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Beauty and the Brand

A Study About Relationships Between Consumers and Cosmetic Brands

by

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Abstract

Title: Beauty and the Brand: A Study About Relationships Between Consumers and Cosmetic Brands

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Keywords: Cosmetics, cosmetic brands, consumer-brand relationships, brand loyalty.

Background: In today's consumption society, there is an endless amount of cosmetic brands to choose from. Moreover, the global consumption of cosmetics continues to increase, both among male and female consumers, and new cosmetic brands are constantly entering the marketplace. Despite this, little is known about the relationships between consumers and cosmetic brands (consumer-brand relationships).

Aim: The aim of this study is to gain a nuanced understanding of the consumer-brand relationships that cosmetic brands give rise to. More specifically, this study aims to answer the following research question; *what relationships do males and females have with cosmetic brands and what are the characteristics of these?*

Methodology: To reach the aim, an abductive research approach was adopted and qualitative data was collected. In total, 14 semi-structured interviews with equally many male and female consumers between the ages of 20-60 were conducted. The empirical findings were analysed with the use of theory (consumer-brand relationships, brand loyalty, and gender) to draw conclusions. To explain the relationships consumers have with cosmetic brands in detail (their characteristics), relationship metaphors were used.

Findings/Conclusion: In total, 21 different consumer-brand relationships were identified; eight strong, eight casual, and five weak. Both male and female consumers of different ages were found to have strong, casual, and weak relationships with cosmetic brands. Stronger relationships are characterised by higher behavioural and mental brand loyalty. In contrast, brand loyalty is lower in weaker relationships. Overall, no distinct differences could be seen when examining the relationships that males and females have with cosmetic brands. Hence, despite the fact that the cosmetics industry is still highly gender-biased and female-oriented, males are also found to form strong relationships with cosmetic brands.

Contributions: This study contributes to brand and consumer behaviour literature, as well as gender studies. A novel understanding of contemporary consumers' consumption of cosmetic brands and their relationship with cosmetic brands is presented. Moreover, 12 novel consumer-brand relationship metaphors were developed, which extend Fournier's (1998) original consumer-brand relationship typology.

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1. Introduction

This chapter introduces the topic of this study and highlights its relevance. To begin with, background information is given. Then, the research problem and the identified research gap is discussed. Following this, the defined research question is presented and the aim of the study is explained. Lastly, delimitations and the outline of the thesis are stated.

1.1 Background

The light is dazzling and the various scents are strong, but also indistinct. You feel lost and confused. No wonder, since you just stepped into the jungle. However, this is not just any jungle. It is the cosmetics jungle. In fact, you just entered the local department store, and in front of you, there are hundreds of cosmetic brands and products, from floor to ceiling, to choose from. Where do you start and how do you choose? More specifically, which brand or brands speak to you? And why? In today's consumption society, the options are endless. Furthermore, new cosmetic brands constantly enter the market, while established brands continue to launch new products at a rapid pace. In addition, most cosmetic brands and products communicate almost the same message and promise consumers similar results. Hence, the cosmetics jungle is a fact.

Cosmetics have been used for thousands of years (Cosmetics Info, 2021). However, with time, consumption patterns have changed and in today's society, cosmetics are present in most people's everyday life. Moreover, in recent years, the global consumption of cosmetics has further increased. The rise of social media, specifically Instagram and YouTube, has had a great impact on the increasing demand for cosmetics (Biron, 2019; Ridder, 2020). Lately, skincare consumption has accelerated and is said to be the leading category, closely followed by hair care and makeup (Ridder, 2020). This is also evident, as the amount of cosmetic brands and products available in the market has exploded.

In 2020, the value of the global cosmetics market was 569.4 billion USD and it is predicted to reach 758 billion USD by 2025 (Statista, 2021a). The cosmetics industry comprises several product categories, usually divided into skincare, makeup (colour cosmetics), hair care, fragrances, and toiletries (personal care). These products are also referred to as fast-moving consumer goods (FMCG), hence, products that are sold/bought quickly/frequently at a relatively low cost/price (Statista, 2021b). FMCG industries, including the cosmetics industry, are further known to be competitive, as they consist of many brands. Although hundreds of cosmetic brands exist, most brands are owned and managed by a few large cosmetics companies, with L'Oréal being the leader (Ridder, 2020).

The cosmetics industry and the majority of today's cosmetic brands and products specifically target women or female consumers (Najem & Puolakka, 2020; O'Neill, 2019). Thus, cosmetics, both consumption and research regarding the topic, is a highly female-oriented field. However, the consumption of cosmetics among men has steadily increased throughout the past decades, and many brands are now becoming more gender-inclusive (Arnett, 2019; Carefoot, 2020; Matlin, 2020; Najem & Puolakka, 2020; O'Neill, 2019; Simon, 2018; Warfield, 2019). According to Statista (2021c), men's grooming habits have changed and

they are now consuming more cosmetic products than ever. Not only is male cosmetic consumption becoming more normalised, but the number of product categories advertised towards men or males is also increasing (Statista, 2021c). Despite this, the cosmetics industry is still gender-biased and cosmetics are often regarded as feminine products (Najem & Puolakka, 2020; Visconti, Maclaran & Bettany, 2018).

As explained by Gillbro (2019), cosmetics are used for various reasons and because of the wide array of products available in today's marketplace, the functional aspects are numerous. Nevertheless, cosmetics are commonly used to change and/or enhance appearance (Gillbro, 2019). Makeup is for example often used to alter facial features, while skincare and hair care are further used to clean, hydrate, and improve skin or hair quality (Gillbro, 2019). Moreover, perfume and products within the fragrance category are used because of their appealing scent and to mask body odour (Gillbro, 2019).

Thus, consumers apply cosmetics and specific cosmetic brands to various body parts. Hence, as with fashion, it can be seen as an extension of self (Belk, 1988), as well as a resource in identity construction (Elliot & Wattanasuwan, 1998). Nevertheless, cosmetics differ from fashion in the sense that it is difficult, if not impossible, for anyone to actually see which cosmetic brand someone "wears". In spite of this, consumers are found to have strong brand preferences when it comes to cosmetics (Clark, Carmichael & Alexov, 2019; Guthrie & Kim, 2009; Papista & Dimitriadis, 2012). Some consumers also express high levels of loyalty towards cosmetic brands (Hodge, González Romo, Garcia Medina & Fionda-Douglas, 2015; Papista & Dimitriadis, 2012; Tuncay Zayer & Neier, 2011). However, studies about brand loyalty and the importance of the brand in regard to cosmetics are still conflicting (Clark, Carmichael & Alexov, 2019; Hodge et al. 2015; Kates, 2000; Tuncay Zayer & Neier, 2011).

While the consumption of cosmetics has increased and the market for cosmetics has expanded, the value of brands has become a common topic in business, among consumers, and in academia. From a consumer perspective, brands can be valuable in several ways. First, brands tend to simplify choice (Ekström & Gianneschi, 2017), for example, when choosing among the many cosmetic products in the store. Moreover, brands can offer symbolic (identity) value, as well as social value (Ekström, Ottosson & Parment, 2017; Elliott & Wattanasuwan, 1998; Klasson, 2017). As mentioned, brands are also used in identity construction, and people use brands to create and express identities (Ekström, Ottosson & Parment, 2017; Elliott & Wattanasuwan, 1998; Klasson, 2017). This is also true in regard to cosmetics, where consumers are found to use specific cosmetic brands as a tool to express themselves (Rudd, 1997), or their status through the use of luxury cosmetic brands (Chao & Schor, 1998). Consumers are further found to establish various bonds with the brands that they consume, which are referred to as consumer-brand relationships (Aaker, 2021; Fournier, 1998).

To understand consumer behaviour and consumption, questions regarding brand attitudes, preferences, and loyalty are often highlighted in consumer research. However, to gain a rich understanding of contemporary consumers and consumption, studying the relationships

between consumers and brands (consumer-brand relationships) is key (Bertilsson, 2017). Arguably, this is also important in regard to cosmetics, since it is used on a daily basis, and because of the increase in cosmetics consumption and its projected growth. Moreover, the concept of consumer-brand relationships further links to brand loyalty and relationship marketing, as different types of consumer-brand relationships can indicate consumers' levels of loyalty to a brand (Aaker, 2021; Bertilsson, 2017; Fournier, 1998). Thus, consumer-brand relationships, in the context of cosmetics, are highly relevant from a managerial perspective, as well as from a research perspective. Despite this, consumer-brand relationships in relation to cosmetics have received limited attention.

1.2 Problematisation

Research about the consumption of cosmetics is found to be rather broad. However, based on the literature review (chapter two), it is evident that little is known about the relationships that consumers have with cosmetic brands. Previous research discussing consumers' relationship with brands have briefly touched upon cosmetics. Moreover, the few studies conducted in this field have mainly included a female perspective. Arguably, no gender-inclusive study, including both a male and female perspective, has been made and an in-depth understanding of the phenomenon is therefore missing.

As stated, the cosmetics industry has long been female-oriented. However, male consumption of cosmetics has increased and men have started to pay more attention to their appearance (McNeill & Douglas, 2011; McNeill & Firman, 2014; Sayon, Florêncio de Almedia & Ponchio, 2020; Souiden & Diagne, 2009; Statista, 2021c). Thus, a shift in the male consumption of cosmetics has been noticed. Even though this shift has been present for quite some time, academic research in this area is still focused on females. Alongside this, most cosmetic brands target women or females, despite the growing market for men or males. Due to this, there is also a gap in research on male consumers relation to cosmetics and cosmetic brands, as well as on the comparison between males and females. With this study, we intend to address these gaps.

Since men/males are often excluded in studies about cosmetics, this study will decrease the present inequality in the field. As a result, the remaining stigma around male consumption of cosmetics may further reduce. Ultimately, this study is also valuable for consumers of cosmetics, specifically men or those that identify as males.

Moreover, it is important for managers and marketers to know how to brand and market their cosmetics in today's society, to further target consumers in the most appropriate way. Hence, due to changes in attitudes and consumption, it becomes essential for managers and marketers to understand how consumers relate to cosmetic brands when marketing and positioning their brands and products in the current cosmetics jungle. Thus, from a managerial perspective, it is also valuable to conduct a study investigating consumers' relationships with cosmetic brands.

Lastly, quantitative methods have often been used in the past when trying to approach this subject. However, consumer behaviour, and specifically consumer-brand relationships, is a complex field. Thus, qualitative research methods are needed to study this topic. Therefore, this study will use a qualitative research strategy.

In summary, it is highly relevant to study consumer-brand relationships in different contexts to gain an in-depth understanding of contemporary consumers and consumption. Until now, no studies have examined consumer-brand relationships, including both male and female consumers, within the field of cosmetics. Because of this, and due to the increasing consumption of cosmetics and the growing industry, this is an important gap to fill.

1.3 Research Question

With consumer insights, the aim of this study is to answer the research question presented below. By doing this, we attempt to contribute to the existing brand and consumer behaviour literature and present practical advice. Consequently, the question provides a focus in the study. The question is defined based on the fact that little is known about the relationships between consumers and cosmetic brands. Moreover, the question is posed since today's marketing and branding of cosmetics is still stereotypical and gendered. Hence, one can expect differences in the relationships that males and females have with cosmetic brands.

RQ: What relationships do males and females have with cosmetic brands and what are the characteristics of these?

1.4 Research Aim and Intended Contributions

As marketing and brand management students, and daily users of cosmetics, we find the topic of consumer-brand relationships highly interesting. However, as stated above, this topic is also important to address to gain a rich understanding of today's consumption society and consumption of cosmetics. New insights within this field would contribute to the existing brand and consumer behaviour literature, by adding new perspectives on consumer-brand relationships and the value of brands.

Hence, the aim of this study is to gain a nuanced understanding of the consumer-brand relationships that cosmetic brands give rise to. Consequently, our empirical findings could result in a novel understanding of how consumers navigate the cosmetics jungle and why they choose specific cosmetic brands. Moreover, we intend to study both male and female consumers. Therefore, this study may also contribute to the field of gender studies. Additionally, including a male perspective is crucial as their consumption of cosmetics is on the rise. In the end, this study could also lead to valuable and practical insights for marketing and brand managers within the growing cosmetics industry. Our findings may also be applicable to similar industries.

In summary, this study will explore and analyse the relationships that exist between consumers and cosmetic brands. Both men and women (male and female consumers) of different ages will be included in the study. This approach is adopted to gain a broader

understanding and to investigate if there is any difference between the two. Thus, the goal is to gain new consumer insights, to further reduce the current research gap, and to provide practical implications. This will be done by conducting a qualitative study, which includes collecting and analysing primary data about consumers.

1.5 Delimitations

In this study, a consumer perspective is adopted. Hence, the purpose is to understand consumers and their consumption. With consumer insights, theoretical contributions could be made. Moreover, practical advice can be provided. However, the purpose of the study is not to develop a new framework for how managers should target consumers of cosmetics.

Additionally, to narrow down the scope, the participants (consumers) in this study were mainly asked about their consumption of cosmetic brands in four categories; skincare, makeup, hair care, and fragrances. Consumers tend to use a variety of hygiene products, for example, soap and toothpaste, without further consideration. Moreover, these products are often shared with family members or other people in the same household. Due to this, the participants were not explicitly asked about toiletries (personal care). However, some participants mentioned brands in this category. Therefore, this category is not completely excluded from the study.

Finally, with this study, the purpose is to gain a broader (more gender-inclusive) understanding of consumers' relationship with cosmetic brands. Thus, both men and women (male and female consumers) in different age groups are included. Nevertheless, as this is a qualitative study, it does not cover consumers with all possible demographic combinations. In addition, due to the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR), sensitive personal data is not collected and processed. Therefore, information about consumers' sexual orientation is not gathered. Hence, this aspect is excluded from this study. Because of the same reason, the participants' monthly income is not disclosed.

1.6 Outline of the Thesis

This thesis is divided into seven chapters. The first chapter is an introduction. In this chapter, the research problem, the research question, and the aim of the study is stated. In the second chapter, the literature review is presented. Then, in chapter three, the theoretical framework used throughout this study is explained. In chapter four, the methodology is described in detail and its strengths and weaknesses are discussed. Afterwards, in chapter five, the empirical findings are presented. The findings are then further discussed in chapter six. Lastly, in chapter seven, conclusions are made. Practical implications, the limitations of the study, and suggestions for future research are also presented in the final chapter.

2. Literature Review

This chapter presents existing literature and previous research related to the topic of this study. First, marketing and branding of cosmetics, and how this affects consumers, are discussed. Secondly, previous studies about the consumption of cosmetics are explained. As this field is rather female-oriented, a male perspective is highlighted. Then, research about consumer-brand relationships is presented, focusing on what has been done in relation to cosmetics. Moreover, since consumer-brand relationships link to brand loyalty, a section is devoted to the conflicting findings regarding cosmetics and brand loyalty. Finally, a summary of the review is made, where previous research is criticised and gaps are identified.

2.1 Marketing and Branding of Cosmetics

As mentioned, the cosmetics industry is highly female-oriented and most cosmetic brands and products target women or female consumers. Moreover, the marketing of cosmetics has long been gender-stereotypical (Carefoot, 2020; Del Saz-Rubio, 2019; Najem & Puolakka, 2020; Simon, 2018). Despite changes in consumption and demand, most cosmetic brands still distinguish between women/females and men/males (Arnett, 2019; Carefoot, 2020; Del Saz-Rubio, 2019; Najem & Puolakka, 2020; Simon, 2018). Hence, products intended for men or males are often marked as “for men” and stereotypical colours are used (Arnett, 2019; Carefoot, 2020; Najem & Puolakka, 2020; Simon, 2018). In general, cosmetics packaging for men or males are also commonly seen in dark blue and black, while feminine colours, hence, red, pink, and pastels, are used for products targeting women or females (Carefoot, 2020; Najem & Puolakka, 2020; Simon, 2018). The language used is also different, where one can observe that brands use feminine or masculine words depending on the targeted consumer (Bai, 2018; Najem & Puolakka, 2020).

Recently, Del Saz-Rubio (2019) conducted a study investigating how male identities are portrayed in today’s advertising of male cosmetics. She concluded that the studied ads relied on gender stereotypes and traditional gender roles. Thus, she claims that the ads do not reflect reality as gender roles are becoming more fluid, and to be a “man” in today’s society is not what it used to be. Instead, it can take many forms (Del Saz-Rubio, 2019). In spite of this, contemporary advertising is not in line with the changes in society (Del Saz-Rubio, 2019). Clark, Carmichael, and Alexov (2019) support this and argue that both advertising and media need to catch up in order to reflect today’s more inclusive beauty standards. Ultimately, the misalignment could have a negative impact on younger generations and contribute to unhealthy ideals (Del Saz-Rubio, 2019). This is also echoed by Frith (2016), who claims that advertising maintains stereotypical gender roles, which influences young consumers.

Previous research has further shown that women tend to regularly purchase cosmetic products for men in their surroundings (McNeill & Douglas, 2011; Najem & Puolakka, 2020; Pilelienė & Grigaliūnaitė, 2018). As explained, because of the overall female presence in the cosmetics market, the majority of the marketing and advertising is aimed towards women. In their study, Pilelienė and Grigaliūnaitė (2018, p.107) therefore state that “[t]he target segment for cosmetics for men are women. Therefore, successful promotional campaigns have to follow “women thinking” and have to emphasize product features which would be important to

women”. On the contrary, McNeill and Douglas (2011) argue that younger men rate the branding and image of cosmetic products as of rather high importance. The participants in their study thought that branding cosmetics as being especially for men were important as it made it clear and easy to identify which products are intended for male use.

With societal changes, highly stereotypical marketing, advertising, and branding are questioned and criticised (Arnett, 2019; Carefoot, 2020; Del Saz-Rubio, 2019; Matlin, 2020; Najem & Puolakka, 2020; O’Neill, 2019; Simon, 2018). Therefore, industries, specifically the cosmetics industry, which are found to be gender-biased, are under pressure. As a result, stereotypical tendencies within the cosmetics industry is slowly fading, and overall it has become more inclusive, both in terms of gender, age, ethnicity, race, skin colour, and body shapes (Arnett, 2019; Carefoot, 2020; Matlin, 2020; O’Neill, 2019; Simon, 2018; Warfield, 2019). Consequently, gender-neutral cosmetic brands, products, and advertisements have increased.

