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The Emotional Bond

Exploring Emotional Brand Attachment in the
Direct-to-Consumer (D2C) Model

Group 29

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Abstract

Title: The Emotional Bond: Exploring Emotional Brand Attachment in the Direct-to-Consumer (D2C) Model

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Purpose: The study aims to uncover the key drivers that foster emotional brand attachment within the D2C model.

Methodology: A qualitative research design was employed and data was collected through 13 semi-structured interviews with Swedish consumers who regularly engage with D2C brands.

Key Findings: The study reveals that emotional brand attachment in the D2C model is primarily driven by the concepts of empowered personalization and functionally embedded emotionality. Consumers form strong bonds when brands become integrated into their daily routines of their daily lives, offer tailored and seamless experiences and foster a sense of belonging through authenticity and community.

Implications: The study contributes theoretically by extending emotional brand attachment theory to D2C contexts, introducing concepts such as *functionally embedded emotionality* and *empowered personalization*. Practically, it offers insights for D2C marketers on how to strengthen consumer intimacy through personalized interactions, transparent communication, and community-driven branding strategies.

Keywords: *Emotional Brand Attachment, Direct-to-Consumer (D2C), Brand Relationships, Functionally Embedded Emotionality, Empowered Personalization.*

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Glossary of terms

Below a brief glossary which clarifies key marketing terms and concepts to help readers understand the ideas discussed in this study:

Direct-to-Consumer (D2C)	A Direct-to-Consumer (D2C) model is a go-to-market strategy in which a brand manufactures its products and sells them directly to end-customers without relying on third-party retailers, wholesalers or distributors. The brand controls the entire value chain, from product design, pricing and merchandising to marketing and the post-purchase relationship. Given its nature, the D2C model is digitally-driven in most cases to facilitate direct interactions.
Business-to-Consumer (B2C)	Business-to-Consumer (B2C) encompasses any commercial activity in which a business sells goods or services to the individual end-user through one or more intermediaries (such as wholesalers, brick-and-mortar retailers, e-commerce marketplace). These intermediaries sit between manufacturer and shopper, shaping assortment, pricing, promotion and the overall buying experience.
Emotional Brand Attachment	Emotional attachment is a deep and affective bond that consumers develop toward a brand or company. Going beyond satisfaction or habitual repurchase, it reflects feelings of love, connection and identity ownership that make the brand personally meaningful and hard to replace.

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1. Introduction

This chapter introduces the background and relevance of the study, clearly identifying the research gap that motivated the study. It outlines the early theoretical foundations of emotional brand attachment within Direct-to-Consumer (D2C) settings and contrasts these with traditional Business-to-Consumer (B2C) models. The chapter also presents the problematization, purpose and research question, while highlighting the study's contributions, delimitations and overall structure to guide the reader.

1.1 Background

The D2C business model is an innovative selling approach that has rapidly transformed the traditional distribution landscape by enabling brands to bypass intermediaries and engage in direct relationships with consumers, enabling a direct engagement strategy (Mu & Yi, 2024; McKee et al. 2023; Reinartz et al. 2019). Thanks to the continuous rise of digital transformation, e-commerce platforms and social media, D2C brands have experienced a significant growth (McKee et al. 2023). Unlike traditional B2C distribution approaches, which rely on third-party distributors and retailers, D2C brands have greater control over messaging (Hollebeek et al. 2014), pricing, customer interactions and brand positioning (Mu & Yi, 2024; McKee et al. 2023). It derives that brands have greater autonomy in creating frictionless customer journeys, strengthening brand identity and optimizing marketing strategies through direct access to consumers and their information (Cocco & Demoulin, 2022). In addition, the integration of community-driven branding initiatives not only promotes shared consumption experiences (Cova, 1997) and word of mouth, but also enhances customer engagement and advocacy, fostering long-term relationships (Baxendale et al. 2015).

