 1. and 2.) The original Finnish transcriptions of interviews are not included in the thesis but can be obtained upon request.

Before answering interview questions, interviewees were presented with a short text that defined the concept of a brand to ensure a sufficient level of background information for all interviewees. This definition is translated below:

> *A corporate brand refers to the sum of all things you have heard, seen or experienced regarding a certain company. In practice, branding refers to creating mental images. A brand is a combination of e.g. the company's reputation, story, culture and visual content, as well as the customer's perceptions, beliefs and attitudes towards the company. In the present day, it can be said that all companies must brand themselves in order to differentiate from competitors, and in theory, any company or product can be a brand. Thus, a corporate brand may refer to both globally known companies and to small local companies. In addition to corporate brands, a brand may be e.g. a product brand, where the brand is created for a singular product instead of a company (such as many globally known food and drink brands), or a personal brand, where an image consisting of certain perceptions is created for e.g. a celebrity, for instance by utilizing social media.*
>
> (Kenton 2022; Venäläinen 2019; Kornberger 2010)

The interviewees were informed that their responses will be recorded in two formats, video and audio, and that the recordings will be deleted once they are no longer needed for transcript purposes. The participants were also informed that their field of study, occupation, area of residence, education level and age would be included in the thesis; while the name of their school or employer and their city of residence would be left anonymous. After the interviews, some answers were slightly modified to ensure anonymity, by e.g. removing the names of interviewee's partners or employers that were mentioned during the interview. These modifications do not affect interview results and are only notifiable as blanked out words in the written transcripts.

Lengths of interviews ranged between 50 minutes and 1 hour 26 minutes as follows:

> P1 and P2: 1 hour 5 minutes (25-page transcript)
>
> P3 and P4: 1 hour 26 minutes (30-page transcript)
>
> P5 and P6: 1 hour 18 minutes (28-page transcript)
>
> P7 and P8: 50 minutes (25-page transcript)

5. ANALYSIS

In this chapter, the interview findings of the four themes as well as brand relationships will be analyzed and compared between interviews. For interview questions, see Appendix 1. (in original Finnish) and 2. (translated into English). In Appendices 1. and 2. the main questions that were asked from all participants are presented in black font. The gray font determines additional questions, that were only added if convenient: some gray questions were skipped if e.g. the interview was appearing to become too lengthy, as allowed by the semi-structured interview format. However, most of the supporting questions were also included in interviews.

To best serve the purposes of this study, interview data was analyzed through *thematic analysis*. Thematic analysis is a flexible method for analyzing qualitative data, and it is most suitable for research where the goal is to understand experiences, thoughts and behaviors (Kiger & Varpio 2020), as well as attitudes, knowledge, opinions and values (Caulfield 2022). Thematic analysis aims at sorting out and portraying data, and finding direct and indirect meanings within it. The method allows examining the phenomenon on a broader scope and should always include the context of the researcher's own interpretation. (Vaismoradi, Turunen & Bondas 2013) These characteristics of the method are well suited for the purposes of this study, as the main scope of the interviews is to gain insights on participants' mindsets and preferences on the research themes, such as brands and media. These include elements of participants' experiences, behavior, opinions and values – all of which are common contexts for selecting the method of thematic analysis. Data is also connected to the larger phenomenon of Gen Z consumer behavior, which makes it appropriate to select a method that both addresses the topic on a broad scope and discovers direct and indirect meanings from participants' answers.

Braun and Clarke (2006) define thematic analysis as a method that can be used to identify, analyze and find patterns or themes within the data. The method helps organize and describe the data set in great detail, while is can also "interpret various aspects of the research topic". Thematic analysis is commonly used for analyzing data sets in text format, such as interview transcripts. (Braun & Clarke 2006) This definition aligns with the data that is analyzed in this study, as analysis is conducted on the written transcripts.

Furthermore, the overall goal of the analysis is to identify patterns from interviews that provide insights on the research themes.

The Analysis chapter aims at finding empirical data related to the research questions, as well as pinpointing possible similarities and differences between different interviewee age groups. The structure of the analysis follows the structure of the interviews. First, the Identity theme introduces the interviewees to the research topic by examining the internal factors from their own viewpoint. Second, the External influences theme continues this examination to the external scope. Third, the Values theme resumes the internal factors and begins to form conclusions particularly on interviewees' brand relationships. Fourth, the Media theme provides insights on the context of media consumption habits, before finally combining all aspects of the interview themes in the Brand relationships theme, which directly addresses the main research question of the study. Findings of the analysis are later contrasted to the literature findings and research questions in the chapter 6. Discussion and conclusions.

5.1 Identity

One of the research aims was to determine Gen Z'ers' central internal factors that affect brand relationships. This includes their personal identities. 'Identity' was selected as one of the four interview themes, as literature suggests that Gen Z'ers commonly find it particularly important to express their identity and stand out from the crowd (see e.g. Tolstikova et al. 2020; OC&C 2019; Francis & Hoefel 2018). While the concept of "expressing one's identity" differs from "standing out from the crowd" – given that is it possible to be very self-expressive while not wanting to stand out particularly – these concepts were intertwined in interviews and combined into a singular question. Literature suggests that both concepts are of high importance for Gen Z, and participants were not asked to separate their insights between the two aspects. While participants were given the opportunity to address the two different concepts separately, their answers regarding self-expression and standing out were commonly linked with one another and did not present any notable contradictions. Accordingly, interview findings on self-expression are combined with the findings on standing out.

Overall, responses were somewhat mixed. Some participants recognize their desire to differentiate themselves from others and state that self-expression is important (P2 and P7); some feel that these values are somewhat important but that they may not actively act to enhance them (P3, P5 and P6); and some prefer to keep more in the background and/or do not purposefully wish to attract additional attention (P1, P4 and P8). However, it should be noted that these assumptions are based on brief pieces of conversation and replies were not investigated or questioned further during the interviews. Additionally, the replies are based on interviewees' personal perception regarding what is considered "standing out from the crowd", and it is possible that a Gen Z'er who states that self-expression is not considered important might refer to an entirely different mindset than e.g. a Gen X'er making the same statement.

> *"I don't think that it's a negative thing to follow the crowd. [--] It is usually brought up in such a way that it would be a bad thing, but I see nothing wrong with it."*
> – P2

The most significant element that defines whether someone wishes to stand out from the crowd or to blend in with others could be assumed to be simply based on differences in personality. For instance, P7 immediately recognizes that it is more natural for her to stand out more and that she sometimes e.g. buys clothing with the aim of being more different. Furthermore, P2 states that at times she likes to express herself "in a different way" and that it is important to express her personality to others. On the contrary, P8 states that it is more natural for her to "follow the crowd" more and to not be in the spotlight. An example of the middle range is P3, who states that he does not find it necessary to stand out in particular, but that he still tends to be different from others through the things he does in life. Furthermore, P5 agrees with P6's reply about self-expression being somewhat important, but still refers to himself as an "extremely stereotypical 24-year-old, Finnish, white, heterosexual man", which in a way resembles P8's answer of being comfortable with following the crowd. As there is significant variation between the eight participants' answers and personal preferences, these interviews suggest that there is no notable interest for "everyone in Gen Z" to stand out and emphasize self-expression – differences in personality are still, naturally, the determinant element.

Additionally, the daily environment has a significant impact on wanting to stand out. For instance, P2 states that is it more likely for art school students, such as herself, to want to be significantly different from others, as opposed to non-art school peers. P1 and P2 also discuss that the crowd they are in affects whether they want to express themselves more or to blend in with others: both agree that it is more likely to want to stand out when they are with their closest friends, and that they are typically more reserved with their self-expression in larger groups and while getting to know new people.

Another significant finding regarding the desire to stand out is the role of past experiences. P1 mentions that when she was younger, she felt that she was different from others due to having a different background and a parent from another culture. This experience caused her to want to "fit in and to be like the others" rather than purposefully wanting to stand out more. Additionally, P4 states that he has no specific need to stand out, partly due to "standing out enough already".

> *"Of course, clothing is the most obvious way [of expressing one's identity].*
> *[--] It really expresses what kind of a person you are."*
> *– P3*

Clothing style was among the most commonly mentioned ways for self-expression: for instance, when talking about wanting to fit in at a younger age, P1 especially expresses this by saying that she wanted to *look* like everyone else. P2 and P7 both mention clothing when asked about self-expression, and P6 mentions that he had recently bought an eccentric piece of clothing as a way to stand out. There were also opposing views to this: P4 states that he personally does not express his identity with his clothing, but rather through e.g. food preferences to send a message to others about his personality. Other mentioned ways in addition to clothing include music – P1 states that her music preferences are a way for self-expression and differentiation. She also mentions that "mainstream artists" are not appreciated in the same way even though their music would be liked, and that this could be a result of wanting to be different. P4 says that even though he feels no need to stand out, it still feels nice to listen to a different kind of music than others: that other people's music preferences almost have a reverse effect on his own preferences.

When asked about how respondents express their identity through consumption decisions, replies that do not consider clothing in particular include: preferring domestic brands (P5 and P7); preferring sustainable, durable and/or eco-friendly products (P4, P5 and P7), rejecting fast fashion (P7) and opting for second-hand products (P2). This list includes those replies that were mentioned particularly for question 1E, though similar responses and attitudes are visible for the majority of interviewees in e.g. the Values theme.

5.2 External influences

Overall, interviews suggest that the most significant external factors to impact participants' consumption and brand preferences are their friends and family. P3 notes that following family consumption norms or friends' recommendations makes decision making much easier, as "you do not have to think about it that much yourself". P8 has a similar view: she says that it is easier to follow the consumption decisions of her friends who have same style and preferences as she does. P5 mentions that word of mouth is "shockingly effective marketing", because it is hard to completely separate a positive experience of a certain product from the positive things that a friend has said about the product beforehand. If the impact of friends and the impact of family are compared, several participants say that the impact of friends is greater than that of the family. Regarding this, P7 notes that friends have a greater impact because the family consists of people of different ages, which naturally affects brand preferences.

> *"I think it really depends on the product. For example, I would never ask my family for recommendations on headphones or a new phone."*
> *– P6*

Even though the participants' close circle that consists of friends and family have the most influential impact on brand preferences, most participants note that family affects very different areas of consumption than friends do, and vice versa. P1 says that family impact affects "food and other basic things" while still living in the family home. P3 says that his family has slightly affected his taste in music and movies. The 24-year-olds have a broader

discussion on this matter: both P5 and P6 agree that there are great differences in the products that are discussed with friends and those that are discussed with family. P6 says that if he were to buy a new bicycle, he would primarily ask for recommendations from his father because of his experience and knowledge on them. P5 mentions an example of the context-specific division between friends and family by saying that with his mother, it is more common to discuss different bedding brands than it would be to discuss microbrewery beers.

