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School of Economics and Management

Best Friend or Acquaintance?

Exploring Brand Relationships between Consumers and
Plant-Based Food Brands

by

Chia-Yin Liu & Hong Anh Tran

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Supervisor: Hossain Shahriar

Examiner: Sofia Ulver

Abstract

Title: Best friend or acquaintance? Exploring brand relationships between consumers and plant-based food brands

Purpose: The purpose of the thesis is to explore the relationships between plant-based food brands and their consumers specifically in Sweden. To do this, the study aims to characterize the brand relationships that consumers form with plant-based food brands and understand their perceived green benefits and underlying value when choosing these brands.

Theoretical Perspective: The three main theoretical perspectives are the brand relationship metaphors developed by Fournier (1998), the consumer-green brand relationship concept proposed by Papista and Dimitriadis (2019), and the consumer value framework developed by Shaw, Grehan, Shiu, Hassan, and Thomson (2005).

Methodology: A qualitative research method was chosen to adopt and 18 in-depth semi-structured interviews with plant-based food consumers were conducted. The empirical findings were collected and analyzed within the theories of brand relationship, consumer-green brand relationship and consumer value.

Findings: In total, six different levels of brand relationships were found from strong and deep to weak and superficial, and an additional new type of brand relationship was also identified. The consumer-green brand relationship was identified during the interviews and refers to consumers' positive feelings of their sustainable contributions when choosing plant-based food brands. Finally, six types of consumer value were used to explain consumers' motivations in forming relationships with brands, and a new type of consumer value was also discovered.

Practical Implications: The study contributes to the literature body of brand relationship and consumer value in the marketing and branding field. It also extends the knowledge of the consumer-green brand relationship in the sustainable context. From the managerial perspective, the study also provides insights into the consumer value that motivates consumers to choose plant-based food and build relationships with brands.

Keywords: Brand Relationship, Consumer-Green Brand Relationship, Consumer Value, Plant-Based Food Brands

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Hong Anh Tran

Table of Contents

1. Introduction.....	1
1.1 Background.....	1
1.2 Problematization.....	3
1.3 Research Purpose and Aimed Contributions.....	5
1.4 Thesis Outline.....	5
2. Literature Review.....	6
2.1 Brand Relationship.....	6
2.2 Consumer-Green Brand Relationship.....	9
2.3 Consumer Value.....	11
2.4 Brand Loyalty.....	13
2.5 Research Framework.....	15
3. Methodology.....	16
3.1 Research Philosophy.....	17
3.1.1 Ontology.....	17
3.1.2 Epistemology.....	17
3.2 Research Approach.....	18
3.3 Research Design.....	18
3.3.1 Semi-Structured Interviews.....	18
3.4 Sampling Method.....	20
3.4.1 Sampling Size.....	20
3.4.2 Sampling Strategy.....	20
3.5 Data Collection.....	23
3.5.1 Interviewers' Role.....	23
3.5.2 Interview Guide.....	23
3.6 Data Analysis.....	24
3.6.1 Qualitative Content Analysis.....	24
3.6.2 Stages of Theme Development.....	25
3.7 Research Quality.....	26
3.8 Research Ethics.....	27
4. Empirical Findings.....	28
4.1 Brand Relationship Metaphors.....	29
4.1.1 Brand Relationship as Marriage Partner.....	29

4.1.2 Brand Relationship as Best Friend.....	31
4.1.3 Brand Relationship as Secret Affair	35
4.1.4 Brand Relationship as Childhood Buddy.....	37
4.1.5 Brand Relationship as Teammate	39
4.1.6 Brand Relationship as Casual Acquaintance	41
4.1.7. Brand Relationship as Crush.....	45
4.1.8 Overview of Brand Relationship Types.....	46
4.2 Consumer-Green Brand Relationship and Green Achievement	47
4.2.1 Consumer Green Satisfaction	48
4.2.2 Consumer Green Trust.....	49
4.2.3 Consumer Green Benefits	51
4.3 Aligned Consumer Value.....	53
4.3.1 Consumer Value as Self-Direction	53
4.3.2 Consumer Value as Stimulation.....	55
4.3.3 Consumer Value as Achievement.....	56
4.3.4 Consumer Value as Hedonism.....	57
4.3.5 Consumer Value as Security	59
4.3.6 Consumer Value as Universalism.....	60
4.3.7 Consumer Value as Patriotism.....	62
4.5 Overall Findings.....	63
5. Analysis and Discussion	65
5.1 Forming Relationship Through Brand Relationship Metaphors.....	66
5.2 Forming Relationship Through Green Achievement.....	68
5.3 Forming Relationship Through Aligned Consumer Value	70
6. Conclusion and Contributions.....	73
6.1 Conclusion	73
6.2 Theoretical Contributions	74
6.3 Managerial Implications	75
6.4 Research Limitations	76
6.5 Direction for Future Research.....	77
7. References.....	78
8. Appendix.....	78
Appendix A - Interview Guide	85
Appendix B - Coding Scheme	88

List of Tables

Table 1. Overview of Interviewees

Table 2. Relationship Types between the Interviewees and the Brands

Table 3. Themes and Overview of Findings

List of Figures

Figure 1. The Landscape of Brand Relationships (Fournier & Avery, 2011)

Figure 2. Research Framework

Figure 3. Stages of Theme Development (Based on Vaismoradi et al., 2016)

1. Introduction

This chapter introduces the topic for the thesis *Best friend or acquaintance? Exploring brand relationships between consumers and plant-based food brands*. To begin with, the background of the research topic is provided, namely the trend of sustainable food consumption toward plant-based food industry specifically in Sweden. Next, the problematization is presented, defining the main construct and initial positioning of the research. After that, the purpose of the research and the research question will be identified and described. At the end of this chapter, an outline for the thesis will be provided.

1.1 Background

The trend toward healthier eating and reducing environmental damage is growing globally, and one sustainable solution is to change how we consume and produce food (Baroni, Filippin & Goggi, 2018; Sanchez-Sabate, Badilla-Briones & Sabate, 2019). More specifically, consuming less meat and substituting it with alternatives is one of the ways to improve health as well as reduce carbon footprint (Sanchez-Sabate, Badilla-Briones & Sabate, 2019; Jahn, Furchheim & Strassner, 2021). Therefore, sustainable food consumption has become a popular topic and consumers nowadays are consciously opting for plant-based diets (Baroni, Filippin & Goggi, 2018).

The term “plant-based food” refers to food that only contains vegetables, fruits, whole grains, legumes, nuts, seeds, and herbs, and it excludes all kinds of animal products such as red meat, fish, poultry, eggs and dairy (Ostfeld, 2017). Contrary to animal meat, plant-based meat products are made from plants and attempt to mimic the flavor, texture, and nutritional value of meat without negatively impacting the environment (Choudhury, Singh, Seah, Yeo & Tan, 2020); plant-based dairy alternatives are mostly made from nuts, soy, or oats that substitute milk, cream, or cheese (Röös, Garnett, Watz & Sjörs, 2018). Even though the market of plant-based products has existed for years globally, it has gained a lot more popularity and has grown tremendously in recent years due to greater consumer demands (National Board of Trade Sweden, 2020; Statista, 2022a). The reason for this is both a growing awareness of the environmental, health effects of livestock meat production and concerns for animal welfare (Janssen, Busch, Rödiger & Hamm, 2016; Choudhury et al., 2020). As a result, the

governments and non-governmental organizations have increased funding for plant-based products, and social activists and celebrities have advocated for wider availability and accessibility (Choudhury et al., 2020).

The plant-based food market has increased exponentially in recent years and the brands of plant-based food have prospered in order to meet the rise of the meat and dairy alternatives demand, especially in Sweden (Choudhury et al., 2020; National Board of Trade Sweden, 2020). Sweden is considered to be one of the most plant-based food friendly countries as approximately 10% of the Swedish population consider themselves vegetarians or vegans in 2018 (Statista, 2021a); 47% of the population had noticed an increase in interest in vegetarian food over the past 12 months in 2018 (Statista, 2021b); 31% of the Swedish population are interested in choosing more vegetable-based proteins as a way to protect the environment (Statista, 2022b). Such plant-based products and brands are typically targeted toward vegans, vegetarians, and flexitarians who intend to reduce their meat consumption. In general, vegans refer to those who avoid any animal-related products, and vegetarians are those who avoid meat and fish but still consume dairy and eggs. Flexitarians are semi-vegetarian who do not avoid meat products but reduce the intake of animal products (Derbyshire, 2017; Rosenfeld, Rothgerber & Tomiyama, 2020). While there are numerous different reasons and factors behind plant-based food consumption, such as health issues, personal values, religious beliefs, environmental concerns, and ethical reasons (Choudhury et al., 2010; Baroni, Filippin & Goggi, 2018), some consumers still hold strong opinions against plant-based food and hesitate to purchase alternative meat or dairy products (Clayton & Weston, 2020).

Due to these different viewpoints and attitudes, consumers interact differently and form various types of relationships with plant-based food brands (Fournier, 1998), which is called brand relationship or consumer-brand relationship. Fournier (1998) defined brand relationship as the relationship that consumers feel, think, have and experience with a product or a brand. The concept of brand relationship has been explored by scholars for decades, and since sustainability and social concerns have gained even more attention in recent years, one type of brand relationship, which is consumer-green brand relationship that focuses on forming the strong and positive relationship with green brands, has been addressed by Papista and Dimitriadis (2019). The paper aims to explore how consumers form their relationships with plant-based food brands. Moreover, the study also involves two other aspects including how consumer-green brand relationship plays a role in consumers' value and how their self-identities and emotions influence their loyalty to green brands. More specifically, this study

focuses on brand relationships between consumers and plant-based food brands from consumers' perspectives.

1.2 Problematization

The topic of brand relationship has been comprehensively studied in the previous branding and marketing literature (Fajer & Schouten, 1995; Fournier, 1998; Aaker, Vohs & Mogilner, 2010; Alvarez & Fournier, 2016; Papista & Dimitriadis, 2019). The concept of brand relationship is initially created as a logical continuation of brand personality, referring to how consumers attribute human-like characteristics to brands (Blackston, 1992; Aaker, Vohs & Mogilner, 2010). The concept has been further developed to identify the characteristics of the bond between brands and consumers through the lens of personal relationship (Fournier, 1998; Alvarez & Fournier, 2016). Thereafter, different levels of order within brand relationships and a typology of 15 brand relationships have been categorized based on the depth and duration of emotions (Fajer & Schouten, 1995; Fournier, 1998). Based on this, the concept of brand loyalty can be understood through the perspectives of consumers' emotional attachment, repeated buying behavior and how they are willing to commit to the brands (Jacoby & Chestnut, 1978; Fournier & Yao, 1997; Oliver, 1997). The topic of brand relationship has been applied in empirical contexts of packaged goods sectors, cosmetics and education to understand how consumers develop relationships with brands in these specific industries (Aurier & de Lanauze, 2012; Papista & Dimitriadis, 2012; Hashim, Yasin, & Ya'kob, 2020). Yet, there have been limited studies that explore the consumer-brand relationship within the empirical context of sustainable or ethical brands. Furthermore, current literature has not applied the brand relationship typology through interpersonal relationship metaphors in green or ethical brands, such as plant-based food brands.

As the concept of brand relationship has been developed and evolved over the decades, along with the sustainable trends that are rising globally and increasing green conscious consumers, the combination of brand relationship and consumers forming greener relationships has been discovered and addressed (Chen & Chang, 2012; Chen, 2013; Papista & Dimitriadis, 2012; Papista, Chrysochou, Krystallis & Dimitriadis, 2017; Papista & Dimitriadis, 2019). The current literature focuses on consumers' feelings of satisfaction and trust toward green brands as well as the emotional benefits that they gain by purchasing from green brands. However, the concept of consumer-green brand relationship has been scant in existing studies due to the newly

developed nature of the topic. Even though consumer-green brand relationship has been conceptualized, it has not been applied to empirical contexts and research. Moreover, there has not been a definition of what consumer-green brand relationship is as a whole.

As consumers' satisfaction, trust and emotional benefits toward green brands heavily depend on consumer value, the underlying motivations of choosing and forming relationships with plant-based food brands are equally important. The concept of consumer value has been broadly studied with a focus on how consumers make purchasing decisions, what factors influence these decisions and how these values drive them toward buying green products (Holbrook, 1999; Shaw et al., 2005; Lee & Park, 2013). However, current studies have not yet addressed how consumer value contributes to forming relationships with brands. Since consumers were found to experience satisfaction when choosing brands that appeal to their ethical and environmental value (Hartmann & Apaolaza Ibáñez, 2006), aligning brand image with consumer value can construct a deeper and closer brand relationship. Therefore, it is believed that consumer value should not be excluded from brand relationship studies.

Therefore, the research conducted in this thesis aims to gain an in-depth understanding of the brand relationships that consumers form with plant-based food brands. It also intends to fill the gaps in the current literature by (1) applying brand relationship metaphors to consumers' relationships with plant-based food brands; (2) providing a definition of consumer-green brand relationship and (3) incorporating consumer value with brand relationship. To achieve this, the following research question is proposed:

How do consumers form their relationships with plant-based food brands?

For this research question, Sweden has been chosen as the study context based on the background given in the introduction that 10% of Swedes are either vegetarian or vegan. The statistic also shows that a lot of Swedes are limiting their meat and dairy intake for health, animals or environmental reasons. As there is a large demand for plant-based food options, Sweden is considered one of the most ideal countries for vegetarians and vegans as well as to conduct the research. Thus, it is important to explore the diverse and in-depth opinions of Swedish-based consumers about their relationships with plant-based food brands.

1.3 Research Purpose and Aimed Contributions

The purpose of the study is to explore the relationships between consumers and the plant-based food brands, and determine the underlying values that motivate them to form these relationships. Furthermore, the study aims to provide both theoretical and managerial insights into brand relationship literature within the field of branding and marketing. From the theoretical perspective, the thesis contributes to the understanding of brand relationships by exploring how consumers form their relationships with plant-based food brands. Secondly, it also intends to contribute to the literature body on consumer-green brand relationship by understanding consumers' satisfaction, trust and the emotional benefits toward plant-based food brands. A definition of consumer-green brand relationship is provided and applied to the empirical context of plant-based industry. Moreover, the study attempts to enrich the previous brand relationship literature by connecting with the concept of consumer value and exploring the underlying motivations that drive consumers to build relationships with plant-based food brands.

From the managerial perspective, the insights generated can also be used by marketing managers and brand managers to understand what factors lead to strong brand relationships from the consumer perspective and therefore, identify the role of brand as a long-term relationship partner. An understanding of consumer values and feelings in their interaction with brands will be gained and this knowledge can be used to create effective relationship marketing strategies to align with these values. Overall, the study aims to extend the understanding of brand relationship and consumer value in the context of sustainable green brands.

1.4 Thesis Outline

The thesis consists of six chapters, in which chapter one has presented an introduction. The introduction includes background information that sets the scene for the study and highlights the problematization and research phenomena. In chapter two, relevant theories and concepts are discussed within existing academic literature. Chapter three describes the methodology of the study including the research design and data collection. Furthermore, chapter four presents the empirical findings of the study. In chapter five, the findings are analyzed and discussed. Lastly, the final chapter concludes the study, which includes theoretical contributions, managerial implications, research limitations and direction for future research.

2. Literature Review

The purpose of this chapter is to present the findings from the current academic literature and provide a theoretical foundation for the thesis. The literature review consists of four main topics and aims to cover existing research within brand relationship, consumer-green brand relationship, consumer value, and brand loyalty. After discussing each of the four concepts, a research framework based on the reviewed literature will be derived and presented at the end of this chapter.

2.1 Brand Relationship

A brand relationship, which is known as consumer-brand relationship, refers to the relationship that consumers feel, think, have and experience with a product or a brand (Fournier, 1998). Blackston (1992) pointed out the concept for the first time that “a brand relationship is a logical extension of the idea of a brand personality”. Brand personality, or brand personification refers to the process of allocating human-like traits to brands (Alvarez & Fournier, 2016). Brands themselves are seen as active partners in the consumer-brand relationships, and brand personality calls for attention not only to consumers’ perceptions and attitudes toward the brands but also to the reciprocating interaction. A brand can be associated with two personality traits including warmth and competence (Aaker, Vohs & Mogilner, 2010). To elaborate, consumers associate brands that have high warmth and high competence with a positive perception of their performance. Meanwhile, brands with high competence but low warmth are perceived with feelings of jealousy. Following this perception, when it comes to brand wrongdoing, consumers may have more negative reactions with a warm firm than a competent brand, as they have more trust and expectations for the brands with high warmth. If a brand with high perceived warmth increases their corporate social responsibility initiatives, consumers’ evaluation about the brand’s product quality and performance will improve (Chernev & Blair, 2015).

Fajer and Schouten (1995) presented and classified the brand relationships as lower-order and higher-order relationships within person-brand relationships; as the relationship becomes higher-ordered, it tends to be more loyal. Thereafter, Fournier (1998) developed a typology of 15 brand relationship metaphors based on the view of relational phenomena, specifically on the brand level. The relationship metaphors typology is characterized and defined by the depth

of emotions and duration of the relationships including voluntary and non-voluntary relationships such as *arranged marriage* and *marriage of convenience*, and short-term and long-term relationships such as *fling* and *committed partnership*.

Based on this, the landscape of brand relationships perceptual map has been further developed by Fournier and Avery (2011) with 18 different types of relationships in which consumers form with their brands (see Figure 1). The brand relationships map has taken into account different dimensions if the relationships are symbolic or functional, voluntary or constrained, strong or weak, long-term or short-term and independent or interdependent. The quadrants are therefore divided by emotional and identity invested versus functionally oriented axis, and weak and superficial versus strong and deep axis. As a result, the top right quadrant is an indicator for brands to form positive brand relationships with consumers which can further build brand loyalty (Fournier & Avery, 2011).