As a result, one of the key factors determining the success of D2C brands is their ability to establish strong emotional connections and long-term relationships with consumers (Fournier, 1998; Fournier & Alvarez, 2012). In a saturated and highly competitive market, emotional

engagement plays a fundamental role in driving consumers' choices and in fostering brand loyalty and advocacy (Ahmadi & Ataei, 2024). In this context, theories such as brand attachment (Fournier, 1998; Shimul, 2022) and brand love (Carroll & Ahuvia, 2006) suggest that consumers are more likely to develop long-term relationships with brands that align with their identities and values. Compared to traditional sales models, D2C brands can benefit from the opportunity to favour experiential and relationship-driven connections, positioning themselves more as partners rather than mere product providers (Dias & Cavaleiro, 2021). On the other hand, while D2C models facilitate unmediated interactions that could strengthen emotional bonds, the absence of intermediaries and human counterparts, who often play pivotal roles in personalizing experiences and building trust, might also diminish such attachments (Lemon & Verhoef, 2016). In fact, the lack of human mediation could paradoxically increase the perceived psychological distance to brands, discouraging the sense of concreteness, proximity and emotional salience in brand perceptions (Trope & Liberman, 2010).

It derives that perceived trust and authenticity represent critical factors to overcome this distance, affecting consumer attachment to D2C brands (Chaudhuri & Holbrook, 2001). In this context, extant literature showcases how consumers are increasingly drawn to brands that feature ethical principles, social responsibility and genuinity (Morhart et al. 2015; Mohr et al. 2021). Trust is further reinforced and fostered through user-generated content and social proof mechanisms such as online reviews (Dessart et al. 2015). Unlike traditional B2C brands that often communicate through mediated corporate messaging, D2C brands leverage social media, community building and direct conversations to cultivate authenticity and trust (Brodie et al. 2013). Despite this, questions arise about whether direct brand interactions actually trigger a greater sense of trust and emotional investment, or whether the absence of human counterparts and intermediary experiences leads to a more transactional and less engaged relationship to brands. Indeed, while D2C brands develop seamless interactions through technology, concerns can arise about the authenticity and emotional resonance of these interactions compared to the human touch offered in traditional B2C settings (Van Doorn et al. 2017). The theoretical implications of the transition from traditional B2C models to D2C settings on consumers' emotional attachment to brands remain underexplored. Given these uncertainties, it is crucial to explore and expand the literature about how D2C models craft consumer experiences and build emotional attachment, as well as

through what drivers and under what conditions consumers form strong connections to brands in the absence of intermediaries.

1.2 Problematization

Given its unique characteristics, the D2C model has redefined and challenged the traditional assumptions about how brands build emotional bonds with consumers by eliminating intermediaries and facilitating direct engagement through digital platforms (Paintsil & Kim, 2022) personalized experiences (Leimstoll & Wölfe, 2021) and social proof (Dellarocas, 2003). While consumer emotional attachment is a well-explored concept, existing research primarily develops around traditional business models, such as B2C (Fournier, 1998; Thomson et al. 2005; Park et al. 2010; Carroll & Ahuvia; 2006; Batra et al. 2012). However, while these studies offer a comprehensive understanding of consumer-brand relationships, they do not fully account for the unique characteristics of D2C brands. This raises concerns about whether traditional theories of brand attachment can be successfully applied to D2C contexts. At the same time, while some emerging studies have specifically started exploring emotional attachment in D2C settings (McKee et al. 2023; Wu et al. 2023; Kalayci et al. 2024; Dellarocas, 2003; Fritz et al. 2017), the literature within this field remains nascent and fails to fully account for how consumers develop and sustain emotional bonds to D2C brands. Unlike traditional models, D2C brands rely heavily on factors that influence emotional engagement in ways that differ from traditional frameworks. However it remains unclear what elements and which circumstances lead consumers to form stable bonds and deep attachment to D2C brands.