In 2004, the cosmetic brand Dove launched its first *Real Beauty* campaign, challenging gender roles and social expectations of women (Unilever, 2017; Visconti, Maclaran & Bettany, 2018). The campaign has become a part of Dove’s current brand message. However, it also received mixed feedback from the public and has been discussed widely since then. A similar example is the well-known razor brand Gillette. In 2019, Gillette addressed *toxic masculinity* in their advertisement for male razors (Topping, Lyons & Weaver, 2019). This initiative has also been criticised by both consumers and the media, as Gillette is known for their rather gendered brands, products, and marketing strategies (Topping, Lyons & Weaver, 2019).

2.2 Consumption of Cosmetics

As stated, the usage of cosmetics has increased and the number of cosmetic brands and products available in the marketplace has exploded. Over the years, the consumption of cosmetics has also been studied from several angles. Previous research has highlighted both the functional and symbolic reasons for using cosmetics. Factors influencing consumers’ purchasing and consumption behaviour have also been investigated.

In 1985, Rook explained consumer behaviour and rituals. In his article, he presented two studies focusing on young adults grooming rituals. The findings showed that the use of cosmetics is often ritualised. Similarly, Rudd (1997) studied females and found that their consumption of cosmetics is highly ritualised. The ritualised acts gave the females a sense of cultural power and social agency. Hence, cosmetics were used as a tool in identity construction and transformation of the self. Moreover, consumption of cosmetics gave rise to social comparison, both among females and with advertisements. El Jurdi and Smith (2017) further argue that women use cosmetics to adhere to beauty ideals and socially constructed norms. However, Rook (1985), Rudd (1997), and El Jurdi and Smith (2017) mainly focused on cosmetic products as is and did not examine the importance of different cosmetic brands.

Regarding social identity, the use of luxury cosmetic brands has been studied. Chao and Schor (1998) showed that female students favoured luxury cosmetic brands, which were used in social settings as a status marker. Nevertheless, income, education, place of residence, and race influenced the consumption of more expensive cosmetics. Ajitha and Sivakumar (2017), identified similar results among women in India. Consequently, these findings indicate that high-end cosmetic brands are used to express identity or desired identity. Thus, despite the fact that other people may not be able to identify which cosmetic brand someone “wears”, the brand can still play an important role for consumers. As a matter of fact, consumers are known to purchase and consume brands and products that they identify with, whether this has to do with beliefs, values, taste, gender, or something else (Belk, 1988; Ekström, Ottosson & Parment, 2017; Neale, Robbie & Martin, 2016; Reed, Forehand, Puntoni & Warlop, 2012).

In terms of functional and visual aspects, clinical studies of using cosmetics and certain skincare products and ingredients have increased on a global scale (Gillbro, 2019). New findings are constantly published, although many studies show conflicting results. While some products and ingredients are said to improve skin quality among individuals with specific skin types, other studies state the opposite, or no significant improvement (Davis, 2019; Gillbro, 2019; SVT, 2021). Thus, the actual effect of using certain cosmetics is often questioned (Davis, 2019; Gillbro, 2019; SVT, 2021). Consequently, the promises made by marketers and advertising of cosmetics are criticised for being misleading or even false (CTVNews, 2015; Davis, 2019; FDA, 2015; Gillbro, 2019; Lee & Childs, 2020; SVT, 2021). Most clinical studies within cosmetics are further conducted on females (Gillbro, 2019), again highlighting the gender-biased field.

With the growing awareness of sustainability-related issues and consumers becoming more conscious, a stream of research regarding green cosmetics has also appeared (Bom, Jorge, Ribeiro & Marto, 2019; Hee & Jae-Eun, 2011). In fact, many consumers search for cosmetic brands and products that are environmentally friendly, organic, natural, vegan, and/or cruelty-free (Biron, 2019; Danziger, 2019; Davis, 2019). Hence, toxic and harmful ingredients are avoided, as well as brands that do not address sustainability aspects and animal rights or welfare (Biron, 2019; Danziger, 2019; Davis, 2019).

2.2.1 Consumption of Cosmetics and Gender

Arguably, cosmetics is a highly gender-biased field. Despite the growing market for male and gender-neutral cosmetics, most cosmetic brands and products still target women or female consumers. This has ultimately impacted the research related to cosmetics, and women are mainly studied in this context. However, with changes in consumer behaviour, demand, and market dynamics, some studies have taken a male perspective. Nevertheless, a gender-neutral perspective is still scarce.

Regarding gender-neutral cosmetics, Najem and Puolakka (2020) investigated consumer’s attitudes towards the advertisement of gender-neutral skincare. A cross-cultural approach was adopted, including Finnish and Lebanese consumers. Findings confirmed that gender identity influences attitudes and purchase behaviour. Moreover, cultural differences were supported.

In conclusion, the authors state that future studies addressing gender-neutral cosmetics and advertisements are needed as consumption of this is growing.

2.2.2 Male Consumption of Cosmetics

In regard to male consumption of cosmetics, Souiden and Diagne (2009) conducted a cross-cultural study on Canadian and French men. The purpose of the study was to compare men's attitudes and motivations towards cosmetics. In general, French men were more positive towards using cosmetics. Moreover, French and Canadian men were found to have different motivations for consuming cosmetics. However, in terms of grooming products, both groups were highly influenced by physical attractiveness and advertising. In conclusion, consumer behaviour was argued to differ between markets where specific products are at different stages in the life cycle.

Contrary to Souiden and Diagne's (2009) findings, McNeill and Douglas (2011) found that the majority of the males in their study justified their consumption by stating that they use cosmetic products because of their functionality, and not to improve appearance. The researchers also interviewed industry experts, who further agreed to these claims and explained that women are often looking for ways to improve their appearance, while men are more likely to search for functional remedies, for example, an aftershave to prevent razor rashes. McNeill and Douglas (2011) state that this is often done as a means to protect their masculine identity. The importance of functionality is further emphasised in McNeill and Firman's study from 2014.

McNeill and Douglas (2011) findings further showed an increase in the awareness and emphasis on appearance and self-image among males. A key factor resulting in this increase was pressure from society, leading boys to become more aware of their looks at a younger age. Furthermore, the males experienced that social ideals have shifted to focus on appearance, and therefore, threaten the traditional male image and gender roles. In addition, female family members and friends were found to have a large impact on the buying behaviour, both through the introduction phase of various cosmetic products and through the actual purchase stage (McNeill & Douglas, 2011). In fact, women were found to purchase cosmetics for men to use.

McNeill and Firman (2014) further argue that male consumption of cosmetics has become more common and accepted, mainly among younger men as older men have grown up during a time when women, in general, cared more about their looks than men. Furthermore, factors influencing younger men to care about their looks were found to be "social comparison, media ideal, functionality and emphasis on specific body areas" (p.139). In contrast, the factors influencing the older men were "influential others, health and lifestyle and specific focus on flat stomach" (p.140).

In addition, Pilelienė and Grigaliūnaitė (2018) investigated which factors men and women find important when purchasing male cosmetics for men to use. The findings showed that certain factors, such as price, advertising, and recommendations, were of similar importance

to both men and women. Other factors, for example, the brand and the habit of using the product, were more important to the men, whereas the scent and the promotion of the product were higher ranked among the women. Pilelienė and Grigaliūnaitė further examined men and women's involvement in the purchasing process of cosmetic products for men. The results showed that while the majority of the men bought their own cosmetics products, it was also common that they either received cosmetics as a gift or that women, for example, a mother, wife, or friend, purchased the products for them.

Recently, Sayon, Florêncio de Almedia, and Ponchio (2020) highlighted the fact that research on male consumption of cosmetics is scarce, although men consume more cosmetics than ever. Hence, they conducted a systematic literature review on the topic, which was followed by a quantitative study on Brazilian men's consumption of cosmetics. The study showed that vanity and masculinity have a positive impact on consumption, while income constraints consumption. However, lower-income men were found to consume more cosmetics than high-income men. Thus, they advise managers to target this segment, which showed a larger interest in cosmetics. In contrast, findings were that age and marital status do not affect consumption. Therefore, they concluded that older generations are also using cosmetics on a frequent basis. Moreover, they discovered that single men do not necessarily use more cosmetics than those in a steady relationship.

2.3 Consumer-Brand Relationships

In 1998, Fournier conducted a study including three in-depth interviews with women in different age groups. The purpose of the study was to analyse the relationships that the women had formed with brands that they consumed. Fournier's findings resulted in a typology consisting of 15 different consumer-brand relationship forms (see Table 1 in chapter three, p.21).

Hence, Fournier's (1998) study highlights that consumers often establish specific bonds with brands, some of which are very strong. Thus, high levels of brand loyalty can be present. She also argues that strong consumer-brand relationships can influence how people define themselves. The interviews conducted in her study further showed that, despite differences between the women, each individual had "an interconnected web of brands that contributed to the enactment, exploration, or resolution of centrally held identity issues" (p.359).

Since its publication, Fournier's (1998) typology has been used in various contexts to study consumers' relationship with brands. It has also been used to explore brand attitudes and loyalty among consumers. For example, consumers' relationships with fashion and luxury brands have been studied (Ekström, Ottosson & Parment, 2017; Hanslin & Rindell, 2014; Hwang & Kandampully, 2012), and consumer-brand relationships in regard to brand activist campaigns (Jørgensen & Omar, 2020). As a result, new consumer-brand relationship forms have been identified and suggested as extensions to Fournier's original typology.

Previous research has also explored how different demographic factors impact consumer-brand relationships. Differences in gender, age, and sexual orientation have been

examined. For instance, Kates (2000) studied homosexual men's relationships with brands. He discovered three novel consumer-brand relationship forms; "community members", "political allies", and "political enemies" (p.506). Hence, this extended Fournier's (1998) typology with new dimensions related to the gay community, power, and politics.

Sahay, Sharma, and Mehta (2012) further confirmed that both men and women establish relationships with brands. However, among younger age groups, they found that women's relationships were more based on affect. In contrast, men's relationships were instead more cognition-based. With age, differences between men and women were found to decrease. The authors state that women's relationships with brands become more functional as they become older. Nawaz, Jiang, Alam, and Nawaz (2020) also studied how gender and age affect consumer-brand relationships. They concluded that brand loyalty differs somewhat among males and females. Overall, females expressed higher levels of brand loyalty than males. In addition, older consumers developed stronger loyalty towards their beloved brands compared to younger consumers.

2.3.1 Consumer-Brand Relationships and Cosmetics

Fournier's (1998) study did not focus on the consumption of cosmetics or cosmetic brands. However, she found that the women in her study did form relationships with some of the cosmetic brands that they used. For example, one of the women indicated that she had a special connection to Estée Lauder, while another woman had a highly emotional bond with a cosmetic brand called Mary Kay. Despite this, consumer-brand relationships in relation to cosmetics were not examined in detail.

However, another study by Guthrie and Kim (2009) investigated female students' involvement with cosmetics and their perception of cosmetic brands. It was argued that brand personality affects brand attitude and that one can gain an understanding of brand perceptions by segmenting consumers into different cosmetic involvement types. These findings align with Fournier's (1998) study as she further claims that consumers tend to assign personality traits to brands. Arguably, consumers relate more easily to brands with human-like characteristics (Fournier, 1998). This phenomenon, hence, humanising a brand, has also become a common strategy among marketers.

In her article, Fournier (1998) also presented the so-called Brand Relationship Quality (BRQ) model, which includes the building blocks of a strong consumer-brand relationship. She explains that six factors are important in terms of strong relationships; love and passion, self-connection, commitment, interdependence, intimacy, and brand partner quality. Papista and Dimitriadis (2012) support several of these factors. In their study on female cosmetic consumers, they state that "trust, commitment, satisfaction, love and intimacy" (p.46) are important elements in a strong consumer-brand relationship. They specifically show that the strength of the relationship is affected by the satisfaction of the brand. Moreover, their results showed that age affects the quality of the relationship and that younger women tend to be more committed and enthusiastic about their favourite cosmetic brands. In contrast, the

authors claim that interdependence is less important, which Fournier (1998) argues to be a vital aspect.

Tuncay Zayer and Neier (2011) further highlighted a gap in the literature and conducted an explorative study of young heterosexual men's relationships with fashion and grooming products and services. Their aim was to test Fournier's (1998) typology in a new context. They found 13 out of the 15 relationship forms developed by Fournier. In addition, they proposed three new consumer-brand relationships; "cheap dates", "mentors", and "business partners" (p.95-96). The main limitation of their study is that only young (between 25 and 32 years of age) heterosexual men were studied. Moreover, both fashion and grooming products and services were studied. Thus, cosmetics were not in focus.

At a later stage, Hodge et al. (2015) studied the relationships between female consumers and luxury cosmetic brands. They identified 14 out of the 15 consumer-brand relationship forms presented by Fournier (1998) within the luxury domain. In addition, they also argue that interdependency is needed between consumers and brands for a relationship to exist. Moreover, they state that the personality of the brand has a vital impact on the relationship. In conclusion, their findings support the argument that brands can serve as legitimate partners. Despite this, the researchers state that larger studies, as well as studies in other contexts, should be undertaken to further validate their results.

Finally, Trudeau and Shobeiri (2016) studied how cosmetic brand experience (the brands' experimental benefits) and brand transformational benefits (self-expression and self-esteem) impact consumer-brand relationships. Their research included both men and women and they found that consumers' brand experience and self-expression have a positive impact on the relationship. Furthermore, they argue that consumers find brand experiences more important than transformational benefits. Thus, consumers were found to search for cosmetic brands that offer certain experiences, which further strengthens the consumer-brand relationship.

2.4 Cosmetics and Brand Loyalty

Overall, academic research regarding brand loyalty of cosmetics is scarce. Moreover, the limited studies addressing the topic show varied results. Some studies state that the brand is important and that consumers have strong brand preferences, while other studies indicate that the brand itself is not important to consumers (Clark, Carmichael & Alexov, 2019; Guthrie & Kim, 2009; Hodge et al. 2015; Papista & Dimitriadis, 2012; Rudd, 1997). As a matter of fact, the plethora of brand options available today is said to lead to low brand preferences (Guthrie & Kim, 2009).

Nevertheless, a few studies have reported that consumers express high loyalty to cosmetic brands. For instance, Kates (2000) found that some gay men are loyal to their preferred cosmetic brands. The preferred brands were those that support the gay community, further indicating that consumers choose brands that align with their identity, beliefs, and values. In a similar vein, Tuncay Zayer and Neier (2011) discovered that some men are loyal to certain cosmetic brands. This type of consumer-brand relationship is found to be a so-called

“committed partnership”, which is defined as a “long-term, voluntary imposed, socially supported union high in love, intimacy, trust, and a commitment to stay together despite adverse circumstances” (Fournier, 1998, p.362). Moreover, the relationship is said to be rather exclusive, thus, the consumers avoid using other brands if possible. However, Tuncay Zayer and Neier also state that men tend to have relationships with cosmetic brands indicating low levels of loyalty. Furthermore, since male consumption of cosmetics is still somewhat stigmatised, men were found to have “secret affairs” with cosmetic brands (Tuncay Zayer & Neier, 2011). Due to this, the authors advise brand managers to improve how they communicate with consumers, to further reduce insecurities and make men feel more comfortable when using cosmetics. Ultimately, this could result in more loyal customers.

Regarding the opposite gender, Papista and Dimitriadis (2012) discovered that females in their study purchased their preferred and favourite cosmetic brand frequently. Additionally, they tried different products from the brand and recommended the brand to others. Hodge et al. (2015) further found that some females have used their favourite cosmetic brand for many years, that they identify with the brand, and that they trust the brand. Although, other consumers were found to expressed low levels of both behavioural and mental loyalty towards cosmetic brands. Since Hodge et al. (2015) studied the consumption of luxury cosmetics, they state that several factors, for example, price sensitivity and identity, influence brand loyalty.

Hellsten and Kulle (2017) further highlight how millennial consumers (born between 1977 and 1995) are a key customer segment in regard to cosmetics. In fact, these consumers spend a lot on cosmetics on a yearly basis. Despite this, they are rather disloyal to cosmetic brands (Hellsten & Kulle, 2017). Hence, brand managers in the cosmetics industry are found to implement many marketing and branding strategies to change this and to achieve brand loyalty in this important target group (Hellsten & Kulle, 2017). For example, they try to speak to consumers in their own language, be transparent, align brand image and identity with consumers values and attitudes, and provide positive brand experiences, both offline and online. Similarly, Papista and Dimitriadis (2012, p.49) state that “[b]y understanding how consumers form brand loyalty as they shop for and consume cosmetics brands, managers can develop marketing strategies to effectively appeal to consumers”. Thus, relationship marketing, hence, building strong relationships with customers, is fundamental for managers to achieve brand loyalty.

Lastly, Clark, Carmichael, and Alexov (2019) recently reported that approximately half of North American consumers are loyal to their cosmetic brands and products. In fact, the increasing demand for natural cosmetics and ingredients trigger consumers to try new brands and disregard the ones they currently use. Consequently, changes in consumers trends and attitudes are found to have an impact on brand loyalty and consumer-brand relationships.

2.5 Critique and Identified Gaps

Based on the above literature review, research about cosmetics and consumption of cosmetics is found to be rather broad. However, as stated, the cosmetics industry is still female-oriented and male consumption of cosmetics continues to be somewhat stigmatised. Therefore, research on men/males and cosmetics is quite scarce, compared to research on women/females.

Moreover, at this point, previous research about the consumption of cosmetics has mainly centred around traditional consumer behaviour topics. Functional and symbolic reasons for using cosmetics have been investigated. In contrast, insights about consumers' relationships with cosmetic brands are still missing. Academic studies on cosmetics and brand loyalty are also limited. However, the fact that consumers' loyalty to cosmetic brands seems to differ indicates that different relationships exist.

In regard to women or female consumers, their relationships with cosmetic brands are only studied in the luxury domain, excluding brands outside this narrow segment. Moreover, young men's relationships with grooming products and services were briefly addressed in a study that was conducted a decade ago. Since then, a lot has happened. The industry has changed and consumption has increased, specifically among men/males. Thus, it appears that there is no gender-inclusive study investigating the relationships that exist between both male and female consumers and cosmetic brands.