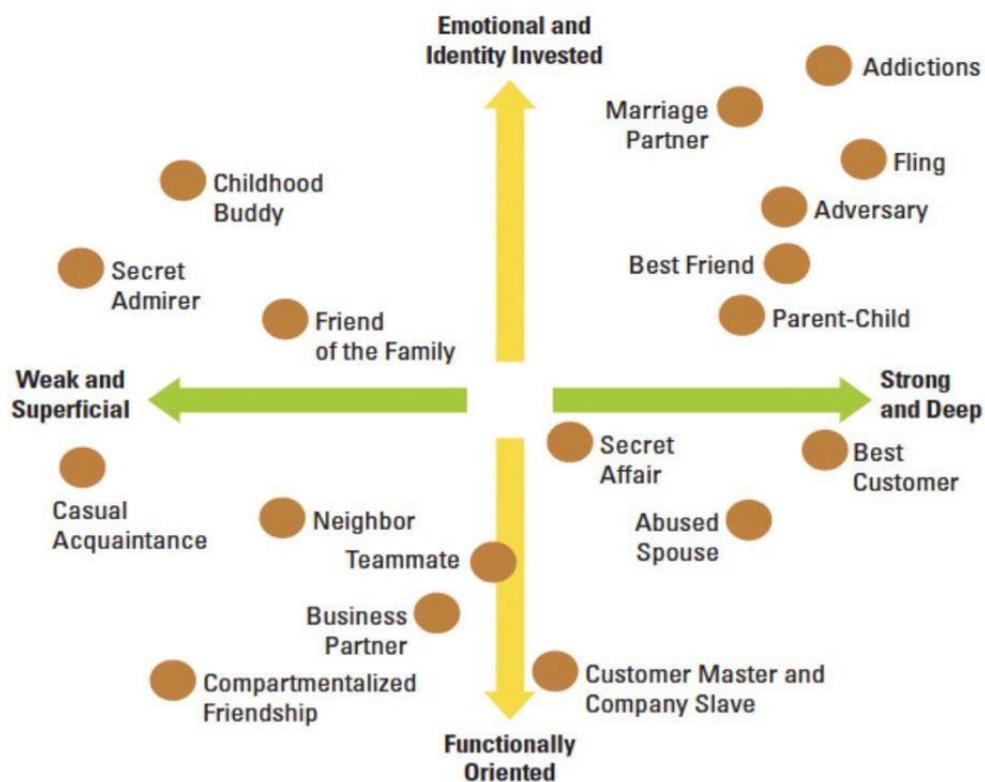


Figure 1. The Landscape of Brand Relationships (Fournier & Avery, 2011)

Empirical studies have explored consumer-brand relationships through the lens of the personal relationship, using the metaphors of the personal relationship to provide a deeper understanding of the relationship between brands and consumers (Fournier, 1998; Breivik & Thorbjørnsen, 2008; Papista & Dimitriadis, 2019). Many studies have suggested that consumers relate to brands similarly to how they relate to people, such as associating brands with human quality, responding to their actions and treating them similarly to a partner in an interpersonal relationship (Batra, Ahuvia, & Bagozzi, 2012; Alvarez & Fournier, 2016). To be more specific, brand relationships that are deep and intimate are categorized as *soulmate* or *best friend*. Other noteworthy relationships are *secret affair*, referring to the relationship that is pleasurable but short-term commitment; *childhood buddy*, referring to the feelings or experience that evokes one's nostalgic memories (Alvarez & Fournier, 2016). To categorize different brand relationships, a six-faceted brand relationship quality construct has been developed and conceptualized by Fournier (1998) including *love and passion*, *self-connection*, *interdependence*, *commitment*, *intimacy* and *brand partner quality* to make the consumer-brand relationship more holistic. Among these elements, *love and passion* indicates the affection toward the brand and the anticipated separation anxiety when not using the brand. *Self-connection* refers to the degree to which the brand appeals to the consumers' identities and values. *Interdependence* indicates the frequency of buying and using the brand. *Commitment* indicates the intention to use the brand in the long-term. *Intimacy* refers to the consumers' knowledge of the relationship partner and is created through learning about the brand. *Brand partner quality* refers to a brand's performance and attitude toward its consumers, such as if the brand makes the consumers feel good, heard or cared for. Moreover, *brand relationship quality* can be developed through the consumers' active interaction with the brand and the brand's effort to reciprocate this interaction.

Brand relationship is characterized by three foundational elements including the consumer-brand bond, the brand as a relationship partner and the consumer as a relationship partner (Alvarez & Fournier, 2016). The first element refers to the strength of the bond, and the bond is stronger when the brand contributes to or reflects the consumer's self-identity and values. In contrast, the consumers may disengage or withdraw from the brand if the brand fails them. The second element means that the brand is perceived as a relationship partner when a brand shows appreciation toward the consumer, and the consumer reciprocates by purchasing from this brand. As a relationship partner, different consumers may differ in their intensity of their interactions and engagements with the brand. The difference can be accounted for by their

interpersonal style of engaging with others, such as their views of self as unworthy or worthy, namely anxious tendency, and their views of others as untrustworthy or trustworthy in relationships, namely avoidant tendency. People with anxious or avoidant interpersonal style tend to have less fulfilling relationships and feel less belonging in life. Therefore, they use brands to meet their belonging needs and help build personal relationships with others (Alvarez & Fournier, 2016).

Brand relationship has been developed for decades, and the concept within this study specifically focuses on the relationship metaphors through the lens of personal relationship. As plant-based food brands have been more and more popular in recent years, forming positive and long-term relationships with consumers is one of the greatest strategies. Nowadays the consumption of plant-based brands is considered as a greener and more sustainable option. Hence, another brand relationship that particularly addresses the concept of contemporary brand relationship, namely consumer-green brand relationship, has been developed and will be elaborated below.

2.2 Consumer-Green Brand Relationship

As the brand relationships have progressed over the time, scholars have developed robust and varied facets of brand relationships within the field of sociology, social and cognitive psychology, anthropology, ethnography and economics (Fajer & Schouten, 1995; Fournier, 1998; Chen, 2013; Alvarez & Fournier, 2016; Papista & Dimitriadis, 2019). As the growing popularity of green brands is a current market trend that has contributed to considerable growth in sales, building strong and long-term relationships between consumers and green brands has become increasingly essential (Papista et al., 2017). Papista and Dimitriadis (2019) addressed the concept of consumer-green brand relationship focusing on consumers' perceived benefits with green brands, which is called relational benefits. However, there is no explicit definition of the consumer-green brand relationship, and the current literature focuses more on the trust and satisfaction that consumers have toward green brands. Chen (2013) pointed out the concept of *green satisfaction* that is "a pleasurable level of consumption-related fulfillment to satisfy a customer's environmental desires, sustainable expectations and green needs". The term *green trust* refers to "a willingness to depend on a product or service based on the belief or expectation resulting from its credibility, benevolence and ability about environmental performance" (Chen, 2013). The combination of *green satisfaction* plus *green trust* will enhance *green loyalty* as it

is defined as “the level of repurchase intentions prompted by a strong environmental attitude and sustainable commitment toward an object, such as a product, a service, a company, a brand, a group, or so on”. Therefore, the concept of consumer-green brand relationship has been identified and initially developed based on the consumer satisfaction, trust and loyalty within green branding (Chen, 2013; Papista & Dimitriadis, 2019).

Subsequently, the concept of the three main factors including relational benefits, relationship quality and satisfaction, and relational outcomes has been developed by Papista and Dimitriadis (2019) based on the concepts of *green satisfaction* and *green trust*. To be more detailed, relational benefits with green brands that include *confidence benefit*, *self-expression benefit*, *socialization benefit* and *altruistic benefit* have been elaborated (Papista & Dimitriadis, 2019). Among these benefits, the *confidence benefit* refers to the performance advantages that the green brand offers. *Self-expression benefit* means that there is a consistency between the brand’s personality and the consumer’s belief system, and the brand relates to the consumers’ belief, attitude and personality. *Altruistic benefit* is a personal benefit motivated by contribution and a warm feeling of giving. *Socialization benefit* refers to a brand’s ability to fulfill the consumers’ needs for social approval and gaining self-confidence by allowing them to fit into social standards. The more benefits the brand provides consumers, the more consumers are willing to favorably promote the brand via word-of-mouth, continue to purchase the products and maintain the relationship as well as buy other products within the same brand (Papista & Dimitriadis, 2019).

As far as the context of consumer-green brand relationship is concerned, existing studies have addressed consumers’ perceived values toward green brand image (Hartmann, Apaolaza-Ibáñez & Sainz, 2005; Hartmann & Apaolaza-Ibáñez, 2012; Barbarossa & De Pelsmacker, 2016), the concept of consumers’ green satisfaction and trust toward green brands (Chen, 2013), and the construct of the consumer-green brand relationship benefits (Papista & Dimitriadis, 2019). However, there is no specific definition to illustrate the concept of consumer-green brand relationship. Connecting with the landscape of brand relationships given by Fournier and Avery (2011), the consumer-green brand relationship can be categorized as emotional and identity invested, as green consumers appraise the value of a product or service according to their environmental motivations, sustainable expectations, and green needs (Patterson & Spreng, 1997) as well as the feeling of *green satisfaction* and *green trust* that they gain from green brands (Chen, 2013). Furthermore, consumers’ *green satisfaction* and *green trust* help to enhance the consumers’ *green loyalty* (Chen, 2013), as there is a positive relationship between

consumer value and their trust, and it also shows a strong and positive impact on consumers' repeat purchase intention toward the brands (Patterson & Spreng, 1997; Sirdeshmukh, Singh & Sabol, 2002; Eggert & Ulaga, 2002). Consumers were also found to have a moral obligation to purchase green products and care for the environmental impact of their consumption (Barbarossa & De Pelsmacker, 2016). As a result, the consumer-green brand relationship can be seen as aligning with the strong and deep side.

Based on the concepts and theories referred from previous studies, consumer-green brand relationship can be defined as “a level of consumption-related achievement feeling that is highly emotional and identity invested in a brand's credibility and contribution for the environment and sustainability”, and it is a type of brand relationship that consumers perceive and experience with a brand. Since consumers hold different opinions and motives for green or sustainable brands, the level of consumer-green brand relationship perceived by consumers is different and depends heavily on their values. Another factor that influences green brand consumption and the level of consumer-green brand relationship, which is consumer value, will be explored further in the next section.

2.3 Consumer Value

The consumption of green brands has risen significantly due to the market trend and rising demand for green products (Borin, Lindsey-Mullikin & Krishnan, 2013). The concept of the 'ethical consumer' has been developed to describe consumers who make decisions aligning with environmental, animal and ethical issues in their daily activities and purchasing habits (Newholm & Shaw, 2007). It is important to understand the underlying motivations of these decisions, as consumer value and self-identity are directly connected with how consumers purchase and consume products, such as food. Consumer value refers to one's underlying motivation in evaluating a product or making a purchasing decision (Holbrook, 1999; Shaw et al., 2005). Consumer value can encourage consumption behavior toward green brands even though the green products might be more costly or inconvenient than non-green products (Lee & Park, 2013). Green brands can evoke and satisfy consumers' emotional needs, as consumers are more likely to feel better after using a brand that resonates with their ethical and environmental values (Hartmann & Apaolaza Ibáñez, 2006). Thus, consumer value goes hand in hand with the consumer-green brand relationship.

There have been many studies about human values, with Milton Rokeach being the founder of the relevant research regarding values. Rokeach (1973) defined value as “a centrally held, enduring belief that guides actions and judgments across specific situations and beyond immediate goals to more ultimate end-states of existence”. There are various definitions of consumer value by academic scholars throughout the time, depending on what aspect to focus on. Maklan and Knox (1997) stated that value is the difference in how consumers perceive a product or service. Holbrook (1999) understood consumer value as an “interactive relativistic preference experience”. According to the definition, consumer value is interactive as it involves an interaction between a consumer and a product or service. It is relativistic, because it involves comparison between products, which varies according to the person’s opinion and the situation. Consumer value is also a preference, as different people place different emphasis on different sets of value. All these elements of consumer value, such as interactivity, relativism, preference, are rooted in the consumption experience. This means that consumers make certain purchasing habits not simply because of the product or brand, but in the experience and benefits provided by the particular brand or product.

Rokeach (1973) developed a comprehensive list of values including *self-direction*, *stimulation*, *achievement*, *hedonism*, *security*, *benevolence*, *universalism*, *conformity*, *power* and *tradition*. This list has also been widely used across different studies in the field of political and social science (Rokeach, 1973). The research by Shaw et al. (2005) further used the framework that was developed by Rokeach (1973) to uncover the consumer value in ethical consumption in grocery shopping. Among the value type list, there are eight sets of values considered important for consumers when shopping for groceries, including *self-direction*, *stimulation*, *achievement*, *hedonism*, *security*, *benevolence*, *universalism* and *conformity*. The value type *self-direction* is highlighted when a consumer has a need for control, autonomy and independence when purchasing groceries. This value is reflected in terms such as ‘freedom’, ‘independent’, ‘self-respect’ and ‘curious’. The second value type, *stimulation*, is seen as important for consumers who have the need for variety and stimulation in order to have an enjoyable shopping experience. The value type *achievement* also serves as a guiding principle in grocery shopping, referring to the one gaining social approval through showing capability that is aligned with social norms. The value type *hedonism* reflects pleasure and sensuous gratification for oneself. In the context of grocery shopping, *hedonism* revolves around the notion of the enjoyment and pleasure of eating and shopping experience. This value is suggested to be less important as

ethical consumers place greater emphasis on environmental concerns than on personal enjoyment.

Furthermore, the value type *security* was also viewed as essential by consumers when shopping for groceries, referring to the needs for safety and security for themselves and others. Consumers who have this value normally go for food that are labeled ‘healthy’ and ‘clean’. The value type *benevolence* is described by characteristics such as ‘helpful’, ‘loyal’, ‘responsible’, and ‘true friendship’. Consumers who have value type *benevolence* are motivated primarily by the desire to protect their friends’ and acquaintances’ well-being. The value type *universalism* reflects the importance of accepting and treating every being with respect and fairness; particular terms that show these values are ‘equality’, ‘social justice’ and ‘protecting the environment’. The last value type is *conformity*, referring to the resistance of actions and impulses that are likely to upset or harm others and violate social norms. The eight value types discovered by Shaw et al. (2005) are helpful for understanding consumers’ underlying values and exploring in detail how these values shape and affect how consumers form relationships with green brands.

The concept of consumer value has been extensively explored by various scholars (Rokeach, 1973; Maklan and Knox, 1997; Holbrook, 1999; Shaw et al., 2005; Ramaseshan & Stein, 2014). Understanding consumer value helps determine the underlying motivations in how consumers make purchasing decisions and identify brands that align with their values. As a result, using the concept along with its characteristics and the various types of value help researchers establish a connection between consumers’ values and how they develop relationships with plant-based food brands. When a brand aligns with consumers’ values, it can lead to higher consumer satisfaction, which links to increased brand loyalty (Ramaseshan & Stein, 2014). As brand loyalty plays an important role in the relationships between consumers and brands, the concept will be elaborated further in the next section.

2.4 Brand Loyalty

The brand loyalty concept has been extensively researched and evolved in the branding and marketing field (McConnell, 1968; Newman & Werbel, 1973; Jacoby & Chestnut, 1978; Oliver, 1997; Oliver, 1999; Gommans, Krishnan & Scheffold, 2001; Ahmed, Chandio & Qureshi, 2015). Brand loyalty can be defined as consumers’ positive feeling and preference toward a brand, and their desire to repeatedly purchase the products or service from the certain brand

despite other external factors (McConnell, 1968; Oliver, 1999). Therefore, brand loyalty sets the differentiation between one brand to another on the market (Ahmed, Chandio & Qureshi, 2015). The level of loyalty can also be determined by how consumers are willing to commit to the brand, which is related to the *commitment* under brand relationship quality construct referring to the consumers' intention to purchase from the brand in the long run (Fournier, 1998). Furthermore, two streams of meanings are typically associated within brand loyalty research, which are repeated purchase behaviors found in consumers and loyalty as an attitude of individual preference (Gommans, Krishnan & Scheffold, 2001).

The understanding of brand loyalty as repeated behavior refers to the consumers' intention within the buying decision process. Loyal consumers are those who repeatedly buy from the particular brand, only commit to that brand and do not research information about other brands (Newman & Werbel, 1973). In that sense, consumers are willing to stick to the particular brand that they feel satisfied with and resistant to change to another one within the same product type, as satisfaction consists of an important element toward brand loyalty (Oliver, 1999). They also tend to be less price sensitive and are willing to pay higher price for a certain brand due to the unique relationship and value with the brand (Shin, Amenuvor, Basilisco & Owusu-Antwi, 2019).

In the view of loyalty as an attitude and individual preference, loyalty is perceived in the emotional aspect of brand loyalty and the consumers' attitude and experience with the brand (Jacoby & Chestnut, 1978). Loyalty is associated with satisfaction, yet satisfaction does not necessarily lead to loyalty (Oliver, 1997). A research by Gommans, Krishnan and Scheffold (2001) showed that this is due to the wide availability of brands on the market, allowing consumers to choose from a variety of options. Highly loyal buyers tend to stay loyal if they have a favorable attitude toward a brand. On the other hand, a regular buyer who has a positive experience with a brand is more likely to develop loyalty. Additionally, when consumers have a favorable relationship with the brand, they will likely share about the brand on social networking sites (Park & Kim, 2014).

Fournier and Yao (1997) criticized the lack of attention to interpersonal relationships in the brand loyalty literature. Therefore, they reconceptualized brand loyalty in the context of brand relationship theory. From this viewpoint, loyalty is understood as fidelity and exclusivity when the consumer only intends to consistently purchase just one brand over time. Loyalty is assumed as a consequence of a decided choice process between competing brands and the

preferred brand (Fournier & Yao, 1997). Based on this concept, brand loyalty is considered similar to a monogamous relationship, taking into account both the attitude and behavior factors. This means that consumers are loyal when they stay committed to the brand and disloyal when they consider a variety of brands. Ramaseshan and Stein (2014) expanded upon this perspective and investigated the link between brand loyalty, purchase brand loyalty and attitudinal brand loyalty with the brand relationship elements. It was found that the deeper the consumer-brand relationship is, the more favorable the experience consumers have with the brand, leading to an increase in both purchase brand loyalty and attitudinal brand loyalty.

Brand loyalty is a well-researched topic with many different perspectives which include loyalty as an attitudinal and individual preference (Jacoby & Chestnut, 1973; Oliver, 1999), loyalty as a behavioral intent (Newman & Werbel, 1973) and loyalty in the perspective of a monogamous relationship (Fournier & Yao, 1997; Ramaseshan & Stein, 2014). The various views of brand loyalty provide the insights to understand the depth of the consumer-brand relationship and the consumers' commitment to the brands. As the four concepts discussed above are interconnected and closely related, a research framework based on the reviewed literature will be presented in the next section.