There were also several answers that suggest the participants use brands as a way to express belonging to a certain social group. For instance, P3 and P4 discuss consumption "trends" that appear within a certain friend group, and both agree that they are linked with a desire for social cohesion (*yhteenkuuluvuuden tunne*). They also both agree that their consumption decisions are affected by the company they are in. P4 continues by saying that if you want to express belonging to a certain group, you must "eat and drink accordingly" – referring to making eco-friendly dietary decisions. Furthermore, P1 and P2 mention that when they were younger, everyone in their friend group "had to have" a bicycle from the brand Jopo. They also discuss the long-term impact of this experience, as Jopo would still be their brand of choice for buying a new bicycle in the present day. These observations suggest that social factors and friend group norms may have a significant impact on brand preferences. Social influences experienced at a younger age may also be visible in adulthood, even to the level of only preferring a certain brand that one is accustomed to earlier in life.

> *"There is a certain kind of continuity. [--] Especially when I was younger, it affected me a lot more. Like, if my family has always bought a certain kind of juice, I have gotten used to it and continue to buy it later on as well. [--] That sort of things come [from home], and they really stick."*
> *– P3*

Across interviews, dietary consumption is found to be heavily impacted by norms and habits formed earlier in life at a younger age. Several participants mention that many of their childhood family's habits regarding groceries have created a strong norm for their food and drink-related consumption in adulthood, which continues to affect their

consumption decisions even after moving out of their parents' house. P4 says, regarding making consumption decisions at a grocery store, that "which ketchup I will choose, [the preference] comes straight from home". P1 says that "if my mother asks me to go and buy some milk, of course I know which milk I'm going to buy". P1 summarizes the effect by saying that the food consumption habits of her family have significantly affected her own food consumption and food brand preferences, and P2 agrees to share the experience.

Participants were also asked to name celebrities or social media influencers that they follow. Participants' answers include "traditional" celebrities, as well as individuals who create content on e.g. Instagram, YouTube, Tiktok or Twitter. Some of the mentioned persons cannot particularly be specified as celebrities or influencers, but rather as ordinary individuals who create interesting, public content on a certain platform. Those persons who are only mentioned or followed by one participant within the pair are separately addressed with brackets. The following list, including both names and online usernames, presents the answers divided by age group:

> **18-year-olds**: Amalie Star, Emma Ellingsen, Emma Chamberlain, unspecified Tiktok influencers, Olivia Neill (P1), unspecified Finnish rap artists (P2)
>
> **21-year-olds**: Sanna Kurronen (P3), Nota Bene (P4), VisualPolitik (P4)
>
> **24-year-olds**: Eddie Hall, Hafþór Björnsson, Juha Vuorinen (P5), Casey Neistat (P5), Jujimufu (P5), Anthony Vincent (P6), Brandon Sanderson (P6), unspecified artists (P6)
>
> **26-year-olds**: Janni Hussi, Anni Hautala, Jaajo Linnonmaa, Priyanka Chopra (P7), Sabina Särkkä (P7), Nea Lindberg (P7)

Perhaps the most notable observation is that there are many similarities between the answers given by the pairs. On several occasions in every interview, the other participant was familiar with the celebrity or influencer mentioned by the other person, including those who are not commonly known in the mainstream. This notion suggests that close friends, such as the participants in this study, are likely to have similar preferences towards the celebrities and influencers they follow, and to know the same persons even if they enjoy a more niche following. Another similarity between interviews – especially among

male participants – is a strong idea of what kind of persons can be referred to as "influencers". P3 states that he "never really understood" following Instagram influencers, while still following online personas on other platforms. P6 mentions several YouTube creators he follows but says that the content he prefers "is not exactly the type that you would describe as social media influencing".

When asked about what characteristics make the mentioned celebrities and influencers interesting for the participants to follow, answers include having an appealing lifestyle and clothing style (P1 and P2); political figures present on social media (P1); creating inspiring content and having compatible values, e.g. accounts that share ideas on thrifting (P2); "good thinkers" who are good at building their own personal brand and are not afraid to express their own opinions online, even when those opinions are considered unconventional or taboo (P3); interesting, high-quality content that aligns with personal interests (P5); being a fan of other content made by the person, e.g. following an author who has priorly published good books (P5); having an entertaining personality or creating entertaining content (P6); having opinions that hold value and that are listened to due to expertise and credibility, e.g. fitness influencers (P7); and following a celebrity due to having an interest towards their persona rather than the content they post online (P8).

Additionally, P7 mentions that the credibility and trustworthiness of an influencer and their recommendations is based on the type of products that they commonly promote. She says that if e.g. a reality TV star would be known to promote online casinos, all of their other recommendations – even on "good" products – are likely to lose credibility following that. P7 summarizes that influencers should be perceived as promoting products that are good for their followers, rather than appearing as someone who only promotes products to make money.

> *"I might occasionally use a discount code [promoted by an influencer] if I come across one. But even then, it is not necessarily because of the promotion but because of hearing good things about the brand elsewhere."*
> *– P7*

Regarding celebrities' and influencers' effect on participants own brand preferences, participants commonly feel that they have no significant effect or a slight effect at maximum. For instance, P5 states that he has never purchased a product promoted by a celebrity or influencers. P6 agrees, with a singular exception of purchasing a monthly subscription to Audible with the aim of supporting the creator who was promoting the brand. P4 notes that the brands promoted by the people he follows are commonly "not even available in Finland". Most participants state that their own social circle has a far more significant impact on brand preferences. However, P3 notes that celebrities and influencers have somewhat of an informant's role. He continues by saying that "you can get [--] information on something, like a service or a product, that you did not know existed". P3 says that this might encourage people to pay attention to the promoted product or service, but if the person is not in the target audience there will be no actual interest evoked.

Three out of four interviews have mentions of indirect or unidentified influences that are transferred from celebrities and online sources to participants' friends. P4, P5 and P7 all state that they recognize their friends to sometimes have consumption preferences or behaviors that are "clearly" adopted from social media platforms, celebrities or influences. P7 highlights brand preferences that she picks up from her friends, while they are originally from online influencers. P5 discusses his friend's distinctive clothing style preferences, and P4 mentions picking up a certain habit or behavior from his friend "without even realizing that it would be coming from a celebrity".

The 18-year-olds have somewhat different answers from other age groups, as they detect to get some brand preference influences online. P2 says that cosmetics and skincare brand preferences are particularly affected by social media, as "everyone buys" those products that are promoted by influencers who have "good skin". P8 also refers to the same observation by saying that among her friends, brands preferences of cosmetics are the most likely to be affected by influencers. Besides this, there are no notable mentions of brand categories that would be heavily affected by celebrities or online personas in terms of participants' own brand preferences.

The 21-year-olds have a wider discussion on celebrities and content creators who have a significant impact on their friends and peers overall. P3 says that many people his age

highly value Harry Styles, saying that it feels like anything he wears or does is perceived as cool and "must be bought". P3 speculates that the driver for this is that Harry Styles is someone who challenges stereotypes and is distinctive from others while having a "new way of doing things". P4 brings up Kanye West, and P3 and P4 discuss how there is an ongoing "Kanye phenomenon", including a whole lifestyle with people worshipping Kanye West's clothing line and even talking in a certain way. P3 also mentions Aleksi Rantamaa, known by his account name Mentaalisavuke, who according to P3 was a major opinion leader (*mielipidevaikuttaja*) among his peers around 2010-2015.

In addition to CE and influencers, the interviews include notions of the internet having an overall effect on brand preferences. For instance, P3 mentions that many people have foreign friends online "who are not necessarily linked to your physical living environment at all". He continues that these online connections have broadened the area of external influences, as well as well as exposing people to influences that would otherwise not be present in their family. P1 and P2 discuss the effect that peers and online environments have, as well as platforms such as Tiktok. P1 says that there are some (unspecified) brands that are often displayed on Tiktok, and that the platform has a strong influence regarding music and songs. P2 continues to say that there are many trends that are picked up from the platform, including behavior and "stupid things as well". However, P6 also mentions the phenomenon of Gen Z trends that are displayed online and continues to say that he is "fairly cynical" towards them, because online trends are often "intentionally established marketing campaigns" started by companies. P5 agrees and says that he is commonly "even more critical" towards trends and things that are deemed very popular.

5.3 Values

To begin the Values theme, participants were asked to describe their personal value systems. Participants' first answers to the question included equality and/or gender equality (P1, P2, P3, P4, P7 and P8), honesty, trustworthiness and/or reliability (P3, P4, P5, P6, P7 and P8), empathy, caring about others and/or acknowledging others' viewpoints (P1, P2, P3 and P8) and environmental values and/or sustainability (mentioned by all participants). Other responses include e.g. freedom (P3 and P4), health or wellbeing (P4 and P7),

happiness (P2), civilization (P3 and P4), practicality (P8), self-improvement (P7) and an overall mention of having very liberal values (P2). These mentions summarize the commonness of those values that are most likely to be important among Gen Z'ers. Additionally, P7 and P8 note that they realize they have many other values that are important, but that it is hard to think of them so fast in the interview situation.

Upon being asked an extend their answer to those values that would be considered societal rather than personal, the 21-year-olds have a wider conversation about the division between the two. P3 states that in his opinion, the overall concept of "love for one's fellow man" (*lähimmäisenrakkaus*) – which is reflected in his own values as caring about others – is certainly not a personal value but rather a very political one. He mentions that it is connected to decision making about e.g. refugees or climate change and as such, it is in a way "connected to everything". P4 continues on the topic by saying that trust is also a very societal value in addition to being a personal one. P3 and P4 have different opinions on the value of freedom: P3 sees it as a very societal value, while for P4 it is rather a more personal matter. This discussion expands insights on how the 21-year-olds perceive their own value systems to be linked with those values that are shared on a wider, societal level.

> *"Almost everything I buy is second-hand."*
> *– P2*

Participants were asked to describe how their values affect their consumption behavior, as this helps connect personal value systems to the brand context of the study. Responses highlight favoring brands and products that are eco-friendly and sustainable. These answers strongly align with participants' value systems, as eco-friendly values were mentioned by all participants for the preceding question. Participants also share real-life examples of their value-affected consumption behavior: P2 states that she pursues consumption that would be as eco-friendly as possible, and mentions that her and P1 both favor flea markets and second-hand products. P7 mentions that she tries to buy from brands that are responsible and sustainable. P6 says that he had been favoring plant-based food more, and that is important to not knowingly support a brand that would e.g. use child labor. He summarizes this by saying that if a brand is clearly "plain evil" (referring to another discussion about Nestlé's unethical business practices, which is addressed later in

this sub-chapter) and blatantly against his own values, it is likely that he avoids that brand. P3 has a similar answer: he states that he avoids buying from brands that are against his own values, using H&M as an example. P5 says that he favors products that are sustainable and durable in use, and that have been manufactured in Finland or in Europe. As a recent example of this, P5 mentions having bought a pair of winter boots from the brand Panama Jack, because they were made in Spain.