The D2C business model has rapidly evolved into a powerful force in the global business landscape. Accelerated by the growing shift toward digital shopping, D2C channels represent a new wave that is reshaping how brands engage with customers and drive growth (Baxter et al. 2022). In 2020 alone, D2C online sales grew by 45% globally, outpacing broader retail trends, with a further increase of 12% forecast between 2020 and 2025 (Baxter et al. 2022). This demonstrates how brands increasingly turn to D2C to boost sales, increase speed to market, capture consumer data and deliver better experiences (Baxter et al. 2022). It derives that understanding the mechanisms underlying emotional attachment in the D2C landscape is compelling, as they are directly linked to constructs like brand loyalty, differentiation and

long-term brand growth, which represent key challenges for D2C brands operating in a highly competitive and rapidly evolving market (McKee et al. 2023; Kalayci et al. 2024; Fritz et al. 2017). Unlike traditional B2C models, where the contact between consumers and brands mainly happens in physical environments managed by third party retailers and distributors, D2C brands primarily operate in a digital-first setting, where consumer attention is volatile and brands are required to constantly innovate to maintain engagement (Reina Paz & Jiménez Delgado, 2020; Paintsil & Kim, 2022; Kalayci et al. 2024). The direct nature of D2C interactions suggests that brands must rely on value-driven differentiation to retain consumers (Barrena & Sánchez, 2009), making emotional attachment not just a factor for competitive advantage but a business pillar.

Indeed, consumers today are increasingly value-driven, digitally empowered and informed (O'Hern & Kahle, 2013), making it harder for brands to be chosen based solely on convenience (Holbrook & Hirschman, 1982). Instead, they strive for transparency, emotional resonance and authenticity (Fritz et al. 2017; Loureiro et al. 2017). The challenge is made even harder by the intense market saturation, where numerous brands compete in every category with increasingly similar offerings (Barrena & Sánchez, 2009). In this context, the ability to cultivate strong emotional attachment may determine which brands succeed and which falls into anonymity. Therefore, given the rapid expansion of D2C brands and the uncertainty surrounding the drivers of emotional attachment within this framework, this study seeks to bridge the gap by investigating how and why consumers form emotional attachments to D2C brands and what are the different dimensions of this process, also compared to traditional models. By providing a deeper understanding of emotional branding in D2C digitally-driven settings, this research aims to offer both theoretical contribution and practical insights for D2C brands striving to cultivate meaningful and long-term relationships with consumers. Finally, the present study calls for additional research into relationship marketing and the dynamics of consumer-brand relationships, thus further emphasizing the timeliness and importance of the research (McKee et al. 2023).

1.3 Purpose and Research Question

The purpose of this study is to explore how emotional brand attachment is formed and sustained within the Direct-to-Consumer (D2C) model, an intermediary-free selling framework that is

reshaping traditional brand-consumer dynamics. By examining how consumers develop emotional bonds with D2C brands, the study aims to identify the specific drivers of emotional attachment that characterize these direct mediated relationships. In doing so, it contributes to the theoretical development of emotional branding by highlighting how these mechanisms differ from those established in conventional Business-to-Consumer (B2C) contexts, where intermediaries and physical retail experiences mediate consumer-brand interactions. The study also provides practical insights for D2C brands seeking to build long-term emotional relationships with consumers. This research is therefore guided by the following question:

What are the key drivers of emotional brand attachment in the D2C model?

1.4 Research Contributions

This study aims to contribute to the growing body of research on consumer-brand relationships and brand attachment by offering a deep exploration of the key drivers of emotional brand attachment within D2C settings. Drawing from multiple theoretical frameworks across disciplines such as consumer behavior, brand management, psychology, sociology and cultural studies, this research advances theoretical understanding of how emotional connections are formed where brand interactions occur without intermediaries.

The research fills a gap in the literature by investigating D2C brand relationships from a consumer-centered perspective, which has been relatively underexplored compared to B2C contexts. Furthermore, it introduces qualitative insights into how identity constructs, trust, empowerment, community dynamics and proximity operate as key emotional triggers within D2C environments. It derives that this study proves valuable also on a practical level, as the findings provide actionable guidance for practitioners, such as brand managers, digital marketers and D2C entrepreneurs, seeking to foster stronger emotional ties and long-term loyalty through effective consumer-based branding strategies.