2.5 Research Framework

The purpose of this study is to gain a deeper understanding of the connection and interplay between consumer value and brand relationship including how consumers form their relationships with green brands, how these relationships evoke consumers' emotions and values, and eventually drive brand loyalty. The concept of brand relationship can be used to gain an understanding of the characteristics and the quality of consumers' relationships with plant-based food brands. The second concept of consumer-green brand relationship is tied together with consumer value, as different consumers might be motivated by different value types in forming relationships with the brands. These two concepts help gain an understanding of consumers' perceived satisfaction and emotional benefits in a green branding context and the role of consumers' values in forming relationships. As different consumers have varying levels of loyalty to brands, the level of loyalty that consumers have with plant-based food brands can be learned by analyzing their commitment to the brands.

The four literature areas provide a holistic understanding of how consumers form relationships with plant-based food brands. To do this, the study explores the depth and characteristics of

these relationships, discovers the link between these relationships with their underlying values and green benefits, and analyzes the commitment level of brand loyalty. To give a clearer understanding of the research and guidance, a research framework is presented below (see Figure 2). Each concept is closely related to each other as consumer-green brand relationship is a type of brand relationship and it is deeply rooted in consumer value; consumer value plays an important role to lead to brand loyalty; brand loyalty requires a strong and positive brand relationship between brands and consumers. These theories are interconnected and complement one another to support the research. The intersection area in the middle which is marked with the blue star is the main core of the research, and the research framework is used to explore the connection between these concepts in order to answer the research question.



Figure 2. Research Framework

3. Methodology

In this section, the methodology of the thesis will be elaborated. The chapter begins with an introduction to research philosophy, including ontology and epistemology, followed by research approach and research design. Next, the sampling method is discussed, including sampling size and sampling strategy. Following this, a transparent description of how the data was collected and analyzed is provided. Subsequently, the reliability and validity are also discussed. Finally, the chapter closes with a discussion of research ethics.

3.1 Research Philosophy

Every research has its own philosophical foundations and roots (Hunt & Hansen, 2008). The research philosophy guides researchers throughout the whole study including how to approach the topic as well as gather and analyze the empirical data. The two components of the research philosophy, ontology and epistemology, will be elaborated below.

3.1.1 Ontology

Research philosophy begins with ontology, and it is about the nature of reality being and existence (Easterby-Smith, Jaspersen, Thorpe & Valizade, 2021). As there are four different ontological positions on a continuum from realism, internal realism, relativism and nominalism, the debates have been in between constantly; however, the main value all depends on human interpretation (Easterby-Smith et al., 2021). For the purpose of the thesis, the ontological view that was chosen is relativism and it is considered the most suitable approach. The reason for this is that this approach allows people to interpret the same phenomena with their own lens and the fact depends on different viewpoints; therefore, multiple versions of ‘truths’ exist (Easterby-Smith et al., 2021).

Brand relationships are formed and experienced differently by different people from different brands, and this varies based on their previous education, work experience, or personal attitudes and beliefs. By choosing this ontology, it is believed that there is no single reality that can be discovered from the research, whereas many perspectives can arise and all of these perspectives are equally significant. As the researchers’ role is to interpret the empirical data in their own way without bias, the interviewees were assured to reflect and express their own opinions and viewpoints about their relationships with plant-based food brands by taking relativism as an ontological approach.

3.1.2 Epistemology

After the ontological approach was chosen, the next step is to determine epistemology, as research philosophy is also built upon epistemology and it is the root to help researchers better understand the theory and the knowledge (Easterby-Smith et al., 2021). Epistemology is known as the study of the nature of knowledge and approaches of inquiry into the physical and social worlds (Easterby-Smith et al., 2021). Based on the relativist approach of the study, social constructionism was chosen as the epistemology. The social constructionism demonstrates the

view that ‘reality’ is not objective and external, but is socially constructed and given meaning by people, experience and their relationships with each other (Easterby-Smith et al., 2021). Moreover, researchers can also further understand the phenomenon by gathering the facts and measuring the frequency of human social behaviors from individuals about how they feel, think and experience via communication (Easterby-Smith et al., 2021). The purpose of the thesis is to gain an in-depth understanding of how consumers form relationships with plant-based food brands. Therefore, social constructionism enables us to understand the relationships that consumers form with plant-based food brands by exploring their perspectives and opinions.

3.2 Research Approach

A qualitative research method was chosen for this study as the qualitative research approach provides the opportunities to study human attributes in both natural and social science fields such as people’s behaviors, opinions, beliefs and relationships (Easterby-Smith et al., 2021). The approach is suitable for this study as the focus is to understand the brand relationships between plant-based food brands and their consumers. Compared to a quantitative approach, the qualitative method focuses on understanding people’s reflections and experiences with rich texture (Jackson, Drummond & Camara, 2007). Moreover, it also provides greater flexibility throughout the research process, such as the ability to adjust or add emerging themes for both interviewers and interviewees during the interviews (Jackson, Drummond & Camara, 2007; Easterby-Smith et al., 2021). By using the chosen method, it is possible to obtain deep insights from the interviewees to a great extent in which the quantitative method such as surveys or questionnaires cannot achieve.

3.3 Research Design

This section describes the research design of how the primary data was collected, including the selection of the interview approach, the reasons for deciding on the method, as well as how and in what form the interviews were conducted.

3.3.1 Semi-Structured Interviews

Individual interviews were selected to collect primary data. Interviews are commonly used and designed to provide an in-depth knowledge of a particular topic for the researchers to explore (Rowley, 2012), and qualitative interviews aim to develop a deeper understanding of

interviewees' point of views (Rowley, 2012; Easterby-Smith et al., 2021). In order to answer the research question, different perspectives of the brand relationships that plant-based food consumers form are vital to analyze. As a result, the interviews with these consumers provide us with a great opportunity to understand their underlying values and their relationships with the brands.

There are different types of interview approaches, and semi-structured interviews were chosen since this method is considered to be the most effective and suitable way of gaining in-depth information, as the approach provides greater flexibility as additional follow-up questions can be added (Easterby-Smith et al., 2021). In other words, questions other than those in the listed interview guide (see Appendix A) can also be asked during the interview. The first part of the interview guide includes ice-breaker questions about interviewees' background and their own self-identified diet lifestyles. The purpose of this design is to make the interview less formal and let the interviewees feel more comfortable and relaxed to talk freely for the next set of questions. Afterwards, the main questions related to the topics of the research were asked. The topics listed in the interview guide with the titles of brand relationship, consumer-green brand relationship and brand loyalty were simply for interviewers to keep track of and intend to use for further analysis.

Throughout the interviews, the goal was to gather empirical data about how consumers form relationships with plant-based food brands, how the relationship makes them feel and experience and define their values and ideologies. The various yet closely related topics are the foundations of this thesis, and the detailed questions are presented in the interview guide (see Appendix A). A more comprehensive process of question formulations will be elaborated in the later chapter 3.5.2 Interview Guide section.

As the post-Covid era has begun, people nowadays are used to having a hybrid working or studying lifestyle (Iqbal, Khalid & Barykin, 2021). Online meetings are commonly conducted on a daily basis and different kinds of remote qualitative interviews have been increasing (King, Horrocks & Brooks, 2019). Since the internet and social media have been widely used and accepted in today's society, online interactions are becoming more similar to in-person real-life ones (Sullivan, 2013). Due to some interviewees living in different regions of Sweden, online interviews arranged through Google Meet are more convenient for both interviewers and interviewees without leaving home and traveling far (Gruber, Szmigin, Reppel & Voss, 2008). All the interviews were scheduled at interviewees' preference and convenience. It is to

ensure that the interviewees were comfortable and willing to share their views and opinions in the safe ground to provide valuable input to the research.

On the other hand, there are some disadvantages to using a semi-structured approach. By following this approach, it is possible that the researchers ask leading questions when following up with interviewees' answers and that could bias the interview results. Another disadvantage is that the interviewees may give conventional answers to avoid being judged, which refers to the social desirability bias (McIntosh & Morse, 2015). To overcome these challenges, the interviewers aimed to take a reflexive standpoint, stayed open and curious to all the answers and possibilities that might contradict their previous beliefs when posing follow-up questions. Interviewees were also encouraged to share their honest answers and assured that all of their opinions were valid and respected.

3.4 Sampling Method

A purposive sampling approach was applied for the study, referring to the samples being chosen according to eligibility criteria in accordance with the research aim (Easterby-Smith et al., 2021). Interviewees were selected based on their familiarity and interests in plant-based food brands. These participants include vegans, vegetarians and flexitarians who are currently living in Sweden and have been purchasing and building relationships with plant-based food brands.

3.4.1 Sampling Size

Deciding on the sampling size for a qualitative project needs to take both practical and theoretical factors into consideration (Robinson, 2014). Therefore, Robinson (2014) suggested that the sampling size can be determined with a minimum and maximum number; it can be small yet with a representable voice from the participants within the study. Due to these factors, researchers are suggested to use 3 to 16 participants to conduct the interviews for a single qualitative study. As an effort to have a more representative voice, 18 participants were chosen in the end as the scope for conducting interviews within a particular topic.

3.4.2 Sampling Strategy

When considering a sampling strategy, a non-probability sampling design was chosen, as sampling units are chosen with unknown probability (Easterby-Smith et al., 2021). This

approach is suitable for the study because there are certain criteria for interviewed participants including their names, social and cultural backgrounds, and diets for the purpose of the study. This also means that generalizations of the sample will be more difficult to make about the larger population (Easterby-Smith et al., 2021).

As there are certain eligibility criteria for sample units according to the study purpose, the purposive sampling strategy was chosen to approach sample members who meet the criteria (Easterby-Smith et al., 2021). Those who do not meet the study criteria were excluded from the study. The eligibility criteria of this study are: (1) identify themselves as vegan, vegetarian, or flexitarian; (2) reside in Sweden; (3) frequently purchase from plant-based food brands and (4) be able to communicate and express themselves in English fluently. These first three criteria were set in light of the study's focus on the Swedish context as well as the brand relationships between consumers and plant-based food brands; the fourth criterion was set due to the research and interviews being conducted in English, and both the researchers and interviewees come from diverse backgrounds, so it is necessary to communicate in English without hindrances. To assess one's brand relationship and loyalty, it is also relevant to gain insights from people who identify themselves as vegan, vegetarian or flexitarian who frequently consume meat and dairy alternatives. This group is the main target audience of plant-based food companies and therefore they are able to offer in-depth knowledge regarding their relationships with plant-based food brands. Moreover, they are knowledgeable and familiar with the research subject, so their views can definitely help answer the research question.

In order to reach out to potential research interviewees, a post was posted on a social media platform. As one of the researchers of this study is a plant-based food blogger with a relative following base, reaching out via the social media platform was considered as a relatively easy way to recruit volunteers to take part in the research. A total of 31 candidates expressed their interests in participating in the interviews. However, considering the evaluation criteria and time limitation, 18 candidates were selected on the basis of chronological order. All of the selected interviewees were interested in and knowledgeable about plant-based food brands. The collected sample of interviewees was relatively diverse, as they come from various backgrounds, age groups, occupations and live in different regions in Sweden.

The following Table 1 gives a general overview of the research sampling.

Table 1. Overview of Interviewees

Pseudonym	Age	Gender	Nationality	Diet
Pieter	24	Male	Dutch	Vegetarian
Kristine	23	Female	Ukrainian	Vegetarian
Helena	23	Female	Finnish	Vegan
Anna	27	Female	Swedish	Flexitarian
Valentina	23	Female	Austrian	Vegetarian
Dina	28	Female	Indonesian	Flexitarian
Eva	24	Female	Swedish	Vegan
Emily	33	Female	Finnish	Flexitarian
Taylor	24	Female	American	Vegetarian
Mikael	32	Male	Swedish	Vegan
Haruto	25	Male	Japanese	Vegetarian
Juan	25	Male	Spanish	Vegetarian
Lars	26	Male	Swedish	Vegan
Felix	24	Male	German	Flexitarian
Arielle	22	Female	French	Flexitarian
Josie	38	Female	Swedish	Vegan
Linnea	29	Female	Swedish	Vegan
Nina	25	Female	German	Vegetarian

3.5 Data Collection

Having determined the research design and sampling method, this section will elaborate on the conducted interviews. This is considered as the crucial part of the thesis to ensure the validity and the applicability of the data to reach the research goal.

3.5.1 Interviewers' Role

The interviews were conducted via an online video call platform, namely Google Meet, for the convenience and preference of both interviewers and respondents. Both researchers took part in all 18 interviews and took turns acting as moderator in order to derive a more comprehensive analysis. The purpose is that the other interviewer could also provide supplementary information or follow-up questions simultaneously. The preparation prior to the interviews and the discussion afterwards were conducted in order to get a better overall picture, general impressions, and possible improvements from the interviews. Each interview was transcribed on the same day that it was conducted to ensure efficiency and quality of the transcriptions as the impressions and memories were fresher and clearer. Half of the interviews were transcribed by each researcher. In order to ensure accuracy, each transcription was done by firstly using the software Tactic during the interviews, then listening to the audio recording and correcting typos or mistakes. In general, the interviews lasted 45 minutes, depending on how much each interviewee shared. Some interviews were shorter and some were longer.

3.5.2 Interview Guide

An interview guide was used throughout all the interviews from 12th to 21st of April 2022 (see Appendix A). The main purpose of the interview guide is to ensure that the interviewers cover the specific topic that they intend to explore, whereas still offering the interviewees lots of freedom to express and respond (Bell, Bryman & Harley, 2019). The questions were used as a guide to help interviewers conduct the interviews smoothly, some additional follow-up questions were added in order to gain a more comprehensive empirical data. In general, the questions listed were used or asked in the similar or rephrased wording. Moreover, a pilot study was conducted priorly, focusing on the relationship marketing concept. Due to the shift in focus to the brand relationship concept within this research, all the questions were adjusted. The interview guide was divided into four parts, including a brief introduction and main goal of the

interview, ice-breaker questions, main questions, and a final appreciation at the end of the interview.

The first part ice-breaker questions were general questions to get to know more about the interviewees' cultural and overall backgrounds as well as diet lifestyles and diet inspirations. The aim of these questions was to contextualize and connect the quotes with themes, and subsequently build a coherent storyline in the data analysis stage. In the second part, interview questions were designed with an aim to answer the main research question. The primary questions were formulated and derived based on literature review that leads to the main topics including brand relationship, consumer-green brand relationship, consumer value and brand loyalty. It is important to review the interview questions several times to ensure the strong relation between questions and the main topics as well as a consistent language, which was familiar and relevant to the interviewees. Moreover, different from structured interviews, the interviews could be taken with different extra related topics depending on the interviewees' input instead of fixed questions, as long as they were relevant and could lead to a smoother and more fruitful outcome. Overall, the interview guide was used to keep track of the questions within the topics yet aimed to provide the interviewees with maximum freedom to express their opinions and point of views.

3.6 Data Analysis

This section describes the analysis method that was chosen for the research, reasons for choosing the method, as well as the process of coding and categorizing the data into different themes.

3.6.1 Qualitative Content Analysis

The qualitative content analysis approach was used to analyze the interview texts, as it is a set of techniques used to analyze textual data and emerge themes. Content analysis is defined as the method that forms systematic conclusions from qualitative data that have been structured by a set of ideas and concepts (Easterby-Smith et al., 2021). Content analysis is appropriate for the study as the aim is to gain a rich and detailed understanding of the topic of brand relationship, identify similarities and contrasts of consumers' relationships with plant-based food brands (Drisko & Maschi, 2016). The theories to support the findings were collected from the existing literature regarding brand relationship, consumer-green brand relationship,

consumer value, and brand loyalty. Some benefits of content analysis is the ability to structure analysis, connect with concepts and ideas as well as provide clarity of data (Easterby-Smith et al., 2021). Researchers can also inductively generate codes, which can be used to compare and connect with existing theories and concepts to develop themes. This makes the data collection and coding process more open and can emerge unexpected understandings (Drisko & Maschi, 2016).

A central aspect of content analysis is the development of themes, which are subjective meanings of the participants' perception of the topic. A theme is used as a description, element, or concept that helps make sense of the ideas and answer the research question. It also helps to organize and cluster codes, which refer to the specific ideas generated from the data set (Vaismoradi, Jones, Turunen, & Snelgrove, 2016). The analysis follows the theme development process as proposed by Vaismoradi et al. (2016).

3.6.2 Stages of Theme Development

After collecting data, four stages of theme development proposed by Vaismoradi et al. (2016) were gone through: *initialization*, *construction*, *rectification*, and *finalization* (see Figure 3). This process aids the coding process as well as generates meaningful insights from the data. During the initialization phase, the data was transcribed properly and transcriptions were gone through multiple times. The general patterns of the interviewees' perspectives and other noteworthy ideas were noted. After this, the construction phase began whereby the codes explaining the data were created. The similarities and differences among the codes were identified so they can be grouped in a cluster. Then, a label was assigned to each cluster covering the similar codes.

Following this, the next phase was rectification, which involves the process of checking and confirming the codes to ensure the reflexivity of the developed themes. This is when the researchers both immerse in the data and take a distance from the data to assess and examine the accuracy of the coding process. Once the themes were developed, researchers were able to connect them to the theoretical framework to create a coherent storyline. The finalization stage was the last phase of theme development. The themes were connected and described in an engaging and coherent narrative. This stage not only made the data more meaningful, but also provided a holistic and well-structured representation of the interviewees' viewpoints and understanding of the phenomenon.