Besides the growing literature on cosmetics, research investigating consumer-brand relationships in different contexts have also increased. The same is true about brand loyalty. Ultimately, these areas are of importance and new research have contributed to the existing brand and consumer behaviour literature. Moreover, it has provided valuable insights for practitioners. Despite this, there is no in-depth study on the relationships that contemporary consumers, both males and females, have with cosmetic brands.

Lastly, the typology presented by Fournier (1998), consisting of the 15 consumer-brand relationships that she found and defined, is not exhaustive. In fact, the typology was developed based on the findings from three women and their lifeworld. Arguably, the phenomenon should be studied in new and relevant contexts to explore other consumer-brand relationship forms, to further improve the understanding of contemporary consumers and today's consumption society. Despite the increasing usage of cosmetics and the growing market, more recent studies, extending or challenging Fournier's typology, have not yet investigated cosmetic brands. Consequently, several gaps in the literature have been identified and await to be addressed.

3. Theoretical Framework

In this chapter, the theoretical framework used in this study is presented and explained. This framework is used as a base throughout the study. Since the aim of the study is to understand relationships between consumers and cosmetic brands, consumer-brand relationship theory is mainly used. However, as consumer-brand relationships are closely related to brand loyalty, dimensions of loyalty also serve as a useful tool in this study. Moreover, in this study, a gender perspective is highlighted. Therefore, concepts regarding gender and identity are described. These are further used when collecting empirical material and discussing the findings.

3.1 Consumer-Brand Relationships

To meet the aim of this study and to be able to answer the defined research question, consumer-brand relationship theory is used when preparing for the semi-structured interviews. Moreover, relationship metaphors are used when analysing and interpreting empirical data. Hence, the consumer-brand relationship typology presented by Fournier (1998) is used as a frame of reference and inspiration. This typology consists of 15 different relationship forms (see Table 1), which has proven to be useful when studying consumer-brand relationships.

According to Fournier (1998), brands can serve as relationship partners in everyday life. Hence, as explained in the literature review, Fournier (1998) developed a typology that includes different consumer-brand relationship forms. These were used to explain the relationships between the consumers in her study and the brands that they used. Consequently, the typology can be used to analyse “the nature, quality, and strength of the relationships consumers form with brands” (Bertilsson, 2017, pp.173-174).

The consumer-brand relationship forms and their definitions rest on six factors; love and passion, self-connection, interdependence, commitment, intimacy, and brand partner quality (Fournier, 1998). These factors are used to determine the strength and quality of the relationship between consumers and brands (Fournier, 1998). Love and passion refer to consumers’ love for a brand and how they can feel that something is missing if they have not interacted with the brand in a while; self-connection relates to if the consumer can identify with the brand, and interdependence regards how often the consumer and the brand interact (Bertilsson, 2017; Fournier, 1998). Commitment has to do with intended behaviour and if the consumer is supportive of the brand in the long run, it also relates to brand loyalty, and if the relationship is exclusive or not (Bertilsson, 2017; Fournier, 1998). Intimacy further explains how consumers build a strong connection to the brand and if they find the brand superior, for example, over time, brand memories are created and consumers may also give the brand a nickname (Fournier, 1998). Finally, brand partner quality links to the general satisfaction and strength of the relationship; it further includes important aspects like respect, reliability, and trust (Bertilsson, 2017; Fournier, 1998).

Table 1 - A Typology of Consumer-Brand Relationship Forms (Adapted From Fournier, 1998, p.362)

Relationship Form	Definition
1. Arranged marriages	Nonvoluntary union imposed by preferences of third party. Intended for long-term, exclusive commitment, although at low levels of affective attachment.
2. Casual friends/buddies	Friendship low in affect and intimacy, characterised by infrequent or sporadic engagement, and few expectations for reciprocity or reward.
3. Marriages of convenience	Long-term, committed relationship precipitated by environmental influence versus deliberate choice, and governed by satisficing rules.
4. Committed partnerships	Long-term, voluntarily imposed, socially supported union high in love, intimacy, trust, and a commitment to stay together despite adverse circumstances. Adherence to exclusivity rules expected.
5. Best friendships	Voluntary union based on reciprocity principle, the endurance of which is ensured through continued provision of positive rewards. Characterised by revelation of true self, honesty, and intimacy. Congruity in partner images and personal interests common.
6. Compartmentalised friendships	Highly specialised, situationally confined, enduring friendships characterised by lower intimacy than other friendship forms but higher socioemotional rewards and interdependence. Easy entry and exit attained.
7. Kinships	Nonvoluntary union with lineage ties.
8. Rebounds/avoidance-driven relationships	Union precipitated by desire to move away from prior or available partner, as opposed to attraction to chosen partner per se.
9. Childhood friendships	Infrequently engaged, affectively laden relation reminiscent of earlier times. Yields comfort and security of past self.
10. Courtships	Interim relationship state on the road to committed partnership contract.
11. Dependencies	Obsessive, highly emotional, selfish attractions cemented by feeling that the other is irreplaceable. Separation from other yields anxiety. High tolerance of other's transgressions results.
12. Flings	Short-term, time-bounded engagements of high emotional reward, but devoid of commitment and reciprocity demands.
13. Enmities	Intensely involving relationship characterised by negative affect and desire to avoid or inflict pain on the other.
14. Secret affairs	Highly emotive, privately held relationship considered risky if exposed to others.
15. Enslavements	Nonvoluntary union governed entirely by desires of the relationship partner. Involves negative feelings but persists because of circumstances.

Over the years, Fournier's (1998) typology has been used to identify consumer-brand relationships in different contexts. Consequently, some studies have presented new relationship forms. Hence, as previously highlighted, the original typology is not exhaustive and other forms of consumer-brand relationships are yet to be discovered. Thus, in this study and the context of cosmetics, new relationship forms or metaphors may be found, which could extend or challenge Fournier's typology and add new perspectives to the literature.

3.2 Brand Loyalty

As stated, consumer-brand relationships and brand loyalty are related. Hence, to avoid being constrained by consumer-brand relationship theory and a typology that was developed based on three women in 1998, aspects of loyalty will be used to understand contemporary consumers and their relation to cosmetic brands. Thus, dimensions of (consumer/customer/brand) loyalty will be used to study consumers and interpret the findings. To provide managerial advice, this approach is also relevant.

In regard to loyalty, Dick and Basu (1994) are often cited. Over the years, their work has been adapted to suit today's reality and reflect current consumer behaviour. According to Ekström, Ottosson, and Parment (2017), there are two dimensions of customer loyalty; behavioural and mental. The behavioural dimension focuses on what the customer does, whereas the mental dimension relates to the customer's thinking. The authors claim that neither dimension fully considers the complexity of customer loyalty, therefore, both aspects should be considered.

Ekström, Ottosson, and Parment (2017) explain that behavioural loyalty refers to the duration of the customer's purchasing history of the brand, as well as the frequency, volume, depth, and share of the purchases. In contrast, mental loyalty focuses on the customer's attitudes, preferences, commitment, identification, involvement, and intention (Ekström, Ottosson & Parment, 2017). The authors also discuss the concept of a *brand advocate*, which is a loyal customer that recommends the brand to others, for example, family and friends, but also to strangers. Arguably, when someone is a *brand advocate*, they express high levels of loyalty to a brand. In summary, several disparate factors affect loyalty, which makes it difficult to create, identify, measure, and/or manage brand loyalty, specifically in industries with high competition (Anselmsson, 2017; Ekström, Ottosson & Parment, 2017). Hence, these difficulties are also present in the cosmetics industry.

3.3 Gender and Identity

The concept of gender is important and relevant in relation to the marketing and consumption of cosmetics in several ways. Visconti, Maclaran, and Bettany (2018) explain how marketers often use gender as a form of segmentation, specifically in the cosmetics industry. They further argue that brands can establish strong connotations to a certain gender and that products on their own can be gendered. As previously stated, the cosmetics industry is a highly gendered market that has long focused on femininity and female consumers.

Visconti, Maclaran, and Bettany (2018) further explain five terms crucial to understand in consumer and gender research; gender, sex, gender identity, gender roles, and sexual

orientation. *Gender* relates to behavioural aspects constructed by society, while *sex* refers to the biological categories and attributes of a person (Visconti, Maclaran & Bettany, 2018). Moreover, *gender identity* revolves around how the individual identifies themselves, hence, if they consider themselves as being male, female, a combination of these, transgender, androgynous, or something else (Visconti, Maclaran & Bettany, 2018). In contrast, *gender roles* are the societal norms of how individuals with a specific gender are expected to behave (Visconti, Maclaran & Bettany, 2018). *Sexual orientation* is the final term described by the authors, and it refers to sexual attraction, that is, to whom an individual is attracted.

3.3.1 Masculinity and Femininity

Masculinity and femininity are other terms used to describe characteristics relating to two common genders; male and female. Throughout time, people have been differentiating between these genders and sorting everything from objects, words, and personalities into the categories of masculinity and femininity (Visconti, Maclaran & Bettany, 2018). These categories are also highly present in marketing and branding, where companies are often gendering their brands and products and using gendered marketing in their advertising (Visconti, Maclaran & Bettany, 2018).

Visconti, Maclaran, and Bettany (2018) state that, historically, masculinity and masculine characteristics have been considered more powerful and honoured than femininity. They further claim that masculine stereotypes usually relate more to the mind, reasoning, and activity, while feminine stereotypes are related to the body, emotions, and passivity. These stereotypes have also been used in the gendering of brands, for instance, sports and car brands are often considered masculine, whereas cosmetic brands tend to be more feminine (Visconti, Maclaran & Bettany, 2018).

Due to the high influence of gender on society, the way people behave, and how they perceive and identify themselves, gendered marketing and brands often influence the consumption of specific products (Visconti, Maclaran & Bettany, 2018). Over the years, consuming products advertised to the opposite gender has also to some extent been considered controversial, and in some cases even wrong (Visconti, Maclaran & Bettany, 2018). The cosmetics industry is one example, where men/males have been hesitant to enter the market, due to its feminine connotations (Ekström, Ottosson & Parment, 2017; Visconti, Maclaran & Bettany, 2018). However, as times are changing, so are also gender norms, which leads to the concept of gender performativity.

3.3.2 Gender Performativity

Gender performativity is a concept within gender studies, which was introduced by the philosopher and gender theorist Judith Butler in 1990 (Visconti, Maclaran & Bettany, 2018). The concept draws on the idea that gender and sexuality are fluid, hence, individuals are biologically assigned a sex at birth, but this does not affect their behaviour (Butler, 2002; Visconti, Maclaran & Bettany, 2018). Instead, Butler (2002) argues that behaviour, and specifically stereotypical gendered behaviour, is shaped by societal norms and expectations.

The concept of gender performativity is further explained by Visconti, Maclaran, and Bettany (2018) who state that by accepting and complying with the gender norms and roles set by society, we continue on the existing path and support the status quo. However, they argue that through provoking and testing these norms, they may actually change and new gender norms can be formed. The authors describe how this change can be encouraged by both consumers and marketers. In fact, marketers may challenge gender norms through their strategic decisions, while consumers may challenge them through their consumption behaviour (Visconti, Maclaran & Bettany, 2018).

Arguably, in general, people are found to consume brands and products that align with how they identify themselves, both in terms of gender, but also as people (Ekström, Ottosson & Parment, 2017; Elliott & Wattanasuwan, 1998; Klasson, 2017). Thus, to be able to collect data in an informed way and to discuss the empirical findings reflexively and with complexity, the concepts discussed in relation to gender and identity will be used in this study. Hence, these concepts are taken into consideration as their underlying meaning may impact the relationships that consumers' form with cosmetic brands.

3.4 Summary

As stated, consumer-brand relationships and brand loyalty are interrelated. In fact, brand loyalty is often measured using dimensions that are similar to the factors used to determine the strength and quality of consumer-brand relationships. Furthermore, since marketing and branding affect consumers, it also affects consumer-brand relationships and brand loyalty. Consequently, because marketing and branding of cosmetics are highly gendered, consumers' relationships with cosmetic brands are, to some extent, also impacted by gender aspects.

In summary, to meet the aim of this study, consumer-brand relationship theory will be used to study the relationships that exist between consumers and cosmetic brands. Moreover, when preparing data collection, collecting data, and when analysing the empirical findings, dimensions of loyalty will be used to further improve the understanding of contemporary consumers' relationship with cosmetic brands (consumer-brand relationships). In addition, concepts related to gender and identity will be used to make sound interpretations of the findings. Consequently, the purpose of using this theoretical framework is to gain a nuanced understanding of the topic, where the goal is to contribute to existing literature and established theory, as well as to provide practical advice.

4. Methodology

This chapter describes the methodology of this study. However, first, philosophical stances in regard to the study are discussed. Then, the research design and the research methods, including the data collection method and the empirical analysis, is explained in detail. The trustworthiness of the study is also discussed, as well as ethical considerations. Finally, the limitations of the methodological choices are reflected upon.

4.1 Research Philosophy

Prior to explaining the methodology, the importance of the philosophical concepts of ontology and epistemology should be addressed. These two concepts are fundamental in regard to research. The first concept, ontology, revolves around "the nature of reality and existence" (Easterby-Smith, Thorpe & Jackson, 2015, p.46). According to Easterby-Smith, Thorpe, and Jackson, ontology can be divided into different ontologies. In terms of social ontologies, the authors present four types; realism, internal realism, relativism, and nominalism. The relativist position suits this research well as it suggests that there is not one single truth, but many and that facts are individual, hence, depending on the frame of reference of the observer (Easterby-Smith, Thorpe & Jackson, 2015). As stated, this study focuses on the relationships between consumers and cosmetic brands. Thus, given that consumers as individuals have their own versions of facts and truths, a relativist perspective is adopted.

The second philosophical concept, epistemology, regards "the nature of knowledge and ways of enquiring into the physical and social worlds" (Easterby-Smith, Thorpe & Jackson, 2015, p.51). Epistemology is further divided into positivism and social constructionism (Easterby-Smith, Thorpe & Jackson, 2015). The authors explain that positivism considers the world as existing externally and is best studied using objective measures, while social constructionism takes a more interpretive approach and revolves around the reality being determined by shared experiences and communication between people, as opposed to external factors. This study takes a constructionist approach as it is assumed that there are several different realities of how consumers perceive and relate to the cosmetic brands that they use. Using this approach, Easterby-Smith, Thorpe, and Jackson (2015) suggest collecting multiple perspectives, preferably through both qualitative and quantitative research. In this study, a qualitative method in the form of semi-structured interviews is used. However, the intention is to interview individuals of different genders and backgrounds to collect as many diverse perspectives as possible.

4.2 Research Design

The purpose of this study is to gain a rich understanding of consumers' consumption of cosmetics and cosmetic brands, and more specifically, consumers' relationships with cosmetic brands. This is done through the collection of primary data of consumers' consumption patterns, preferences, and attitudes towards cosmetic brands. Thus, a qualitative research design is used, as it allows for the collection of rich and detailed data about individuals (Easterby-Smith, Thorpe & Jackson, 2015).

Given the purpose of this study, an exploratory stance is taken. According to Saunders, Lewis, and Thornhill (2012), in-depth interviews, preferably semi-structured or unstructured, are useful when wanting to understand individuals and explore a phenomenon. Hence, by asking open-ended questions about consumer's consumption of cosmetics and cosmetic brands, valuable insights about consumers' relationships with cosmetic brands can be found. Consequently, the chosen research design will generate new consumer insights that contribute to existing literature and potentially extend established theory.

Moreover, an abductive approach is adopted since iteration between theory and empirical material is done to draw conclusions. Saunders, Lewis, and Thornhill (2012) explain that abduction is a combination of both deduction and induction. The purpose of deductive research is to test an existing theory, often by accepting or rejecting formulated hypotheses (Saunders, Lewis & Thornhill, 2012). Hence, this approach is mainly used in quantitative studies (Saunders, Lewis & Thornhill, 2012). In contrast, inductive research collects empirical data, often qualitative, with the purpose to generate theory (Saunders, Lewis & Thornhill, 2012). When conducting abductive research, empirical data is gathered to explore phenomena, and with the use of theory, empirical findings are interpreted and theory is often refined and/or extended (Saunders, Lewis & Thornhill, 2012). An abductive approach is, therefore, best suited as this study intends to collect and analyse rich empirical data about consumers to make theoretical contributions.

4.3 Research Methods

In this section, the methods used in this qualitative study are described. First, the literature review method is explained, which was conducted prior to collecting and analysing empirical data. Then, the semi-structured interviews, including the interview guide, the data collection method, and the sampling method are described in detail.

4.3.1 Literature Review Method

To define the research problem, the aim of this study, and formulate a relevant research question, a systematic literature review was made. During this process, several online sources were used to find previous academic research related to the topic of this study. When collecting material, academic journals, mainly within marketing, branding, and consumer research, were utilised. The reference list of relevant sources was also examined to find key literature. Academic textbooks were further used. In addition, reliable websites and news articles were searched to provide updated background information about the topic. When searching for literature, the following keywords were used in various combinations; cosmetic(s) brands/consumption/industry, consumer-brand relationship(s), consumer behaviour, marketing, advertising, branding, brand loyalty, gender, male, and female.

4.3.2 Semi-Structured Interviews

The qualitative data was collected through semi-structured interviews. With this method, it is possible to gain an in-depth understanding of social phenomena (Easterby-Smith, Thorpe & Jackson, 2015). Due to the nature of this study and the research question, this method was deemed appropriate. Ultimately, the use of semi-structured interviews provides insights into

consumers' lifeworld and actions and allows for a rich understanding of their attitudes, opinions, preferences, and behaviour. Semi-structured interviews also allow the interviewer to ask the interviewee to further explain their opinions in detail and to give examples based on their answers (Easterby-Smith, Thorpe & Jackson, 2015). Thus, this method includes flexibility, which is crucial when the goal is to understand consumer behaviour. In contrast, similar insights are difficult to obtain when distributing surveys with closed questions, conducting structured interviews, or when observing consumers at a distance (Easterby-Smith, Thorpe & Jackson, 2015).