P4 makes an interesting observation about eco-friendly consumption by stating that he dislikes the idea of consumers having to take full responsibility for selecting only environmentally friendly products. He continues by saying that value-based consumption decisions should not be left for the individual, but rather consumers should be the ones with the freedom to choose. P4 says that in his opinion, companies' non-environmentally friendly and unethical practices should be politically restricted at a higher level. However, despite this opinion P4 still states to recycle and reduce his meat consumption – while still feeling that it makes no real difference if a dish of meat is thrown away or a piece of clothing gets recycled.

The 21-year-olds also continue on the topic of green consumption by discussing dietary choices. P4 states that he uses value-based consumption as a message to others, and discusses a real-life example of only eating vegetarian food while on military service as a concrete way to impact structures and others' attitudes. P3 mentions that there is a symbolic value connected to someone else seeing you eat vegetarian food instead of meat. P3 and P4 also jokingly mention that this behavior could be perceived as acts of virtue signaling. Overall, when asked about value-based consumption, reducing meat consumption and favoring plant-based food is also mentioned by P2 and P5.

Besides insights that regard environmental values, P6 mentions that the value of honesty is reflected in his consumption behavior as avoiding companies that have repeatedly been caught with lying about their products. P8 mentions that before making a consumption decision, she often considers how practical the purchase would be. P3 states that while considering how important the value of caring for others is to him, he sometimes feels even a bit embarrassed about how little that value is visible in his consumption behavior: that he

does not consider it enough as opposed to how much caring for others impacts his behavior regarding e.g. friendships or studies.

The 18-year-olds also discuss the effect that their values have on supporting celebrity brands: P1 and P2 state that it is important for influencers and artists to have sufficiently similar values as themselves, and that if e.g. an artist is known to be racist or in other ways problematic, P1 and P2 do not feel comfortable expressing to others that they like their music. As a real-life example of this, P1 mentions that when the Finnish rap artists Prinssi Yusuf and Musta Barbaari begun posting anti-vaccine content on social media during the COVID-19 pandemic, P1 afterwards realized that it had changed her perception of them and that she no longer thought of them as being "that cool". Overall, P1 states that this phenomenon is about considering what type of people she wants to support.

> *"Being eco-friendly is important to me [--] but I still have not quit eating meat, so I am not sure how eco-friendly you can claim to be at that point."*
> *– P6*

There are also suggestions towards Gen Z'ers having a very strong sense of the impact that their consumption decisions have on the environment. Many answers suggest that interviewees have internalized a mindset where they are expected to acknowledge their own responsibility regarding sustainable consumption. For instance, regarding self-expression through consumption decisions, P3 and P4 discuss the external pressure of opting for vegan alternatives. P3 states that in the present day, it is a big deal whether you choose to pour oat milk or regular milk to your coffee, and that he even felt embarrassed upon realizing that he had chosen regular milk at the beginning of the interview instead of oat milk, which he usually chooses. Many responses regarding personal values also support this assumption, as several participants are quick to judge themselves for eating meat, or at least feel the need to articulate out loud that they do while discussing their environmental values. A good example of this is the discussion of P5 and P6: even though both of them say to favor plant-based products among other green consumption decisions, P5 says that "being eco-friendly is still a value for me, *even though* I am a murderer who eats animals [--] and destroys the planet and the rainforests" – and P6 that "being eco-friendly is important to me [--] *but* I still have not quit eating meat, so I do not know how

environmental friendly you can claim to be at that point", as presented above. This is a significant observation about Gen Z'ers' strict demands for themselves regarding values – even those who pay attention to environmental issues and bear responsibility for their consumption decisions, still seem to strongly feel that they should be doing more.

> *"It's really difficult to keep up with all these [unethical practices of companies], because [--] if they have messed something up or operated on the basis of unacceptable values, [--] obviously they are actively covering it up. It's difficult."*
> *– P5*

There were also some answers suggesting that personal values and ethics sometimes become secondary in comparison to practical factors. For instance, P6 states that it is very hard to avoid buying products from the brand Nestlé because "they own such an enormous portion of everything, for instance in the drink industry". This suggests that P6 still sometimes buys brands owned by Nestlé due to practical reasons, even though he agrees with P5's statement about Nestlé being "an evil [and] a very, very twisted company". P6 summarizes this by saying that "it is really hard, but I would not support Nestlé's products if possible".

> *"[The brand preferences of] our friend group may [--] differ from the mainstream, as most of us are broke students. [--] It's not the brand that has an effect, it's the price."*
> *– P6*

Furthermore, frugality and costs are significant factors that affect consumption and at times, hinder making green consumption decisions. P6 states that the majority of people in his friend group have to make consumption decisions with the price as a primary factor. P2 says that as a high school student, money is a big determinant, and P1 continues by saying that e.g. she would surely make more purchases based on online influences if she had more money. P1 also mentions that she had recently been thinking about her own spending upon turning 18 because of being less financially dependent on her parents, which has made it harder to consider green values in her consumption. P4 notes the same matter by saying

"well, if I think about factors other than price, then…" and continues to discuss sustainable consumption decisions.

Participants were asked to describe what kind of values companies "have to have" (i.e. corporate values) in the present day. Most common answers address being eco-friendly, sustainable and/or responsible (P3, P4, P7 and P8), being trustworthy and/or transparent (P4, P5, P6), and being ethical in business practices (P5, P6). Other mentions include supporting gender equality and/or diversity (P1, P2 and P5), a desire from the company to adapt to new circumstances and continuously develop their operations (P7), and customer-centricity and paying attention to the customer experience (P8). P5 and P6 also discuss that many present-day companies primary aim at maximizing profits in the short-term, which may result in problematic consequences. P3 addresses the same topic through the example of boycotting companies that did not react to the invasion of Ukraine in the spring of 2022. He says that this clearly shows that some companies prioritized their own profits over the suffering of Ukrainians.

Regarding company values, the 18-year-olds bring up companies using the rainbow flag during Pride month, and address how the matter is two-fold: on one hand, P1 says that she would dislike a company that would express being against Pride – but on the contrary, if the rainbow flag is added to products sold by a company that does not support the values behind Pride, it is also frowned upon to use the flag solely as a marketing technique. With this conversation, P1 and P2 are expressing that acts of pink washing are detected and have a negative effect on their perception of the brand. Furthermore, P1 and P2 note that sometimes organizations face two conflicting external pressures from consumers with opposing values. Using the church as an example, P2 mentions that a relative of hers had made a Pride post on social media and received massive backlash from those who are against it. She continues by saying that in the same context, many companies are trying to do their best regarding e.g. equality and fighting racism, but there will always be someone against those values. P2 summarizes this by saying that "it is, in a way, really hard for [companies] as well, that they either need to pick a side or [--] not to take a stand on anything at all".

Furthermore, the 24-year-olds continue on the topic of values matching the brand's values. P6 mentions the personal brand of author J. K. Rowling, who had priorly branded herself as someone who supports and speaks for equality, but later expressed deep prejudice and "even straightforward hatred" against those who are transgender. P6 jokingly adds that J. K. Rowling could get some credit for not afterwards denying what she had said, "unlike what a lot of other brands do", but that he still thinks the case was unacceptable on J. K. Rowling's behalf. P6 continues by stating that overall, he dislikes brand that try to cover up "their true values" only to conform to current trends, such as being eco-friendly. P5 agrees by saying that green washing, or "any other washing", is annoying.

> "[Consumers' trust] can be broken in many ways. By not being sustainable, by treating employees badly, or just by [--] launching a single bad product."
> – P4

Upon discussing the type of actions or values that are not acceptable for companies, many answers regard human rights: P2 says that she does not want to support companies that stand for "bad values", such as racism or inequality. P3 states that it is particularly unacceptable for a company to openly create a lot of pollution or to use child labor without even trying to change the situation, and that this is very noticeable when the price of the final product is very low. P8 says that all business operations that go against human rights are unacceptable.

P3 also adds that in the present day, many employees have added a disclaimer to their social media profiles, e.g. Twitter, about their opinions being solely their own and not reflective on the opinions of their employer – but if that employee were to publicly express very controversial opinions, their doings would still simultaneously affect the image of the employer company. The same observation is made by P6, who mentions that companies cannot claim to be separate from their employee's controversial public opinions, if the same employee is allowed to keep working in the company management without any action taken on the company's behalf.

There were also many examples of companies that are boycotted, have unethical practices and have a negative brand image among the participants. These examples are more thoroughly discussed among brand relationships in sub-chapter 5.5.

5.4 Media

The Media theme receives great attention in the analysis since the theme includes interview questions regarding several distinguishable topics. To add structure and clarity, different topics are further divided into sub-chapters: social media consumption, traditional media consumption and preferred news sources. The matter of fake news is also briefly addressed among questions about news sources.

This theme is of particular interest for the commissioner company operating in the field of media. Thus, data on the Media theme is analyzed in greater detail and delivered directly to Yle, but only those sections that help examining the research questions are included in the thesis report. Further interview findings on participants' traditional media consumption and preferred news sources can be obtained upon request.

5.4.1 Social media

First, participants were asked to name their most important social media platforms or channels. The responses are summarized in Table 4. below. It should be noted that this chart does not present *all* social medias that participants mention to use, but those that are perceived as the most important.

Table 4. Participants' answers on their most important social media platforms

	P1	P2	P3	P4	P5	P6	P7	P8
Instagram	x	x	x		x	x	x	x
YouTube	x	x		x	x	x		
Tiktok	x	x					x	x
Snapchat	x	x		x		x		
WhatsApp			x	x			x	x
Telegram				x	x	x		
Reddit					x	x		
Pinterest	x	x						
Jodel	x	x						
Twitter			x					
Facebook								x
LinkedIn							x	

It is important to acknowledge that questions regarding the most important social media platforms were not standardized between interviews, but rather based on each participant's own perception. For instance, P3 named only three social media platforms that he finds to be the most important, even though he mentioned that his social media usage is far more active and versatile than P4's – who mentioned four platforms. Additionally, P3 later mentions that he has uses "almost all social medias" but only the three most important ones are being presented above. P1 and P2 named more platforms than other participants, but this versatility could be caused by them starting a wider overall conversation about their social media usage, which resulted in a larger number of platforms being named. Lastly, it is possible that some platforms are significantly important in everyday use but forgotten while answering: for instance, P8 adds a mention of WhatsApp being among the most important platforms later on while discussing social media usage for communication purposes.

Instagram

Instagram is the most commonly named social media among participants' most important platforms, with mentions from seven out of eight participants. The 18-year-olds state that Instagram is "always popular", and throughout the interview they mention using the platform for many different purposes: following social media influencers, creating their own posts, following political figures, getting to know new people, communicating with friends, reading news, and finding entertainment. P1 and P2's discussion about Instagram gives an example of how multifunctionally the platform is used. P3 mentions that out of his most important platforms Instagram is the most interactive, and that the Stories function in particular is very useful for getting an opinion on a certain matter from a larger group of people. P5 states that he mainly uses Instagram to see his friends' posts and content, with P6 agreeing. P7 mentions that Instagram is an easy channel for scrolling through online stores and profiles of clothing brands, and that she sometimes makes online purchases through the platform. P7 also names Instagram as her most important channel for communication. P8 states that Instagram is mainly used for following friends, as well as celebrities and influencers.