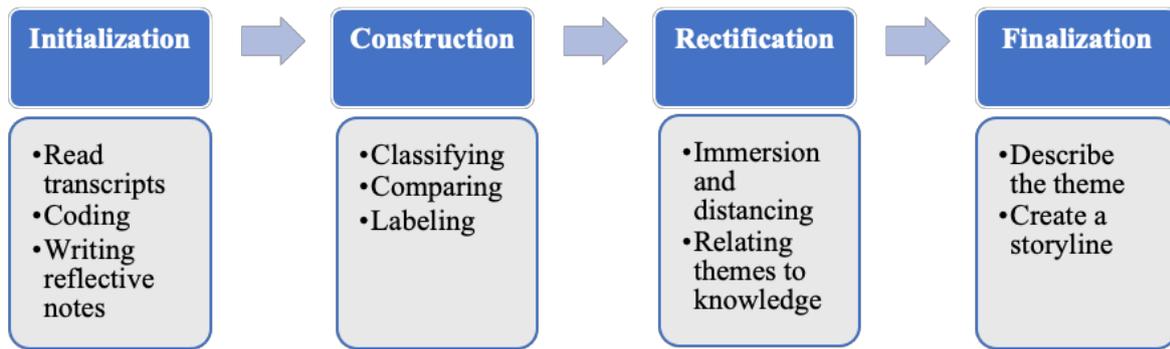


Figure 3. Stages of Theme Development (Based on Vaismoradi et al., 2016)

3.7 Research Quality

Qualitative research is often scrutinized for not adhering to scientific rigor, not justifying the methods chosen and lacking transparency in the data analysis and thus, the findings are open to interpretation and can have research bias (Noble & Smith, 2015). Assessing the quality of the research is important to minimize these limitations and enhance the study's credibility. The three concepts validity, reliability and generalizability are discussed as they are the terminologies typically associated with assessing the quality of qualitative research (Long & Johnson, 2000).

In qualitative constructivist research, validity measures if the perspectives of the research are *authentic*, *plausible*, and *critical* (Easterby-Smith et al., 2021). A research is *authentic* when it convinces readers that the researchers have sufficient understanding of the topic; it is *plausible* when the study is relevant with current issues or concerns and *critical* when the research implies the readers to be aware of their beliefs and assumptions. To enhance *authenticity*, an extensive literature review was conducted to learn about the relevant concepts and previous studies in the branding and marketing field. The chosen concepts and topics were linked in the 2.5 Research Framework section to help understand and answer the research question. To enhance *plausibility*, the relevance of the topic in the study context and how the study contributes to the existing body of literature in brand relationship, consumer-green brand relationship and consumer value were presented in the 1.2 Problematization section. To meet the *critical* requirement of the study, all perspectives of the interviewees were presented in a comprehensive and structured manner in the 4. Empirical Findings section. By doing this, the thesis aims to represent a fair and equal overview of all diverse opinions and ensure that no

contradictory opinions get dismissed. Through the data collection process and presentation of the findings, the readers are encouraged to think critically and be aware of their taken-for-granted beliefs.

Reliability in qualitative research refers to the appropriateness and consistency of the analytical procedures and the consideration of personal biases that might affect the findings (Noble & Smith, 2015). To maintain the reliability of the study, the researchers needed to clearly indicate the relevance and appropriateness of the data collection and analysis as well as maintain integrity when interpreting the data. The researchers also adopted a reflexive standpoint, acknowledged the personal biases that might have an influence on findings and stayed open to understandings that challenged the taken-for-granted assumptions. As for generalizability in qualitative research, it refers to how the findings can be applied in different contexts or subjects (Noble & Smith, 2015). As the research topic is related to plant-based food brands, this study can also be generalizable to other green, sustainable or ethical brands.

To conclude, the three terminologies for assessing research quality were considered. As researchers, the responsibility was to give a fair representation of interviewees' diverse viewpoints and be aware of personal biases to minimize the research limitations. To help maintain transparency for those who want to replicate the research, an interview guide and coding scheme were provided (see Appendix: Interview Guide and Coding Scheme).

3.8 Research Ethics

There are a number of ethical aspects that need to be taken into consideration when conducting a research, the first of which is to ensure that the research does not cause harm to participants and ensure the full consent of participants (Bell & Bryman, 2007; Easterby-Smith et al., 2021). More specifically, participants might suffer from different types of harm, including physical or psychological harm as well as the harm to their self-esteem and dignity (Easterby-Smith et al., 2021). During the whole research process, none of the interviewees were at risk of physical harm since all information regarding the interviewees' personal data and privacy were kept confidential and only used for research purposes. The interviewees' identities remain anonymous in this paper and each one was assigned with a pseudonym.

Additionally, the second consideration associated with interviewees is to make sure that they were adequately informed about the project in advance, as honesty and transparency are two

of the most important ethics to be taken into account (Easterby-Smith et al., 2021). This was achieved both in the sampling strategy process and during the interviews. When the participants reached out and expressed their interests to take part in the interviews, the purpose of the research and the method to conduct the interviews were clearly explained. Additionally, both of them were also mentioned and described again in the beginning of each interview to ensure that the communication was transparent.

The last element to keep in mind is to avoid any misleading or false reporting of the findings within the research (Bell & Bryman, 2007). As the role of researchers might affect the outcome of the interviews based on the questions, the questions need to be carefully designed to avoid biasing the results by leading interviewees to a specific answer. The questions asked in the Interview Guide (see Appendix A) were carefully reviewed and adjusted several times in order to deliver unbiased findings. Following this, the data was analyzed based on the responses from the interviews with the goal of properly reporting the empirical findings. It was assured that the identities of the interviewees were kept confidential and there was no risk of revealing. All information and the purpose of the research were clearly communicated to them, and each interview question was designed to get the empirical data that is unbiased. Overall, after taking the above elements into account, it can be said that the process of conducting the interviews with the interviewees met the ethical standards within the research.

4. Empirical Findings

In this chapter, the empirical findings from the interviews are derived based on 18 in-depth interviews. The overarching construct of the study is to understand how the consumers form different levels of relationships with plant-based food brands. The outcome will be presented in three themes including brand relationship metaphors, consumer-green brand relationship and green achievement, and aligned consumer value. As consumers form relationships with brands with different levels of depth based on the brand relationship metaphors, they are more likely to form closer relationships with brands that help them fulfill their green achievement and align with their values. The three themes are equally important and support the overarching construct, providing a holistic understanding to the research question. To elaborate, the brand relationship metaphors theme is a way to categorize relationships according to different levels of depth. As for the consumer-green brand relationship and green achievement theme, it is classified based

on different aspects of consumer green fulfillments. Moreover, the consumer value theme is categorized as the underlying factors that drive consumers to purchase plant-based food and develop relationships with green brands. The themes are further divided into sub-themes in order to deliver a comprehensive outcome.

4.1 Brand Relationship Metaphors

The first theme of the empirical findings presents the data on how the interviewees feel, think and experience toward plant-based food brands and how they form their relationships with the brands. Understanding how the interviewees feel and how they form their relationships can provide insights into the research question. In the following section, the empirical findings were categorized according to the depth of the relationships formed by interviewees from deep to weak. The brand relationship quality construct (Fournier, 1998), consisting of *love and passion*, *self-connection*, *interdependence*, *commitment*, *intimacy* and *brand partner quality* were evaluated in accordance to the interviewees' answers. To be more specific, *love and passion* refers to the affection toward the brand and *self-connection* indicates the degree of a brand's appeal to consumers' identities and values. *Interdependence* implies the frequency of buying from the brand and *commitment* indicates the intention to use the brand in the long-term. *Intimacy* refers to the consumers' knowledge of the brand as the relationship partner and *brand partner quality* refers to a brand's performance and attitude toward its consumers. These elements of the construct were used to assess the quality of the relationships. Furthermore, *brand loyalty* was analyzed based on the *commitment* level under relationship quality construct and presented within each section.

4.1.1 Brand Relationship as Marriage Partner

The deepest and the most emotionally invested brand relationship that is long-term and committed to staying together is considered as *marriage partner*. In this relationship, consumers are willing to engage in a monogamous relationship and be loyal to a particular brand. They are also willing to commit to the brand in the long run. One of the interviewees Anna expressed her love and passion toward two of her favorite plant-based food brands Yipin and Alpro:

“I got to say Yipin tofu, I always have it in my fridge. There’s no way a day I can go without it [...] I haven’t found anything closer to quality as Yipin is providing.”

“Absolute pure love. I can’t say anything else, I really do love Alpro. [...] I’ve tried different brands but they don’t taste as good and it doesn’t feel like it’s the same. Alpro is go-to no matter what, they never fail. Not yet at least.”

Anna further emphasized her affection and commitment with Yipin, showing a high level of *brand loyalty* in the long-term:

“It’s a love for life. I’m never gonna quit it. I’m never gonna stop buying it.”

Another interviewee, Linnea, also described how she feels about two of her frequently consumed plant-based food brands, Anamma and Oatly:

“If Anamma is my basic closet, those favorite black pants and the favorite black top that you can put on any day and you felt good. That’s Anamma. Anamma is my basic black clothes that you know, put on for work and always feel comfortable. Everyone has the basics, like the favorite pair of jeans or favorite shirt that you can just put on when you’re like, oh, I don’t know what to wear, I’ll just go with that one. Like you can always rely on them. [...] I can’t live without it (Anamma).”

“Oatly is the shoes that I put on every day, because it’s like the yogurt that I make my dip sauce for my chips, I make my pasta sauce with it. It’s the shoes that I put on every day.”

Based on the statements, a high level of *love and passion, interdependence, commitment, intimacy* and a positive view of *brand partner quality* have been identified, as Anna and Linnea both expressed their affection and attachment as well as the strong and deep connection with their favorite brands. Moreover, a high degree of *self-connection* is also found, as they can relate to their favorite brands in terms of emotions or identities. Anna feels positive and healthy both mentally and physically when she goes for plant-based food brands, and that is the lifestyle she prefers:

“I feel happy when I do it, it feels just right. My body’s thanking me and I’m also helping the company itself. But every time I buy it, I know that I’m doing it for a

good cause it's for myself, and it's for the people around me. The only relation I can have with this is good. A better lifestyle definitely, better health, better mentality, just overall better."

In addition to the happier and healthier lifestyle, Linnea also explained that plant-based food brands give her energy and a sense of belonging, which reflects both her emotion and identity as a vegan:

"I think it (plant-based brand) goes really well with my life. I can still get all the energy I need, you don't have to be tired all the time just because you're vegan or vegetarian. A normal life. Like I don't have to miss out on normal foods just because I'm vegan."

Both Anna and Linnea have a high level of *interdependence* on their favorite brands, as they buy from the brands every time they do grocery shopping, no matter how many times they go:

Anna: "Every time I go grocery shopping, it doesn't matter if it's two times a week or five times a week. I always buy something more (from the brands)."

Linnea: "I would say at least once or two times a week."

As a result, the brand relationship as *marriage partner* has a high degree of *love and passion, commitment, self-connection, interdependence, intimacy* and a positive view of *brand partner quality*. Consumers who view their favorite brand as *marriage partner* are willing to have a monogamous relationship, stay loyal and committed to the brand in the long-term.

4.1.2 Brand Relationship as Best Friend

Regarding *best friend*, it is the brand relationship that is defined as "voluntary union based on reciprocity principle, the endurance of which is ensured through continued provision of positive rewards. Characterized by revelation of true self, honesty, and intimacy. Congruity in partner images and personal interests common" (Fournier, 1998). This type of relationship falls into the strong and deep and highly emotional and identity invested quadrant, which is considered as a strong relationship but not as strong as *marriage partner*. Valentina expressed how close she perceives the relationship with her favorite plant-based milk brand Oatly and her good understanding of the brand:

“I think I would see them as a friend, as their messaging is quite personal. It feels like they are on your side in that sense, and they’re more approachable than other brands. I feel like maybe because they target my age group, and as I said, the messaging is quite direct and personal but I feel like they could be friends.”

Dina, Taylor and Mikael also described how they perceive if their favorite brand was a person and characterized this relationship:

Dina: “I would say they’re good friends of mine. Like I can have them every day. Like I can be with them every day.”

Taylor: “If Oatly was a person, Oatly be like the cool kid at school, like sunglasses. Maybe Oatly is like Italian or something. Italians are friendly. They’re nice, they’re the life of the party, and then you know, friends with everybody.”

Mikael: “They’re like, cool person. And so yeah, I guess it’s like a friend maybe. It’s very, very cool to hang around. Best friends.”

In addition, Haruto explained how he perceives his favorite plant-based food brands and what their personalities are:

“ I would say those people (referring to his favorite brands) are very conscious about the environment or like animals. It’s actually good to be with them because maybe we can exchange, you know what kind of meal you can make out of those products. I’ll say, I could be a very close friend because what you eat matters a lot, like even getting into a relationship.”

Similar to the other interviewees discussing the metaphor of personality about Oatly, Josie talked about her feelings with Oatly and her other favorite brand Anamma:

“Oatly is kind of a cool, quirky barista friend. And Anamma is more like home base because it’s not plain but it’s like basic stuff. I’ve mainly buy the minced sausages and stuff like that. Oh so those are like the homey friend to me.”

On the other hand, Linnea and Nina described her views of the brands that they frequently go for:

Linnea: “Garant is that pink scarf that you put on because you’re going to brunch once a week.”

Nina: “I think they would be my friends that you hang out, good friends, maybe. Like people that you hang out with. I think they will be very similar to me.”

According to the statements from the seven interviewees, a moderate level of *love and passion* and a positive view of *brand partner quality* have been identified, as they all see the plant-based food brands as good friends that they often hang out with. Moreover, a high degree of *intimacy* and *self-connection* is also found, as they have good knowledge of the brand and can relate to their favorite brands with their feelings or identities. Valentina, Dina, Mikael and Josie feel connected to the plant-based food brand because of its marketing strategy and that they are the right target audience:

Valentina: “I feel like it’s quite a good connection. They target my age group and support the lifestyle I am trying to achieve, so I feel like the person I try to be.”

Dina: “I would say I’m pretty connected with them because I think specifically Oatly, they’re trying to be really relevant to the young generation.”

Mikael: “Especially with Oatly, their marketing is very nice. Somehow I felt very connected with Oatly since the marketing is so cool.”

Josie: “I think I feel kind of connected because going up there was not a matter of brands, so every time something new came up, I’m like, oh this is for me. Someone out there knew that people like me exist.”

Moreover, interviewees can be found to have a high degree of *interdependence* on their favorite brands, as they buy from them several times a week when they do grocery shopping.

Valentina: “Several times a week. Because I drink quite a lot of oat milk. So two, three times a week.”

Mikael: “I drink like one each week. I guess when I’m buying it’s like, once or twice a week.”

Josie: “Every time I go shopping, we go through a lot of oat milk and then I usually buy something every time I go shopping.”

Compared to the brand relationship as *marriage partner*, the interviewees who have the relationship as *best friend* with the plant-based food brands have a low degree of *commitment*. They are comfortable with choosing other plant-based food brands if the current brand increases the price and thus, are more price sensitive:

Valentina: "I might find another brand that I like more, or like equally. I think if I don't find anything I like better, the relationship will just improve."

Mikael: "If they just increase a bit, I will probably still buy but if it's like too much and other brands are still cheaper then I will switch."

Haruto: "I think it depends on how much they increase as long as I can afford to buy. I think I also continue to buy but if there was a cheap meat alternative, I might switch but it depends on the taste. But I mean the price definitely does impact my choice in the future."

Josie has already switched to another alternative brand over Oatly because there is a cheaper option:

"Oatly I tend to choose something else over them, because they're the most pricey ones."

Nevertheless, some interviewees still have a higher level of *commitment* to stay loyal to their favorite brands in the foreseeable future and will continue to purchase from them. Josie mentioned that she is satisfied with the products with her favorite brand Anamma, even if the price increases in the near future she will still buy from it:

"Probably Anamma I will still buy them because I like their products."

Similarly, Taylor explained that she will continue to buy from her favorite brand Oatly if the price goes up:

"In the sense that I'm in the area, yes I'll be buying from them and the unforeseen future, but Oatly is worldwide and I'll definitely be buying from them."

As a result, the brand relationship as *best friend* has a moderate degree of *love and passion*, high level of *self-connection*, high degree of *interdependence*, high level of *intimacy*, a low degree of *commitment* and a *positive view of brand partner quality*. Unlike the brand

relationship as *marriage partner*, *best friend* has a lower degree of *commitment* and *brand loyalty* since consumers who have this type of relationship are not committed to a particular brand nor in the long run; they might have different favorite brands or opt for better alternatives and tend to be more price sensitive.

4.1.3 Brand Relationship as Secret Affair

In terms of *secret affair*, it is a type of brand relationship that is described as “highly emotive, privately held relationship considered risky if exposed to others” (Fournier, 1998). In other words, the feelings and experience that is pleasurable but induces a sense of guilt can be seen as guilty pleasure. This relatively strong and deep emotion-driven brand relationship and guilty pleasure have been identified within three interviewees. Pieter explained his feelings when he makes his choices among plant-based food brands and how he defines himself:

“I don’t say too much to people that I’m vegetarian because I always have a fear that there’s some sort of idea of like you’re like this activist or hipster. [...] I don’t really buy a brand or like a meat replacer. I am always very careful that I don’t want to look like I’m like the cool guy that’s using alternatives.”

“I don’t want them to have their first impression of me being vegetarian because they probably will align some ideas of how a vegetarian is to me or who that person entails. So I usually avoid it in new contexts.”

Eva has also expressed her feelings when she buys products from plant-based food brands:

“If I buy vegan cream fresh, so tonight I’m gonna make a nice sauce and dinner with it so I feel good but also it feels kind of bad because I’m trying to eat clean. So it’s also like a quick fix. So it makes me feel both good and bad.”

Moreover, Lars shared his experience of how he felt about choosing plant-based meat alternative brands:

“Bad. It’s probably like I still sometimes get a craving for something that I haven’t eaten for a very long time that I just have this very fond memory of, and choosing the plant-based alternatives or kind of using plant-based alternatives to mimic that dish or something. It sometimes makes me question: why am I doing this?”

“I just remember that tastes so fondly and it’s super nice, but then every single time I’ve actually broken my policies and tried small piece of it, I just get super disappointed.”

Based on the statements, Pieter’s narratives show that talking about his plant-based consumption and brands to others causes embarrassment, yet he still feels good with his choices since these brands offer functional benefits, such as being tasty during his daily routine. As for Eva, she has mixed emotions and feels both good and bad at the same time because she wants to achieve her personal goals such as eating clean, meaning whole foods. Yet, she still chooses Anamma’s products which are processed food because of the convenience instead of insisting on her goal.

Similarly, Lars explained that sometimes he feels bad using plant-based alternatives to mimic non-plant-based dishes that he craves once in a while. This is because he tries to only use whole food, natural ingredients instead of mock meat products due to health concerns. He feels guilty after trying plant-based alternatives that mimic the meat dishes, but he is assured that the choice of choosing exclusively plant-based products is right and feels satisfied after this. Both Eva and Lars are concerned about their health and feel the emotion of guilt from choosing plant-based products that are slightly more processed, but they still do it because these meat alternatives are easy, quick to cook and satisfying their cravings.