Furthermore, as stated by Ekström, Ottosson, and Parment (2017), consumer behaviour is a complex discourse. Therefore, qualitative methods, and specifically, semi-structured interviews, are useful to fully understand social phenomena, for example, consumer-brand relationships. Kvale (1994) further argues that obtaining nuanced and rich descriptions are more easily done through qualitative research that uses flexible methods, for example, interviews. Moreover, semi-structured interviews can also result in findings that are unexpected to the interviewer (Bryman & Bell, 2011). Hence, interesting and surprising findings could be found. Ultimately, valuable findings are more likely to be unexplored during highly structured interviews or through surveys with closed questions. Consequently, to answer the research question in a nuanced way, collecting empirical data through semi-structured interviews is motivated.

4.3.3 Interview Guide

Before data collection, an interview guide with questions was created (see Appendix A). The defined research question was used as a basis for the formulation of the interview questions. In addition, established and relevant concepts and theories, hence, the theoretical framework presented in chapter three, were considered when composing the questions. However, to avoid potential errors, leading questions and complex or theoretical concepts were avoided. Consequently, the interview questions were divided into themes, that is, consumption of cosmetics and cosmetic brands, with the objective to gain the insights needed to answer the research question. The interview guide was first written in English and later translated into Swedish since several interviews were planned to be conducted in Swedish. To ensure consistency, back translation was used.

The interview guide and the majority of its questions were tested in a pilot study conducted by the authors a few weeks before this specific study began. Hence, prior to conducting the interviews in this study, the interview guide was updated based on feedback given by the supervisor of this thesis. The updated guide was also reviewed carefully and feedback from the pilot study, as well as the perceived experiences of the interviews conducted during the pilot study, was taken into consideration. After modifications were made, the data collection began.

4.3.4 Data Collection Method

14 semi-structured interviews with consumers were conducted in April 2021. Due to convenience, and because of the COVID-19 pandemic, the authors of this thesis interviewed

seven consumers each. Three interviews were conducted in person, while 11 were done remotely through telephone and video calls, using Messenger, Skype, and Zoom. The interviews lasted between 20-40 minutes.

Before the interview, the interviewees were informed about the purpose of the study, and ethical concerns, in writing (see Appendix B). At the same time, informed consent from the participants was collected. Then, the following personal information about the participants was gathered; name, age, sex, gender (identity), nationality, current country of residence, current occupation, education, and monthly income. Due to ethical reasons, a pseudonym is used in this paper. Thus, the participants remain anonymous. Moreover, the participants' monthly income is not disclosed. Therefore, no harm to participants is recognised.

At the beginning of the interview, the purpose of the study was repeated by the interviewer. However, this was done carefully, to avoid influencing the participants' answers beforehand. Moreover, the interviewer explicitly explained that the study focuses on cosmetics and cosmetic brands, which includes skincare, makeup (colour cosmetics), hair care, fragrances, and toiletries (personal care).

During the interviews, the predefined questions were used as a guide. However, depending on the answers given by the participants, follow-up questions were asked, hence, laddering-up and laddering-down. The interviews were audio-recorded. In addition, the interviewer took notes while interviewing, both to aid the transcription process that followed after the interviews, but also to note down any non-verbal reaction that could be of interest to the analysis.

First, general questions about the participants' consumption of cosmetics were asked. This was done to gain an understanding of their interest in cosmetics, their habits and routines, and which factors that they find important when purchasing and consuming cosmetics. Then, questions related to cosmetic brands were asked. These questions were asked to understand the relationships between the consumers and cosmetic brands. Overall, the questions focused on which brands they use and why, how often they use the brands, how long they have used them, and if they like them. They were also asked if the brands mean something to them emotionally and if they have any special memories that they associate with the brands that they use. Furthermore, questions regarding brand trust and self-identification, dependability, and exclusivity were asked.

In addition, to learn more about consumers' relationship with cosmetic brands, the participants were asked about their favourite cosmetic brand(s), if they use any specific cosmetic brands for special occasions, and if they avoid any cosmetic brands. Finally, the participants were also asked if they follow any cosmetic brands online, for example, on social media, and if they are a member of any cosmetic brand loyalty club. Consequently, the questions were formulated with the theoretical framework (chapter three) in mind. However, to avoid being constrained by specific concepts and models, the questions were modified to suit the aim of this specific study.

Nine out of the 14 participants were Swedish-speaking consumers, thus these interviews were conducted in Swedish. One interviewee spoke Norwegian. However, this interview was also done in Swedish since that person had a good understanding of Swedish and the interviewer understood Norwegian very well. Four interviews were held in English since four participants did not speak Swedish. The purpose of using different languages was to make sure that participants understood the questions and could provide answers without being restricted due to language barriers.

After conducting the interviews, the recorded data was transcribed manually. This procedure is very time-consuming. Therefore, this work was divided between the interviewers (the authors of this thesis). The transcribed material resulted in 70 pages of detailed consumer insights. Regarding the transcribed material in Swedish, only the findings used in this paper were translated back to English.

4.3.5 Sampling Method and Sample

The sample in this study is a combination of a convenience, purposive, and snowball sample. The choice of convenience sampling was mainly due to the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic and the succeeding restrictions, which complicated both the sampling process and the data collection process. Hence, the participants were personally contacted by the authors due to their availability. Despite using a convenience sample, the sample was still guided to meet the aim of the study. Thus, the purposive sampling method was used to make sure that the sample consisted of both men/males and women/females of different ages. Finally, the snowball method was used as some participants were found and contacted by suggestions from third parties. Table 2 shows the profile of the participants.

Table 2 - Profile of the Participants

Pseudonym	Age	Sex	Gender (identity)	Nationality	Country of residence	Occupation	Education
Hanna	20	Woman	Female	Norwegian	Sweden	Student and working part-time	High school (final semester)
Olivia	24	Woman	Female	Finnish and Swedish	Sweden	Student	5,5 years at university (final semester)
Lisa	25	Woman	Female	Swedish	Sweden	Working	5 years at university
Amanda	27	Woman	Female	Norwegian	Norway	Working	3 years at university
Alice	27	Woman	Female	Ukrainian	Sweden	Student	5 years at university
Sophie	56	Woman	Female	Norwegian	Sweden	Working	3 years at university
Malin	57	Woman	Female	Swedish	Sweden	Working	3 years at university
Martin	23	Man	Male	Dutch and Swedish	Sweden	Student	3 years at university

Fabian	28	Man	Male	Swedish	Sweden	Student and working part-time	2 years at college (final semester)
Tim	28	Man	Male	Mexican	Sweden	Student	5 years at university (final semester)
Jonathan	29	Man	Male	Swedish	Sweden	Working	High school
Erik	54	Man	Male	Swedish	Sweden	Working	5,5 years at university
Daniel	59	Man	Male	Norwegian	Malta	Retired, currently an eco-framer	5,5 years at university
Christian	60	Man	Male	Swedish	Sweden	Working	3 years at university

The sample consisted of seven women between the ages of 20-57 and seven men between the ages of 23-60. In addition, the women identified as females and the men identified as males. The sample includes both men/males and women/females to meet the aim of the research and to be able to answer the research question. Moreover, the intention was to interview consumers in different age groups to gain a wider perspective. Although, the main purpose of the study is not to compare different age groups.

The participants' nationality and current country of residence differed, as well as their current occupation and educational background. However, most participants were Scandinavian and lived in Sweden. Furthermore, the majority of the participants were currently working full-time or studying.

4.4 Empirical Analysis

According to Rennstam and Wästerfors (2018), analysis of qualitative material includes three key activities; sorting, reducing, and arguing. They further state that all qualitative research differs, hence, there is no linear procedure to follow. Therefore, depending on the study, and its context, the analysis will vary. Rennstam and Wästerfors also recommend analysts to be creative in their analysis and to avoid relying heavily on conventional recommendations and established theory, as it might constrain the analysts and impact the outcome negatively.

Based on the advice by Rennstam and Wästerfors (2018), the analysis began by sorting and reducing the empirical material. First, the transcribed interviews were summarised into shorter stories about the consumers and their consumption of cosmetics and cosmetic brands. This resulted in 14 comparable summaries. Sorting and reducing data in this way is advantageous as it results in rich understandings of social phenomena (Rennstam & Wästerfors, 2018). Ultimately, the reduction made it possible to focus on key findings. After summarising, the material was coded and categorised into themes. Two broad themes were identified; (1) general consumption of cosmetics and cosmetic brands and (2) the relationships between consumers and specific cosmetic brands. These themes were then further divided by gender, male and female, resulting in four different themes. However, to reach the aim of this thesis, and to answer the research question, the second theme (the relationships between consumers and specific cosmetic brands) was analysed in detail by the

authors. In contrast, the findings regarding general consumption of cosmetics and cosmetic brands were mainly analysed to gain key insights about the participants and to improve the understanding of their relationships with cosmetic brands.

The next step regarded the activity called “arguing”, which refers to theorising. According to Rennstam and Wästerfors (2018), this means creating arguments by using empirical material. Furthermore, while theorising, the aim is to contribute to, or create, theory (Rennstam & Wästerfors, 2018). In this process, concepts and theory were used to analyse and interpret the material. Consequently, the theoretical framework (chapter three) was used as a base when analysing the findings. The findings were further used to describe phenomena, hence, consumer-brand relationships, in-depth. Thus, there was an iteration between theory and empirics to interpret and understand the findings. Illustrative excerpts and quotes from the interviews were also used to strengthen the arguments.

Finally, the findings were discussed and the research question was answered (chapter six). The findings were also discussed in relation to previous research, which was presented in the literature review (chapter two). Lastly, conclusions were made (chapter seven).

4.5 Trustworthiness

Regarding the trustworthiness of the study and the empirical findings, several aspects should be discussed. The chosen methods ultimately affect the results of the study. Therefore, it is important to reflect upon the choices that are made. Consequently, the validity and reliability of empirical findings are often highlighted. However, these concepts are mainly used in quantitative studies (Bryman & Bell, 2011). Instead, four similar criteria are suggested when assessing the quality of qualitative findings; credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability (Bryman & Bell, 2011).

Credibility refers to if the findings are believable, hence, it links to internal validity (Bryman & Bell, 2011). To achieve credible results, it is important that the interviewees are provided with clear instructions prior to the interview. Moreover, to be able to reach the aim of the study, it is fundamental that the participants are asked the right questions and that they understand what they are asked. Thus, misunderstandings should be avoided. These aspects were therefore considered before and during the data collection.

Transferability, which is similar to external validity, relates to if the findings would apply in other contexts (Bryman & Bell, 2011). In a qualitative study, the findings are influenced by the chosen sample. Therefore, it may be difficult to ensure that the same results would appear in other or similar contexts. However, by interviewing individuals with different demographics and backgrounds, the transferability is improved.

In a similar vein, dependability has to do with the likelihood that the findings would be the same at another point in time (Bryman & Bell, 2011). Hence, it relates to reliability and replicability (Bryman & Bell, 2011). As for reliability, the interviewees were provided with the same information and asked more or less the same questions to improve the overall

trustworthiness of the findings and this study. Moreover, in this chapter, the research methods used in this study have been described in detail. By explicitly explaining the research methods, and the analysis of the empirical material, other researchers can replicate the study. Thus, this chapter ensures replicability. However, due to individual aspects, replicating this study would most likely lead to somewhat different results as consumption differs between individuals and the interpretation of empirical material is conducted by humans with various experiences.

Finally, confirmability regards objectivity and questions to what extent the researchers have impacted the results (Bryman & Bell, 2011). To avoid potential errors, the interviewers, hence, the authors of this thesis, were careful to not influence the interviewees before and during the interviews. Despite this, achieving complete objectivity is difficult as the study is carried out and findings are analysed and interpreted by two people with similar backgrounds. Hence, the authors' backgrounds and opinions could influence the analysis of the empirical material. This would then impact the final results of the study.

4.6 Ethical Considerations

When conducting research and collecting empirical material, several ethical issues need to be considered. According to Easterby-Smith, Thorpe, and Jackson (2015), the concept of ethics revolves around guiding people to behave in a moral manner. Ethics in research further considers the protection of participants from any type of harm, and the protection of their dignity (Easterby-Smith, Thorpe & Jackson, 2015). It also regards the integrity of the research community, by avoiding disinformation and research fraud, as well as acknowledging connections and sources of fundings (Easterby-Smith, Thorpe & Jackson, 2015). In order to conduct an ethical study, researchers must ensure that all participants are fully informed about the purpose of the research and that the participants consent to their own participation (Easterby-Smith, Thorpe & Jackson, 2015). Furthermore, researchers must ensure that they preserve the privacy and anonymity of the participants and that they establish the confidentiality of the collected data (Easterby-Smith, Thorpe & Jackson, 2015). Finally, when presenting the findings of the research, the reporting of false or misleading information must be avoided (Easterby-Smith, Thorpe & Jackson, 2015).

In order to comply with the guidelines presented by Easterby-Smith, Thorpe, and Jackson (2015), the methods used are considered to be harmless and respect the dignity of the interviewees. Prior to the collection of data, the interviewees were also informed about the purpose of the study. Moreover, they were told that their identity and privacy is protected, that their participation is voluntary, and that they were free to withdraw from the study at any point without any questions. They were also informed that they can retrieve the results of the study once completed. This information was provided in writing through the Information Sheet (Appendix B). As previously mentioned, all participants also had to give their consent before participating in the study.

Furthermore, the personal data that was collected was kept in a confidential manner. Hence, the key to the coded data (the pseudonyms) was separated from the actual data, to protect

identities. Moreover, due to the GDPR, no sensitive personal data was collected. Therefore, participants were not asked about their sexual orientation, religion, or health status, as this is considered sensitive information and could potentially harm the participants. In addition, the intention of the authors of this thesis was to avoid any misinformation about the nature of the study and to be transparent about the research. Finally, the authors did their best to ensure that the presentation of the findings consists of a truthful report of the results.

4.7 Limitations of Methodology

Despite careful consideration regarding the methods used, the methodology still has a few limitations. The first limitation is the chosen sample and sampling strategy, which due to time constraints and the COVID-19 pandemic does not fully represent or reflect reality. Because of the pandemic, a convenience sampling method was used, as the current restrictions complicated the data collection. The pandemic also limited the possibility to observe consumers closely during a longer period of time, through which empirical data of consumers' actual behaviours and habits could have been recognised and examined. However, while the pandemic hindered certain aspects of the data collection, the sample used contained a variety of ages, occupations, and, to some extent, nationalities.

Another limitation of the research is the potential misunderstandings linked to both the interview settings, which mainly took place over Messenger, Skype, and Zoom, as well as language barriers. As stated, four interviews were conducted in English. However, none of the interviewees had English as their native language, potentially resulting in misunderstandings. When using video calls, non-verbal expressions can also easily be missed, and answers can be misinterpreted. Furthermore, distance interviews are, in general, also more prone to be interrupted due to technical difficulties.

Further limitations include asking too general or leading questions, thus indirectly affecting the participants' responses. This prevents the findings from presenting an accurate picture of reality. The participants may also be hesitant to speak the actual truth when answering questions. This could be due to various reasons, for example, they may not feel comfortable in the interview or the truth might be something that they are ashamed of. Additionally, they might not know what they actually feel or think when asked on the spot. These limitations are acknowledged as they could potentially affect the final results.

Another aspect to be taken into consideration is understanding when saturation has been reached. As the topic of this research is on a highly personal and individual level, it may be difficult to understand when saturation is reached and when participants are no longer providing new information or novel perspectives. Although, as this is a qualitative study, conducted over a period of 10 weeks, 14 semi-structured interviews, with equally many male and female consumers, were found to be sufficient.

5. Findings and Analysis

In this chapter, empirical findings are presented and analysed. To interpret the findings, relevant theories and concepts are used. Thus, the theoretical framework (chapter three) is used as a base and a theoretical lens throughout the analysis. The analysis of the findings focus on consumers' relationship with cosmetic brands, hence, this is the main theme of this chapter. The findings are further divided into sub-themes, to distinguish between different types of consumer-brand relationships.

5.1 The Relationships Between Consumers and Cosmetic Brands

In this qualitative study, various relationships between consumer and cosmetic brands (consumer-brand relationships) have been identified. During the semi-structured interviews, the participants mentioned several cosmetic brands. Consequently, the consumers' stories and lived experiences with these brands have been analysed. Moreover, the relationships between the consumers and the brands have been defined using relationship metaphors. This was done to further explain the characteristics of the relationships. In total, 21 different consumer-brand relationship forms were identified. Nine of these are relationship forms presented by Fournier (1998). Due to the limitations of Fournier's typology, 12 novel consumer-brand relationships are proposed. Ultimately, these are contributions to theory and Fournier's original typology. The novel relationships have been defined and named based on the empirical findings.

To understand the differences between the identified consumer-brand relationships, and to answer the defined research question, this theme has been divided into three sub-themes; strong, weak, and casual consumer-brand relationships. The different relationship forms are categorised into strong, casual, and weak relationships based on both behavioural and mental loyalty aspects, as per Dick and Basu (1994) and Ekström, Ottosson, and Parment (2017). A consumer-brand relationship is found to be strong when the consumer expresses both high behavioural and mental loyalty to a brand. In contrast, when the consumer is expressing moderate behavioural and mental loyalty, or either strong behavioural or mental loyalty but not both, it is considered a casual relationship. Lastly, a weak relationship is when the consumer is showing both low behavioural and mental brand loyalty. Consequently, the factors presented in section 3.2 were considered when categorising the consumer-brand relationship forms and when analysing the empirical findings. In the following sections, the empirical findings are summarised in tables and empirical examples from the semi-structured interviews are presented to support the findings. However, before presenting the main findings, key insights about the participants are stated in 5.1.1.

5.1.1 Key Insights About the Participants

In this section, key insights about the participants (consumers) are presented. The participant's attitudes, opinions, interest, and consumption in relation to cosmetics are highlighted. This is done to facilitate the understanding of contemporary consumers' relationship with cosmetic brands.