P3 makes an interesting observation about Instagram's internal culture by saying that "Instagram has, kind of, become increasingly politicized" and mentions that there is an external pressure to address societal or global issues through e.g. posting "info boxes" to Instagram stories. He addresses this by saying that for some people, it does not matter at all what someone does outside of social media if they do not spread awareness online or "pretend to be as aware as possible about everything". P3 feels that this shift in Instagram user culture has made using the platform less fun and relaxed than it used to be. The same phenomenon is mentioned by P2, who says that especially her friends from art school "repost some things about, for instance, racism or animals' rights" online and that their shared content increases her own exposure to such societal issues.

Tiktok

> *"I feel that it is probably also connected to the generation we have grown up*
> *in. That Tiktok and [other social media platforms] have had a huge impact."*
> *– P1*

Tiktok was among the most discussed social medias, even though only half of the participants (P1, P2, P7 and P8) state to actually use the platform. In this study, all of the female participants say they use Tiktok, while none of the male participants do. P2 states that the majority of people in her friend group use Tiktok, and P1 says that the platform is a big external influence in her age group. In the 18-year-olds' interview, Tiktok is said to be their most used platform and overall mentioned in several contexts – they mention that Tiktok affects e.g. fashion trends, music and brand preferences, and even individuals' behavior through mannerisms that are picked up on the platform. P1 and P2's overall conversation about e.g. their friend groups and peers suggest that Tiktok is an enormously popular platform for teenage users in particular – even to such a level that it can form trends and affect young consumers' mindsets. This could present an issue, especially considering P1's note that content regarding values in Tiktok is often seen through the two extremes, i.e. polarization is visible on the platform. P3 notes that Tiktok is significantly popular in the present day and mentions that he used to have a Tiktok account during the COVID-19 pandemic, but that had deleted it after noticing how much it affected his attention span – saying that he "absolutely had to delete it".

It is notable that Tiktok's overall brand is commonly seen as fairly negative, even by those who actively use it themselves: P2 says that Tiktok is "trash" as a platform, and P8 states that it is easy to "quickly get absorbed in Tiktok for several hours". The 24-year-olds discuss the reasons why they do not use Tiktok themselves: P6 says that he does not like the format of Tiktok's content, and P5 says that he is against the platform because it is deliberately made to be as addictive as possible. P5 continues by saying that he dislikes the overall online culture of "super high-paced entertainment".

Snapchat

Snapchat is mentioned by several participants. P1 states that she uses the platform for communicating with friends, including using the video call function, and P2 says that Snapchat is very popular among her age group. P4 says that Snapchat is "perhaps the only [--] morally unpleasant platform that I have ended up using", implying that he uses Snapchat even though his overall social media usage is mentioned to be at a low level. P6 states to use Snapchat on a daily basis to communicate with his friends.

However, answers suggest that the platform is generally declining in popularity and/or the level of usage among Gen Z: when the 26-year-olds are asked about if they still actively use Snapchat, P8 says that she "could pretty much delete the app, if it did not include Snapchat groups", which refers to the Snapchat group chat feature that allows several people to send and receive shared pictures and messages. Furthermore, P2 mentions that Snapchat used to be the most frequently used platform before Tiktok emerged, but that it has "kind of lost its hype" during the past couple of years and that usage has now decreased to only using the platform to communicate with friends. In addition to Tiktok, P8 mentions that Snapchat usage decreased among the popularization of Instagram, especially when the Stories feature – which refers to a post that is only visible for 24 hours after uploading – was no longer exclusively found on Snapchat but was added to Instagram as well.

Other platforms

Other observations from social media usage include those platforms that are only mentioned by few participants. For instance, Facebook – which has been found to be declining in popularity for younger users while still being used by older Gen Z'ers (Criteo 2017) – is only mentioned by P8, who represents the oldest age group of the interviews. Additionally, Telegram and Reddit are mentioned by only P4, P5 and P6, all of whom study in the field of technology. P4 addresses this directly by saying that he uses "technology student (*teekkari*) social medias" meaning Telegram and Reddit. This observation implies that social media usage can also be heavily affected by one's social environment, such as their field of studies, where the common norm includes interaction on specific social media platforms. Furthermore, the 21-year-olds discuss the phenomenon of platform "mini trends" that are visible within smaller social circles, such as friend groups – P3 mentions that he had recently downloaded a social media platform called BeReal only because many of his friends had begun using it. P3 and P4 continue the discussion by saying that "mini trends" are very common, in a sense that friends recommend new applications to each other. Both agree that the motivation behind these recommendations is to suggest something that the other person may enjoy using.

Social media usage time

Most participants feel that they use social media too much. This can be seen in participants' first reactions upon hearing the question: P1 and P2 both state that they do not even want to check their screen time – P6's answer is "Jesus… dozens of hours on a weekly basis" – P7 states that her screen time is "unfortunately" closer to five hours a day – and P8 agrees with this by saying that she uses social media "too much".

When social media usage time is examined interview by interview, the 18-year-olds state that their year-round daily average is around five hours per day for both P1 and P2. P1 mentions that her screen time had increased during her summer holiday, reaching as much as ten hours per day at times – while on school days, her screen time is estimated to be around three hours per day. P2 says that on some days she uses her phone for two hours, and on some other days for nine hours. She also adds that she does not "really do anything worthwhile" on e.g. Tiktok, and that she could make better use of her time. P1 states that Tiktok and YouTube are her most used platforms, and that she uses YouTube for e.g. following content regarding certain series and shows. P2 mentions that she uses Tiktok, Snapchat, YouTube and Instagram on a daily basis; Jodel, which is used more occasionally for a couple of hours at a time; and Pinterest, which is often used for an hour at a time, but not daily. Most of these usage habits are agreed on by P1.

Among the 21-year-olds, P4 says that he uses communication platforms, such as Snapchat, WhatsApp and Telegram, for around one hour per day altogether. He also states that he may occasionally use YouTube for several hours "in good conscience", because the content that he consumes on the platform is often in some way useful and educational – e.g. videos about history and videos spoken in a foreign language. P3 does not mention a specific time estimate, but states to be very impressed by P4's daily consumption of just one hour – this would suggest that his own daily screen time is much higher. While discussing different social media platforms, P3 mentions that he uses Twitter to follow conversation about societal issues and news.

Among the 24-year-olds, P6 states that he spends "dozens of hours on YouTube" on a weekly basis, in addition to a few hours on Reddit. P6's Telegram usage depends on how

active the chat conversations happen to be at different times. P5 says that he uses YouTube and Reddit on a daily basis for an hour or two each. Both P5 and P6 use Reddit and YouTube mainly for entertainment and sometimes for searching for information, such as news. P5 mentions to have followed a few influencers on Telegram – despite mainly using the platform for communication purposes – and that his Instagram usage is more occasional and focused on seeing what his friends are up to.

> *"I realize that I am opening Instagram for the eighth time and there are no new posts... There has to be something wrong with that. [--] I use [social media] way too much."*
> *– P8*

Among the 26-year-olds, both P7 and P8 wish to lower their screen time. P7 estimates her daily screen time to be five hours, of which 90 % is used on the most important social media channels that she had mentioned (see Table 4.). P8 estimates that her daily usage time is four hours – adding that it is easy to get absorbed in Tiktok for several hours. P8 makes an interesting observation about social media usage being somewhat compulsive at times, especially when she has time off from work: she states to check e.g. her Instagram feed for several times in a row even though there is no new content available. P7 agrees with this and continues by saying that she often realizes to have opened a social media app and then "in a way, you are not even really looking at [the content], you're just scrolling through".

5.4.2 Traditional media

Interviews show that participants use traditional media significantly less than digital or social media. One of the most common traditional media usage habits is watching the news on TV, as mentioned by over half of interviewees. Another highlighted habit is to listen to the radio in the car: all participants across interviews mention the radio–car connection in some context, even if not stating to share the habit themselves. P3 makes an observation on this by saying that many listen to radio only if they own a car, and P8 mentions that "obviously, the radio is on" while driving. Regarding estimates on consumption time,

many answer to use traditional media for around one hour, or the maximum of one hour, per day. Some singular traditional media channels – such as radio and TV for P4, or paper magazines for P5 – are used by certain participants so occasionally that the weekly average consumption is closer to zero.

> *"If you are watching TV, [--] you realize that you have already seen a lot of it on social media. Like, almost everything."*
> *– P7*

Participants' purposes for traditional media usage are mainly focused on gaining information on news and current affairs. Most participants say to opt for searching information on traditional media especially when a significant incident is occurring, such as the COVID-19 pandemic or the war in Ukraine. In addition to news broadcasting, talk shows – such as A-Studio and MOT – and governmental briefings are mentioned in several interviews. However, P7 also notes that traditional media can be slower at providing new information in comparison to social media platforms, as presented in the quote above.

There are some light observations on why traditional media is decreasing in popularity in P5 and P7's answers: P7 states to prefer streaming services over TV, as she uses Netflix, CMore, HBO, Ruutu, Viaplay and Yle Areena. P5 says that it is "a lot nicer" to be able to decide what content he consumes, instead of having to settle for what is currently playing on TV or radio. These notions suggest that Gen Z'ers are commonly used to choosing their content consumption preferences by themselves rather than only e.g. watching what is on TV. Thus, the accessibility and wide variety of options in online environments may be one of the main reasons why traditional media channels are losing to digital content among young consumers.

> *"My family has had a subscription to Hesari for quite a long time. [--] If we have Hesari in paper form, I will read it. [--] If I am [at my parents' house] and the news are on, I always watch them."*
> *– P1*

Another significant observation is that many participants' traditional media usage is highly affected by their parents' consumption habits. For instance, the 18-year-olds say to read the newspaper and watch television because their parents have a newspaper subscription and have the TV on at home. Both also state that the radio is always on when they are in the car with their parents – when they are accompanied by friends, they listen to Spotify instead. Adopting the consumption habits from parents is also mentioned by the 24-year-olds, who both state to sometimes watch the television when visiting their family home. P5 states that he used to read Helsingin Sanomat in paper form while still living with his parents who had a subscription.

5.4.3 Preferred news sources

As a part of examining media consumption habits, participants were asked about their preferred sources for consuming news, including news in text form, audio and video. Answers are summarized in Table 5. below:

Table 5. Participants' preferred news sources

	P1	P2	P3	P4	P5	P6	P7	P8
Helsingin Sanomat	x	x	x	x	x		x	
Yle	x	x	x	x	x	x		
Ilta-Sanomat	x	x						
MTV		x			x *			
Foreign media (various)	x	x		x				
Local newspapers (various)	x					x		
Social media (various)	x *	x *				x	x	x
TV and radio (unspecified)							x	x

(* Using the source is mentioned, while particular *preference* is not expressed.)