Furthermore, the interviewees have a good understanding of their chosen plant-based brands and are exposed to these brands through marketing, ads or personal contacts, showing a high level of *intimacy*:

Eva: “I don’t research every single brand but I try as much as I can, and at least make sure that it stays within my personal values of how they’re produced, and how they’re transported and stuff like that.”

Pieter: “For Vegetarian Butcher, I think they have a massive marketing budget, so you’ll see a lot of ads from them, and they have quite interesting ads. [...] Those ads go sort of viral in the Netherlands so that’s how I know them.”

Lars: “Oatly. Well, since I’m from Lund, I’ve kind of been following their journeys and since they started as a company. So I’ve known them since forever because I have contacts within the entrepreneurship world and that network.”

As a result, the brand relationship as *secret affair* has been identified. The three interviewees mentioned above show a high degree of *love and passion*, *self-connection* and *intimacy* as they know the brands, relate to them with strong emotional and identity investment. They either feel embarrassed or guilty yet pleasurable due to their involvements with the brands. A relatively negative view of *brand partner quality* has been found as the brands make them feel embarrassed or guilty yet pleasurable. Moreover, the level of *interdependence* and *commitment* has not been found based on the three interviewees within the brand relationship type of *secret affair*.

4.1.4 Brand Relationship as Childhood Buddy

The brand relationships as *childhood buddy* has been identified among two interviewees, Nina and Helena. This relationship is defined as an infrequently engaged relationship that evokes security and nostalgic feelings of one's younger self (Fournier, 1998). Helena views plant-based food brands as an effective substitute for the meals that she used to have as a child:

“With Hälsans Kök, I can have the nuggets that I used to eat when I was a child, and if you don't really feel like cooking, you can just buy some frozen products from there.”

Similar to this, Nina discussed how easy and convenient mock meat products are in recreating vegan or vegetarian version of childhood dishes, as traditional German dishes tend to be meat-heavy:

“I think what's good about Anamma is that you can do vegetarian or vegan versions of traditional meals, so I can make traditional home cooked meals that I ate in my childhood vegetarian or vegan.”

The perceptions that Nina and Helena have with the brands are considered with a high degree of *self-connection* as they feel that their identities and values are represented by the brands.

Nina: “I feel like they (plant-based brands) are targeting people like me. So I feel like they are representing my personality. I always feel like this is the kind of person I want to be.”

Helena: “At least for me like what you buy is a big part of your values and just buying vegan food, kind of shows that you have certain values.”

Both interviewed participants who view plant-based brands as *childhood buddy* also have a positive view of the brands:

Nina: "I actually feel good. Because I think like okay, I'm helping good companies, they believe in the same values and so on."

Helena: "I've never really thought about the relationship with them, but I mean, I'm very happy with them because I know that they're both good brands, and they kind of give me the satisfaction that I look for in food."

Moreover, a high level of *intimacy* is found, as when being asked about the brands, Nina and Helena could easily describe its characteristics in terms of functionality, accessibility and packaging:

Nina: "Anamma is the first brand to go. It's like everywhere basically. So it's the easiest and most accessible compared to the other brands."

Helena: "Hälsans Kök, I would say is meaty because their products are very similar to meat products. Healthy. Because I think they are probably healthier than a lot of meat products. And green, just because their packaging is green."

They have varied views regarding their *commitment* and *interdependence* to plant-based food brands when being asked if they will continue buying from these brands in the future. Nina will still commit to buying the brand whereas Helena is open to trying other brands:

Nina: "I think I would still buy it."

Helena: "If something's on sale like an offer, I would definitely not mind buying from another brand too. I'm very open to trying all the different brands that you can find."

Helena demonstrated a low level of *brand loyalty*, as she is open to trying to new products and likely to change her preference toward Oatly:

Helena: "There are so many new vegan products coming out all the time, it (relationship with these brands) probably will change. For example, with oat milk, when there are so many different brands and if you try something else and you like it more, there is a danger that you kind of move on to another brand."

In conclusion, the brand relationship as *childhood buddy* is found to be high in *love and passion*, *self-connection*, *intimacy* and *brand partner quality*, as the interviewees know the brands well and bond with them through a nostalgic lens of their youth. However, this brand relationship is low in *commitment* and *interdependence* as the interviewees are open to trying different new brands. As a result, interviewees who form their relationships as *childhood buddy* are not loyal toward the brand.

4.1.5 Brand Relationship as Teammate

Some interviewees form their relationships with the plant-based brands as *teammate*, demonstrating a weak and superficial relationship that only fulfills the functional benefits. Juan often purchases Oatly and enjoys using the brand, but does not feel connected to the brand. When being asked about his relationship with Oatly, he elaborated:

“(Oatly) is perhaps like a classmate that you see quite often because you have to be in class every week with them, but you don’t necessarily hang out with them after class or know much about them. You probably know their names and all that because it’s a small class, but that’s pretty much it.”

Similar to this, Felix does not focus on brands when buying plant-based food. He often purchases store brands and whichever is the cheapest. He cares more about the functionality of the products rather than the brands. When being asked about the relationship with the brands he often purchases, he answered:

“(These brands are like) some of my study colleagues that I studied with but I don’t know really well. I don’t really know what they do in their free time.”

When applying the relationship quality construct into this relationship, a low level of *love and passion* has been found, as neither both interviewees know much about the brands or feel a deep connection to them. They only rely on the brands for the functional benefits of the products they provide:

Felix: “I’m not even sure if I know a brand that comes to my mind, because they sell it at Lidl where usually things are cheap, and it’s called Vemondo. I wouldn’t call it my favorite, I don’t really care what brands, I just eat what I like and it’s the only brand I know.”

Juan: "I'm not super attached to it (Oatly) then. It's just that what they are offering right now is probably something that may be a bit better than what other brands are offering."

They also have a high level of *interdependence* on the brand, as they purchase the brands every time they do grocery shopping. However, if the brand is not available at the store, they are comfortable with switching to another brand, showing a low level of *commitment*:

Felix: "So once, twice a week probably, every time I do groceries at Lidl, I will buy something from that brand (Vemondo) probably. If I'm in another supermarket, I'll buy another brand."

Juan: "I will say perhaps like once a week or so. And I just like to buy one of the cartons, I'll have it like a few days a week for breakfast."

"If Oatly stop selling their products, I would find alternatives because there are many other alternatives. Or if I moved to somewhere where they don't have Oatly, I don't think I would miss it because I think I would be able to probably find something that is similar or that can replace it."

Felix and Juan expressed a low level of *intimacy* as they do not know much about the brands. Felix only buys the brand Vermondo because it was visible at the supermarket he goes to, whereas Juan does not recall the brands he buy other than Oatly:

Felix: "I just buy it at Lidl and that's why I know it because it jumps into my face. I didn't search for it. No one recommended it to me. It just happened to be the one that I usually buy."

Juan: "I don't think about brands per se, I just look for something that I think oh, this is going to be nice to try and then, I buy it that way."

"I don't know the name of the brand. I just look at the package. And you know, by looking at how it looks."

A low level of *self-connection* is also identified, as they do not relate to the brands on an emotional or identity level. As this brand relationship tends to be more shallow, Felix also demonstrated distrust in the product regarding whether the brands have honest intentions to protect the environment, showcasing a skeptical view of *brand partner quality*:

“I have a certain suspicion about brands that sell plant-based products. The company that owns this brand probably has other brands that are not at all caring about the environment at all and that’s what I think about now.”

Furthermore, Felix also shared the view that if there is a more affordable option available, he will choose it. This shows a low level of brand loyalty and price sensitivity:

“If there is an alternative, I will go for the cheaper one.”

These statements demonstrate a weak and superficial relationship, as the interviewee does not fully trust the brand and only relies on it for the functionality of the products. As a result, the brand relationship as *teammate* has a low degree of *love and passion, commitment, self-connection, intimacy*, a high level of *interdependence* and a relatively negative view of *brand partner quality*. Forming the relationship with the brand as *teammate*, the interviewees have frequent encounters with the brands due to necessity, yet do not have a deep connection with them. They are also not loyal toward the brand and are open to trying new options that better fit their budget.

4.1.6 Brand Relationship as Casual Acquaintance

Casual acquaintance is a type of relationship that is defined as “low in affect and intimacy, with a few sporadic engagement and few expectations for reciprocity or reward” (Fournier, 1998). Six interviewees Pieter, Mikael, Taylor, Lars, Arielle and Emily build their relationships with plant-based food brands as *casual acquaintance* and their narratives below demonstrate the superficial and weak relationships with the brands:

Pieter: “For Oddly Good, there’s not much of a relationship. It’s just like this is my go-to relatively affordable, but still a good brand.”

Taylor: “Yipin as a person, I feel like maybe they’re a little shy. They know everybody but they don’t talk to everybody. More like an acquaintance.”

Lars: “I don’t really see them (Yipin and Oatly) as a friend. Like I see them as an acquaintance or something. That’s probably the best relationship term I can use.”

Mikael: “Beyond Meat or the other brands, they’re more of an acquaintance. They’re not like my best friend or anything.”

Arielle, Mikael and Emily further described the *casual acquaintance* relationship with the plant-based food brands. They buy products from the brands frequently but do not feel a deep connection with them:

Arielle: "It's like when you go to the supermarket and interact with the cashier every day. You don't know them, but you're close with them in a way because you meet them every day. I smile with them and I can talk a bit but I don't know a lot about it except the fact that they are very useful for me. Like acquaintances."

Emily: "(How connected do you feel with the brand) I buy a lot of their products so I would say to some extent. I'm like involved or connected, but as I said, if there's a new player in the market offering the same stuff I would like and whichever prices. I would like, swap. So it's not that it has to be like exactly that."

Similarly, Lars and Pieter buy from the brands every week but only use them for the functional benefits:

Lars: "That (brand relationship) is probably pretty distant. I don't like having too many relationships with companies and brands. Like I don't like it to feel like a connection to them or anything. They're just meant to serve a basic purpose and if they do that well, I'm happy."

Pieter: "For Oddly Good, I guess the benefits is that it's the affordable version but still has the quality. I don't taste the difference between Oddly Good or Oatly."

Meanwhile, Taylor and Mikael buy the brands they view as acquaintances less frequently than their favorite plant-based food brands:

Mikael: "Beyond Meat is very good too. But it is a bit expensive. So I buy it less frequently."

Taylor: "Yipin, the tofu things. Like I said, I don't eat that much tofu, so I might go through two blocks a month maybe."

The *self-connection* is also identified to be weak, as Taylor thinks Yipin tofu is a cool brand but does not feel connected with it on a deeper or more personal level. Yet, Taylor does research

the brand and is aware of the brand's positioning as a family company, demonstrating a high level of *intimacy*:

“Yipin, I like the story behind their company. It's a cool to bring the family aspect into it but I'm like not connected in that sense, like I said soy tofu is not a part of my culture.”

Similar to this, Mikael, Emily and Lars also showcased good knowledge of the brand, resulting in a high level of *intimacy*:

Mikael: “Beyond Meat is fancy. Very, meat-like, juicy.”

Emily: “Oatly, I think their marketing is brilliant. I think they are one of the market leaders probably. They probably like, set the standard for the rest and like their marketing is genius.”

Lars: “If I go for any of the products marketed for vegans or vegetarians, I would probably go for Yipin tofu because that's the tofu that I like the most. And it's kind of available in the store that I go to, and it's a Swedish small brand.”

“For plant-based milk, I usually go for Oatly because it's the tastiest of the brands that exist and it's also from Lund which is kind of cool. And it's not supported by one of the bigger brands, like Nestle or the other conglomerates.”

Arielle and Pieter purchase from the brands frequently but do not have a lot of information about them, showing a low degree of *intimacy* and *self-connection*:

Arielle: “My connection is not a lot, to be honest. I've never heard of them and I just take out about this story of Oatly. We don't have a lot of information or even in supermarkets within Sweden, I feel like the section is like hidden in the back.”

Pieter: “Oddly Good, I know them just because I was in the supermarket and it's next to Oatly and it's cheaper.”

Many interviewees also do not feel that they have to buy from these brands specifically, showing a low level of *commitment* and *brand loyalty*:

Pieter: “I can say I’m not that loyal to Oddly. It’s just the perfect middle ground for now. But if there’s a new alternative that pops up, that’s even more affordable but still also tasting super good, and I will not hesitate to switch to that brand.”

Mikael: “I don’t feel like I have to buy like Anamma or Beyond Meat. It’s like I can buy whatever looks tasty.”

Emily: “Of course if there’s a cheaper option, like cheaper but similar option coming to the market, then I would like try that as well.”

Lars and Arielle’s *commitment* and loyalty toward Oatly is dependent on Oatly’s business practices and direction in the future:

Lars: “If Oatly continues the path that they’re taking currently, and there’s another brand that has equally good quality but it’s more local and like keeps to some better standards or ethical standards. Then I will prefer to choose them.”

Arielle: “I will maybe try to know the brands more and try to see if I can actually really rely on them. And if I can then I think I can just buy what they sell with a plant-based and otherwise I would just try to find better alternatives.”

Taylor will continue buying Yipin tofu but is motivated by local production and environmental factor when considering a tofu brand:

Taylor: “I like the Yipin story, but I might go with a cheaper option. It depends if one is local and one is shipped from another country. If the other tofu shipped all the way from Asia, that’s a big carbon footprint to take into account. I really care about the environment, so it might just be worth it to pay 10 SEK for Yipin just for environmental sake.”

The brand relationship as *casual acquaintance* is found within five interviewees, demonstrating the weakest and most superficial relationship from the data. It is low in depth in *love and passion* and interviewees have neutral views about the *brand partner quality*. The degree of *self-connection* and *commitment* are low as plant-based food brands are perceived to only fulfill functional benefits such as quality, price and taste that can easily be replaceable with other alternatives in the market. The level of *interdependence* and *intimacy* in this relationship are varied by different interviewees, as some of them buy from the brands frequently, know them well yet do not perceive a deep connection with them. This is a finding that contradicts

Fournier's (1998) understanding of brand relationship as *casual acquaintance* that is low in *intimacy* and *frequency*. The level of *brand loyalty* for these interviewees within the relationship type is low as they constantly opt for better choices.

4.1.7. Brand Relationship as Crush

A new type of brand relationship as *crush* has been identified from the interviews, and it can be seen as an addition to the brand relationship metaphors of Fournier (1998). Unlike the previously mentioned relationship types that are two-sided and have connections in between the relationships, the newly identified brand relationship as *crush* is only one-sided. Therefore, the existing brand relationships cannot explain this type of relationship. *Crush* can be categorized as a strong, emotionally invested, and identity-driven relationship since consumers have passions and interests about working for the brand and at the same time the brand represents them. With this type of brand relationship, consumers have one-sided infatuation and admiration for the plant-based food brand. They might constantly search for information about the brand, perceive it as aligning with their values and see a potential to work for the brand. During the interviews, three interviewees Dina, Taylor and Juan have shown their interests in working at Oatly, and see the brand as a potential employer to work for:

Dina: "I kind of really want to work with them actually."

Taylor: "Oatly, I am very connected, it's like I love it so much, that I would love to work there, I'm constantly trying to find a way to work there."

Juan: "I just checked them (Oatly) on LinkedIn because I was curious, I wanted to see what they are up to, and perhaps, what kind of jobs they are offering as well. So more interested in do I have chances of perhaps, finding a job for them? Or what kind of jobs are they offering rather than I love this brand so much that I want to know more about it."

According to the statements from three of the interviewees, they expressed the positive feelings toward the brand and tried to find a possibility to develop deeper connections as potential employees. The level of *self-connection* within the relationship type *crush* are considered high as the interviewees feel related to Oatly with their identities invested and are willing to be a part of the brand. The level of *intimacy* can be classified as high since the interviewees search for job information of the brand on LinkedIn. Furthermore, the level of *interdependence* and

commitment toward the brand has not been found, the level of *love and passion*, and *brand partner quality* varied within this relationship type.

4.1.8 Overview of Brand Relationship Types

Based on the 18 interviews, the following table summarizes various types of relationships that consumers form with plant-based food brands from strong and deep to weak and superficial. The new type of brand relationship identified is also shown below:

Table 2. Relationship Types between the Interviewees and the Brands

Category	Brand Relationship Type	Interviewee with the Brand
Strong and Deep	Marriage Partner (Fournier, 1998)	Anna with Yipin and Alpro
		Linnea with Anamma and Oatly
	Best Friend (Fournier, 1998)	Valentina with Oatly
		Dina with Oatly
		Taylor with Oatly
		Mikael with Oatly
		Haruto with Oatly, Anamma and Hälsans Kök
		Josie with Oatly and Anamma
		Nina with Anamma
	Secret Affair (Fournier, 1998)	Pieter with Vegetarian Butcher and Oddly Good
		Lars with plant-based meat alternative brands

		Eva with Peas of Heaven and Oddly Good
Weak and Superficial	Childhood Buddy (Fournier, 1998)	Helena with Hälsans Kök
		Nina with Anamma
	Teammate (Fournier, 1998)	Juan with Oatly
		Felix with Willy's store brands
	Casual Acquaintance (Fournier, 1998)	Pieter with Oddly Good
		Taylor with Yipin
		Lars with Oatly and Yipin
		Arielle with Oatly and Yipin
		Mikael with Beyond Meat and Anamma
Other	Crush	Dina with Oatly
		Taylor with Oatly
		Juan with Oatly

4.2 Consumer-Green Brand Relationship and Green Achievement

Whereas the first theme focuses on interviewees' interpersonal relationships with brands, the second theme consumer-green brand relationship focuses on the perceived feeling that comes with buying products from green brands. The feeling is a sense of achievement relating to their contributions to the environment and sustainability. In the following section, the empirical

findings are categorized based on consumers' satisfaction and trust as well as their reciprocal relationships with green brands.

4.2.1 Consumer Green Satisfaction

The satisfaction of consumers comes in many forms and levels; *green satisfaction* refers to the positive feeling in consumption related to the environmental desires, sustainable expectations, and green needs (Chen, 2013). Consumers with *green satisfaction* believe that even though they are individuals, they still make a difference with small steps. This type of consumer-green brand relationship has been identified within the interviewees. They explained the positive emotions when they buy from the plant-based food brands, such as proud, healthy, and happy:

Pieter: "There's some sort of emotional benefit or something like you feel better, and I don't feel guilty that I'm still using it. [...] If I can do it, maybe other people also can do it, and then we can solve some issues connected within sustainability. So like being proud, more healthy and maybe happier."