1.5 Delimitations

This study is subject to some delimitations, which define the boundaries within which the research is conducted. First, this study is geographically limited to the Swedish market, as

selected participants were residing in Sweden. While Sweden provides a digitally mature and economically developed setting for D2C brands, the findings may not be directly transferable to other cultural or national contexts. Indeed, consumer attitudes and behaviors may differ significantly in other markets and cultural contexts. Additionally, while the study aims to ensure a relevant variety of D2C brands across different industries, such as fashion, skincare, sports and lifestyle, the number of included categories remains relatively limited compared to the wider range of industries where the D2C model can hypothetically be applied. As a result, though the findings provide cross-sector insights, they should not be interpreted as fully explanatory or universally representative of all industries, where D2C business models might be found.

1.6 Outline of the Study

In order to provide a clear structure for the reader, this study is methodically organized into a total of seven chapters. The introduction chapter (Chapter 1) sets the stage for the research by providing background information and justifying the need for this study. Chapter 2 presents a comprehensive review of the existing literature, outlining relevant theories, concepts and prior studies within the field of D2C and brand emotional attachment. The following Chapter 3 highlights the theoretical frameworks that guide the analysis and data interpretation. Following the key theories, Chapter 4 details the research method, including the chosen research approach, data collection method, sampling strategy and data analysis procedure. It also addresses the issue of ensuring credibility and the ethical considerations taken into account during the research process. After this, the empirical findings and analysis chapter (Chapter 5) presents the empirical insights derived from the collected data. These findings are organized thematically offering a foundation for the subsequent discussion. As a result, the discussion chapter (Chapter 6) discusses the results in relation to the research question and the existing body of literature, by reflecting on their theoretical and practical implications and highlighting unexpected outcomes. Lastly, Chapter 7 concludes the study by summarizing the main insights, acknowledging the study's limitations and opening avenues for future research.

2. Literature Review

The following chapter provides an overview of the existing literature in the theoretical area of this study. This includes the development and current status of the main literature on brand emotional attachment, including aspects relevant to answering the research question. The review is divided into two dimensions, Direct-to-Consumer (D2C) and Business-to-Consumer (B2C). Following the review, critiques on the chosen literature are presented and discussed.

2.1 Emotional Attachment to Direct-to-Consumer Brands

Despite the D2C business model has experienced a rapid growth in terms of adoption and popularity in the recent past (McKee et al. 2023; Sharma & Dutta, 2023), the model and its role in cultivating emotional attachment has received limited research attention. The D2C model has transformed and reshaped traditional brand-consumer relationships by removing the intermediaries and enabling a direct connection (Mu & Yi, 2024; Kim et al. 2021). As a result, unlike traditional approaches, D2C brands rely significantly on digital touchpoints, e-commerce platforms, personalized marketing strategies and community engagement to build long-term customer emotional attachment (McKee et al. 2023). Building on this, this section aims to explore the extant literature to understand the fundamental aspects of the D2C model explored so far and how they foster consumer emotional attachment through digital engagement, trust building and social mechanisms.

Unlike traditional B2C settings, where brands rely on third-party distributors, D2C companies sell and communicate directly with customers, allowing them to exert greater control over brand messaging, customer data, pricing and customer experience (Mu & Yi, 2024; McKee et al. 2023). Through the removal of intermediaries, D2C brands can personalize interactions, offer exclusivity and create a seamless customer journey that increases brand affinity and attachment (Kalayci et al. 2024).

As a result, a pillar within the D2C business model involves consumer trust formation (McKee et al. 2023). In traditional retail, trust is often mediated by reputable retailers who provide legitimacy and assurance (Wu et al. 2023). However, in a D2C setting, brands must autonomously build credibility through transparency, authenticity and personalized engagement. In this context, Wu et al. (2023) highlight the role of cognitive and emotional trust in fostering consumer confidence in unmediated transactions. According to Atulkar (2020), brand trust plays a crucial role in fostering loyalty and is influenced by brand benefits like quality, value and status, driving long-term brand attachment. Trust is further reinforced by online reviews and user-generated feedback mechanisms which serve as a mechanism of social proof (Dellarocas, 2003; Wu et al. 2023).

Another key aspect of D2C brands concerns personalization. It is suggested that personalization facilitates the establishment of strong emotional bonds by creating meaningful interactions that resonate with consumers on a deeper level (Chandra et al. 2022). Similarly, Kalayci et al. (2024), contrasting D2C brands with multi-brand retailers, found that the former offer a stronger sense of exclusivity, but require significant customer acquisition efforts and financial resources to be successful. Leimstoll & Wölflé (2021) further reinforces the importance of brand engagement and meaningful customer interaction as fundamental requirements of D2C brands.