Helsingin Sanomat (later referred to as HS) and Yle were the most commonly preferred sources for consuming news, while HS was the most commonly mentioned first answer for the question. Most participants stated to use the HS mobile app, with some mentions of the traditional Helsingin Sanomat newspaper. Answers regarding Yle's platforms were somewhat versatile, including Yle's website, TV broadcasting, Uutisvahti and Yle's Instagram page. Several participants mentioned Yle as their preferred news source particularly when considering TV content. Answers highlight participants' perception of Yle and HS being the most high-quality news sources: P1 says that she begins with Yle or HS whenever she wants to gain information on a certain matter, with P2 agreeing and stating that Yle and HS are "a strong duo". P3 feels that HS has a special role among news sources, as it is considered to be "outstandingly" trustworthy, accurate and fast – especially while still being a commercial media source. P4 says that if he wants to "really get familiarized with a certain topic", his information search includes Yle's Uutisvahti among other sources.

Lastly, using social media as a news source was discussed in further detail with the 18-year-olds and the 24-year-olds. As addressed in the literature review, Fromm (2021) suggests that nearly half of 18-21-year-old Gen Z adults get the majority of their news from social media. This issue was brought up as an additional question in the 18-year-olds' interview. P2 mentions that she has a "bad habit" of seeing news content on Tiktok and not researching the matter any further. Even though P2 perceives herself as a "fairly media smart" (*mediakriittinen*) person, she comes across "at least one piece of fake news every two days" on Tiktok and states that it is easy to sometimes not acknowledge the falsehood. P2 continues by saying that especially for someone who would be a few years younger than her, it is very easy to believe the fake news content if there is no further background research. Both P1 and P2 sometimes use social media for news consumption, but their answers suggest that such sources often come with negative side issues and as such, are not preferred over more trustworthy news sources. Both P1 and P2 seem very aware of the fake news phenomenon.

5.5 Brand relationships

This sub-chapter includes examples of brand that are liked and disliked by interview participants, as well as analysis on participants' overall expectations and demands for companies. As priorly mentioned, questions regarding brand relationships were not categorized in a separate interview theme, but rather intertwined with the four other themes. For instance, some of the participants' answers regarding the Value theme are presented in the Brand relationships analysis to make observations on the factors that help brands establish and strengthen relationships with Gen Z consumers.

While the set of interview questions includes questions on participants' brand relationships and perceptions on Yle's brand, detailed findings on the topic only add little value on the overall scope of this study. Interview data on Yle's brand is delivered directly to the company and excluded from the thesis report, but can be obtained upon request.

First, brands that were mentioned across interviews distinctively in a positive or negative context are presented below. Answers are categorized by interview to express similarities within the age group pairs. As it was found to be common for the participant pairs to agree with each other's opinions and to share similar attitudes, the lists show brands that both participants found likeable or dislikeable. If the attitude is not shared, the participant who presented the opinion is separately noted. It should be acknowledged that the two lists of liked and disliked brands do not include all brands mentioned by participants, but those that were specifically referred to in a positive or negative context and/or further discussed during the interview. Similarities and differences between interviews are further analyzed after the two lists.

The following list presents brands that were mentioned to be *liked and preferred*, or brought up in a *positive* context:

> **18-year-olds**: Apple, Jopo, the overall branding of second-hand clothing
> **21-year-olds**: Apple, New York Times (P3)
> **24-year-olds**: Asus (P5), Valco (P5), Verkkokauppa.com (P5), Ecco (P6), Alko (P6)

26-year-olds: Makia (P7), Kiehl's (P7), Alvar (P7), Lumene (P8), Craft (P8), Kesko (P8)

Participants' reasoning for liking a certain brand include e.g. perceived high quality, good online and social media presence, professional-looking visuals, proven sustainability, trustworthiness, domesticity, good customer service, openness and transparency, eccentricity, having a "clean" brand image, customer-centricity, supporting social causes such as Pride, appealing product packaging, fun marketing communications style, and being reasonably priced. P3 notes that regarding the factors that make a certain brand likeable, "many small things make a big difference". Several participants state that they surely have more brands that they love or frequently use, but that it is hard to remember them on the spot.

The following list presents brands that were mentioned to be *disliked and avoided*, or brought up in a *negative* context:

18-year-olds: Shein, Kärkkäinen, Android, Seiska
21-year-olds: Posti, Meta (which includes e.g. Facebook and Instagram), Shell, Teboil, Fortum, H&M (P3), VR (P3), Jodel (P3), Ikea (P4)
24-year-olds: Nestlé, Apple, Teboil, Kärkkäinen, Amazon
26-year-olds: Nestlé, H&M, XXL, Mac Cosmetics (P7), Apple (P8), Tesla (P8), Big Four companies (P8)

Participants' reasoning for disliking a certain brand include e.g. unecological products, negative personal experiences, unlikeable style of brand visuals, green washing, using child labor, using animal testing, discrimination, unethical working conditions for employees throughout the supply chain, practices against human rights, pursuing fast fashion, having a brand image that is soulless or too polished, artificial "buzz" created around the brand, forcing unnecessary English marketing communications on Finnish products and services (Fafa's and the Mall of Tripla mentioned as examples), dominating cheap markets (a reason for disliking Ikea), and being frequently mentioned in public in a negative context (a reason for disliking VR). P6 adds that in his opinion, having a negative

impact on the environment is bad but having "objectively evil" business practices and values is even worse.

Observations about participants' reasons for liking or disliking a certain brand present similarities with the other themes. Perhaps the most distinctive factor that affects brand relationships appears to be participants' values: the majority of the positive reasons regard ethical and environmentally friendly business practices as well as supporting social causes, all of which are strongly brought up among questions in the Values theme. On the contrary, the majority of the negative reasons that cause participants to dislike a certain brand include unethical and non-environmentally friendly business practices, as well as discrimination. These findings suggest that values are a significant driver behind Gen Z participants' brand preferences. There are also some suggestions that consider the Media theme and usage of digital platforms, such as online and social media presence being perceived as important. However, many factors that can be viewed as more traditional are visible: price, packaging, customer-centricity, communication and good customer service are still important factors among participants' brand preferences.

Regarding brands that are popular within participants' friend groups, mentions include e.g. domestic Finnish brands, such as Vallila, Arabia and Iittala; local brands linked to the area of residence, such as Pyynikin Panimo; sustainable brands and brands that produce durable products; brands that frequently engage in student sponsorships; second-hand brands, such as UFF; brands advertised on social media or promoted by influencers; and brands that differentiate their user from others, which is brought up in the context of artists' personal brands.

The most notable similarities across different age groups' interviews regard brands that are perceived negatively. For instance, Kärkkäinen is mentioned by half of the participants as a brand that is avoided. Participants address the scandal of the company owner Juha Kärkkäinen, who has been reported to publicly cooperate with the Neo-Nazis (see Helsingin Sanomat 2017). Kärkkäinen's controversy regarding the COVID-19 pandemic, where the company e.g. encouraged its employees to reject the COVID-19 vaccination (see Helsingin Sanomat 2021), is also mentioned. The negative brand image of Kärkkäinen is so strong that the 18-year-olds state to question their friends' values if they were to visit

Kärkkäinen stores and support the company. Another example of a negatively perceived brand is Nestlé: the 24-year-olds refer to the company as "plain evil" and mention several scandal examples, such as Nestlé extracting millions of liters of water from an area that left local residents with no drinking water (see The Guardian 2018). The 26-year-olds also discuss Nestlé's unethical supply chain.

Furthermore, H&M is mentioned as an avoided brand in several interviews, due to pursuing fast fashion and appearing in a number of scandals regarding unethical practices. Several participants state to currently boycott Russian-owned brands, such as Teboil, as well as Finnish brands that refused to leave the Russian market following Russia's invasion of Ukraine in February 2022. These observations combined suggest that companies' public scandals and unacceptable practices are widely acknowledged, and that personal values have a major role in Gen Z's brand relationships.

On the contrary, the brand of Apple is perceived as both good and bad across interviews. The younger participants, referring to the 18- and 21-year-olds, express positive attitudes towards Apple: P1 and P2 say that most of their friends of the same age have iPhones, and that their preference is so strong that they perceive the competing Android's brand as negative. P3 states that Apple is "incredibly good" at lifestyle marketing and that he owns several Apple products, including an iPhone, a Mac, an iPod and Airpods, and P4's answers suggest that he prefers Apple's Mac over competing products. On the contrary, the older participants, referring to the 24- and 26-year-olds, express more negative attitudes. P5 criticizes Apple working "behind the scenes" to decrease consumers' rights and freedoms, as well as increasingly producing phones that can only be repaired in Apple service centers to maximize their profits. P6 shares the same negative attitude. P8 states that she is not the "biggest fan" of Apple and criticizes Apple's practices of cashing in with products that break after a year or two of usage, while making additional parts expensive and reparation difficult. While these attitudes may be caused coincidentally by different personal preferences, interview findings may suggest differences in younger and older Gen Z consumers' attitudes towards heavily marketed lifestyle brands, such as Apple.

Another significant difference to other interviews can be observed in the 24-year-olds' interview. Their consumer behavior and perception on brands is somewhat different from

that of other participants: both state to be critical towards companies' branding and marketing efforts. P6 states that his "own purchasing behavior is not really affected by the brand". P5 says that he deliberately tries to "not be affected by brands" and critically analyzes "all kinds of marketing and brands' [--] image-building efforts", as he views such actions as false and having "nothing to do with the actual product". Later in the interview, P5 continues to say that he is "rather anti-consumption" and always aspires to buy products that are durable and repairable in case they break. P5 also notes that it is extremely difficult in the present day to find brands and products that are actually durable in usage.

Many answers suggest that memories and emotions are strongly linked to participants' brand relationships, especially positive ones. For instance, P1 mentions that she likes the personal brand of certain artists because their music evokes positive memories from a certain time in her life. When asked about brands that are liked or even loved, P4's first response addresses games that he grew up with, such as Angry Birds and Clash of Clans, and TV shows that he used to watch as a child. When asked to specify what makes them likeable, P4 states that his bond with those brands is tied to being attached to them, as well as having positive memories of spending time with friends while playing said games. These answers suggest that having positive memories linked to a certain brand at a younger age is related to liking the brand and/or having a positive relationship with the brand in adulthood as well.

There are also some mentions on brands that are avoided for reasons not specifically related to the brand itself but rather on personal preferences. For instance, the 18-year-olds state that they avoid Hesburger and prefer McDonald's. P2 states that there is "no real reason behind this" and that the reasoning is not tied to Hesburger's brand in particular, but rather to being accustomed to preferring McDonald's in their friend group. This insight suggests that sometimes a brand may be avoided even if there is no negative perception towards the brand image, but simply as a result of one's friend group's norms or due to being accustomed to preferring a competing brand. Furthermore, P4 mentions that he has a "personal boycott" against Fafa's due to them using English as the common service language. P4 states that it is his own preference to favor brands that offer service in Finnish.

6. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

This chapter concludes the study by discussing the interview data from the viewpoint of the research questions. Contents of the interviews are also connected to the findings of the literature review. Furthermore, this chapter evaluates which theoretical models and arguments presented in literature are found to be valid among the participating Finnish Gen Z'ers and which are not.