Haruto: "I feel more confident to say, oh, I'm vegetarian because you know, I'm eating those products and just stopped eating dairy products. Gained a sense of satisfaction in a way."

Anna also described the green image that comes to her mind and reminds her of when it comes to plant-based food brands:

"Forest. I don't know why but I think about the forest as soon as I see it because that's the only thing I want to see in the future. I want to see more green more plants, more trees. [...] Every time I buy it, I see a greener lifestyle for everyone."

Similarly, Dina, Taylor, and Mikael also expressed their positive feelings about choosing plant-based food brands:

Dina: "I feel pretty good. I feel like I'm taking my part in society or like to the world, to the earth."

Taylor: "It's the contribution that I'm making on the earth, I guess is good."

Mikael: "I think it's pretty good. It's every time I buy it, a bit good within myself, because I do something good for the animals, and the environment and

everything. [...] I guess some feelings of being good kind of and also that is quite cool with that kind of stuff (plant-based food products).”

At the same time, Felix and Josie described in what way they feel good about choosing plant-based food brands:

Felix: “I feel good about it because I know I’m not doing something bad in a world where it’s strongly incentivized to do something bad, so I can have a reason to feel good about myself.”

Josie: “I feel good because I’m supporting the lifestyle and I’m supporting everything that goes with not eating meat.”

Moreover, some interviewees expressed that they contribute a small amount by choosing these brands but still feel satisfied and think even small impacts matter a lot to the world:

Kristine: “I feel really good that I am doing some impacts. For me, even small impacts matter. [...] If I do something good for other person or buy something, other people will see and do the same, so I think it works like this in our world.”

Emily: “Maybe like trying to make a change. Oh I’ve tried as well. It’s a small thing, but maybe like it contributes a little bit to that or like helps a little bit.”

Haruto: “Even though that’s like a very small contribution, if many people find out that those products are tasty, that can change the eating habits of other people.”

Juan: “In a certain way, I have made a few very small steps toward reducing that amount of suffering. It also makes a small positive impact on the environment.”

Based on the statements from the interviewees, *green satisfaction* has been identified as they all feel delighted and fulfill a sense of contribution in terms of sustainability, the environment and a greener lifestyle.

4.2.2 Consumer Green Trust

Green trust refers to consumers’ expectations or faith in a product, service or a green brand based on its credibility and ability to be environmentally friendly or sustainable (Chen, 2013). It can be built in different ways, and consumers can perceive it with a variety of aspects. One

of the interviewees Arielle expressed her way of deciding if she can rely on the plant-based food brands is that she will research more about the brands and get to know exactly what they offer:

“Try to look closer to what exactly they sell, figure out whether the food comes from, for example, how it’s processed or is it processed? Because I feel like it’s natural and it’s not processed and I feel I can rely on it but can I actually? So I will try to maybe try to know the brands more.”

Some consumers may also be skeptical about such plant-based food brands of whether they are really environmentally friendly or sustainably manufactured, or if they only aim to maximize profits as the ultimate goal. Felix and Josie both explained what they think about the these brands:

Felix: “I mean I have a certain suspicion if a brand only sells plant-based products it can only be so bad. The company that owns this brand probably has other brands that are not at all caring about and it’s all kind of critical, that’s what I think about now.”

Josie: “Of course I know that they are like brands they want to make money and they see what’s going on in the society and like people want vegan stuff so we’re gonna make it. [...] Even if they are big brands, they are of course just trying to make money. But I think a lot of them started out as having genuine intentions.”

On the other hand, if a green brand is involved in scandals, wrongdoings or if its actions and values are not aligned with consumers’ values anymore that cause consumer distrust, consumers will stop buying from the brand and even boycott it. Eva and Taylor both explained their reasons for not purchasing plant-based food brands any longer if the brands are involved with scandals or wrongdoings:

Eva: “I’ve actually done that before with a few vegan brands that are like shown afterwards that they have done things that I don’t stand for, so I will just stop using their products and stop buying it.”

Taylor: “It depends on the brands. I think I’m one of those people that I will literally boycott a brand. I’ll continue to use it but if I find out something like

*Oatly CEO is part of a drug trafficking ring, then you know maybe that changes
(continue to buy from the brand or not)."*

According to Arielle, Eva and Taylor's narratives, *green trust* has been found between their relationships with plant-based food brands. However, if the brand disappoints them or causes any distrust, they will take some actions to stop supporting it, and possibly boycott it. Moreover, *green trust* is also identified as Felix and Josie expressed concerns about plant-based food brands of whether they are truly genuine or profit-driven, demonstrating their expectations of the brands to be sustainable and environmentally friendly.

4.2.3 Consumer Green Benefits

The findings of consumer-green brand relationship discover all four types of green brand benefits (Papista & Dimitriadis, 2019) including *confidence benefit*, *altruistic benefit*, *self-expression benefit*, and *socialization benefit*. The interviewees associate a variety of *confidence benefits* with plant-based food brands, such as healthy, good quality, good consistency, tasty and they can trust the brand to consistently deliver these benefits:

Pieter: "Coffee's actually nicer even with oat milk. So to me it's like a double benefit because I treat myself to a nice coffee with oat milk. And I know that it's way more sustainable than using regular milk."

Helena: "The brands (Oatly and Hälsans Kök) appeal to me with their consistency because I know that they're good, that's why even if they come out with something new, I'm very eager to try it because since I've had like a good history with these brands, I know that the new product will probably be good."

Anna: "Those are the most important factors for me, it's eco-friendly, it's a good taste, and it's a good consistency."

There are many *altruistic benefits* with purchasing green brands, as interviewees recognize their contributions to environmental protection and animal welfare. These *altruistic benefits* are categorized as personal benefit and a warm feeling of giving:

Valentina: "It's a healthier alternative and it's better for my body, for the animals as well as the environment. Because I've been doing good things when choosing plant-based brands."

Emily: “For Oatly, they show that they care for the environment and want to do something different, and make the change, and I think they stand out a little bit from the other brands in that way.”

Moreover, interviewees also show their altruistic endeavor to support brands that are local, family-owned and have ethical and sustainable business practices:

Kristine: “If I see vegan or vegetarian brands try to change the impact on climate change but also focus on their logistics and supply chain that they’re trying to decrease carbon emission in that area as well, so those are like, the biggest that I look for.”

Taylor: “Yipin, you know, like supporting a family-owned business, supporting local and supporting family on businesses.”

Nina: “I always try to find vegan alternatives that are locally made because I tried to buy like local small scale brands, if possible.”

By choosing plant-based food brands, interviewees find the brand values and personalities match with them, showing the *self-expression benefit*:

Haruto: “I was like these brands match with my values, to be environmentally friendly. And to be like, mindful about animals.”

Lars: “It kind of reflects my choice of diet and it always ties back to sustainability and health reasons and ethical reasons.”

Valentina: “The brand goes in line with my ethical considerations, I feel like they represent what I’m thinking maybe or what I’m trying to achieve for myself.”

Nina: “It becomes part of your personality somehow. So I think it’s part of me to eat vegetarian, and I cannot imagine me being different anymore. Maybe it’s like a little bit of a hipster thing to do and I believe I’m a little bit of a hipster.”

Plant-based food brands also help them feel included and represented in society, despite having a more unconventional diet. This finding is consistent with *socialization benefit*, referring to a brand’s ability to help consumers fit into social norms and standards while improving their self-confidence:

Helena: “I gained not feeling excluded from any foods because when I buy from these brands, I can just kind of eat the same things as everyone else. So I don’t feel I’m being left out or that I have to only eat like beans every day.”

Taylor: “I still want to have a burger, I still want to have the experience of eating chicken nuggets or something. So I get to have those experiences through food [...] Like there’s nothing that I necessarily missed in my diet before.”

Linnea: “(What have you gained from buying from plant-based food brands?) A normal life. Like I don’t have to miss out normal foods just because I’m vegan.”

Eva: “I don’t feel left out because I can’t eat dairy or meat products anymore. If I’m going somewhere and I have to bring my food, I don’t have to eat salad because that’s the main thing meat eaters say about vegans. I can also show and inspire people that you can still eat a plant-based diet, and tasty food.”

In conclusion, the interviewees perceive plant-based food brands as providing all four types of green benefits including *confidence benefit* regarding the brand performance; *altruistic benefit* regarding the feelings of contribution to the environment or animals; *self-expression benefit* referring to the brand that aligns with their values and *socialization benefit* when the brand helps them avoid being left out and gain social acceptance.

4.3 Aligned Consumer Value

The third theme of the empirical findings outlines the different consumer value that interviewees have when doing grocery shopping and choosing plant-based food brands. Consumer value helps guide the consumers toward green consumption behaviors and deepen the relationships with the brands that align with their values. Based on the consumer value type framework by Shaw et al. (2005), six value types have been identified and applied as they are considered highly relevant in this context, namely *self-direction*, *stimulation*, *achievement*, *hedonism*, *security* and *universalism*. A new value type has also been identified and generated, namely *patriotism*.

4.3.1 Consumer Value as Self-Direction

When making food choices, some interviewees value a sense of control, independence and autonomy, which are the characteristics of *self-direction* value type. Plant-based food brands

help Kristine balance her busy lifestyle as a busy student, while still taking control of her diet and having healthy habits:

Kristine: "Because I'm very practical person, especially my lifestyle as a student, and I need to rush in many things, but I still want to have healthy habits. So when I see those vegan or vegetarian substitutes that are very practical and flexible, I think it fits with myself and my lifestyles that I have with my studies as well."

Anna and Josie are strong advocates for the plant-based lifestyle, as they speak up for themselves when others question their lifestyle choice:

Anna: "But I'm gonna stand by it (plant-based lifestyle) and I've lost a lot of friends because of that. I can't have that in my life and people trying to force me to go back to meat, it's not who I am, especially my family when they do it."

Josie: "I'm very glad that I stopped eating meat, and I definitely identify as someone who doesn't eat meat. I like it. It made me better at arguing or better at putting out my reasons why I do it and maybe questioning other people's choices but being very gentle. It made me more brave in a way."

The value type of *self-direction* is also demonstrated in the curiosity to explore the brand or product to stay informed and compare with different brand options. As Taylor is an entrepreneur, she loves to actively research brand stories and broaden her knowledge of brand motivates and her relationship with Oatly:

"I'm an entrepreneur. So I love a good entrepreneur story. I know Oatly started here in Skåne, so I want to say their story started, maybe out of Lund University."

Linnea is very picky with what she buys, as she holds strong veganism values that directs her life and consumption choices:

"I mean what would I even be as a person if I wasn't vegan or vegetarian? That's who I am as a person. Because she (Linnea's partner) thinks it makes me the crazy person I am. It's my reality, I don't even know who I would be if I wasn't a vegan. I'm very picky with what I buy, I don't buy any leather goods or leather bags."

The *self-direction* value is found in four interviewees' answers. Through lifestyle choices and plant-based food consumption, the interviewees demonstrated a sense of control and independence. They have confidence in making their own food choices and doing their own research on different brands and products. They also have an awareness and confidence in their own identities and are not reliant on other people's opinions.

4.3.2 Consumer Value as Stimulation

Some consumers have the value type as *stimulation* and need variety and stimulation when buying and choosing plant-based food. Linnea enjoys checking different items at the food market while Eva and Emily like trying a variety of plant-based products to stimulate their curiosity:

Linnea: "All my money goes to food and the food market. Like I can spend an hour there just cruising around checking everything, what's in it because I think it's very interesting."

Eva: "I buy from every brand, I like to try new things. If this is a new vegan product I will try it at least once. So I definitely buy everything that's out there."

Emily: "I like to try new things and I think nowadays that seems to be like a lot of new products coming to the market and a lot of companies also offering vegetarian alternatives. So if I find something new, I like to try it."

Going plant-based helps Arielle increase her knowledge of the world and try different cuisines that are outside of her comfort zone:

"I've become more self-aware since becoming a flexitarian, because you try cuisine from different countries because there are so many. Now I feel like I'm more open-minded to new experiences, new things. [...] It makes you think a little bit outside the box and try new things and not just stick to the old routine."

Moreover, some interviewees seek for plant-based recipe inspirations and information on social media, documentaries and other sources. These sources help them stay informed and inspired to follow their plant-based lifestyles:

Anna: "I prefer to follow people (rather than brands). Better to cook something and show me how it's done and I can take inspiration from that."

Dina: “I follow people who share their recipe or like, inspiration about becoming vegan or vegetarian to maintain my habits.”

Valentina: “(I draw inspiration from) Instagram I would say, the main source of recipe inspiration and I follow some vegan people who talk about the environment and stuff, and I saw like the Netflix documentaries.”

In conclusion, some interviewees are found to have the value type of *stimulation*, as they enjoy trying a wide variety of options, getting recipe inspirations and information from social media and cooking different cuisines when choosing plant-based food brands.

4.3.3 Consumer Value as Achievement

The value type *achievement*, which refers to the act of gaining social approval through showing capability that is aligned with social norms (Shaw et al., 2005), is also found during the interviews. Despite vegetarians and vegans are still a minority group in Sweden, many interviewees see going for plant-based foods as aligning with social standards, as it is trendy and encouraged in Sweden:

Emily: “It’s quite a big trend like quite many of my friends in Sweden are the vegans or vegetarians.”

Eva: “They’re (plant-based food brands) trying to get to a hugely demanded target audience because being plant-based and being vegan is on the trending right now.”

Juan: “More and more people are becoming more aware of the impact that the meat industry and the industry have on the environment and they are slowly making these individual choices.”

Some interviewees are found to gain a sense of achievement by going plant-based:

Haruto: “I feel like on an individual level, like changing your eating habits can have a huge contribution to the environment. So like stopping eating meat, I was like that in that sense. I’m contributing quite a lot.”

Dina: “In terms of environment, I’m giving my best contribution, because I’ve seen a research about it that if you consume vegetables you will produce less emissions compared to cooking meat or fish.”

Josie: “My contribution is not eating meat, not buying animal products, except for secondhand. So I feel that no one can do everything but everyone can do something. So I feel that I’m doing my part, this is something really easy for me.”

Interestingly, two of the interviewees expressed that it is harder to have more sustainable food choices in their home country compared to Sweden:

Dina: “For my family, we’re trying to become more sustainable, but the other families in Indonesia don’t really do the same. I think it’s kind of hard to change the whole nation to become more sustainable because of that, and I don’t think the government has done much to accommodate us to become more sustainable.”

Haruto: “When I was eating out with my friend in Japan, it’s kind of difficult. Whatever you go to eat in Japan, there’s always something made with fish or meat.”

Several interviewees feel that a plant-based lifestyle aligns with social norms and standards in Sweden, specifically with the growing trend of sustainability. These opinions showcase the value type of *achievement*. However, in other countries such as Japan and Indonesia, this lifestyle might change to be less of a norm. In conclusion, the *achievement* value type might vary in different cultures.

4.3.4 Consumer Value as Hedonism

One of the value type *hedonism* that was developed by Shaw et al. (2005) puts an emphasis on pleasure and sensuous gratification for consumers. When it comes to shopping behavior, eating and consuming food in an enjoyable way, as well as having an associated pleasurable experience, are the key concepts in this context. Different aspects of pleasurable feelings have been identified with the value type of *hedonism* among the interviewees, such as the pleasure from shopping, enjoyment of food and a privilege associated with being able to afford plant-based food products. Emily and Linnea explained their enjoyable feelings with cooking plant-based food:

Emily: “Knowing that maybe it’s the healthiest stuff that I eat or buy and if I think in some ways it makes you experience a little bit more when it comes to cooking and doing stuff.”

Linnea: “I can spend an hour there (food market) just cruising around checking everything, what’s in it because I think it’s very interesting, and it’s fun to cook. [...] It’s like the shopping part and the cooking part. I think that’s even more fun than actually sitting down and eating their food.”

Moreover, Taylor related her exciting feelings to the brand history with herself:

“Having Oatly in a place where it began, because you can have Oatly in the US, you can have Oatly all over the world but you know, sitting here for my glass of Oatly right here where it all began, that’s history.”

Arielle also described her joyful experience when she goes shopping and finds her favorite plant-based food brand provides her with some inspirations:

“Sometimes I know that brands, they provide recipes with their products. I know that sometimes on the back of the products, they have recipe inspiration of how you can cook with the product.”

On the other hand, the majority of interviewees mentioned that the taste of the plant-based food is the most important factor for their enjoyment:

Pieter: “So if I do buy meat replacement, then I want the ones that taste the best. [...] I just always try to prove to other people that vegetarian food tastes amazing because I think that’s the best approach for it in general. That’s my activism, cooking good food.”

Dina: “For Oatly, I would like appreciate them so much because they could turn plant-based milk into something that we can really enjoy every day, the taste.”

Eva: “I like Oddly Good. I think they make good products because I like oat milk a lot. I think they’re tasty. Peas of Heaven, tasty and easy to cook.”

Felix: “I like whether I buy the product from a plant-based brand at Lidl or buy like a no name brand, the same feeling I’m looking forward to eating it because it’s going to be delicious food.”

Furthermore, Helena and Haruto both think they feel privileged to be able to choose plant-based food brands:

Helena: "I think it's a bit more difficult when it comes to like the impact you're making on society because at the same time you are very privileged to be able to choose what you buy at a supermarket."

Haruto: "I also feel a bit privileged because I can choose their product instead of buying a regular, maybe the regular and cheaper products."

Based on the narratives, the value type *hedonism* can be found as the interviewees enjoy either their own cooking and eating process or shopping experiences. Additionally, some of them feel that there is a sense of privilege associated with having a plant-based lifestyle.

4.3.5 Consumer Value as Security

Another value type *security* that was discovered by Shaw et al. (2005) has been identified among the interviewees when consumers go shopping and they take into account their own safety, security for society and themselves. Those consumers who hold value type as *security* tend to choose products or brands that are labeled as healthy or clean, as they consider their health and security as an important element. Dina, Lars and Anna explained their healthy perceptions of plant-based food brands and how the plant-based lifestyle supports their health concerns:

Dina: "I become flexitarian because I have diabetes genes from my mother's side, so I wanted to really pay attention to what I eat just because I wanted to try to practice a healthy lifestyle as much as I can."