It derives that emotional brand attachment is a foundational dimension in D2C models. Fritz et al. (2017) explore the concept of authenticity in branding, which strongly demonstrates that consumers are drawn to brands that exhibit uniqueness and authenticity, thus affecting purchase decisions and brand involvement. Similarly, in a study about luxury brands, Hyun et al. (2022) argue how incorporating direct digital interactions can enable businesses to build customer-based brand equity by leveraging on emotional appeals, web design friendliness and efficient customer service. In the case of brand-owned D2C physical stores, emotional attachment is also influenced by store-evoked affect, such as feelings of pleasure and excitement which enhances emotional attachment to brands, especially when these feelings align with consumer personality traits (Orth et al. 2010). In the same vein, Koo & Kim (2013) highlight how design and merchandise cues significantly impact consumer emotional bonds and store love in single-brand retail settings, emphasizing the importance of experiential factors in fostering strong consumer attachment. However, as the majority of D2C brand sales are made online through digital platforms and

touchpoints, Bilgihan & Bujisic (2015) explore how website features influence customer commitment and engagement in online commerce, reinforcing the importance of hedonic pleasure and seamless digital experiences. In the online environment, digital word of mouth and social proof significantly impact D2C brand perceptions. In this context, Pang & Lee (2008) explore opinion mining and sentiment analysis, demonstrating how user-generated online discussions shape brand reputation and customer opinions. Similarly, Chevalier & Mayzlin (2006) examine the effect of reviews on sales performance, strengthening the idea that user-generated content and peer recommendations significantly influence purchasing behaviors. Dellarocas (2003) further builds on this by discussing the online feedback mechanisms, emphasizing their role in not only encouraging trust and cooperation, but also in affecting brands' reputation and credibility. In the digital realm, it is emphasized that consumer engagement is increasingly participatory and community-driven (Brodie et al. 2011; Romero, 2017). Platforms enable user-generated content that reinforces brand messaging, while simultaneously providing social proof. This is central to such content that enhances perceived authenticity and emotional involvement (Dessart et al. 2015). Additionally as highlighted by Li et al (2020), when consumers engage as brand ambassadors, they internalize the brand values and become emotionally invested, further reinforcing their brand attachment.

2.2 Emotional Attachment to Business-to-Consumer Brands

The academic knowledge about D2C is still underexplored and therefore it is vital to acknowledge how the core mechanisms behind consumer-brand relationships are still present in broader B2C theory. To better understand these dynamics, this review turns to the traditional B2C literature, which focuses on emotional attachment, cognitive engagement and social mechanisms as key drivers of consumer behaviour.

2.2.1 Emotional Dimensions of Consumer Behavior

There is a linkage between emotional brand attachment, enhanced consumer loyalty and financial outcomes which provides a foundational basis for analyzing consumer-brand bonds (Park et al. 2010). Emotional brand attachment is not just a behavioral tendency but also a multifaceted affective bond (Thomson et al. 2005; Park et al. 2010; Carroll & Ahuvia, 2006; Grisaffe & Nguyen, 2010). It can be described as a tri-dimensional emotional construct

consisting of affection, connection and passion (Thomson et al. 2005). Affection represents the warmth and fondness a consumer feels towards a brand while passion refers to the intensity of emotional arousal a consumer experiences when engaging or thinking about the brand. On a higher level, connection captures the perceived bond or psychological closeness between the consumer and the brand. These emotional dimensions not only signify the strength of attachment but can act as predictors of key consumer behaviors. For instance, affection is often linked with positive brand attitudes and satisfaction while passion is more likely to trigger an immediate behavioral response such as impulsive purchases or positive word-of-mouth. Finally, connection is typically associated with long-term loyalty and consumer resilience in the face of brand crises. Thomson et al. (2005) framework emphasizes that strong emotional attachment results in a consumer's willingness to prioritize the brand over alternatives, advocate for it when criticized and maintain the relationship even under unfavorable circumstances. These components create a deep sense of bonding between the consumer and the brand, thus predicting loyal behaviors such as advocacy, resistance to switching and increased spending (Thomson et al. 2005).