First, the study findings are summarized by returning to the research questions. Secondly, the theoretical contributions of the study are presented and contrasted with prior research and existent literature. Lastly, the chapter introduces the central managerial implications, study limitations and areas of future research.

6.1 Summary of the findings

For the main research question "*What are the central characteristics of Gen Z'ers' brand relationships?*", being driven by personal value systems was perhaps the single most significant element found to characterize participants' brand relationships. Most participants outlined their own value systems clearly and expressed a desire for brands to support similar values for a positive consumer-brand relationship to exist. Conversely, brands that pursued contradicting values were commonly among those that were avoided or even boycotted. Some participants' answers suggest that brand relationships are also affected by personal preferences that are not related to the brand itself: for instance, favoring one brand and avoiding another simply due to being accustomed to a certain habit. Some mentions in interviews suggest that an appealing brand image can also have a positive effect on Gen Z's brand relationships. An example of this is Apple for the youngest participants, or certain cosmetics brands for the 26-year-olds. Additionally, there are some mentions of more traditional factors that continue to positively affect brand relationships, such as customer-centricity, communication, (low) price, packaging and good customer service.

The first research sub-question is "*How do internal factors, including values and personal identities, affect Gen Z'ers' brand relationships?*". The most relevant findings can be summarized in three areas: *reflecting personal values on brand preferences*, *expressing one's personality to others*, and *expressing belonging to a certain social group*. Personal values – such as honesty, empathy, equality and environmental values – are highly reflective on consumption decisions and brand preferences. Personal values are strongly acknowledged and clearly outlined, and many participants express a clear preference on those brands that align with their own value systems. Secondly, brands are used to externally express one's personality, for instance through differentiated clothing style, food consumption or music preferences that present their individuality. Finally, some participants mention using brands as a way to express belonging to a certain social group, such as a friend group or "those who make sustainable consumption decisions". This can be seen in acts such as environmentally friendly or exotic dietary decisions, fast fashion avoidance, or owning a product (such as a mobile phone or bicycle) from a certain brand that is favored within the friend group.

To summarize the findings based on the second research sub-question, "*Which external influences, including celebrities and influencers, affect Gen Z'ers' brand relationships the most?*", the most impactful influence comes from friends and family. The difference between the two is dependent on the brand or commodity in question. Some products or services that participants would ask recommendations on from their friends are those that they would never ask recommendations on from their parents, and vice versa. The impact of CE, influencers and peers is not substantial in this study. While some participants state to notice a slight impact, most feel that these parties have no actual impact on their consumption decisions. However, this is based on the *perceived* impact, solely evaluated by the participants themselves. To find more data on the *actual* impact that includes the subconscious impact and that could be comparable between members of different generations, further research outside the scope of this study would be required. Some participants recognize a wider, unspecified impact that different internet environments possess on their consumption behavior and brand preferences. However, this impact is slight and not determining.

For the third and final research sub-question, "*What are Generation Z's media consumption habits like?*", there was a lot of data gathered from the interviews. Gen Z's main media consumption characteristic was found to be social media centricity, with most participants using a versatile combination of different social media platforms for several hours every day. Instagram and YouTube were found to be the most commonly used platforms among interviewees. Regarding traditional media, Gen Z'ers' consumption levels were found to be low across age groups. Traditional media content is often consumed through the impact of one's external environments, e.g. watching the news on TV with one's parents who are used to the habit, or listening to the radio that is playing in the background at the gym. The most significant content type sought from traditional media channels revolves around news and information gathering (such as opting for TV news for gaining reliable information on COVID-19 or the invasion of Ukraine), while online sources are the preferred channel for gaining entertainment content. As opposed to the view presented in literature about nearly half of young Gen Z'ers getting the majority of their news from social media (Fromm 2021), participants commonly perceived social media channels as bad sources for news consumption, while Yle and Helsingin Sanomat were highlighted as the two most trustworthy news sources.

6.2 Theoretical contributions

This sub-chapter compares the study findings to prior research, introduced in the literature review. The central aim is to determine which theoretical models and perceptions were found to be applicable throughout the empirical research insights, and which were less accurate in the context of this study. The structure follows the research questions' contents by addressing the themes of Gen Z'ers' brand relationships, affecting internal factors, affecting external influences, and media consumption habits in separate sub-chapters.

6.2.1 Brand relationships

Among the few existent literature findings that consider Gen Z's brand relationships, Fromm (2021) argues that trust is an important factor for Gen Z and insincere brands are

detected fast. Brands must also be transparent and upfront in their actions, as Gen Z'ers have become extremely skilled in finding and verifying information (Fromm 2021). Additionally, Coman et al. (2022) state that Gen Z'ers present companies with new expectations and increasing pressure. These observations were accurate throughout interviews: participants were able to name numerous scandals and unacceptable business practices of well-known brands, which had resulted in them avoiding or even boycotting those brands. Trustworthiness and transparency are among the most important factors for brands to acknowledge in order to establish and maintain a relationship with Gen Z'ers, as brands' insincerity or disagreeable actions are widely known and have a strong negative impact on brand relationships.

In relationship marketing literature, emotional elements are among the dominant factors for consumer-brand relationships (Heilbrunn 2003). There were some interview observations towards this: among naming liked and preferred brands, some participants mentioned brands that were linked with positive emotional connections and memories, through e.g. growing up with the brand. There were also mentions of brands that were not particularly disliked "for any real reason", but that evoked emotions of annoyance and were thus strictly avoided. Regarding brand love – which refers to intense positive emotions that make consumers more loyal, more likely to talk positively about the brand and more resistant towards negative information (Batra et al. 2012) – there were only few concrete examples. While there were no direct mentions of brands that participants would state to "love", the brand relationship and attitudes that P1, P2 and P3 possess towards Apple could be viewed as a brand love. For brand hate – which refers to negative emotions and behavioral outcomes, such as complaining, negative word-of-mouth and boycotting (Zarantonello et al. 2016) – there were several examples that were similar between interviews, as mentioned priorly. Hegner et al. (2017) state that brand hate can be caused by bad experiences with the brand in the past, or ideologically unacceptable organizational behavior, such as legal or moral wrongdoings. This was highlighted in interviews, especially for the context of brands' ideologically unacceptable behavior.

There were no clear similarities of brands that would be preferred by participants across age groups. This may suggest that among Gen Z, there are only few brands that are "preferred by everyone", and it is more common to form differentiating, individual

preferences based on personal value systems, suggestions of one's family and friends, and prior experiences that one has with the brand. However, those brands that were avoided and perceived negatively commonly consisted of the same brands across interviews.

6.2.2 Internal factors

Findings on internal factors are further divided into two parts: Identity and Values. This division follows the structure of the separate interview themes of the same names, while both elements address the same research question RQ2.

Identity

Perhaps one of the literature review's most accurate descriptions of Gen Z'ers' personal identity is presented in the report conducted by Google (2016), which suggests that Gen Z perceives "being yourself, embracing what you love, rejecting what you don't and being kind to others" as cool. There are several answers where interview participants state to like being the way they are (e.g. as opposed to purposefully seeking differentiation from others), as well as avoiding and boycotting the things and values that they dislike. There are also suggestions across interviewee age groups that point towards viewing empathy and being kind to others as important traits and significant values that guide participants' own actions, both in personal lives and in brand preferences. Additionally, Francis and Hoefel (2018) argue that Gen Z'ers have a tendency to be more open and understanding towards different kinds of people. This is also found to be valid throughout interviews, as values such as supporting Pride, acknowledging other people's viewpoints and accepting people with other preferences to oneself are seen as good – while discrimination is deliberately mentioned among negative brand associations.

What is found to be less accurate in practice is the statement of Gen Z'ers expressing a particularly strong desire to stand out from the crowd (OC&C 2019) as self-expression is the single most important value of the generation (Tolstikova et al. 2020). As discussed in the Analysis chapter, there was broad variation of personal preferences among the participants: while some did express a desire to stand out, some expressed a clear

preference to keep in the background and to not deliberately attract additional attention to themselves. The analysis suggests that differences in one's personality are the central element, and it should *not* be accepted as the common assumption that it would be natural for all Gen Z'ers to wish to stand out. However, determining whether or not Gen Z'ers desire to stand out is stronger than among other generations would require standardizable and comparable answers between different generational groups, which lies outside the scope of this study.

Regarding social media presence, literature suggests that Gen Z'ers use social media as a tool for personal branding (Finch 2015). Furthermore, Jacobsen and Barnes (2020) argue that Gen Z'ers wish to keep their own online image clean and positive, so that it opposes no risks to their future career opportunities. Even though this is not directly addressed in the interviews, there are observations to suggest that some participants share this mindset. For instance, both P3 and P6 state that if company employees share controversial opinions online, their actions will affect the image of the company – despite any disclaimers of the employee's being solely their own and "not reflective on the opinions of the company". These statements suggest that P3 and P6 view online behavior as something that cannot be fully separated from one's employee or work life.

Finally, literature suggests that Gen Z'ers are savings-minded (Schlossberg 2016) and highly frugal (Fromm & Read 2018). There are aligning mentions in several contexts, with some participants mentioning that price is a dominant purchasing factor and frugality greatly affects consumption. However, it should be noted that this can be caused solely by participants' young age and stage of life, rather than pointing out a generation-specific characteristic.

Values

Gen Z's values that are presented in literature are found to be widely accurate throughout the interviews. The literature review presents statements about Gen Z being highly interested in social responsibility (Dabija & Pop 2013), conscious of the future (Williams 2015) and socially aware and justice-oriented (Johnston 2018). Furthermore, according to Djafarova and Foots (2022), Gen Z is the most interested in sustainable lifestyles and the

most likely to opt for ethical purchases when compared to other present generations. These arguments were proven to be accurate in the Values theme, as all participants deliberately mentioned environmental values to be of high importance to them. Many clearly expressed their understanding of the consequences their own actions have on the environment and on future generations (e.g. feeling a somewhat internalized pressure to make ethical and sustainable dietary decisions, or to avoid fast fashion brands), and some addressed concrete ways in which they make their own consumption more sustainable and ethical (e.g. favoring durable or second-hand products, avoiding brands with unethical business practices, favoring plant-based food alternatives, and avoiding over-consumption).

Naderi and Van Steenburg (2018) argue that Gen Z'ers are more "green" attitudinally rather than behaviorally. There were some notions towards this being true – while all participants mention green values to have significant importance to them, it was more common in interviews to share attitudinal statements than to give examples of actual consumption behavior that would put these values into practice. Still – most participants do mention real-life actions that they have taken upon to turn their awareness into green and ethical consumption. Thus, the statement of Naderi and Van Steenburg (2018) is found to be somewhat accurate but not definite. Furthermore, Djafarova and Foots (2022) propose that frugality caused by the current stage of life is a significant barrier to hinder Gen Z'ers ethical consumption. This is highly likely to be accurate. While the connection between frugality and ethical consumption is not further specified in interviews, several participants mention money as a determining factor for their consumption decisions. This link is likely to explain the slight attitude-behavior gap that may be detected in interviews.