Lars: "That (plant-based food consumption) really helped and some of the damage that I've had from before started kind of disappearing, so I decided that I should expand it into going kind of full vegan and see what that does to me, which helped with the allergies as well."

Anna: "The plant-based diet is really helping me to find a good focus, what's good for me to eat and what I should avoid, and my health is getting better. [...] The main reason why I do it is because of my health and when people say that we are meant to eat meat. No, we're not."

Anna and Emily found inspiration from vegan or vegetarian athletes who advocate for a plant-based lifestyle and improve their health performance after choosing to go plant-based:

Anna: “I chose to go to a more plant-based food and when I saw athletes, athletes themselves changed their diet. The performance got better, the blood got better, their overall health got better.”

Emily: “Many high level athletes nowadays are vegetarian or vegan as well. So I think they are really inspirational and I think if they can do it, anybody can do it.”

Furthermore, Kristen supports the health benefits of plant-based alternatives, which provide her with sufficient nutrition in her diet:

“They’re (plant-based food brands) part of my diet and they’re really good substitutes, especially for protein and just like, healthy things.”

Looking at the narratives, the value type *security* can be identified as interviewees consider their health and prefer products or brands that are healthy, clean, and green. Moreover, they were inspired by plant-based athletes and believe this plant-based lifestyle is essential and better for their own health and safety.

4.3.6 Consumer Value as Universalism

In terms of the value type *universalism*, it emphasizes the importance of treating every person and being equally and with respect. In other words, people with this value are concerned with issues regarding equality, social justice and environment (Shaw et al., 2005). From the data, concerns for various issues regarding environmental impact, animal welfare, and cruelty free were identified. Interviewees addressed their concerns for the environment, including climate change, carbon emissions and attempt to minimize the harm to the planet with their food choices:

Pieter: “I do think that it’s bad if you eat a lot of meat because not only is it bad for your own health, it’s also just really a bad environmental decision.”

Kristine: “In the beginning I went vegetarian because of climate change, but also agricultural production like in different parts of the world.”

Emily: "I think that's (plant-based lifestyle) an easy way to do something about the climate change and care for the environment. [...] I just think they taste better and then there's like the environmental aspect and I respect them."

Furthermore, the majority of the interviewees discussed their love of animals and concern for animal welfare as these values affect their shopping habits and lifestyle choices. Animal welfare fits well into the *universalism* value type as it is related to treating every animal with kindness and fairness:

Helena: "I think there's like a big aspect of values in the things that you buy, and when you're vegan, I think you're maybe a bit more conscious about the choices you're making. [...] I think it makes a huge impact, especially on animal welfare obviously."

Valentina: "I did it because of an ethical consideration. And I didn't want to hurt any animals. I didn't want any animal to die for my food."

Felix: "I started to think about human and animal lives that suffer because of that. I do not buy meat or rarely buy animal products at all. Surely it tells you a lot about my values and what I care about."

Linnea: "I've always been an animal loving person. And I just realized that animals are friends and not food, so I think that belief just grew stronger within the years."

Some interviewees were inspired by documentaries and personal research on animal welfare as the reasons why they do not consume meat:

Anna: "I watched a documentary a friend of mine recommended and I started seeing this horrifying view. I consider myself an animal lover through, but I can't stand behind that industry. It's horrifying. [...] I do believe they're living in fear. I'm not gonna eat something that contains fear and blood."

Eva: "It started off with watching documentaries and learning more about how the animal industry is and how animals feel. I kept on doing my research and I felt like I couldn't keep on eating. I couldn't justify eating animal products."

According to the interviewees, the value type *universalism* can be found as the vast majority of them are concerned about the environment and animal welfare. They value the environment and care about making an impact on climate change and carbon emissions, as well as trying to reduce the harm and pollution to this planet. Furthermore, they are also concerned about the rights of animals and believe animals suffer when people consume meat. As a result, the value type *universalism* can be identified by the majority of interviewees.

4.3.7 Consumer Value as Patriotism

A new value type *patriotism* has been identified that was not previously termed by Shaw et al. (2005). *Patriotism* is a positive feeling of pride associated with national, cultural characteristics and other symbolic meanings of one's home country. Since the interviewees come from diverse cultural backgrounds, some of them prefer to support brands that are originally from their home countries. Pieter demonstrated the loyalty toward Vegetarian Butcher because he is proud that the brand is from his home country the Netherlands:

“For Vegetarian Butcher I am more loyal to it, partially because there was this nationalistic thing like this is a Dutch brand so that's why I like it, but also they like to be innovative and they were one of the firsts in the market and the quality of the products is just very good.”

Similarly, after moving to Sweden, Emily feels obligated to support a Finnish brand:

“There's one more brand called Valio, and I basically buy that in Sweden because it's Finnish and I feel the need to support a Finnish brand.”

“Maybe sometimes I feel brand loyalty because of where the companies are from, like if I could choose between a Finnish company and a French company, I would go for the Finnish one.”

When asked to describe Oatly, Helena finds the brand close to heart because it is a Swedish brand and was developed at her university:

“Oatly, I would probably say cozy because I know that Oatly was made in the university. So it kind of feels like close to home. There's another word, consistent. You always know what you're getting with Oatly. Oatly has a very Swedish vibe.”

The consumer value type *patriotism* is identified to have an influence on the perception of the plant-based food brands through a sense of pride and positive associations with the home country's image and symbolism.

4.5 Overall Findings

This section is finalized with an overview of the findings, and the following are some of the most notable findings from this research:

Table 3. Themes and Overview of Findings

Theme	Findings
1. Brand Relationship	
Marriage Partner	Brand relationship as <i>marriage partner</i> has a moderate degree of <i>love and passion, commitment, self-connection, intimacy</i> , a high level of <i>interdependence</i> and a positive view of <i>brand partner quality</i> .
Best Friend	This type of relationship has a moderate degree of <i>love and passion, self-connection</i> , a high level of <i>interdependence</i> and a positive view of <i>brand partner quality</i> . The level of <i>commitment</i> was found to be low.
Secret Affair	The brand relationship as <i>secret affair</i> is identified, referring to the feelings and experiences that are pleasurable but induces a sense of guilt. It is high in <i>love and passion, self-connection, intimacy</i> but low in <i>brand partner quality</i> . The level of <i>interdependence</i> and <i>commitment</i> were not found.
Childhood Buddy	The brand relationship as <i>childhood buddy</i> is high in <i>love and passion, self-connection, intimacy</i> and <i>brand partner quality</i> as the interviewees bond with these brands through a nostalgic lens of their youth, and low in <i>commitment</i> and <i>interdependence</i> .
Teammate	The brand relationship as <i>teammate</i> has a low degree of <i>love and passion, commitment, self-connection, intimacy</i> , a high level of <i>interdependence</i> and a relatively negative view of <i>brand partner quality</i> .

Casual Acquaintance	The brand relationship as <i>casual acquaintance</i> is considered a low degree of <i>love and passion, self-connection, commitment</i> and interviewees have neutral views about the <i>brand partner quality</i> . The level of <i>interdependence</i> and <i>intimacy</i> are varied.
Crush	A new form of brand relationship that is identified and defined as a strong, emotionally invested, and identity-driven relationship. Consumers who have brand relationship type as <i>crush</i> are passionate and interested in working for the brand and at the same time the brand represents them. This type of brand relationship is high in <i>intimacy</i> and <i>self-connection</i> . The level of <i>interdependence</i> and <i>commitment</i> has not been found, and the level of <i>love and passion</i> and <i>brand partner quality</i> varied.
2. Consumer-Green Brand Relationship	
Green Satisfaction	<i>Green satisfaction</i> has been identified as the interviewees feel delighted and fulfill a sense of contribution in terms of sustainability, the environment and a greener lifestyle.
Green Trust	<i>Green trust</i> has been found between consumers and plant-based food brands. However, if the brand disappoints them or causes any distrust, consumers will take some actions to stop supporting it, and possibly boycott it.
Green Benefits	All four types of <i>green benefits</i> have been identified including <i>confidence benefit</i> regarding the brand performance; <i>altruistic benefit</i> regarding feelings of contribution to the environment and animals; <i>self-expression benefit</i> referring to the brand aligns with their values and <i>socialization benefit</i> is when the brand helps them avoid being left out and gain social acceptance.
3. Consumer Value	
Self-direction	The <i>self-direction</i> value type is found within many interviewees, as they value a sense of control and independence when choosing brands.

Achievement	The <i>achievement</i> value type is also identified, as many interviewees find that having a plant-based lifestyle is an action that aligns with the social norms and standards in Sweden, specifically with the growing trend of sustainability.
Stimulation	<i>The stimulation</i> value type refers to consumers who enjoy trying a wide variety of options, learning about brand stories and cooking different cuisines when choosing plant-based food brands.
Hedonism	The value type <i>hedonism</i> is found as the interviewees enjoy either their own cooking and eating process or shopping experiences.
Security	The value type <i>security</i> can be identified as interviewees consider their health important and prefer products or brands that are healthy, clean, and green. Moreover, they also believe the plant-based lifestyle is essential and better for their own health and safety.
Universalism	The value type <i>universalism</i> can be found as the vast majority of interviewees are concerned about social justice, the environment, and animal welfare.
Patriotism	A new value type that is identified as a positive feeling of pride associated with national, cultural characteristics and other symbolic meanings of one's home country.

5. Analysis and Discussion

The purpose of this chapter is to provide an analysis of the empirical findings from the previous chapter. The key findings and discussion are presented based on the research of the literature review.

5.1 Forming Relationship Through Brand Relationship Metaphors

During the semi-structured interviews, the 18 interviewees mentioned several plant-based food brands that they like the most or most frequently purchase from. Thereafter, the stories and experiences from them with these brands were analyzed. Interviewees have been found to form different types of relationships with brands through the metaphors of interpersonal relationships. This is due to their different perceptions of the plant-based food brands based on the level of *love and passion, self-connection, interdependence, commitment, intimacy* and *brand partner quality*. This is consistent with the concept of brand personality that refers to the consumers' projection of human-like characteristics to brands (Batra, Ahuvia, & Bagozzi, 2012; Alvarez & Fournier, 2016). To be more specific, the relationships between the interviewees and the plant-based food brands were defined and categorized using the relationship metaphors and the relationship quality constructed by Fournier (1998). A total of seven different brand relationship types from this framework were identified. The four types of strong and deep relationships are *marriage partner, best friend, secret affair* and *crush*, and the other three weak and superficial ones are *childhood buddy, teammate* and *casual acquaintance*. *Crush* is the new relationship type that has been identified and proposed within this research, whereas the other six types were found to be consistent with Fournier's relationship typology (1998).

Brand relationship as *crush* refers to those consumers who are passionate and interested in working for the particular brand and at the same time, they feel the brand represents them. This type of brand relationship can be connected to the concept of employer branding, which is an emerging field in marketing and developed by Backhaus and Tikoo in 2004. Employer branding is used initially by brands for human resources to recruit new talents and promote the corporate brands as attractive employers (Backhaus & Tikoo, 2004; Sivertzen, Nilsen, & Olafsen, 2013). When the potential employees can relate their values and personalities to the brand's image, they become more interested in working for the brand (Backhaus & Tikoo, 2004). As many of our interviewees are graduating students, they not only look for brands for buying food but also look for job opportunities within the brands they enjoy and relate to. This is reflected in the high degree of *self-connection* and *intimacy* within the brand relationship as *crush*. As far as the concept of brand relationship as *boss-employee* that was addressed by Fournier, Breazeale and Avery (2015), it is categorized as an intense and strong yet relatively negative relationship, which is not the same with the relationship as *crush*. Since employer

branding is a rather new concept, it has not been explored and covered by Fournier (1998) as the concept and theories have been evolving over the decades.

Furthermore, these relationships were also categorized and analyzed according to both consumer repeated buying behavior (Oliver, 1999) and loyal attitude and individual preference (Jacoby & Chestnut, 1978). The level of loyal attitude is associated with the *commitment* element whereas the repeated buying behavior is connected to the *interdependence* element of the six-faceted relationship quality construct (Fournier, 1998). Interviewees who have strong relationship types such as *marriage partner* and *best friend*, were found to have a high level of *interdependence* and *commitment* toward the brands. In contrast, interviewees who have weak and superficial relationship types such as *childhood buddy*, *casual acquaintance* and *teammate* were identified with a low level of *interdependence* and *commitment*. However, regarding the brand relationship as *casual acquaintance*, there were varied opinions on the level of *interdependence* and *intimacy*. Some interviewees were found to have a high degree of *interdependence* and *intimacy* toward the brand, which means they purchase brand products frequently and prefer the brands over others. Nevertheless, they do not form close relationships or connection with them and only view the brands as acquaintances. This is because some are skeptical and distrust the brand in terms of the brand's authenticity or simply do not like to build relationships with brands, regardless how much they enjoy the brands or products. These interview participants showcased an avoidant interpersonal style, meaning they view the brand as an untrustworthy person (Alvarez & Fournier, 2016). People with avoidant interpersonal style tend to avoid building relationships with brands and prioritize sincerity when evaluating a brand (Swaminathan, Stilley, & Ahluwalia, 2009). This shows that other than the relationship quality construct (Fournier, 1998), the strength and depth of brand relationship can also be influenced by one's interpersonal style in developing relationships.

To conclude, interviewees associate human-like characteristics to brands, respond to brands in the same way as they respond to relationship partners and form relationships with them through interpersonal relationship metaphors. This is in line with the existing literature on brand relationships (Fournier, 1998; Batra, Ahuvia, & Bagozzi, 2012; Alvarez & Fournier, 2016) which indicates that the consumers relate to brands similarly to how they relate to people and develop relationships with varied levels of strength and depth. On the other hand, contradictory to the definition of Fournier (1998) that brand relationship as *casual acquaintance* is "low in intimacy, with a few sporadic engagement", some interviewees were found to buy from the brands frequently but avoid building deep and close relationships with brands. This means that

repeated buying behavior and satisfaction toward the brand do not necessarily lead to higher brand loyalty, which is consistent with what Oliver (1999) suggested. Furthermore, a few interviewees expressed distrust toward brands, showing how avoidant tendency can influence the level and depth they relate to brands (Swaminathan, Stilley, & Ahluwalia, 2009; Alvarez & Fournier, 2016). Lastly, based on the analysis, a new type of brand relationship as *crush* has been identified and proposed to expand the brand relationship metaphors typology by Fournier (1998) to explain the one-sided relationship.

5.2 Forming Relationship Through Green Achievement

During the interviews, interviewees were asked about their feelings and attitudes toward the plant-based food brands as well as their perceived contributions regarding plant-based food consumption to the environment or animal welfare. It is found that interviewees form relationships with plant-based food brands as they feel a sense of achievement or contribution when buying from them. The achievement related to green brands includes *green satisfaction*, *green trust*, and *green benefits*, which lead to the *consumer-green brand relationship*. This relationship is a type of brand relationship that is contemporarily developed due to the increasing importance of sustainable and environmentally friendly consumer value and needs (Papista et al., 2017; Papista & Dimitriadis, 2019). It is found to be emotion and identity invested based on Fournier and Avery (2011), as the interviewees enjoy and trust the brands for their sustainable and ethical values. Some even relate their own personalities and identities with the brands who help further improve their sustainable efforts.

Some interviewees perceive positive emotional benefits associated with buying plant-based food brands, namely the feeling of pride and satisfaction when they know they contribute to the environment and sustainability through choosing green brands. These emotions are related to the concept of *green satisfaction*, and this is consistent with what Chen (2013) suggested that consumers experience a feeling of pleasure and fulfillment when buying from green brands. To add to this, whereas interviewees feel satisfied, they also feel that their plant-based food consumption is a small step that adds up and contributes to their ultimate goal of reducing animal suffering and protecting the environment. Yet, they also believe that they can do better in other areas and their small actions can inspire others to do the same.

Moreover, one of the interviewees believes the plant-based food brands started with a genuine intention as she has expectations and beliefs in them to be environmentally friendly or

sustainable. Hence, *green trust* can be identified (Chen, 2013). However, some other interviewees extensively research the brands in terms of production, values, as well as sustainable and ethical performance since they are skeptical about whether the brand is genuine in their sustainability efforts or merely driven by profits. This can be connected to the concept of corporate greenwashing, which occurs when a brand fails to deliver on its promise to be green (Akturan, 2018). The unfulfilled promises can create doubt in the minds of consumers, harm brand perception, and reduce green trust and loyalty (Chen & Chang, 2012). Two of the interviewees expressed that if the brand is associated with scandals or misaligned with their values, they will stop supporting the brand, and possibly boycott it. This finding is aligned with the suggestion of Chernev and Blair (2015) that consumers tend to react negatively when a company has wrongdoings and leaves them with a negative impression. Surprisingly, interviewees were found to show more skepticism and distrust toward plant-based food brands instead of completely trusting them.

As for the *green benefits* model that was developed by Papista and Dimitriadis (2019), interviewees were found to have all four types of *green benefits*. The first one which is *confidence benefit* can be identified as the interviewees feel confident and assured that the brands will deliver what they promise (Papista & Dimitriadis, 2019). It is found that other than just providing promised service or products, consistency in quality throughout the time is also essential according to two interviewees. Moreover, *altruistic benefit* is also found as some interviewees support plant-based food brands with the individual motivation to contribute to the environment, animal welfare and society. Many expressed that they feel a sense of responsibility and obligation to opt for plant-based products for environmental and ethical reasons, and this is consistent with the moral obligation to care for the environment found by Barbarossa and De Pelsmacker (2016). Additionally, many interviewees feel an altruistic need to support brands that are local, small or family-owned.

The next benefit that was identified during the interviews is *self-expression benefit*, as some interviewees can relate to the brands with similar values and personalities. The brand image was found to also represent interviewees' ideal self-image and lifestyle. This is in line with the findings by van der Westhuizen (2018), as consumers have a need to express their identities and aspirational lifestyles through the consumption choices. Lastly, *socialization benefit* was also found. Some interviewees expressed that they can fit into social norms and standards due to not being excluded in social events as there are a variety of plant-based substitutes available in the market. Brands also boost their self-esteem at the same time as they help meet the needs

for social belonging. This is consistent with the positive relationship between social acceptance and brand usage since brands help consumers increase the feeling of belonging in communities (Kang, Tang & Fiore, 2014). Within the research, it is also found that consumers tend to demonstrate a higher level of loyalty and repeat their buying behavior when they associate many of these benefits with the brands. They are also more likely to share about the brand with their close friends and family via word-of-mouth. This is consistent with the finding by Papista and Dimitriadis (2019) that when the more green benefits are associated with the brand, the more consumers are willing to favorably recommend the brand to the peers, repeat buying the products and purchase other products from the same brand.