Among the female participants, Hanna (20), Lisa (25), Amanda (27), and Alice (27) claimed to be interested in cosmetics. Olivia (24) stated that she is interested in skincare, because of

her sensitive skin, but not cosmetics in general. Sophie (56) said that she is somewhat interested, while Malin (57) is not interested, mainly because she dislikes spending time on it. The interest in cosmetics also varied among the male participants. Martin (23), Fabian (28), Tim (28), and Daniel (59) stated that they are interested in cosmetics. In contrast, Jonathan (29), Erik (54), and Christian (60) claimed to have no interest in cosmetics. Jonathan further stated that he has “other priorities in life”. Erik said that he finds it purely “uninteresting”. Finally, Christian explained that the norm during his life has been that “men do not consume a lot of cosmetics”. As explained by Ekström, Ottosson, and Parment (2017), McNeill and Firman (2014), and Visconti, Maclaran, and Bettany (2018), men have long been reluctant to enter the cosmetics market since it is highly female-oriented.

The majority of the participants with an interest in cosmetics explained that their interest relates to that they want and/or like to take care of their skin and/or appearance. They also said that using cosmetics make them feel and/or look “good”, “beautiful”, and/or “fresh”. However, the females mainly referred to feeling and looking “good” or “beautiful”, while the males justified their consumption by stating that it makes them feel and/or look “fresh”. According to Visconti, Maclaran, and Bettany (2018), these word choices reflect traditional gender stereotypes, where femininity is related to the body and emotions, hence, “beautiful” and “good looking”, and masculinity refers more to the “mind” and “activity”, thus, feeling “fresh”. Hanna and Lisa further explained that using cosmetics is “fun”, indicating that cosmetics are also used as a hobby and to be creative. Thus, the findings show that male and female consumers have a varied interest in cosmetics. In fact, both men/males and women/females of different ages are interested, as well as uninterested, in cosmetics.

In addition, both the male and female participants were found to use a wide range of different cosmetics on a daily basis. Hence, skincare, hair care, fragrances, and toiletries (personal care) are consumed frequently, which confirms that consumption of cosmetics has increased and is common among both men/males and women/females. However, makeup was mainly used by the female participants. In fact, using makeup as a man, or when identifying as a male, was found to be uncommon and rather stigmatised. Arguably, this could be because of its strong feminine connotations, which Ekström, Ottosson, and Parment (2017) and Visconti, Maclaran, and Bettany (2018) highlight. Overall, the participants (consumers) with a stronger interest in cosmetics and concern about appearance also consume more cosmetics than those with a lacking interest.

5.1.2 Strong Consumer-Brand Relationships

Based on the analysis of the findings, 27 strong relationships were identified between the female participants and cosmetic brands, and 17 were identified between the males and cosmetic brands. In total, this resulted in eight different consumer-brand relationships. Three of these; *committed partnerships*, *best friendships*, and *courtships* are relationship forms that were developed by Fournier (1998), while “happily arranged engagements”, “supportive friendships”, “caring friendships”, “loyal friendships”, and “soulmates” are novel consumer-brand relationship metaphors. Table 3 is a summary of the findings. Following the table, empirical examples are presented.

Table 3 - Strong Relationships Between Consumers and Cosmetic Brands

Relationship Form	Definition	Females and Brands	Males and Brands
Committed partnerships (Fournier, 1998)	Long-term, voluntarily imposed, socially supported union high in love, intimacy, trust, and a commitment to stay together despite adverse circumstances. Adherence to exclusivity rules expected.	Amanda (27) and Ole Henriksen. Sophie (56) Clinique. Malin (57) and Dove.	Jonathan (29) and Hugo Boss. Christian (60) and Jean Paul Gaultier.
Best friendships (Fournier, 1998)	Voluntary union based on reciprocity principle, the endurance of which is ensured through continued provision of positive rewards. Characterised by revelation of true self, honesty, and intimacy. Congruity in partner images and personal interests common.	Hanna (20) and The Body Shop. Olivia (24) and Decubal and Head & Shoulders. Lisa (25) and bareMinerals and Rituals. Amanda (27) and Jan Thomas.	Fabian (28) and Björn Axén and Bulldog. Christian (60) and ACO.
Courtships (Fournier, 1998)	Interim relationship state on the road to committed partnership contract.	Not found.	Martin (23) and Vita D'or.
Happily arranged engagements (novel)	High satisfaction level. Arranged/recommended by a third party. Exclusive relationship, but exit is not too difficult.	Olivia (24) and bareMinerals. Amanda (27) and Living Proof.	Tim (28) and Guerlain. Erik (54) and Hugo Boss.
Supportive friendships (novel)	The satisfaction level is good. Interaction is regular or sporadic. Supports through following online and/or being a member in a brand loyalty club.	Lisa (25) and Makeup Store, Smashbox, and Urban Decay. Alice (27) and Victoria's Secret.	Martin (23) and Smyle. Tim (28) and Hugo Boss and Old Spice.
Caring friendships (novel)	A caring relationship. Used for its gentle purposes. Yields positive rewards. Interaction is regular.	Hanna (20) and Cerave and The Ordinary. Lisa (25) and Avene, Emma S., and La Roche-Posay. Malin (57) and Daxxin.	Erik (54) and Clinique For Men.
Loyal friendships (novel)	Long-term relationship. The satisfaction level is good. Interaction is regular. Trust and recommend the brand.	Lisa (25) and Dior, IsaDora, Lancôme, and The Ordinary. Sophie (56) and Emma S.	Fabian (28) and Dove and Head & Shoulders. Jonathan (29) and D:fi. Daniel (59) and HealthAid and Miaroma.
Soulmates (novel)	A strong relationship with a high satisfaction level. Exclusive commitment and frequent interaction. High in love, intimacy, and trust. Common interests, values, and beliefs.	Alice (27) and Rituals.	Not found.

Committed Partnerships (Fournier, 1998)

Regarding *committed partnerships*, Amanda explained that her favourite skincare brand is Ole Henriksen. She is using products from the brand every day and has done so for the past six months. Amanda had heard a lot about the brand and after doing her own research, reading and watching reviews online, she started using it. So far, it is the best skincare brand

she has tried. Therefore, she is only using Ole Henriksen in terms of skincare and she intends to continue to do so. Amanda trusts Ole Henriksen since she finds it to be a “high-quality” brand. Furthermore, Amanda follows the brand on Instagram, to learn more about it and to stay updated. When asked how she would feel if the brand would not be available in the market anymore, she said; “it would be sad. It’s a bit difficult to find skincare favourites that you like. It often takes some time”. Arguably, the relationship between Amanda and Ole Henriksen is seen as a *committed partnership*, as per Fournier’s (1998) definition. In addition, it is a strong relationship since Amanda expresses both high behavioural and mental loyalty to the brand.

Moreover, Christian explained that he has used his favourite perfume brand, Jean Paul Gaultier, for almost 12 years. He likes the brand a lot, enjoys that it is a bit different, and believes that the brand, to some extent, helps him to express his identity. He explained;

“I am not ashamed of saying that I use Jean Paul Gaultier. They have some of this openness, they are not promoting any type of macho culture, but rather something in between.”

This statement indicates that Christian share the same values as Jean Paul Gaultier and have a positive attitude towards the brand, which further shows that mental brand loyalty is high. Furthermore, it indicates that he is using the brand since it is not as “macho” and masculine as other perfume brands, but rather that he appreciates the “openness” that Jean Paul Gaultier stands for. Christian is therefore found to be positive to move away from stereotypical masculinity, as well as being open to more gender-neutral brands. Since Christian does not use any other perfume brand, he shows a high level of commitment to the brand. Based on this and on his strong connection to, and long-term use of, the brand, he appears to have a *committed partnership* with Jean Paul Gaultier.

Best Friendships (Fournier, 1998)

In terms of *best friendships*, Hanna mentioned that one of her favourite cosmetic brands is The Body Shop (skincare and hair care). Her relationship with The Body Shop goes back more than five years. She likes the brand because their products work well on her sensitive skin and she finds it affordable. Hence, she is currently using the brand every day. She trusts the brand and recommends it. Moreover, Hanna likes what The Body Shop stands for;

“They have a lot of projects for animals, nature, and humans, as well as welfare. And they use sustainable ingredients in their products and produce them in a sustainable way.”

These aspects are important to Hanna. Hence, this is a key reason why she likes The Body Shop and has become a member of their loyalty club. Being a member is further convenient as she receives discounts. Based on the findings, The Body Shop could be seen as a *best friend*, as per Fournier (1998), since the relationship is voluntary, positive, genuine, and intimate. Moreover, personal interests are shared. The intimacy in Fournier’s definition is

clearly visible in that Hanna uses the brand to take care of her sensitive skin. Furthermore, her long-term usage of the brand, along with her relation to the ethics and values of the brand, illustrates a high level of love and passion, as well as commitment. Arguably, Hanna is both behaviorally and mentally loyal towards The Body Shop.

In addition, Lisa explained that one of her favourite brands is bareMinerals, both because she likes their products, but also because it is a vegan and cruelty-free brand. She stated;

“I like to look at the brand and see what they have for ethics and morals, but then also what customers say about them. Ingredients and that is also important.”

This statement indicates Lisa does not want to consume cosmetic brands that are not ethical and fair since it does not align with her own values. Lisa is using bareMinerals in her daily makeup routine and recommends it. She started using the brand two years ago and it reminds her of when her interest in makeup began, further indicating shared interest. Lisa trusts the brand and expects them to do “what they say”. The brand also helps her to feel more confident. Hence, bareMinerals is seen as a *best friend*.

Among the males, the *best friendship* metaphor was visible between Fabian and two of his favourite brands; Bulldog and Björn Axén. Fabian has used skincare from Bulldog on a daily basis for almost four years. He motivates his consumption of the brand with the fact that it gives him a “boost” every morning and he thinks that it helps him to improve his appearance by making him feel and look “fresher”. Here Fabian shows that he is, to some extent, challenging traditional gender norms. He admits that he is using the products to enhance his appearance. However, he still adheres to certain masculine stereotypes by using masculine expressions. Fabian also said that Bulldog is one of his favourite brands since he can trust it. Moreover, the brand indirectly helps him to express his identity as he enjoys taking care of his skin.

Similarly, Fabian explained that he has used hair styling products from Björn Axén for over a year. He enjoys the feeling of the products, as well as the fragrances, and has found that the brand helps him to express his identity. Furthermore, he said; “I enjoy experimenting a lot with my hair, so through Björn Axén I have found new hairstyles that I feel comfortable with”. Thus, Fabian and Björn Axén appear to have interests in common. Arguably, Fabian is found to be behaviorally and mentally loyal to both Björn Axén and Bulldog.

Courtships (Fournier, 1998)

The *courtship*, as per Fournier (1998), was only found between Martin and Vita D’or, a brand selling coconut oil. In fact, Martin has only used the brand for a short time. He explained;

“So what I started doing recently is to, every morning, swish around coconut oil in my mouth. I don’t know if that could be considered cosmetics, but I would definitely say that I use it as cosmetics. I’ve read a lot about it that my teeth get whiter.”

Martin further said that he really likes the flavour of the coconut oil from that specific brand. Hence, he does not want to change to another brand. Consequently, the relationship is regarded as a *courtship*, on its way to becoming a *committed partnership* if the consumption continues. The *courtship* is found to be a strong relationship type as it also rests on both strong behavioural and mental loyalty aspects, more specifically; frequency in usage, positive attitude, preference, commitment, and intention.

Happily Arranged Engagements (Novel)

Regarding the novel consumer-brand relationship metaphors, five strong relationships are proposed. Among the females, Olivia explained that she started using bareMinerals 10 years ago after someone recommended it to her. Today, she is using the brand when wearing makeup (around two times a week) and she finds it easy to use. She would definitely recommend the brand to others and if she was forced to replace it, she would have to ask someone with expertise to help her find something similar. Hence, Olivia is showing high levels of commitment to bareMinerals through her long-term and exclusive consumption. Additionally, she demonstrates love and passion for the brand, as well as interdependence. The relationship between Olivia and bareMinerals is therefore seen as a “happily arranged engagement”, which has been defined as; “high satisfaction level. Arranged/recommended by a third party. Exclusive relationship, but exit is not too difficult”. Olivia’s relationship with bareMinerals is an engagement since she is using the brand exclusively, however, exit is not overly complicated. This relationship form is further classified as strong since both strong behavioural and mental loyalty aspects are present.

The “happily arranged engagements” were also found among the male participants. For instance, about four years ago, Tim received a bottle of perfume from the brand Guerlain from his father. This has since been his everyday perfume, and also a favourite as he likes the balanced fragrance. Because it was a gift, he has an emotional connection to it, and as he uses the perfume on a daily basis he believes that it helps him to express his identity. He stated; “it’s a smell that people characterise with me because it’s the normal brand I use”. Tim’s strong connection to the brand demonstrates that he has a strong love for it. He is also committed to Guerlain and shows intimacy, interdependence, and self-connection. Based on the findings, this relationship can also be seen as a “happily arranged engagement”. The “engagement” can be argued for due to the exclusivity in use and that Tim would be “sad” if he had to replace it. Furthermore, strong behavioural and mental loyalty is found in Tim’s long-term and frequent consumption of the brand, as well as in his positive attitude towards Guerlain.

Supportive Friendships (Novel)

Another novel relationship that was found was the “supportive friendship”. This friendship has been defined as; “the satisfaction level is good. Interaction is regular or sporadic. Supports through following online and/or being a member in a brand loyalty club”. The “supportive friendship” was, for example, found between Lisa and Smashbox, a makeup brand that she uses on a daily basis. She likes the brand and its products. Moreover, she

follows the brand on social media (Instagram). Lisa is also following Urban Decay (makeup) on Instagram. In addition, she is a part of Urban Decay's loyalty club. However, her consumption of Urban Decay's products is more sporadic. In a similar vein, Lisa is also using makeup from Makeup Store, but not every day. However, she explained that she has joined their brand loyalty club because she likes the brand and its products. Ultimately, these relationships can be seen as "supportive friendships". The "supportive friendship" is also strong since both behavioural and mental loyalty dimensions tend to be high.

Among the males, both Martin and Tim have relationships with cosmetic brands which are considered as "supportive friendships". Martin mentioned using toothpaste tablets from Smyle because they are "more eco-friendly than regular toothpaste", which is something he values as sustainability is important to him. Thus, self-connection is high. Martin found the brand on Instagram, started following it, and is now a satisfied customer. Furthermore, Tim previously used both Hugo Boss and Old Spice on a regular basis. He does not use Hugo Boss regularly anymore since he uses Guerlain instead, but he still follows the brand on social media and can therefore be seen as a "supportive friend". Similarly, regarding Old Spice, Tim likes the brand, the "smell" of their products, and especially their commercials with "famous and cool actors". However, he is not using Old Spice at the moment because the brand is not available in Sweden. Despite this, Tim continues to follow the brand on social media to show his support. Hence, the relationship has turned into a "supportive friendship".

Caring Friendships (Novel)

Hanna, Lisa, and Malin were also found to have a "caring friendship" with cosmetic brands that they use. The "caring friendship" has been defined as; "a caring relationship. Used for its gentle purposes. Yields positive rewards. Interaction is regular". This is shown as Hanna is using Cerave and The Ordinary daily because the brands offer skincare that is gentle to her sensitive skin. Moreover, Lisa uses Avene, Emma S., and La Roche-Posay regularly for the same reasons. Malin further explained that she started using Daxxin (hair care) a couple of years ago when she experienced some issues with her scalp. The brand was supposed to solve her problems and it did. Thus, she trusts the brand and has continued to use it, showing commitment, interdependence, and intimacy. When asked how she would feel if the brand was not available to her anymore, she said; "I would probably be a little annoyed because I'm a comfortable person". Consequently, the relationship between Malin and Daxxin is regarded as a "caring friendship". This novel relationship metaphor is also strong because consumers are found to show high behavioural and mental loyalty to the brands that they have a "caring relationship" with.

Regarding the male participants, Erik has been using Clinique For Men for the past 10 years. He is using aftershave lotion from the brand based on the fact that it is unscented and he does not like to have cosmetics with fragrance on his face. Hence, the relationship between Erik and Clinique For Men is long-term and he uses it in a caring aspect. Therefore, the relationship can be seen as a "caring friendship". Erik's preference for unscented products

further indicates that he prefers to use neutral cosmetics. In fact, strong scents, whether they are masculine or feminine, are not favoured.

Loyal Friendships (Novel)

In addition, “loyal friendships” were also found among the participants. This relationship has been defined as a; “long-term relationship. The satisfaction level is good. Interaction is regular. Trust and recommend the brand”. Arguably, the strength of the relationship is reflected both in terms of behavioural and mental loyalty. In addition, love and passion, interdependence, commitment, intimacy, and brand partner quality are high. As an example, Sophie said that she is using skincare from Emma S. regularly and has done so for almost four years. When asked why she is using the brand, she said; “I imagine that they are pretty good. They are quite expensive”. Besides being satisfied with the brand and using it regularly, she trusts it and recommends it. Her relationship with Emma S. can thus be regarded as a “loyal friendship”.

Daniel was found to have similar relationships with HealthAid and Miaroma, from which he uses essential oils. He explained; “generally, I do not use any perfumes or so, but I use a lot of essential oils, which is doing much more”. He further said that he has used these brands for close to 10 years and that he thinks that they have “good quality for a decent price”. He also discussed the importance of them being “fair brands” and that he trusts them. Thus, his relationships with HealthAid and Miaroma are seen as “loyal friendships”.

The “loyal friendship” was also found between Fabian and Dove. Fabian explained that he has specifically used deodorant from the brand for a very long time. His favourites are in fact those that are marketed towards females. He said; “in general I think that deodorants for females smell better than the ones for males”. Thus, Fabian does not seem to have an issue with transgressing the boundaries between male and female cosmetics.

Soulmates (Novel)

Finally, Alice explained that she is only using a few cosmetic brands. Her absolute favourite brand is Rituals (skincare, makeup, and hair care). She likes the quality of the brand and she is very satisfied with their products. Furthermore, to Alice, ingredients are of the highest importance and she prefers to use cosmetics that are not tested on animals, which Rituals lives up to. Hence, she is using the brand every day and has done so rather exclusively for a year. However, she tried the brand for the first time more than two years ago when she received a birthday gift containing cosmetics. Today, she purchases products from Rituals frequently and recommends the brand to others in her surroundings. She also buys Rituals as gifts for her beloved ones.