Dabija et al. (2020) argue that Gen Z'ers prefer retailers that make contribution to societal issues, such as protecting the environment and ensuring employee welfare. This value is shared across interviews in several contexts, with participants addressing numerous real-life examples of positively perceived companies that contribute to these issues, while companies that act contrariwise are perceived negatively. Furthermore, Schlossberg (2016) suggests that Gen Z'ers expect companies to provide a stronger meaning that aligns with personal values. This is also found to be accurate, as participants' attitudes towards different brands show a strong correlation to those personal values that they had priorly expressed to be important to them.

However, while Pichler et al. (2021) suggest that Gen Z finds it important for companies to *publicly stand for* societal issues, interviews present somewhat versatile views. On one hand, among the values that companies "have to have" in the present day (i.e. corporate values), some participants mention that companies should publicly support social causes, such as gender equality and Pride, in order to not be disapproved. On the other hand, there are also mentions about realizing the viewpoint of companies that sometimes face two conflicting external pressures from consumers with opposing values, and that may thus decide to stay neutral on issues that divide consumers. Some participants state that companies should only publicly stand behind their own true values – otherwise supporting societal issues may be detected as acts of green or pink washing, which is frowned upon by participants.

While research findings on Gen Z's values and consumption still remain scarce in literature, there were also few other examples of Gen Z's characteristic values that do not address environmental values or ethics. For instance, Williams et al. (2010) define being sincere and honest as one of Gen Z's central values. This was confirmed in the interviews, as being honest, trustworthy and reliable was among the most commonly mentioned values for both personal values and the values that companies "have to have".

Perhaps the most significant observation that can be made on values is that participants were able to strongly acknowledge and clearly outline their personal value systems. Values are a significant factor to guide participants' consumption behavior, and Gen Z'er interviewees possess strong awareness on the value systems of brands which are also concretely and continuously evaluated.

6.2.3 External influences

According to Sahay and Sharma (2010), peers and family highly affect young consumers' brand relationships. While this finding refers to young consumers altogether rather than Gen Z specifically, this claim is found to be very true. Across interview age groups, friends and family were found to be the most important external influences whose suggestions

affect participants brand preferences. While there were some slight mentions on the effects that peers possess, most participants found that "peers" as a larger group do not have a significant acknowledgeable impact on their own consumption. Regarding peers, Sahay and Sharma's (2010) notion about peers' *acceptance* having an impact is more accurate. This is particularly relevant while discussing brands in the negative context. Considering the overall acceptance of peers is more noticeable among participants when the situation concerns engaging with a brand that e.g. has a negative brand image or that has been proven to be involved with unethical or controversial business practices.

Furthermore, literature suggests that parents are the dominating party to influence young consumers' consumption (Martin & Bush 2000). This was somewhat relevant, especially regarding consumption of food and drink brands, as well as adopting traditional media consumption habits. On brands that fit into certain categories – particularly groceries that are accustomed to within the family – many participants describe parents' impact as very persistent and long-lasting. However, when participants were asked to compare the impact of family or friends, friends were commonly agreed to have a more significant effect. Thus, it could be argued that *friends* are the dominating party to influence Gen Z's consumption.

A phenomenon that was found to be contrary to that suggested in literature was the impact of celebrities and social media influencers. For instance, Kirkpatrick and Adams (2017) suggest that over 80 % of Gen Z members are influenced by social media in their purchasing decisions. Additionally, according to OC&C (2019), Gen Z is found to be more influenced by celebrities than older generations. Participants did not recognize celebrities and influencers as someone who would affect their own purchasing decisions. Some said that they have never purchased a product promoted online, or that they, at maximum, may sometimes use a discount code on products that are relevant to them. However, there were mentions that acknowledge the subconscious impact that these influences have: for instance, P5 questions his own perception of this phenomenon and says that "everything affects everything". The 21-year-old participants also discuss their friends who take significant inspiration from certain celebrities. In summary, the interviews did not include a great amount of data that would prove that celebrities and influencers would possess a significant impact on Gen Z's consumption and brand preferences. It is more accurate to

state that the internet overall has an impact. Particularly for the 18-year-old participants, Tiktok is mentioned in numerous different contexts, which suggests that the platform is an example of an online influence that has a significant impact on teenaged Gen Z'ers.

6.2.4 Media consumption

Interview findings on Gen Z's media consumption habits were mostly aligning with suggestions presented in literature. For instance, Chamberlain (2017) highlights the importance of online environments by stating that Gen Z'ers see the digital world and the real world as a "cohesive realm", while Tolstikova et al. (2020) describes this Gen Z characteristic with the term 'phygital', referring to a union of physical and digital realities. This was found to be accurate – interview participants commonly talk about online environments and social media platforms as just another environment of their everyday lives. There is no separation between digital and physical realities, as social media platforms are visited on a daily basis and even play a part in participants' personal relationships. Especially for the 18-year-old participants, it could be stated that online platforms have some level of effect on almost all areas of life.

Gen Z's internet consumption is somewhat similar to the level addressed in the literature review. According to Adobe (2018), Gen Z'ers spend as much as 11 hours online every day. There were notions towards high consumption, as many participants mention to use their phone for 4-6 hours daily – still, none state to consume online material for over 10 hours per day. P1 mentions sometimes using her phone for 9 hours per day while on holiday, and a common reaction across age groups is to dislike the high level of consumption and to wish to lower personal screentime. However, it is important to acknowledge that discussion regarding participants' consumption levels of digital content is focused on social media usage and/or phone screen time. This does not take into account the overall daily hours spent online on other devices, e.g. on a laptop while studying or working. Thus, participants' *actual* daily online content consumption cannot fully be compared to the consumption hours claimed by Adobe (2018), as determining this would require further research across different devices.

In literature, Gen Z is reported to watch internet videos 2,5 times more than TV, while 67 % of Gen Z'ers state that YouTube is a 'must-have' (Spangler 2016). This is likely to be true among respondents, with participants' online consumption levels even exceeding the level that is presented in literature when compared to traditional media consumption. For instance, the highest TV consumption level addressed in interviews is a maximum of one hour per day, and the majority of participants mention YouTube among the most important social media platforms. Overall, there was a significantly clear preference on social media over traditional media for all participants, which is the same notion as that presented in a report conducted by Deloitte (2021). Criteo (2017) suggested that in 2017, younger Gen Z'ers preferred Instagram and Snapchat, while older Gen Z'ers used Facebook. In 2022, Instagram has maintained its strong position across interviewee age groups, as it is reported to be the most popular social media platform for participants – while Snapchat seems to be declining in popularity and relevancy, though still being actively used. Facebook was only mentioned in one interview, by P8 who belongs in the oldest participant age group.

6.3 Managerial implications

Overall, the findings of this research can be utilized by companies targeting Gen Z consumers throughout different fields, while the further scope is on Finnish Gen Z'ers between the ages of 18 and 26. While Gen Z literature is still lacking research on common phenomena, this research provides new and useful information on those elements that Finnish Gen Z'ers base their consumer-brand relationships on. Parts of this both academic literature and qualitative interview findings of this thesis can also be further utilized by media companies facing a turning point between traditional and digital media, as consumers' demands and consumption habits are changing rapidly in the field of media.

A particularly significant discovery for companies is presented by the research findings on Gen Z's values, as they are among the most central drivers for how brands are perceived and which brands are engaged with. The study also provides direct suggestions to brands in the form of Gen Z participants' views on which actions are expected from brands, and which are conversely not tolerated at the risk of boycotting. Supporting sustainable and

ethical values, while still avoiding green and pink washing, are of significant importance for Gen Z. Gen Z'ers strong awareness of global and societal issues allows them to evaluate companies' actions closely, and scandals or disagreeable practices are widely acknowledged. Participants' answers show that brands' mistakes are tolerated, if they are properly corrected afterwards and the brand is transparent and responsible about the mistake.

Furthermore, the study findings highlight the importance of online activity. As both literature and interview findings suggest, Gen Z'ers do not distinguish the online world from the physical world, but rather they are deeply intertwined and online environments have a significant role in Gen Z participants' everyday lives. This raises two main implications: firstly, brands of the present day must be aware that strong online presence is no longer a mere strength, but rather a necessity for reaching young consumers – who are continuously moving away from traditional media channels. Secondly, the internet and social media present Gen Z'ers with an endless access to information on issues and scandals all around the world. This highlights the responsibility and transparency aspect of brands and even their employees, as the internet makes brands' wrongdoings and controversies highly visible and interesting to value-driven young consumers.

6.4 Limitations and future research

The most significant limitation of this research is that participants responded to questions and discussed the themes based on their own interpretation. As the study scope was to examine Gen Z'er participants' attitudes, opinions and values – i.e. abstract concepts – and interviews were conducted in the semi-structured interview format, responses vary based on each participant's communication style and own understanding of the question topic. For instance, for the question about participants' most important social media platforms, some participants only mentioned those few platforms that they perceived as the most important ones, while some mentioned all platforms they use. Another factor to affect the findings is that participants were not asked to prepare before the interviews took place, and interview themes (other than the overall topic of the thesis) were not presented beforehand to the participants. This may cause some scarcity within answers, as several participants

stated during the interview that e.g. they recognize having more specified brand preferences or important personal values, but that it is difficult to remember them on the spot.

This study is also limited in terms of generational differences. As priorly mentioned in the Analysis chapter, a Gen Z'er who states that self-expression is not considered important might refer to an entirely different mindset than a Gen X'er making the same statement. Participants base their answers on their own perceptions of the study themes and given that the interview consists of numerous topics to address, participants were not asked to elaborate and justify their reasoning for every aspect of the study. Thus, the empirical findings of this thesis focus on describing only Gen Z characteristics and consumption habits, but cannot alone be utilized to accurately compare Gen Z'er insights with those of other generations. Findings that would present generalizable differences between generations regarding the themes of this study would require further research, as the conversational nature of the selected research method does not present interview data in a standardizable form.

Furthermore, it should be noted that the interviews include responses from eight participants between the ages of 18 and 26. As such, the findings cannot be used to describe common viewpoints of all Gen Z age groups, which in 2022 include those aged between 12 and 27 according to the definition of Kotler et al. (2014) and Ismail et al. (2021). In addition to the participant quantity and age limitations, it is important to acknowledge the effect that each participant's background has on their value systems, brand preferences and media consumption habits. For instance, all participants above the age of 18 are university students or graduates. This is highly likely to create an undefined level of similarity between participants' answers. Additionally, six out of eight participants reside in the Helsinki Metropolitan Area, which limits a large portion of interview findings to consumers who live in larger cities in Southern Finland.

Following these limitations, comparing answers and perceptions between members of different generational groups would benefit from further research. As such, the research would perhaps need to be conducted in a form more structured than what is selected for

this thesis, as this would increase the level of comparability and standardization between participants' answers.