Self-congruence explores how consumers explicitly distinguish between their actual and ideal selves (Malär et al. 2011), as emotional attachment is deeper when brands are closely aligned with consumers' ideal self-concepts, with aspirational identity playing a central role in consumer-brand relationships. The emotional weight of high-involvement products can foster deeper attachment when brand values resonate with consumer aspirations (Milheiro et al. 2014). Moreover, Loureiro et al. (2017) expand by highlighting how a company's brand reputation plays an important mediating role in strengthening emotional attachment. The authors highlight authenticity, trustworthiness and consumer loyalty and show how these constructs shape the perceived character of a brand. This includes ethical behavior and long-term performance and the ways they significantly influence emotional bonding. Two main theoretical lenses have been adopted to investigate the emotional brand attachment: (1) cognitive engagement and (2) social mechanisms.

2.2.2 Cognitive Engagement

Cognitive engagement plays a vital role in shaping brand-consumers relationships (Brakus et al. 2009; Aaker, 1997; Shanahan et al. 2019). It can be conceptualized as a blend of behavioral, cognitive and emotional dimensions (Brodie et al. 2011). Cognitive engagement can be further

explored by noting that interest, perceived relevance and personal benefits lead to deeper brand thinking processes (Romero, 2017). Holbrook & Hirschman (1982) provide a broader framework that includes the experiential aspects of consumption by suggesting that consumption is inherently emotional and symbolic rather than purely utilitarian.

A strong and consistent brand personality also significantly influences how consumers can cognitively and emotionally relate to a specific brand. Aaker (1997) framework identifies five dimensions of brand personality: sincerity, excitement, competence, sophistication and ruggedness which can contribute to brand differentiation and relationship quality. These traits enable brands to adopt human-like characteristics, making it easier for consumers to form their self-concept and create attachments. The scale of brand experience can be categorized with brand interactions into affective, behavioral, intellectual and sensory dimensions (Brakus et al. 2009). These structured experiences can shape consumer expectations and facilitate long-term commitment by encouraging meaningful cognitive and emotional connections.

Building on this, Shanahan et al. (2019) highlight how experiential contexts can produce measurable cognitive outcomes. Their research into nature-based experiences identifies three key cognitive dimensions, that is directed attention restoration, increased capacity for reflection and cognitive quieting. Directed attention restoration refers to the recovery of mental energy that becomes emptied due to overstimulation. Increased capacity for reflection speaks to a consumer's ability to interpret and integrate brand messages more deeply while cognitive quieting offers mental space for emotional resonance to take place. These insights align with the objectives of immersive brand environments, which aim to deepen emotional engagement.

2.2.3 Social Mechanisms

From a social standpoint, brands can act as tools for identity construction. Belk (1988) argues that possessions form an extended self which facilitates brands to align with personal identity and gain emotional salience. Similarly, products and brands can foster social connections and community belonging thanks to their linking value (Cova, 1997). Community-building strategies also intersect with trust and authenticity, which are critical for brand loyalty (Li et al. 2020). Consumer trust is not just a function of brand performance but also of perceived authenticity and the brand's alignment with consumer values. Similarly, the role of corporate brand reputation in

fostering trust and emotional attachment indicates that ethical brand behavior enhances perceived authenticity (Loureiro et al. 2017). The role of social proof through user-generated content can be used as mechanisms to validate brand authenticity, thereby reinforcing emotional ties through perceived communal endorsement (Brodie et al. 2011; Li et al. 2020; Gomez & Suarez 2019).

Foundational relationship perspectives argue that brands should be viewed as relationship partners with various personalities and dynamics (Fournier, 1998). This conceptual lens elevates the brand from a transactional actor towards a social entity capable of friendship and love. This relational view is that consumer-brand bonds are not static but evolve over time based on reciprocal actions, perceived value and contextual factors (Gómez-Suárez, 2019).