Furthermore, Alice follows Rituals on social media and is a member of their loyalty club, something she enjoys since the brand often gives its members recommendations and small gifts. She also likes their marketing and that they promote a healthy lifestyle. When asked if she trusts the brand, Alice said; “they support my beliefs. This is how I want to be, not eating Snickers you know”. Therefore, she further thinks that the brand helps her to express her

identity; “they promote these healthy things and I consider myself also a healthy person and they match my beliefs”. Rituals also reminds Alice of her honeymoon in Santorini since she used their products when she was there. Thus, specific scents from the brand bring back very good memories. Consequently, Alice would be really sad if the brand was not available to her anymore.

Based on these findings, one can argue that Alice and Rituals are “soulmates”; the relationship is strong, high in love, intimacy, and trust. The satisfaction level is high and interaction is frequent. Furthermore, the relationship is rather exclusive and commitment is high. Moreover, it rests on common interest, values, and beliefs. The “soulmate” is found to be the strongest consumer-brand relationship since the consumer is expressing true behavioural and mental brand loyalty. Moreover, the consumer, in this case, Alice, acts as a *brand advocate*, as per Ekström, Ottosson, and Parment (2017).

5.1.3 Casual Consumer-Brand Relationships

In addition, 20 casual relationships were identified between the females and cosmetic brands, and 18 were found between the males and cosmetic brands. In total, this resulted in eight different consumer-brand relationships. Four of these; *arranged marriages*, *marriages of convenience*, *compartmentalised friendships*, and *rebounds/avoidance-driven relationships* are relationship forms presented by Fournier (1998), while “happily arranged friendships”, “friends with benefits”, “digital friendships”, and “nurse” are novel relationship forms. Table 4 is a summary of the relationships that were found. Below the table, empirical examples are presented.

Table 4 - Casual Relationships Between Consumers and Cosmetic Brands

Relationship Form	Definition	Females and Brands	Males and Brands
Arranged marriages (Fournier, 1998)	Nonvoluntary union imposed by preferences of third party. Intended for long-term, exclusive commitment, although at low levels of affective attachment.	Not found.	Jonathan (29) and Rituals. Erik (54) and Barnängen.
Marriages of convenience (Fournier, 1998)	Long-term, committed relationship precipitated by environmental influence versus deliberate choice, and governed by satisficing rules.	Hanna (20) and Maybelline New York. Olivia (24) and ACO. Sophie (56) and Nivea.	Tim (28) and Nivea.
Compartmentalised friendships (Fournier, 1998)	Highly specialised, situationally confined, enduring friendships characterised by lower intimacy than other friendship forms but higher socioemotional rewards and interdependence. Easy entry and exit attained.	Hanna (20) and YSL. Alice (27) and Lancôme. Sophie (56) and Clean, Dior, and Marc Jacobs.	Martin (23) and Axe. Fabian (28) and Paco Rabanne and Versace.
Rebounds/avoidance-driven relationships (Fournier, 1998)	Union precipitated by desire to move away from prior or available partner, as opposed to attraction to	Not found.	Daniel (59) and Sea Magik.

	chosen partner per se.		
Happily arranged friendships (novel)	High satisfaction level. Arranged/recommended by a third party. Non-exclusive relationship.	Olivia (24) and Giorgio Armani. Amanda (27) and Clarins. Alice (27) and Bioderma.	Fabian (28) and Exuviance. Tim (28) and L'Oréal.
Friends with benefits (novel)	Voluntary union. The relationship exists because of positive rewards. No strong connection/emotions/feelings involved. Non-exclusive relationship.	Hanna (20) and Benefit, IsaDora, and Nars. Olivia (24) and Apoteket and Nivea Men. Lisa (25) and Chloé and Dolce & Gabbana. Sophie (56) and Clarins.	Martin (23) and Andrelon, Dove, Palmolive, and Sanex. Fabian (28) and Calvin Klein. Christan (60) and HTH and Nivea.
Digital friendships (novel)	The relationship is only digital. At least one party follows the other online through social media. Yields positive rewards and is inspirational.	Lisa (25) and Fenty Beauty.	Tim (28) and Givenchy.
Nurse (novel)	Short-term relationship. Arranged/recommended by a third party. Problem solver.	Not found.	Martin (23) and Head & Shoulders.

Arranged Marriages (Fournier, 1998)

The *arranged marriage*, as per Fournier (1998), was found, but only among the male participants. The reason for this may be that the female participants were found to mainly purchase their own cosmetics, while the males, to some extent, also rely on females in their close surroundings to provide them with cosmetic products. As stated, neither Jonathan nor Erik are interested in cosmetics. Hence, both use cosmetic brands that their female partners purchase for them. Consequently, both have formed relationships resembling an *arranged marriage* with these brands. For Jonathan, it is the brand Rituals, from which he uses various products when showering. He uses the brand frequently and rather exclusively but has never purchased products from the brand himself. Instead, the relationship is arranged by his wife.

Similarly, Erik is often using Barnängen (shampoo), a brand available in his household. He likes the brand in the sense that it “works and does what it is supposed to do”. However, he was very clear with the fact that he does not have any emotional connection to the brand itself. Consequently, the *arranged marriage* is found to be a casual relationship since behavioural loyalty is rather strong but mental loyalty is moderate to low.

Marriages of Convenience (Fournier, 1998)

Furthermore, from a consumer-brand relationship perspective, Hanna’s relationship with Maybelline New York resembles what Fournier (1998) refers to as a *marriage of convenience*. Hanna started using the brand as a teenager because it was “popular”. Today, she uses Maybelline when she wears makeup (a few times a week). She likes the brand and explained; “I think they have good products and it’s affordable”. However, despite having used the brand for a long time, she does not have an emotional connection to it. Moreover, she does not know too much about it. Therefore, she cannot say that it helps her to express her identity. In addition, she would not find it very hard to replace it with another brand. In fact, she is using products from other makeup brands as well. Based on the findings, the

relationship is long-term, satisfactory, but non-exclusive, and not very deep. Hence, neither behavioural nor mental loyalty is very high. Therefore, one can argue that the relationship is similar to a *marriage of convenience*, as well as casual.

Another empirical example of the same relationship type was found between Tim and Nivea. When Tim moved from Mexico to Sweden, he had to rethink his consumption of cosmetics because several of the brands that he was used to were either more expensive or simply not available in Sweden. He, therefore, turned to Nivea, a brand that he recognised and has used since he was young. He finds the price and the quality of the brand to be good and he enjoys that Nivea sells products in large sizes since he consumes a lot of creams to hydrate his dry skin. Tim also follows Nivea on social media, to stay up to date about what they are doing. However, while he is a frequent consumer of the brand, he explained that he does not really trust the brand and its agenda; “I trust the brand as quality products, but as a company, I know that all companies go for money”. Moreover, he would not be too sad if he had to change to another brand. Consequently, the relationship is considered a *marriage of convenience*.

Compartmentalised Friendships (Fournier, 1998)

The *compartmentalised friendships* were further identified between Hanna and Yves Saint Laurent (YSL) (perfume), Alice and Lancôme (perfume), Sophie and Clean (perfume), Dior (perfume), and Marc Jacobs (perfume), Martin and Axe (perfume), and Fabian and Paco Rabanne (perfume) and Versace (perfume). Hence, this type of relationship is found to be common between consumers and cosmetic brands selling perfumes, mainly because it is, according to Fournier (1998, p.362), a “highly specialised” and “situationally confined” friendship that is long-term but easy to exit. Moreover, the “socioemotional rewards” are high, while intimacy is lower. In fact, the participants indicated that, when using perfume or other fragrances, the scent is the most important factor, while the brand is usually of less importance.

For example, Hanna has a perfume from YSL called Black Opium. She has used the same perfume, occasionally, for many years, mainly because she likes the scent. Hence, she does not consider the brand itself to be a favourite. Despite this, when asked if the brand helps her to express her personality, she said; “yes, in a way. It has become a scent that I often wear”. Thus, it can be seen as her signature scent. However, she would be “fine” if she had to replace the brand. Consequently, Hanna’s relationship with YSL is found to be long-term but interaction is sporadic. Moreover, it is satisfactory and used in identity construction, but lacks further intimacy. Arguably, the relationship is a *compartmentalised friendship*.

Furthermore, Sophie was found to have *compartmentalised friendships* with three different perfume brands; Clean, Dior, and Marc Jacobs. Sophie also explained that she likes to try new perfume brands and different scents as long as they are not “too masculine”. Hence, this indicates that Sophie dislikes using cosmetics that interfere with her femininity.

Additionally, a *compartmentalised friendship* was found between Fabian and Paco Rabanne. He has used Paco Rabanne for special occasions for two years and he thinks that the scent

suits him well. Hence, it helps him express his identity, showing self-connection to the brand. He also trusts the brand and thinks that it is affordable. Despite this, he uses other perfumes as well and is not a huge fan of the brand itself. He also said that he will most likely not use the brand “forever”. Fabian’s consumption of Versace is similar, and therefore, this relationship is also seen as a *compartmentalised friendship*. Similarly, Martin explained that he uses perfume from Axe for “social events”, including “presentations at university, parties, and dinners with friends”. Arguably, the *compartmentalised friendship* is a casual relationship since consumers tend to express moderate behavioural and mental loyalty, or strong behavioural or mental loyalty but not both, towards the brands with which they form this relationship.

Rebounds/Avoidance-Driven Relationships (Fournier, 1998)

Regarding *rebounds/avoidance-driven relationships*, Daniel explained that he has exchanged products from Dr. Organic for products from Sea Magik (hair care). He has used Sea Magik regularly for the past six months but clearly stated that he is not “addicted” to it. In fact, he would simply try to make his own products if the brand was not available to him anymore. Daniel also explained;

“I want to take care of my skin and my body, so I am constantly looking for the best products that can actually help me improve my various conditions and so on.”

Arguably, the relationship between Daniel and Sea Magik could be seen as an *avoidance-driven relationship*, given that he is using it as a replacement to Dr. Organic, and that he lacks a strong connection to it. Moreover, despite using a number of cosmetic brands, Daniel also enjoys making his own homemade cosmetics, partly from ingredients that he grows on his own. He explained;

“I try to change as things develop. We [me and my wife] are also making our own cosmetics. We try to make it ourselves, which is our favourite solution, or find another brand that is more genuine and honest and straightforward. We are basically seeing how different brands are developing and then we buy what works and leave what doesn’t work. We are also trying to turn back to local, so going away from the big brands. The trend that we see here [in Malta] is that you go much more from global brands to local brands.”

Hence, making and using his own cosmetics can be seen as a “do it yourself (DIY)” solution to avoid the market and commercial brands. Moreover, as Daniel explained, he will not stay with a brand if he does not like how it has developed. The *avoidance-driven relationship*, defined by Fournier (1998), is considered a casual relationship as mental loyalty is vague. Although, behavioural loyalty tends to be higher.

Happily Arranged Friendships (Novel)

In terms of novel consumer-brand relationships, four causal relationships were found. One was the “happily arranged friendship”. This is a non-exclusive relationship with a high satisfaction level. Moreover, it exists because it was arranged or recommended by a third party. As an example, Olivia’s favourite perfume is from Giorgio Armani and is called Si. This relationship started two years ago in Spain when Olivia was on an exchange semester with some friends. One friend recommended the perfume to her and she fell in love with the scent. Thus, she associates the brand, and specifically the perfume, with the time in Spain; “I think back about it, so it’s just good memories”. The perfume, and its scent, also helps her to express her personality, indicating self-connection. However, she would not be too sad if it was not available in the market anymore since she changes perfumes every now and then. While Olivia might not use the brand regularly, the relationship is still high in love, as well as intimacy. Arguably, the relationship could be seen as a “happily arranged friendship”.

The “happily arranged friendship” is further visible between Fabian and Exuviance. Fabian received a number of samples and products from the brand when he was working for them a couple of years ago. Since then, he has used skincare products from the brand. Similar to his consumption of Bulldog (see p.38), he uses the brand to improve his appearance, especially for special occasions. Likewise, he justified this consumption by using the expression “to feel fresher”, once again emphasising on a masculine expression when explaining that he wants to improve his appearance. Fabian also said that he is fond of the brand and will continue to use it, but not exclusively, because it is “rather expensive”. Consequently, the main reason why the “happily arranged friendship” is regarded as a casual relationship is that consumers forming this type of relationship with brands are found to be mentally loyal to the brand but behavioural loyalty is not equally strong. In fact, it has been defined as a “friendship” since the relationship is non-exclusive.

Friends with Benefits (Novel)

Another relationship metaphor that was found was the “friends with benefits”. This relationship has been defined as a; “voluntary union. The relationships exist because of positive rewards. No strong connection/emotions/feelings involved. Non-exclusive relationship”. Hence, this is a casual relationship as mental loyalty is moderate to low. Moreover, behavioural loyalty is not very high as it is a non-exclusive relationship. This relationship was quite common between the participants and cosmetic brands. Consumers that have this relationship with cosmetic brands use the brands because of “functionality”. In fact, several of the participants were of the opinion that it is not the brand that is important, but the quality of the product itself. In addition, the participants found to have “friends with benefits” also mentioned that the price is important when purchasing cosmetics. As stated by Hanna; “it [the products] should be affordable and work. It should do what I want it to do”.

Olivia further mentioned that she is using shaving foam from Nivea Men, mainly because she thinks that the product is “great, works well, and smells fresh”. Moreover, she explained that she has no issues with using a cosmetic brand marketed specifically for men as long as it

works. Similarly, Olivia is using almond oil (skincare) from Apoteket. Overall, these two consumer-brand relationships are based on the fact that Olivia likes a specific product. Hence, the brand itself is not important and she has no emotional connection to it. Moreover, she uses other brands in the same categories. Therefore, Nivea Men and Apoteket are seen as “friends with benefits”.

Several cases of the “friends with benefits” could also be found among the males. For example, when Martin is not in need of specific anti-dandruff shampoo, he uses either Andrexon or Sanex. He likes the brands because they are simple yet functional. Similarly, Christian uses HTH and Nivea for their “functionality” and because of “old habits” when he is not using his favourite skincare brand ACO.

Digital Friendships (Novel)

Moreover, because we live in a digital society, “digital friendships” were found. This consumer-brand relationship is different from the “supportive friendship” in the sense that it only exists online. Hence, it has been defined as; “the relationship is only digital. At least one party follows the other online through social media. Yields positive rewards and is inspirational”. Furthermore, the relationship is casual as behavioural and mental loyalty aspects are not very strong. Due to the fact that the “digital friendships” are solely digital, it contains a different type of commitment. The consumer shows commitment towards the brand through expressing their love and passion, and potential self-connection, through supporting and consuming it online. Among the females, this relationship was found between Lisa and Fenty Beauty. Lisa follows Fenty Beauty on social media because they post “fun” content. However, she has never tried anything from the brand.

Among the males, Tim follows Givenchy on social media. His relationship with the brand is also a “digital friendship” since he does not consume the brand in any other way. Tim further explained that he has studied advertising. Hence, he likes to watch “good commercials” and to follow brands “to see what they are doing”. He also said; “I follow them on Instagram or TikTok. I think on TikTok they are posting a lot of stuff that is interesting”.

Nurse (Novel)

Lastly, similar to visiting a “nurse” when experiencing a problem, Martin started using Head & Shoulders (shampoo) some weeks ago when he discovered that he had dandruff. The brand was recommended to him by a third party as it was supposed to solve his problem. Hence, he has used the brand frequently since then. While the shampoo has helped him with his dandruff, he does not consider the brand to be a favourite, and will most likely switch to another shampoo brand once his current bottle is finished.

Looking at the factors presented, Martin’s relationship with Head & Shoulders resembles what one might have with a “nurse”. The “nurse” provides assistance, which is helpful but often time-limited. Once the problem is solved, the “patient” (consumer) does not need help anymore. Thus, the relationship will dissolve. Therefore, commitment is low. Arguably, the “nurse” is found to be a casual relationship since both behavioural and mental loyalty aspects

are moderate; the brand is used for a short-term and although it may result in a high satisfaction level, the consumer has no further emotional connection to the brand. The “nurse” was not found among the female participants, although some of them use cosmetic brands for their aiding and caring aspects. However, all of these relationships were identified as “caring friendships”, mainly due to the continuous and rather long-term use of the brands.

5.1.4 Weak Consumer-Brand Relationships

Finally, 12 weak relationships were identified between the females and cosmetic brands, and 14 were found between the males and cosmetic brands. In total, this resulted in five different consumer-brand relationships. Two of these; *casual friends/buddies* and *flings* were developed by Fournier (1998), while “fake friendships”, “friendly ex”, and “toxic ex” are novel. The reason why *casual friends/buddies* are considered to be a weak relationship and not a casual relationship is that Fournier’s (1998) definition of *casual friends/buddies* demonstrates that the relationship between the consumer and the brand is both behaviorally and mentally low. The findings regarding weak relationships are summarised in Table 5 and empirical examples are presented below the table.

Table 5 - Weak Relationships Between Consumers and Cosmetic Brands

Relationship Form	Definition	Females and Brands	Males and Brands
Casual friends/buddies (Fournier, 1998)	Friendship low in affect and intimacy, characterised by infrequent or sporadic engagement, and few expectations for reciprocity or reward.	Lisa (25) and H&M cosmetics.	Daniel (59) and Clarena. Fabian (28) and Nivea.
Flings (Fournier, 1998)	Short-term, time-bounded engagements of high emotional reward, but devoid of commitment and reciprocity demands.	Hanna (20), Olivia (24), Lisa (25), Amanda (27), Sophie (56), and Malin (57) with various brands.	Martin (23), Fabian (28), Tim (28), Jonathan (29), and Daniel (59) with various brands.
Fake friendships (novel)	Voluntary union. The satisfaction level is low. Interaction is infrequent or sporadic. Non-exclusive relationship.	Amanda (27) and IsaDora and Max Factor.	Daniel (59) and Dr. Organic.
Friendly ex (novel)	The relationship has ended. No hard feelings between the parties.	Amanda (27) and Redken.	Fabian (28) and D:fi. Tim (28) and Ralph Lauren and Hermès.
Toxic ex (novel)	The relationship has ended. Negative feelings towards the other party still exist.	Alice (27) and Dove and Garnier.	Fabian (28) and Dax Wax. Tim (28) and Axe. Daniel (59) and Biode.