Furthermore, as this study provides a multifaceted overview of several research topics, each topic could be further researched to expand the understanding of underlying motives and drivers that e.g. cause certain behaviors. An example of such behavior is the detected tendency of favoring the recommendations of family on certain kinds of brands, and friends' recommendations on other kinds. This division could be examined further to help strengthen the understanding of Gen Z's brand relationships even further. The media context – which in this study focuses on analyzing Gen Z's media consumption habits – could benefit from further research on the actual communication habits that Gen Z'ers engage with and expect from brands in online environments.

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APPENDICES

Appendix 1. Interview questions in Finnish

Note: Main questions that were asked from all participants are presented in *black* font. The *gray* font determines supporting questions, that were only added if convenient. However, most of the supporting questions were also included in interviews.

Page 1:

Haastattelukysymykset

<u>Alkuesittely</u>

Omat tiedot (LUT ym.), gradun aihe, toimeksiantaja

<u>Taustatiedot</u>

Anonymiteetti: Haastattelussa kerätyt vastaukset tulevat pro gradu -tutkielmaan anonyymeinä. Vastauksia ja haastateltavien taustatietoja, kuten ikä ja millä alalla opiskelee tai on töissä voidaan yhdistää samaan henkilöön, esimerkiksi "Haastateltava 1". Tarkkoja henkilötietoja, kuten nimeä, asuinkaupunkia, työnantajaa tai opiskelupaikkaa ei gradussa yhdistetä haastateltaviin.

Haastattelu tulee graduun kirjallisessa muodossa. Haastattelu nauhoitetaan litterointivaihetta, eli haastattelun tekstimuotoon siirtämistä varten. Nauhoitteet poistetaan kun niitä ei kirjoitusprosessissa enää tarvita. Voitte lukea gradun sen valmistuttua, linkki lähetetään myöhemmin.

Haastattelun eteneminen: Haastattelussa käydään läpi neljä teemaa. Jos mikään kysymyksistä tai termeistä vaikuttaa epäselvältä, siitä voi aina kysyä vapaasti. *Onko tähän mennessä kysymyksiä?*

Nimi & syntymävuosi:

Tämänhetkinen asuinpaikka (kotikaupunkia ei tarvitse määrittää):

Korkein koulutustaso:

Millä alalla olet tällä hetkellä töissä tai mitä alaa olet opiskellut?

Mistä tunnette toisenne ja kuinka pitkältä ajalta?

Alkuun – **brändin määritelmä**: "Yritysbrändi tarkoittaa kaikkien niiden asioiden summaa, joita olet kuullut, nähnyt tai kokenut tietystä yrityksestä. Käytännössä brändääminen tarkoittaa mielikuvien luomista. Brändi on kokonaisuus, joka muodostuu muun muassa yrityksen maineesta, tarinasta, kulttuurista ja visuaalisesta sisällöstä, sekä asiakkaan mielikuvista, uskomuksista ja asenteista yritystä kohtaan. Nykypäivänä voidaan ajatella, että kaikkien yritysten on brändättävä itseään erottuakseen kilpailijoistaan, ja teoriassa mikä tahansa yritys tai tuote voi olla brändi. Yritysbrändi voi siis viitata sekä maailmanlaajuisesti tunnettuun yritykseen että paikalliseen pienyritykseen. Yritysbrändin lisäksi brändi voi olla esimerkiksi tuotebrändi, jolloin brändiä luodaan yrityksen sijaan yksittäiselle tuotteelle (*esimerkiksi* monet maailmanlaajuisesti tunnetut ruoka- tai juomabrändit) tai henkilöbrändi, jolloin *esimerkiksi* julkisuuden henkilöstä luodaan tiettyjä mielikuvia sisältävä brändi mm. sosiaalisen median avulla."

Page 2:

1. Identiteetti
1A) Osaatko nimetä brändejä joista pidät tai jopa "rakastat"? *Voitko kuvailla mielikuviasi näistä brändeistä tai kertoa miksi pidät niistä?*
1B) Osaatko nimetä brändejä joita välttelet tai jopa "vihaat"? *Voitko kuvailla mielikuviasi näistä brändeistä tai kertoa miksi et pidä niistä?*
1C) Mitkä tai minkälaiset brändit ovat suosittuja omassa kaveripiirissäsi? *Mitkä piirteet tekevät juuri näistä brändeistä suosittuja?*
1D) Miten tärkeää sinulle on ns. massasta erottuminen ja oman persoonan ilmaiseminen?
1E) Miten ilmaiset omaa identiteettiäsi kulutusvalinnoilla?
> *kiertäminen: jos identiteetin ilmaiseminen on tärkeää, miten se vaikuttaa ostopäätöksiin ja siihen minkälaisia tuotteita ja palveluita kulutat omassa elämässäsi?*

2. Ulkoiset vaikutteet
2A) Miten omat sosiaaliset kontaktisi (eli mm. kaverit, perhe, ikätoverit) vaikuttavat siihen, mitä brändejä tai minkälaisia brändejä käytät?
2B) Osaatko nimetä julkkiksia tai some-vaikuttajia joita seuraat? *Mitkä piirteet heissä ovat sinulle mielenkiintoisia?*
2C) Onko julkkiksilla tai some-vaikuttajilla vaikutusta siihen mitä brändejä suosit? Minkälainen vaikutus?
2D) Osaatko mainita julkisuuden henkilöitä tai some-vaikuttajia, joilla on vaikutusta lähipiirisi brändivalintoihin? Millainen vaikutus?
2E) Osaatko nimetä millä ulkoisella taholla on suurin vaikutus siihen, mitä brändejä suosit?

3. Arvot
3A) Kuvaile lyhyesti arvomaailmaasi. Mitkä arvot ja asiat ovat sinulle tärkeitä?
> *kierrettynä: mistä asioista välittää omassa ja muiden toiminnassa, mikä on elämässä tärkeää?*
3B) Jos arvosi näkyvät omassa kulutuksessasi, miten?
3C) Millaisia arvoja yrityksellä mielestäsi "kuuluu olla" nykypäivänä? *Millainen toiminta tai millaiset arvot yrityksillä eivät ole ok? Keksitkö tällaisista yrityksistä esimerkkejä?*

4. Media
4A) Mitkä ovat sinulle tärkeimpiä sosiaalisen median kanavia tai sovelluksia? *Mitä sisältöjä kulutat näissä kanavissa? Kauanko arvioit käyttäväsi niihin aikaa päivä- tai viikkotasolla?*
> (*kierrettynä: esim. jos käytät jotain kanavaa vain yhteydenpitoon, jotain vain viihtymiseen, jotain tiedon hakemiseen...*)
4B) Paljonko arvioit käyttäväsi perinteistä mediaa (eli ei nettimateriaali vaan esim. TV, lehdet, radio) viikkotasolla? *Minkälaista sisältöä erityisesti etsit kun käytät perinteisen median kanavia? Mitä lähteitä käytät uutisten lukemiseen, kuuntelemiseen tai katseluun?*
4C) Missä alustaa tai sovellusta käytät mieluiten videomateriaalin kuluttamiseen?
4D) Mitä mielikuvia Ylen brändi herättää? Pidätkö Yleä omaan käyttöösi soveltuvana ja miksi pidät / miksi et?

Appendix 2. Interview questions translated into English

Page 1:

Interview questions – English translations

<u>Introduction</u>

Interviewer's personal information (LUT etc.), topic of the thesis, commissioner company

<u>Background information</u>

> *Anonymity:* The answers gathered from this interview will be included in the Master's thesis as anonymous. The answers and interviewees' background information, such as age and the field of studies or work may be connected to the same person, e.g. "Participant 1". Specific personal information, such as name, city of residence, employer or place of studies will not be connected to the participants.

> This interview will be included in the thesis in written form. The interview is recorded for transcription purposes, which refers to converting the interview into text. The recordings will be deleted once they are no longer needed in the writing process. You may read the thesis after it has been finalized, a link will be sent to you later.

> *The course of the interview:* The interview consists of four themes. If any of the questions or concepts seem unclear, you can always ask for clarification. *Do you have any questions at this point?*

Name and year of birth:

Current area of residence (specified city not required):

Highest level of education:

Occupation – in what field do you currently work in or which field have you studied?

How do you know each other and for how long?

To begin – **<u>definition of a brand</u>**: "A corporate brand refers to the sum of all things you have heard, seen or experienced regarding a certain company. In practice, branding refers to creating mental images. A brand is a combination of e.g. the company's reputation, story, culture and visual content, as well as the customer's perceptions, beliefs and attitudes towards the company. In the present day, it can be said that all companies must brand themselves in order to differentiate from competitors, and in theory, any company or product can be a brand. Thus, a corporate brand may refer to both globally known companies and to small local companies. In addition to corporate brands, a brand may be e.g. a product brand, where the brand is created for a singular product instead of a company (such as many globally known food and drink brands), or a personal brand, where an image consisting of certain perceptions is created for e.g. a celebrity, for instance by utilizing social media."

Page 2:

1. Identity
1A) Can you name brands that you like of even "love"? *Could you describe your conception of these brands or explain why you like them?*
1B) Can you name brands that you avoid of even "hate"? *Could you describe your conception of these brands or explain why you dislike them?*
1C) What brands or what kind of brands are popular within your own friend group? *Which characteristics make these brands particularly popular?*
1D) How important is it for you to "stand out from the crowd" and to express your personality?
1E) How do you express your own identity through consumption decisions?
> (*I.e. if it is important for you to express your personality, how does it affect your purchasing decisions?*)

2. External influences
2A) How do your personal social contacts (such as friends, family, peers) affect which brands or what type of brands you use?
2B) Can you name celebrities or social media influencers that you follow? *Which characteristics make them interesting to you?*
2C) Do celebrities or social media influencers affect your brand preferences? What kind of an effect is that?
2D) Can you name celebrities or social media influencers that affect the brand preferences of your inner circle? What kind of an effect is that?
2E) Can you name a singular external influence that would have the most significant effect on your brand preferences?

3. Values
3A) Shortly describe your values. Which values and things are important to you?
> (*I.e. what are the things that hold importance in your own actions and in the actions of others; what are the things that are important in your life?*)

3B) If your values are visible in your consumption, how?
3C) What kind of values do companies "have to have" in the present day? *What kind of actions or what kind of values are not OK for companies to have? Can you think of examples of such companies?*

4. Media
4A) What are the most important social media platforms for you? *What kind of content do you consume on these platforms? For how long do you estimate that you use these platforms on a daily or weekly basis?*
> (*I.e. if you, for instance, use a certain platform solely for communication, another for entertainment, another for gaining information...*)

4B) For how long do you estimate that you use traditional media (excluding online material, including e.g. TV, newspapers and magazines, radio) on a weekly basis? *What kind of content do you particularly search for when using traditional media channels? What sources do you use for reading, listening to or watching the news?*
4C) What is your favorite platform for consuming video content?
4D) What is your perception of Yle's brand? Do you perceive Yle as suitable for your own use and why / why not?