2.3 Critique of Extant Literature

While the reviewed literature can provide a comprehensive overview of emotional brand attachment, several critical limitations can be observed. Despite the increasing adoption of D2C models, the academic scrutiny of emotional attachment within this domain has still remained relatively limited and unexplored. Much of the existing literature focuses on descriptive characteristics such as trust formation, personalization and user engagement (McKee et al. 2023; Kalayci et al. 2024; Wu et al. 2023) but often lacks any conceptual integration or theoretical thoroughness. Studies tend to isolate specific factors rather than position them within a cohesive and extensive framework that can capture the complexity of D2C consumer-brand relationships. As a comparison, B2C research benefits from more established theoretical constructs such as brand attachment (Thomson et al. 2005), brand love (Carroll & Ahuvia, 2006) and self-congruence (Malär et al. 2011). Yet, these models are typically explored within conventional retail structures and may not fully account for the increasingly fluid and participatory nature of the modern D2C brand environment.

Furthermore, there is limited critical engagement with the interplay between emotional, cognitive and social mechanisms in D2C. While some research can distinguish these components (Brakus et al. 2009; Brodie et al. 2011), it is vital to acknowledge how their mutual influence and interdependencies are often overlooked. The role of consumer identity, brand symbolism and social interaction are acknowledged (Belk, 1988; Cova, 1997) but empirical studies infrequently take these dimensions into consideration in a way that allows for a nuanced understanding of

communal or co-created attachment. Additionally, the literature often fails to critically address potential tensions, such as the contradiction between personalization and scalability or between consumer empowerment and brand control in digital environments. Overall, there remains a need for a more integrated, multidimensional and contextually responsive approach to studying emotional attachment across contemporary brand settings.

3. Theoretical Framework

The following chapter provides an overview of the main theoretical frameworks of this study employed to analyze the empirical data. The theoretical frameworks contain the main concepts within brand emotional attachment and socio-cultural aspects that are relevant to answering the research question.

The theoretical framework delves into the emotional foundations of consumer-brand relationships by integrating both psychological and socio-cultural perspectives. It begins with an analysis of three key theoretical models: Fournier (1998) Brand Relationship Quality (BRQ), which conceptualizes brand relationships through an interpersonal lens; Thomson et al. (2005) Emotional Brand Attachment (EBA), which examines the core emotional dimensions of affection, passion and connection; and Trope & Liberman (2010) Construal-Level Theory (CLT), which explains how individuals construe objects and constructs based on perceived psychological distance and proximity. The chapter then expands its focus to explore how emotional attachment is further shaped by cultural meanings and collective experiences, drawing on Anderson (1983) concept of imagined communities and Cova (1997) notion of linking value.

3.1 Brand Emotional Attachment

This study adopts an emotionally grounded lens to examine the formation, development and maintenance of consumer-brand relationships, focusing on two foundational yet theoretically distinct models. These are the Fournier (1998) Brand Relationship Quality (BRQ) framework and the Emotional Brand Attachment (EBA) model by Thomson et al. (2005). These frameworks serve as analytical cornerstones in the field of consumer behavior, offering insights into the nature of emotional closeness. These constructs are essential for understanding the factors driving consumer loyalty, brand engagement and long-term relationship stability. In this study, these two perspectives are treated independently to enable a multifaceted and rigorous analytical examination of emotional attachment.

To further strengthen the theoretical foundation, it is necessary to highlight the conceptual value of emotional closeness itself. Traditionally, emotional closeness in branding transcends utilitarian product satisfaction by establishing psychological ties between consumers and brands (Thomson et al. 2005). This form of closeness can often serve as the foundation for active engagement, brand advocacy and long-term loyalty. It is within this context that the two chosen theoretical models allow a comprehensive yet differentiated examination of emotional consumer-brand bonding, with BRQ focusing on the broader structural and relational implications and EBA focusing on the inner emotional mechanics. Additionally, to deepen our understanding of how emotional closeness is perceived in consumers' minds, this study incorporates Construal-Level Theory (Trope & Liberman, 2010). CLT complements the emotional grounded frameworks by offering a cognitive perspective on psychological distance, proposing that consumers mentally construe brands differently depending on their perceived proximity, influencing emotional attachment and the mental representation of the brand relationship.