Casual Friends/Buddies (Fournier, 1998)

The *casual friend*, presented by Fournier (1998), was found between Lisa and H&M cosmetics. This is motivated by the fact that Lisa only uses makeup from H&M’s own beauty brand occasionally and has low expectations about the brand. Thus, the relationship is both behaviorally and mentally weak. Among the males, *casual friends* were found between Daniel and Clarena, as well as Fabian and Nivea. Daniel explained that he has used products

from Clarena for the past five years but he is currently using the brand more sporadically than before. In fact, he is not really sure about the development of the brand;

“It was working really well, not so sure anymore, it’s a bit unclear how it is developing. It was my favourite hair shampoo and conditioner, and worked really well.”

Moreover, Daniel said that if the brand was not available anymore, he would try to create his own shampoo and conditioner. Given that Clarena used to be his favourite brand in the hair care category, but that he has begun to feel unsure about the quality of the brand, Daniel’s loyalty, both behavioural and mental, has diminished. Hence, Clarena can be seen as a *best friend* that has now turned into a *casual friend*.

Flings (Fournier, 1998)

Hanna, Olivia, Lisa, Amanda, Sophie, and Malin also mentioned that they like to try new cosmetic brands, to explore what is available. Sophie further said that she likes to try new brands “out of curiosity”, but admitted that advertising most likely also influences her consumption behaviour. This indicates that all female participants, except Alice, tend to have so-called *flings*, as per Fournier (1998), with different cosmetic brands. *Flings* are defined as “short-term, time-bounded engagements of high emotional reward, but devoid of commitment and reciprocity demands” (Fournier, 1998, p.362). The *fling* is considered to be a “weak” relationship type as both behavioural and mental loyalty is rather low. However, *flings* may turn into more stable relationships if the consumer continues to use the brand(s).

Among the males, Fabian, Tim, Jonathan, Erik, Daniel, and Christian stated that they tend to use the same brands when consuming cosmetics, mainly due to “old habits”. However, Fabian, Tim, Jonathan, and Daniel also mentioned that they occasionally try new cosmetic brands. While Daniel often uses the same brands, he said that he is also very keen on changing to new brands as things develop, and would stop consuming a brand if it becomes less “eco-friendly or bad for the skin”. Martin further said that he tends to change brands frequently. He explained that he is not “attached to a specific brand”, and enjoys trying new brands to find more “sustainable alternatives”. Ultimately, these findings indicate that males also have *flings* with different cosmetic brands. Hence, this type of consumer-brand relationship is present both between male consumers and cosmetic brands and female consumers and cosmetic brands. Although, in general, the male participants were not equally enthusiastic about exploring what is available on the cosmetics market as the female participants were. Moreover, both Erik and Christian said that they rarely or never try new cosmetic brands, mainly because of their disinterest in cosmetics.

Fake Friendships (Novel)

In regard to weak consumer-brand relationships, “fake friendships” were also found. This relationship is found to be voluntary in nature, interaction is infrequent or sporadic, and non-exclusive. Moreover, the satisfaction level is low. Taking the relationship aspects presented by Fournier (1998) into account, they are all relatively low. The consumer lacks

love and passion, self-connection, interdependence, and intimacy towards the brand. Furthermore, although the consumer does use products from the brand, commitment and brand partner quality are also low. To illustrate this, Amanda explained that she occasionally uses makeup products from IsaDora and Max Factor. However, she is not very fond of the brands and tries to avoid them since she believes that the quality is not very good. Since Amanda uses the brands infrequently, her behavioural loyalty is found to be rather scarce. Similarly, her mental loyalty is also weak, given that she does not think highly of the quality of the brands, nor does she like them very much. Based on this, IsaDora and Max Factor are considered “fake friends”.

The “fake friendship” was also identified among the males. Daniel explained that he used to be a frequent user of various cosmetics from Dr. Organic. However, he has reduced his consumption of the brand and moved on to other brands as he did not like the consequences following an acquisition. This shows a shift in Daniel’s loyalty towards the brand, from high to low. Arguably, his relationship with Dr. Organic can be seen as a “fake friendship”. Moreover, Daniel said;

“I always check and when something is not working, I go to another brand. I think one thing around this is that when things are not good anymore I am not sticking to the brand “because this is my brand”. I do not care about the brand, I care about the product you know. As I said, I have moved quite a bit away from some Dr. Organic products because I have noticed that they are really not the same as they were before.”

This further highlights how Daniel is not attached to specific cosmetic brands. It also shows that he is a conscious consumer who evaluates and reflects upon his consumption choices. Thus, his opinions and behaviour align with his personal values and desire to live a more sustainable lifestyle.

Friendly Ex and Toxic Ex (Novel)

The interviews further revealed two new types of weak relationships; the “friendly ex” and the “toxic ex”. These consumer-brand relationships are found when the consumer is not using the brand anymore, although they still have some kind of connection to the brand. For example, Amanda mentioned that she previously used hair care from Redken. However, since she has found a new favourite hair care brand (Living Proof), which she uses exclusively, Redken is seen as a “friendly ex”. Despite the separation, she has no hard feelings towards Redken. Therefore, the relationship may still contain traces of love, as per Fournier (1998). In contrast, Alice said that, in the past, she was using hair care from Dove and Garnier. However, she stopped doing so because she felt that her hair turned very dry from their products. She explained that; “basic or mass-marketed brands like Dove and Garnier have silicones in their products, which can make the hair dry”. Hence, both Dove and Garnier could be seen as a “toxic ex”; the relationships have ended but negative feelings towards the other party still exist.

The “friendly ex” and the “toxic ex” were also found among the males. For example, previously, Tim used perfumes from Ralph Lauren and Hermès, and deodorant from Axe. He stopped using Ralph Lauren because; “I found it [the fragrance] to be too fruity at the end of the day”. Thus, this can be seen as a “friendly ex” since no hard feelings are involved. Similarly, he has no hard feelings towards Hermès, although he is not using it anymore. In contrast, Tim explained that he avoids Axe;

“I grew out of it. I used to use it when I was a kid or teenager. And then, I don’t know, it smells like it has this super-strong smell that you can smell from a long way. It’s not a brand that I like.”

This statement can be interpreted as if wearing a strong scent that collides with his identity makes him feel uncomfortable. Hence, since Tim clearly stated that he is not a fan of the brand, Axe is regarded as a “toxic ex”. Daniel also said that, because he is specifically looking for sustainable options, avoiding plastic, and concerned about which ingredients cosmetics are made of, he started to buy products in bulk. However, he mentioned that;

“I realised that one of the brands [Biode] that I actually liked have started to add really bad ingredients in their products. So I’m actually going to return 5-litres of hand sanitiser that is terrible, from a brand that was really organic and bio before. It’s a little bit like this greenwashing thing. They had really good products before, but now they are starting to add all kinds of bad things into it.”

Hence, his relationship with Biode used to be good, although now it has turned into a “toxic ex”. Finally, Fabian mentioned that he has tried many different brands while searching for “the best hair wax”. He has for example used D:fi, but because he found a better alternative (Björn Axén), D:fi has become a “friendly ex”. Another brand that he has used is called Dax Wax. This brand can be seen as a “toxic ex” since he found it to be like “handball glue” in his hair. Hence, he does not like it at all. Consequently, the “friendly ex” and the “toxic ex” are seen as weak relationships because behavioural and mental brand loyalty is low.

6. Discussion

In this chapter, the findings are discussed. Moreover, the research question is answered. Key findings are also discussed in relation to existing research, which was presented in the literature review. Finally, the trustworthiness of the findings is discussed.

6.1 Discussion of Consumer-Brand Relationships

In this section, the findings regarding consumer-brand relationships are discussed. Hence, the research question is answered. Moreover, the results are compared to existing research.

RQ: What relationships do males and females have with cosmetic brands and what are the characteristics of these?

The findings of this study show that consumers have different relationships with cosmetic brands. In fact, strong, casual, and weak relationships are formed. Furthermore, this study has found that both males and females of different ages have relationships with cosmetic brands. In addition, they all form consumer-brand relationships of various strengths.

Strong consumer-brand relationships are found to be those where the consumer frequently uses and has a high level of love and intimacy to the brand. Furthermore, trust tends to be high and the consumer often recommends the brand. Hence, the consumer expresses both strong behavioural and mental brand loyalty. Strong relationships are usually also long-term, rather exclusive, and satisfaction is high. This aligns with Fournier (1998), who explains that consumers often form strong relationships with brands to which they have strong loyalty. Moreover, as stated by Papista and Dimitriadis (2012), love, intimacy, trust, commitment, and satisfaction are key elements in strong consumer-brand relationships.

In contrast, casual consumer-brand relationships are formed when the consumer shows moderate behavioural and mental loyalty to the brand, or when they show either strong behavioural or mental loyalty but not both. Moreover, consumers usually develop casual relationships with cosmetic brands that they use because of their functionality. Hence, strong feelings or emotions are rarely involved. According to Sahay, Sharma, and Mehta (2012), men's relationships with brands are generally more functional than women's. Moreover, they state that consumer-brand relationships tend to become more functional as consumers age. However, based on the findings in this study, both males and females of different ages are found to have functional relationships with cosmetic brands.

Lastly, weak consumer-brand relationships were found between consumers and cosmetic brands that they either use infrequently and are not really fond of or brands that they have stopped using but still have some sort of relationship with. Hence, both behavioural and mental brand loyalty is low. Arguably, these findings show that in today's consumption society, and specifically in the jungle of cosmetics and cosmetic brands, consumers can be rather disloyal to the brands that they use. In fact, as shown, consumers are not resistant to change to other brands if they are not satisfied with what they currently use. This further

supports the findings by Clark, Carmichael, and Alexov (2019), Hellsten and Kulle (2017), and Hodge et al. (2015).

Consequently, consumers are found to express various degrees of behavioural and mental loyalty to the cosmetic brands that they use. In addition, the majority of the participants indicated that they also like to try new brands and explore what is available in the cosmetics market, hence, they have short-term *flings*, as per Fournier (1998). As stated in the literature review (section 2.4), brand loyalty regarding cosmetics shows very disparate results. Overall, the results of this study indicate the same. This further showcases the difficulty to create, identify, measure, and/or manage brand loyalty within the cosmetics industry. Moreover, the majority of the participants said that the brand itself is often of less importance. Instead, the functionality and quality of the products offered by cosmetic brands tend to be valued higher. Thus, this does not support the idea that consumers use specific cosmetic brands as status markers, which both Chao and Schor (1998) and Ajitha and Sivakumar (2017) claim.

Overall, no distinct differences could be found regarding the relationships that men (male consumers) have with cosmetic brands when compared to those that women (female consumers) have. Hence, biological sex and gender identity do not seem to have a great impact on consumer-brand relationships in the context of cosmetics. The same is true about age as both younger and older consumers were found to have various relationships with cosmetic brands. These findings differ from the findings of Sahay, Sharma, and Mehta (2012), who argue that men's and women's consumer-brand relationships vary and that they change with age. Moreover, according to Nawaz et al. (2020), females and older consumers tend to be more loyal to brands compared to males and younger consumers. Arguably, the results of this study do not support this since both male consumers and young consumers were also found to be highly loyal to some of the cosmetic brands that they consume.

However, as shown in chapter five, 27 strong relationships were identified between the female participants and cosmetic brands. In comparison, 17 were found among the males. The reason for this may be that the female participants were found to use more cosmetic brands in their daily skincare and makeup routines. Hence, this does not imply that women/females are more likely to form stronger relationships with cosmetic brands than men/males. Consequently, although cosmetics are often regarded as feminine products, men (male consumers) are still found to have strong relationships with cosmetic brands. This confirms that stereotypical gender norms, roles, and behaviours are changing. Regarding "gender performativity" (Visconti, Maclaran & Bettany, 2018), this can be seen as consumer behaviour that challenges traditional gender norms and roles set by society.

Based on the findings, interests, personal values and beliefs, as well as lifestyle choices were instead found to influence the consumers' opinions and consumption behaviour, which further impacts their relationships with cosmetic brands. For example, consumers who care about sustainable consumption, the environment, and animals were found to have stronger preferences and opinions about which cosmetic brands they consume. Moreover, they form relatively strong relationships with brands that share their values and beliefs. As an example,

consumers who value animal protection develop stronger connections to cosmetic brands that are vegan and against animal cruelty. Thus, this study supports that conscious consumers also search for sustainable cosmetics, which Biron (2019), Danziger (2019), and Davis (2019) report. Moreover, this confirms the fact that consumers consume brands and products that they can identify with, which Belk (1988), Ekström, Ottosson, and Parment (2017), Elliott and Wattanasuwan (1998), Klasson (2017), Neale, Robbie, and Martin (2016), as well as Reed et al. (2012) highlight.

It should also be noted that the participants who stated that they are not interested in cosmetics still form relationships with cosmetic brands. Additionally, they were found to have rather strong relationships with the brands that they use. This could be because they only use a limited number of brands and that they have used the same brands for a long time. Thus, they have been able to develop a strong connection to these brands, as well as a high level of brand loyalty.

Another finding from this study is that consumers, in general, often trust and recommend the brands that they use. Hence, the fact that consumers tend to be rather sceptical towards marketing claims and promises made by cosmetic brands (CTVNews, 2015; Davis, 2019; FDA, 2015; Gillbro, 2019; Lee & Childs, 2020; SVT, 2021) does not seem to decrease their willingness to support the brands that they consume. Although, as shown, they are not slow to move to other brands if or when trust is broken.

Furthermore, to explain the relationships between consumers and cosmetic brands in detail, hence, specific characteristics, relationship metaphors were used. This method was inspired by Fournier's (1998) study. Among the 21 different consumer-brand relationships found in this study, nine were found to align with the metaphors presented by Fournier (1998). Thus, this study can support nine out of the 15 relationship metaphors presented in Fournier's typology. To better understand how these relationships differ, they were further categorised by strength. As explained in chapter five, *committed partnerships*, *best friendships*, and *courtships* were found to be strong. *Arranged marriages* and *marriages of convenience*, *compartmentalised friendships*, and *rebounds/avoidance-driven relationships* are seen as casual. Lastly, *casual friends/buddies* and *flings* are labelled as weak.

As shown in chapter five, the *arranged marriages* were only found among the male participants. This can be explained based on the fact that the interviews also revealed that females usually purchase their own cosmetics, while males also establish relationships with cosmetic brands based on their partners' preferences. This aligns with the findings made by McNeill and Douglas (2011), Najem and Puolakka (2020), and Pilelienè and Grigaliūnaitė (2018), who all state that women often purchase cosmetics to men with whom they are closely related.

6.1.1 Discussion of Novel Consumer-Brand Relationships

In order to explain contemporary consumer-brand relationships in the context of cosmetics, 12 novel consumer-brand relationship metaphors have been proposed. These are named and

defined based on the characteristics of the relationships found between the participants (consumers) and cosmetic brands. Arguably, these are contributions to consumer-brand relationship literature and extends Fournier's (1998) typology.

Regarding the strong relationships, the "happily arranged engagements", "supportive friendships", "caring friendships", "loyal friendships", and "soulmates" were found. The "happily arranged engagements" have similarities with Fournier's (1998) *arranged marriages*. However, they differ in the sense that the "happily arranged engagements" are high in satisfaction and less exclusive.

The "supportive friendships", "caring friendships", and "loyal friendships" are rather similar in nature but have different characteristics (see definitions in Table 3). For example, the "supportive friendships" include a digital dimension, hence, supporting through digital channels. Moreover, the consumer may support the brand by being a member of a brand loyalty club. However, overall, being a member of a specific cosmetic brand loyalty club was not very common among the participants. This could be because, in a Scandinavian/European context, consumers are more likely to join customer clubs of specific department stores than single brands. Consequently, brand managers have to find other ways to create and manage customer loyalty in today's competitive cosmetic industry. In contrast, "caring friendships" are formed mainly due to their caring aspects. Lastly, "loyal friendships" are long-term and trust is of high importance.

Finally, the "soulmates" were found. Arguably, this metaphor was needed since the strongest consumer-brand relationship presented by Fournier (1998) did not explain the strong relationship between Alice and her favourite cosmetic brand Rituals. The "soulmates" are found to include high levels of love and passion, self-connection, commitment, interdependence, intimacy, and brand partner quality, as per Fournier (1998). In addition, the "soulmates" also score very high on both behavioural and mental loyalty aspects, as per Dick and Basu (1994) and Ekström, Ottosson, and Parment (2017).

Among the casual relationships, the "happily arranged friendships", "friends with benefits", "digital friendships", and "nurse" were found. The "happily arranged friendships" is mainly used to explain relationships that are similar but less exclusive than the "happily arranged engagements". Moreover, since consumers often use cosmetics for their functionality, and the brand itself appears to be of less importance, the "friends with benefits" is used to illustrate these relationships. Ultimately, this type of consumer-brand relationship was common among the participants and cosmetic brands.

Furthermore, today's consumers, mainly younger consumers, are also found to consume cosmetic brands online, through social media. Sometimes this consumption is solely digital. Hence, in today's digital society, the consumption of cosmetic brands does not have to be restricted to physical products. Consequently, "digital friendships" were found, which reflects the present digital consumer culture.

Finally, since cosmetics are also used for solving short-term skin and health conditions, the “nurse” appeared as an appropriate consumer-brand relationship metaphor. This metaphor differs from the “caring relationship” because it is short-term and temporary. Hence, it is therefore categorised as a casual consumer-brand relationship and not a strong consumer-brand relationship. The “nurse” is also arranged or recommended by a third party.

The metaphors used to explain the weak consumer-brand relationships resulted in three novel forms; the “fake friendships”, “friendly ex”, and “toxic ex”. These were mainly proposed as the participants also talked about cosmetic brands that they have some sort of relationship with, although they do not like them and/or consume them anymore. Arguably, consumers are found to have voluntary relationships with cosmetic brands that they do not like. Moreover, they see brands as old partners.