Overall, the interviewees of this study were found to form relationships with the plant-based food brands through a positive consumption-related feeling of green achievement. These findings are consistent with the theories and frameworks that were developed by several authors (Chen & Chang, 2012; Chen, 2013; Kang, Tang & Fiore, 2014; Chernev and Blair, 2015; Barbarossa & De Pelsmacker, 2016; Akturan, 2018; van der Westhuizen, 2018; Papista & Dimitriadis, 2019), as consumers deepen their relationships based on their level of satisfaction, trust and benefits associated with the brands' environmental and ethical performance.

5.3 Forming Relationship Through Aligned Consumer Value

The insights from 18 in-depth interviews shed light on different sets of underlying value that consumers have when forming relationships with plant-based food brands. The findings indicated seven types of consumer value including *self-direction*, *stimulation*, *achievement*, *hedonism*, *security*, *universalism* and *patriotism*. The former six value types were adapted from the consumer value framework by Shaw et al. (2005) and *patriotism* is a newly identified and expanded one.

Firstly, interviewees who like to do research about different brands and evaluate between choices and rely on themselves to make purchase decisions were found to reflect *self-direction* value (Shaw et al., 2005). They are self-directed individuals who value freedom and independence, hold their opinions strongly and stay true to their lifestyle choices, even when being questioned by others. Additionally, it is found that having freedom and independence are not necessarily positive as two of the interviewees hold strong opinions toward plant-based consumption that make them either lose social support or impose their views on others.

Secondly, interviewees who value contributing to sustainability with their food consumption aligning with current trends reflect the value type of *achievement* (Shaw et al., 2005). The interviewees see an increasingly popular trend to choose plant-based food and adopt more sustainable choices. This is consistent with the claims that when dealing with massive environmental problems such as climate change, people believe taking individual actions will help bring positive change and thus, engage in sustainable lifestyle choices (Shaw et al., 2005; Lee & Park, 2013). Interestingly, some interviewees perceive adopting a plant-based diet as a trendy and widely encouraged topic in the Swedish context but this is less applicable in their own countries such as in Indonesia and Japan. This can be connected to the definition of consumer value by Holbrook (1999) as relativist, because consumer value varies in different contexts and differs between different people. It is a notable finding that emerged from the study as the plant-based lifestyle is perceived as an achievement in Sweden but not necessarily in some other countries.

The next value type that is identified within the research is *stimulation* (Shaw et al., 2005). Interviewees were found to enjoy going to different places to shop, trying different products, and cooking different cuisines to stimulate their curiosity. This value is also shown as they get inspiration from food magazines, social media, chefs and influencers to cook different dishes. Consistent with the definition of consumer value made by Holbrook (1999), consumer value is rooted in the enjoyment and benefits of the shopping and consumption experience and not only in the product or brand. Additionally, social media and influencers were found to be the main sources of inspiration for adding stimulation to their plant-based consumption. The other value type of *hedonism* was also identified within the interviewees as they enjoy the pleasure of eating and consuming plant-based brands (Shaw et al., 2005). Another significant finding is that some interviewees feel privileged to be able to choose plant-based food brands. According to a previous study by Lee and Park (2013), whereas consuming sustainable products is a growing trend, it has also become a symbol of luxury and privilege, as these products can be too expensive, inconvenient and inaccessible for some consumers.

Some interviewees were discovered to perceive the value type *security* important and see choosing plant-based food as the key element to living a healthy life (Shaw et al., 2005). This is in line with the interviewees' motivations for safety and security, which leads to choosing plant-based food brands that align with their health concerns (Shaw et al., 2005). In addition, it is found that athletes who have a plant-based diet are viewed as an inspiration and associated with a healthy image according to two interviewees. On the other hand, some interviewees also

value protecting the environment and reducing harm for animals through their lifestyle and consumption as the value type of *universalism* was found. This value type specifically involves protecting the equality of people and preserving nature (Shaw et al., 2005). In addition, the finding shows that the interviewees highly emphasized the topic of animal rights and thus, the context of *universalism* can be extended to include protecting the well-being and rights of all animals. It can be considered that this is one of the most important values for interviewees in consuming plant-based products as all interviewees share this view.

Within the research, a new type of consumer value, referring to the value type as *patriotism* has been identified and proposed to expand the consumer value framework by Shaw et al. (2005). This value type emerges when interviewees have a preference toward the brands that originate or have connections with their home countries. In other words, the value emphasizes the role of one's homeland and feeling of *patriotism* in buying plant-based food brands. This is related to how one makes consumption choices to express their national identity and attachment with national-iconic products or brands (Spielmann, Maguire & Charters, 2020). By extending the framework, this type of value deepens the understanding of consumers' purchasing behavior and the role of national identity in forming relationships.

On the other hand, the two value types of *benevolence* and *conformity* were not identified within the framework by Shaw et al. (2005). Interviewees were not found to have these values as they do not value positive interaction with other people and do not have a need to restrain from socially disruptive behavior when buying plant-based products. To conclude, interviewees were found to be driven by six different value types within the consumer value framework of Shaw et al. (2005) and an additional value *patriotism* is proposed to expand the framework. They were also discovered to choose plant-based food brands that align with their personal values and help them contribute to the environment and animal welfare. As suggested by Ramaseshan and Stein (2014), brands can evoke emotional connection with consumers and build deeper relationships and loyalty if they appeal to consumer value. All these consumer values showcase the variety of underlying motivations that can be satisfied by forming relationships with plant-based food brands.

6. Conclusion and Contributions

In the final chapter, the findings and conclusions of this study are summarized and presented in order to answer the research question. Thereafter, theoretical contributions and managerial implications are given. Lastly, research limitations and direction for future research are addressed.

6.1 Conclusion

The thesis seeks to investigate the brand relationships that consumers form with plant-based food brands by exploring three main themes of forming relationships through brand relationship metaphors, green achievement, and aligned consumer value. 18 in-depth interviews with plant-based food consumers with international backgrounds residing in Sweden were conducted to answer the following research question:

RQ: How do consumers form their relationships with plant-based food brands?

To answer this, consumers form different types and levels of relationships with plant-based food brands, and each consumer can possibly form different types of relationships with different brands. These relationships that they form can be categorized to seven brand relationship types according to the depth of the relationships, namely *marriage partner*, *best friend*, *secret affair*, *childhood buddy*, *teammate*, *casual acquaintance* and *crush*. The relationships were also categorized based on different levels of *love and passion*, *self-connection*, *interdependence*, *intimacy*, *commitment* and *brand partner quality*. The most common relationship type consumers form with plant-based food brands was found to be *casual acquaintance*, with varying levels of *intimacy* and frequency of purchasing behavior. A newly identified brand relationship type as *crush* has been expanded to explain the relationship type that has not yet been discovered by Fournier (1998).

Secondly, consumers form relationships with plant-based food brands that help them fulfill the feeling of green achievement including *green satisfaction*, *green trust* and *green benefits*. Consumers were found to feel satisfied and trust toward green brands on the basis of the environmental and ethical contribution achieved through the brand relationship. However, many consumers show distrust and skepticism about the brand's environmental performance, or they simply believe in the green brands just because the brands have not disappointed them

or involved any wrongdoing. Hence, it can be concluded that green achievement plays a key role in deepening the consumers' relationships with plant-based food brands.

Finally, consumers were found to have different underlying values and motivations when forming relationships with plant-based food brands. Using the consumer value framework by Shaw et al. (2005), the consumer value can be classified as *self-direction*, *achievement*, *stimulation*, *hedonism*, *security*, *universalism* and *patriotism*. The first six value types were identified among the interviewees and adapted from Shaw et al. (2005), whereas *patriotism* is a newly identified consumer value type that was not mentioned within the consumer value framework to explain the positive feeling of pride associated with national, cultural characteristics and achievement with one's home country. Consequently, these seven consumer value types serve as underlying factors for consumers when constructing relationships with plant-based food brands.

6.2 Theoretical Contributions

The findings of this study contribute to a deeper understanding of consumers' brand relationships in the branding and marketing literature context. Whereas there was extensive prior research about brand relationship, this research is distinguished by the focus on exploring brand relationships in the empirical context of plant-based food brands. With the data from 18 in-depth interviews, insightful understandings of consumer-brand relationships have been gathered by using the brand relationship metaphors by Fournier (1998). As these metaphors can be seen as relatively outdated, the newly identified brand relationship type *crush* expands this typology and is practical for understanding the consumer-brand relationship in the modern marketing and branding context. Additionally, it is found within the study that intimacy and frequency of buying the brand does not necessarily lead to a deeper brand relationship. There are a variety of factors that affect the depth of brand relationships, such as skepticism about brand performance and a tendency to avoid building relationships. With these unique findings, the research has made contributions to enrich the existing literature of brand relationships in the marketing and branding field.

Furthermore, the study also contributes to the understanding of the consumer-green brand relationship. As there has not an explicit definition of consumer-green brand relationship yet, this study provides a definition of consumer-green brand relationship and outlines what this relationship entails based on previous studies by Chen (2013) and Papista and Dimitriadis

(2019). This definition can serve as a guide for future studies on this topic and apply it to different contexts and industries. Finally, the study differs from others by connecting consumers' value with brand relationships and showing how consumers form relationships with brands that resonate with their values. The newly identified consumer value which is called *patriotism* extends the consumer value framework by Shaw et al. (2005), explaining the positive feelings of associating national pride and cultural characteristics with a consumer's home country.

6.3 Managerial Implications

The findings of the study are applicable for marketers and brand managers within the food industry for various reasons. Firstly, these insights demonstrate the importance of brand relationship, as consumers with closer and deeper brand relationships tend to be more loyal and committed toward the brands. They are also more willing to repeat their buying behavior and promote the brands via word-of-mouth. Therefore, food brands are advised to consider and prioritize building strong and close brand relationships in their marketing strategies. To be more specific, creating the brand relationship as *marriage partner* and *best friend* can be the goal that companies aim for, as these two relationships are deep and intimate, with a strong degree of *love and passion, self-connection, intimacy, interdependence, commitment* and *brand partner quality*.

Secondly, as different consumers were found to have different underlying values for building brand relationships, companies should listen and identify what consumers want and need. After identifying their needs, branding and marketing professionals at food companies should communicate a message that appeals to consumers' values and relates to their personalities, lifestyles, and aspirational image, making them feel heard and appreciated. The more benefits and values that a company provides to the consumers, the stronger the brand relationship will be.

Moreover, the common finding in all of the interviewees' answers is the importance of making ethical and sustainable food choices. Sustainability is seen as a growing trend that companies should integrate into their marketing and messaging. Consumers trust and feel satisfied purchasing from the brands with a sustainable focus and help them further enhance their contributions to the environment and animal welfare. However, the sustainable effort by the company must be perceived as genuine and considerate. Otherwise, the strategy may backfire,

and the company could suffer from consumer backlash and boycott, which would diminish the brand relationship.

6.4 Research Limitations

After concluding and summarizing the outcome and deriving managerial implications, a number of limitations have been identified within this study. First, the sample size of the research is limited due to time constraints. With the size of 18 interviewees, the results cannot be applied to all consumers of plant-based food brands since the sample size is not adequate enough to be considered as a large scale to represent the entire population. Due to the fact that the research was conducted with the interviewees who have international backgrounds, residing in Sweden and actively buying from plant-based food brands, the findings may not be generalizable to other countries and industries. Furthermore, twelve out of eighteen interviewees were female, whereas male consumers of plant-based food did not have an equal voice in the research. Another limitation can also be the method as qualitative that the results based on what the interviewees expressed and based on how the researchers interpreted, which can affect the trustworthiness of the study. Other similar studies within consumer-brand relationships were constructed to be able to generalize the outcome and test the applicability of the newly identified brand relationship metaphors. Arguably, a quantitative research method could also be used to test the applicability of empirical findings.

Furthermore, the concept of consumer-green brand relationship has not yet been extensively discovered, and there has been scant resource and literature available within current studies. The typology of brand relationship using relationship metaphors developed by Fournier (1998) is relatively outdated. However, the study incorporating the concept of consumer-green brand relationship is rather new. Moreover, the three different aspects of understanding how consumers form their relationships with plant-based food brands focus on consumers' perspectives, which lack the brand's viewpoint to construct a comprehensive study. The study should also consider more influential factors that might affect the depth and duration of the brand relationships, such as life or financial situation of the interviewees. Despite having these limitations, the findings are still considered to be valuable and can be applied as a base for future research. Based on the limitations mentioned above, the recommendation and direction for future research will be discussed in the next section.

6.5 Direction for Future Research

In light of the limitations outlined above, there are several directions and recommendations to consider for future research. Firstly, more interviewees can be included in the study to gather and analyze the brand relationships in between, thereby making the study more comprehensive with a larger number of participants; male interviewees can also be included more in the research to make the genders' voices equal within the study. The relationships between consumers and plant-based food brands could also be quantitatively tested which can enhance the generalizability and robustness of the study. To elaborate, future study could further analyze how the factors such as price, accessibility and convenience could influence the depth of relationships.

On the other hand, the focus of this study is to explore how consumers form their relationships with plant-based food brands specifically in Sweden. Future research can be expanded to interviewing plant-based food brands' marketing or brand managers from the brand side, getting to know more in-depth about how brands build relationships with consumers by utilizing relationship marketing strategies. Based on the brand relationship as *crush* identified within this study, future studies could also explore the connection between employer branding techniques and brand relationship. To be more specific, university graduates and prospective employees could be interviewed.

As this research only focuses on the context in Sweden, the study could be extended to other countries to incorporate a variety of cultures and backgrounds, making the study more comprehensive. A cross-country comparison could also be conducted to compare and contrast how different cultures interpret brand relationships. The newly identified consumer value as *patriotism* could also be used to specifically target national brands and explore how consumers form relationships with them. Lastly, another potential direction could be to conduct a longitudinal study about the plant-based food consumption and relationships between consumers and the brands, which can provide a better understanding of how the relationships develop and change over time.

7. References

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8. Appendix

Appendix A - Interview Guide

The interview guide is used to guide the interviews with plant-based food consumers to answer the research question:

How do consumers form their relationships with plant-based food brands?

The interview structure is given below:

1. Introduction of the researchers and the interview topic
2. Ice-breaker questions to the plant-based food brands
3. The main interview guide questions
4. The end of the interview

1. Introduction of the researchers and the interview topic

First of all, thank you very much for taking your time for the interview. We are Chia-Yin and Anh, two master's students studying International Marketing and Brand Management at Lund University and currently working on our master thesis project about consumer-brand relationships within the plant-based food brands in Sweden. The reason why we would love to have an interview with you is because we are trying to understand the relationships between you and the plant-based food brands. No matter what your answers are, they are all really valuable for us, so please feel free to tell us anything. We would like to ask for your permission to record the interview, as we will only use it to transcribe your answers to do further analysis for our study.

2. Ice-breaker questions to the plant-based brands

- Can you introduce yourself and tell us your name, age and occupation?
- Can you tell us a bit more about your cultural background?
- Do you identify yourself as a vegan, vegetarian, or flexitarian? Can you elaborate on the reason you chose to adopt this diet/lifestyle?
- Do your family/friends have any impact on this decision?
 - Do they support or challenge your decision?

- From where do you draw inspiration to follow this diet/lifestyle? (e.g. news, YouTubers, social media influencers...)

3. The main interview guide questions

Brand Relationship:

- Do you have a favorite plant-based food brand(s)? You can choose one or multiple brands (e.g. dairy, meat alternative).
- Can you describe this brand in 3 words?
- How did you know about this brand? How and why did you start buying their products?
- How often do you buy from plant-based food brand(s)?
- Do you also buy from other brands within the same category? (e.g. milk, meat alternatives) How often do you buy from them?
- Do you exclusively buy plant-based food brands in general or do you also buy regular milk/meat? Why/why not? And how often?
- How connected do you feel with this brand(s)? And how would you define your relationship with the brands?
 - Imagine your favorite brand was a person, what kind of relationship do you think you have with it?
- Do you follow or engage with these brand(s) on social media? How?

Consumer-Green Brand Relationship:

- What factors appeal to you about this brand? What sets this brand apart in your opinion?
 - Elaborate about self-identity/connection.
- How do you feel about buying products from plant-based food brands?
 - What does this brand remind you of?
 - How do you relate this with yourself?
 - What do you think you have gained from buying from this brand?
 - How do you think this defines you as a person, your values and ideologies?
- In what way do you feel good/bad about choosing plant-based food brands?
 - How do you feel about your contributions to the environment/society/animal welfare?
 - How actively do you talk about this with others?

- What is your level of engagement in activism or resistance against non-plant-based food products?
- Do you share anything about this brand/product on social media?

Brand Loyalty:

- Will you continue to buy the plant-based food products from the brand in the long run?
 - How do you think your role will evolve and the relationship will change/grow with the brand?
 - If the brand increases the price in the future, will you still buy from the brand? Or you will go for another brand for the same product?

4. The end of the interview

Thanks for answering our questions. Is there anything particular that you would like to add or let us know?

Thank you so much again and we appreciate your valuable input.

Appendix B - Coding Scheme

Theme	Description	References
Brand Relationship	The relationship that consumers feel, think, have and experience with a product or a brand (Fournier, 1998).	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Typology of 15 brand relationship metaphors by Fournier (1998). • The relationship quality construct by Founier (1998). • Three different brand loyalty perspectives by Newman & Werbel (1973), Fournier & Yao (1997), and Oliver (1999).
Consumer-Green Brand Relationship	A level of consumption-related achievement feeling that is highly emotional and identity invested in a brand's credibility and contribution for the environment and sustainability.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Green trust concept by Chen (2013). • Green satisfaction concept by Chen (2013). • Green benefits by Papista and Dimitriadis (2019).
Consumer Value	One's underlying motivation in evaluating a product or making purchasing decisions (Holbrook, 1999; Shaw et al., 2005).	Consumer value framework by Shaw et al. (2005).