6.2 Discussion of Gender and Cosmetics

As stated, the analysis of the findings shows that both male and female consumers of different ages are interested in cosmetics. Moreover, males and females claim to have an interest in cosmetics because they want to take care of their appearance. Arguably, consumers’ opinions and behaviours are found to be affected by expectations from, and norms in, society, as well as marketing and advertising that promote certain beauty standards. This has previously also been highlighted by Del Saz-Rubio (2019), Frith (2016), and Visconti, Maclaran, and Bettany (2018). Moreover, they state that today’s advertising often leads to unhealthy ideals.

Furthermore, as explained by El Jurdi and Smith (2017), women often use cosmetics to comply with beauty ideals and norms constructed by society. The findings of this study imply that men, or male consumers, tend to do the same, which aligns with what Souiden and Diagne (2009) found, but contradicts the findings made by McNeill and Douglas (2011). However, as explained by McNeill and Douglas (2011), men tend to justify their consumption of cosmetics by stating that it is used for functional reasons, mainly to protect their masculinity. This justification is also observed among the males in this study. In addition, the females in this study further claimed that a large extent of their consumption of cosmetics and cosmetic brands is functional.

However, while both genders form similar relationships with cosmetic brands and use cosmetics for similar purposes, males and females are still found to use different words when explaining their consumption. As stated in the analysis, when describing that they use cosmetics to improve or enhance their appearance, the females used feminine words, for example, “beautiful”, while the males used the word “fresh”, which can be seen as more masculine. The emphasis on masculine words further supports the findings of McNeill and Douglas (2011).

When analysing the findings, another aspect regarding gender stood out. The female participants were found to use and have relationships with cosmetic brands with female, male, and gender-neutral names. In contrast, the male participants were only (except Daniel

and Clarena) found to have relationships with cosmetic brands with male and gender-neutral names. This could be because female names are rarely used by cosmetic brands specifically targeting male consumers. However, it could also be because men/males are more hesitant to use brands that have a feminine identity and image since it could collide with their masculinity and gender identity.

Despite this, some of the male and females explained that they use, or are positive towards using, cosmetic brands and products specifically targeted towards the opposite gender. Using more gender-neutral cosmetic brands and opposing stereotypically gendered brands was also acknowledged. This supports the fact that the consumption of cosmetics is changing towards a more gender-equal consumer culture and that traditional gender roles are slowly fading. As explained by Visconti, Maclaran, and Bettany (2018), the most effective way to change the gender norms set by society as a consumer is to actually oppose stereotypical gender behaviours.

To summarise, based on the empirical findings, the stereotypical idea that “cosmetics are for women or females” is questioned. Men or males are also found to be frequent consumers of cosmetics. Moreover, they have relationships with cosmetic brands. In fact, the differences between male and female consumption of cosmetics and cosmetic brands, as well as the relationships that they have with cosmetic brands, are surprisingly small. Hence, cosmetic brands that only target women or females and ignore men or males risk losing great market opportunities as the consumption of cosmetics continues to increase, specifically among men/males.

6.3 Trustworthiness of Findings

Regarding the trustworthiness of the findings, a few aspects can be discussed. The use of semi-structured interviews resulted in the insights needed to answer the research question. Thus, the selected data collection method was found to be appropriate since it provided a rich understanding of how consumers relate to cosmetic brands.

However, after conducting the qualitative interviews, potential limitations were identified. First, limitations related to misunderstandings are acknowledged. Regarding language barriers, four interviews were conducted in English. However, the interviewees had English as a third language. Therefore, certain questions and answers had to be clarified. Furthermore, the interviewees could have withheld information for various reasons. The participants may for example also use other cosmetic brands that they never mentioned during the interview. In fact, asking the participants about all the brands that they use, or have used recently, is found to be a rather complicated and time-consuming process.

It should also be noted that all relationships are different. Therefore, it can be difficult to label and categorise individual relationships. For example, although many similarities exist, a relationship that is considered to be a so-called *best friendship* still differs from other *best friendships*. Lastly, the participants’ perceptions of time varied a lot. For example, some participants considered a “few months” to be long-term, while others said that using a

specific brand for five years was “not that long”. Therefore, when analysing and interpreting the data, six months was considered long-term. This decision was based on a combination of the participants’ viewpoints but also the theoretical framework used. Ultimately, this decision could have impacted the final results.

7. Conclusion

In this final chapter, conclusions are made. First, the aim of the study and the key findings are highlighted. Secondly, the contributions are stated. Then, practical implications are given. Lastly, the limitations of the study and recommendations for future research are discussed.

7.1 Research Aim

The aim of this study was to gain a nuanced understanding of the consumer-brand relationships that cosmetic brands give rise to. More specifically, the goal was to understand the characteristics of the relationships that male and female consumers have with cosmetic brands. To reach the aim, a qualitative study in the form of semi-structured interviews with male and female consumers of different ages has been conducted. After data collection, the empirical findings were analysed and interpreted with the use of theory. Consequently, this study has resulted in an in-depth understanding of contemporary consumers' relation to cosmetic brands. Moreover, the relationships that consumers have with cosmetic brands have been explained using relationship metaphors.

In conclusion, both male and female consumers of different ages are found to have strong, casual, and weak relationships with cosmetic brands. Stronger relationships are characterised by higher behavioural and mental brand loyalty, while brand loyalty is lower in weaker relationships. Consumers are further found to have strong relationships with cosmetic brands that they can identify with and specifically those that share their personal values and beliefs. Moreover, as stated by Fournier (1998), strong relationships are found to be high in love and passion, self-connection, and intimacy. This study also confirms that interdependence, commitment, and brand partner quality are key elements in strong consumer-brand relationships, which Fournier (1998) further argues. In contrast, casual and weak relationships are found to be based more on functionality.

Overall, no distinct differences could be identified regarding the relationships that male and female consumers of different ages have with cosmetic brands and the strengths of these relationships. However, some males were found to establish relationships with cosmetic brands based on their partners' preferences, and younger consumers were more likely to consume and support cosmetic brands online through social media. Interestingly, this study has therefore shown that male and female consumers' relationships with cosmetic brands are similar. This insight is remarkable as the cosmetic industry has long been, and to a large extent still is, highly gender-biased and female-oriented. Moreover, the marketing and branding of cosmetics is often gendered and follows stereotypical gender norms.

7.2 Contributions

This study contributes to brand and consumer behaviour literature in several ways. First, it presents a novel understanding of contemporary consumers' consumption of cosmetics and their relationship with cosmetic brands. Hence, this study offers new and unique consumer insights and perspectives on the value of brands. Moreover, it decreases the knowledge gap about consumers', both males and females, relationships with cosmetic brands, as well as male consumption of cosmetics in general. Therefore, this study also contributes to the field

of gender studies, as male and female consumer behaviour is compared. In fact, this study has shown that in regard to cosmetics, current consumer culture is becoming more gender-equal since traditional gender boundaries are challenged by consumers.

Regarding theoretical contributions and consumer-brand relationship theory in specific, this study further supports nine of the 15 relationship forms presented by Forunier (1998). However, to explain consumers' relationship with cosmetic brands in today's consumption society, 12 new consumer-brand relationship metaphors have been developed (see Table 6). These novel consumer-brand relationship forms are found to be useful when explaining the relationships that contemporary consumers have with cosmetic brands. However, these relationship metaphors may also be applicable in similar contexts, for example, when investigating relationships between consumers and other FMCG brands. Consequently, the novel consumer-brands relationship forms reflect current consumer culture and extend Fournier's (1998) original typology.

Table 6 - Novel Consumer-Brand Relationship Forms

Relationship Form	Definition
Happily arranged engagements (strong)	High satisfaction level. Arranged/recommended by a third party. Exclusive relationship, but exit is not too difficult.
Supportive friendships (strong)	The satisfaction level is good. Interaction is regular or sporadic. Supports through following online and/or being a member in a brand loyalty club.
Caring friendships (strong)	A caring relationship. Used for its gentle purposes. Yields positive rewards. Interaction is regular.
Loyal friendships (strong)	Long-term relationship. The satisfaction level is good. Interaction is regular or sporadic. Trust and recommend the brand.
Soulmates (strong)	A strong relationship with a high satisfaction level. Exclusive commitment and frequent interaction. High in love, intimacy, and trust. Common interests, values, and beliefs.
Happily arranged friendships (casual)	High satisfaction level. Arranged/recommended by a third party. Non-exclusive relationship.
Friends with benefits (casual)	Voluntary union. The relationship exists because of positive rewards. No strong connection/emotions/feelings involved. Non-exclusive relationship.
Digital friendships (casual)	The relationship is only digital. At least one party follows the other online through social media. Yields positive rewards and is inspirational.
Nurse (casual)	Short-term relationship. Arranged/recommended by a third party. Problem solver.
Fake friendships (weak)	Voluntary union. The satisfaction level is low. Interaction is infrequent or sporadic. Non-exclusive relationship.
Friendly ex (weak)	The relationship has ended. No hard feelings between the parties.

Toxic ex (weak)	The relationship has ended. Negative feelings towards the other party still exist.
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Lastly, this study also contributes to the field of brand loyalty by showing that consumer-brand relationship theory can be used to identify and measure loyalty among consumers. In fact, key insights about consumers' level of loyalty to cosmetic brands are made in this study. These insights are further valuable from a managerial perspective.

7.3 Practical Implications

The findings of this study are valuable for managers and marketers within the cosmetics industry for various reasons. First, the study has revealed that there is a similar interest in cosmetics amongst male and female consumers. Both genders are also forming equally strong relationships with the cosmetic brands that they use. It is therefore recommended that cosmetic brands become more gender-inclusive in their marketing, advertising, and branding, as many brands are currently avoiding or ignoring potential customers. Brands could also produce cosmetic products that are more gender-neutral as this could potentially attract male consumers to purchase and consume more cosmetics. These recommendations are further supported by Arnett (2019), Carefoot (2020), Matlin (2020), Najem and Puolakka (2020), O'Neill (2019), Simon (2018), and Warfield (2019).

In terms of societal implications, it is advised that regulatory bodies or organisations review existing regulations and guidelines regarding the marketing and advertising of cosmetic brands and products. As stated, the cosmetic industry is highly gendered, but this is slowly changing. Therefore, regulatory frameworks need to be updated to follow this societal change. This should be done to protect consumers from misleading marketing, for example, that certain cosmetic brands or products would not work or cannot be used because they target a specific gender. Moreover, as Del Saz-Rubio (2019) and Frith (2016) state, highly stereotypical marketing of cosmetics can lead to unhealthy ideals, specifically among younger consumers.

Furthermore, the findings revealed that consumers use cosmetic brands for various reasons and have different relationships with them depending on this. Thus, marketers should adapt their marketing strategies accordingly. In addition, as explained, managers and marketers often struggle with creating, identifying, measuring, and maintaining brand loyalty, specifically in competitive industries. Hence, as the findings show, managers and marketers could use consumer-brand relationships as a framework when identifying and measuring loyalty in relation to cosmetic brands. It could also be used as a guiding tool when creating campaigns targeting specific consumer segments, for example, consumers who search for brands that share their values and beliefs.

The empirical findings further showed that consumers also follow cosmetic brands on social media platforms and that this influences their behaviour towards, and relationship with, the brand. The fact that digital consumer-brand relationships are formed is a key insight for brand managers and something they should take into account when trying to achieve brand loyalty,

specifically since being a member of a cosmetic brand loyalty club is not that common, at least not in a Scandinavian/European context. Hence, cosmetic brands should utilise digital channels and target consumers online, through social media, to further build strong relationships.

7.4 Limitations and Future Research

A number of limitations regarding this study have been identified. First, the sample of the study is limited. Both the sample size and the chosen sample are limited as neither presents a proper image of a larger population. While the sample size of 14 consumers was equally divided between men/males and women/females, other demographics varied. The results from this approach may show a wider perspective, however, it only showcases a few individuals in each category. Thus, the limited sample ultimately impacts the trustworthiness of the findings of this study. Despite this, the findings are still found to be valuable and can be used as a base in future research.

Moreover, this study focused on males and females, hence, leaving out other genders and preventing a holistic understanding of the studied phenomenon. Furthermore, due to GDPR, information about the participants' sexual orientation could not be collected. Future research could therefore include other genders, as well as investigate if sexual orientation has any impact on the consumption of cosmetics and consumers relationships with cosmetic brands.

Hence, a larger and more gender-inclusive sample should be studied to gain a holistic understanding of consumers and their relationship(s) with cosmetic brands. By doing so, the overall trustworthiness of the findings would increase. Moreover, similar studies in other contexts should be made to be able to generalise the results and test the applicability of the newly defined consumer-brand relationship metaphors. Arguably, quantitative research methods could also be used to test the applicability of the findings.

Furthermore, a limitation with interviews is that the findings only rely on what the participants say, which also affects the trustworthiness. Therefore, observing consumers and their consumption of cosmetics closely in real life is a potential future research method. In fact, empirical observations allow for the researcher(s) to understand and acknowledge what consumers actually do. It would therefore result in a deeper understanding of the phenomenon in question. Doing this could further provide managers and marketers with practical advice on how to target consumers successfully.

Another potential avenue for future research is to conduct longitudinal studies about the consumption of cosmetics and consumer-brand relationships. This would lead to an understanding of how relationships develop over time. Consequently, this would also result in consumer insights that could be of interest to managers and marketers within the growing cosmetics industry.

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Appendices

Appendix A - Interview Guide

Step 1:

Make sure that the participant has read the information sheet.

Step 2:

Write down the participants personal information.

1. Name:
2. Age:
3. Sex (man/woman):
4. Gender (male/female/other):
5. Nationality:
6. Current country of residence:
7. Current occupation:
8. Highest level of education:
9. Monthly income (after tax) in SEK:
 - 0
 - 1-20,000
 - 20,001-40,000
 - 40,001+
 - I do not want to specify

Step 3 - General Information:

Before we start, I will just go through some general information. First, the purpose of our study and this interview is to gain an understanding of consumers' consumption of cosmetics and cosmetic brands.

I will record the interview so that we can transcribe it and analyse the material. However, the data will only be used for research purposes. I also want to remind you that your answers are anonymous. Hence, we will not use your real name in the written report.

During the interview, I will ask you questions about your consumption of cosmetics and cosmetic brands. There are no right or wrong answers. In our study, we focus on cosmetics and cosmetic brands, which includes skincare, makeup, hair care, fragrances, and personal care. If you have any questions or if there is something you do not understand, just let me know. Okay?

Step 4:

Start recording and state the name of the interviewer, the interviewee, and the date and time. Ask the participant if they have read the information sheet and if they give their consent to participate.

“I will start by asking you some general questions about cosmetics.”

General questions:

1. Are you interested in cosmetics? Why/why not? If yes, which cosmetics?
2. Which types of cosmetics do you use (skincare, makeup, hair care, fragrances, and/or personal care)?
3. Why do you use these?
4. How often do you use these cosmetics? Explain your routines/habits?
5. Do you buy your own cosmetics products? Explain.
6. Which factors do you find important when buying/using cosmetics? Is there any difference between different cosmetics? Explain.
 - *List of examples:*
 - *Price*
 - *Product (consistency/colour/smell, etc.)*
 - *Package: practicality and/or visual aspects*
 - *Ingredients*
 - *Durability*
 - *Promised effects*
 - *Perceived quality*
 - *The brand (image)*
 - *Availability*
 - *Country of origin*
 - *Sustainability aspects (product/package/production/recycling, etc.)*
 - *Other factors*

“Now I will ask you questions about cosmetic brands.”

Questions about cosmetic brands:

7. Do you often use the same cosmetic brands (and/or products)? Why/why not?
 - Is there any difference between different cosmetics?
8. Do you often try new cosmetic brands (and/or products)? Why/why not?
 - Is there any difference between different cosmetics?
9. Do you care about which cosmetic brands you use? Why/why not?
 - Is there any difference between different cosmetics?

10. Can you give an example of a (name a category) brand that you use?
- Why do you use the brand?
 - How often do you use the brand?
 - For how long have you used the brand?
 - Why did you start using the brand?
 - How often do you buy products from the brand?
 - Do you like the brand (brand name)? Why/why not?
 - Would you consider the brand to be a favourite? Why/why not?
 - Does the brand mean something to you emotionally? Do you have any strong/special/specific feelings connected to the brand? Explain.
 - Do you have any special memories that you associate with the brand? Explain.
 - Do you know what the brand stands for? Explain.
 - Do you trust the brand? Why/why not?
 - Does the brand help you express your identity (personality/you as a person)? Why/why not? Explain.
 - Would you recommend the brand to others? Why/why not? If yes, to whom?
 - Have you recommended the brand to others? Why/why not? If yes, to whom?
 - How would you feel and what would you do if the brand was not available in the market anymore?
 - Do you use other brands in the same category?
11. Do you have any favourite cosmetic brand(s)?
- If yes, go to question 10.
 - If no, why not?
12. Do you use any specific cosmetic brand(s) for special occasions? Examples.
13. Do you avoid any specific cosmetic brand(s)? Why/why not? Examples.
14. Do you follow any cosmetic brand(s) online (for example on social media)?
- If yes, which ones and why? Explain.
 - Does this influence your buying behaviour and/or consumption of the brand?
15. Are you a member of any cosmetic brand loyalty club?
- If yes, which ones and why? Explain.
 - Does this influence your buying behaviour and/or consumption of the brand?
16. Is there anything you would like to add?

Appendix B - Interview Information Sheet

Interview Information Sheet

This study is conducted by two master students from Lund University School of Economics and Management as a part of their master thesis in International Marketing and Brand Management. The purpose of the study and the interview is to gain an understanding of consumers' consumption of cosmetics and cosmetic brands.

The interview will take between 30-60 minutes. The interview will be recorded so that the researchers can transcribe the interview and analyse the material. You are welcome to look at your transcribed interview if you wish to do so. The data collected in connection to the interview will only be used for research purposes. The final research paper will be published online and can be accessed for free.

We will collect the following personal data; name, age, sex, gender (identity), nationality, current country of residence, current occupation, your highest level of education, and monthly income. However, your real name will not be used in the research paper. Instead, a pseudonym will be used. Your personal data will be handled with confidentiality and deleted once the project has been completed.

The interview is voluntary and you have the right to withdraw from the study at any time without any questions.

Thank you for participating!