3.1.1 Brand Relationship Quality (BRQ) Model

Fournier (1998) BRQ model provides a more structured theoretical approach on conceptualizing consumer-brand interactions as enduring multifaceted relationships. This framework alters the analytical perspective from purely transactional models by adopting principles from interpersonal relationship theory proposing that consumers engage with brands in ways similar to human relationships. Rather than limiting analysis only to behavioral loyalty or purchasing frequency, BRQ incorporates affective, cognitive and relational dimensions to capture the complexity of a long-term brand engagement. Each of the six BRQ dimensions encapsulates a core attribute of relationship quality that contributes to a composite assessment of emotional depth and relational integrity. Through this model, emotional closeness is conceptualized not only as a viewpoint but as an evolving and measurable feature of consumer-brand dynamics. Thus, the BRQ framework offers a systematic tool for evaluating how consumers' trust, identification and commitment develop over time, making it particularly suitable for examining durable brand loyalty (Fournier, 1998).

The dimension about love/passion refers to the intensity of emotional lust and affective commitment that a consumer feels toward a brand. This dimension captures the romanticized and emotionally invested nature of some brand relationships. Love/passion often leads to heightened

loyalty and affect-driven behaviors such as brand advocacy or voluntary promotion through word-of-mouth. In high-love scenarios, consumers can experience an emotional attachment that resembles romantic passion which can elevate the brand to a partner-like counterpart (Fournier, 1998). Self-Connection describes to what degree the brand resonates with the consumer's self-concept, encompassing both the actual and ideal self (Belk, 1988). A strong sense of self-connection can imply that the brand is not merely a product but also a reflection of the individual's aspirations, identity and value. This emotional alignment enhances the perceived relevance and psychological ownership, often resulting in loyalty-driven behaviors that are not easily disrupted (Fournier, 1998).

Interdependence captures the behavioral indications of the consumer-brand relationship, focusing on the frequency, scope and diversity of interactions. A high interdependence can indicate how the brand plays an emotional, functional and ongoing role in daily life. This regular engagement creates habitual closeness, which stabilizes the relationship even when external conditions differ (Fournier, 1998). Commitment sets the consumer's psychological and emotional intention to maintain a long-term relationship with the brand. Unlike behavioral loyalty, which may be driven by convenience or habit, commitment in BRQ is rooted within the emotional investment and forward-looking intentions. Consumers who are committed remain loyal despite market fluctuations or alternative options which can reflect a durable emotional connection (Fournier, 1998).

Intimacy involves the perceived emotional closeness and mutual understanding between consumer and brand. This dimension is built through personalized communication, consistent experiences and shared values. Intimacy enables trust and comfort which can support the notion of a brand as an emotionally safe and soothing relationship partner (Fournier, 1998). Brand Partner Quality refers to the degree to which the brand can be interpreted as fulfilling the expectations of a responsive, reliable and trustworthy partner. This includes specific traits such as empathy, ethical behavior, honesty and reliability. High brand partner quality can reinforce consumer confidence and strengthen emotional investment, which is particularly useful in times of uncertainty or challenges (Fournier, 1998).

Drawing upon interpersonal relationship theory, Fournier (1998) argues that brands, much like humans, can assume the role of relationship partners. This challenges the traditional transactional

view of branding and positions the consumer-brand interaction as a more dynamic, emotionally charged relationship. Beyond the six core dimensions, the BRQ model posits that relationship quality is not merely a state but a dynamic process influenced by ongoing consumer-brand interactions. The quality of the brand relationship influences a set of downstream attitudinal and behavioral mechanisms including accommodation, tolerance/forgiveness, biased partner perceptions, devaluation of alternatives and attribution biases. These constructs can provide empirical markers in order to understand relationship resilience and psychological durability. Therefore, high levels of BRQ can correlate towards an increased consumer willingness to overlook brand failures, attribute them to external circumstances and maintain loyalty compared to alternatives (Fournier, 1998).

3.1.2 Emotional Brand Attachment (EBA) Model

Thomson et al (2005) provide a theoretically grounded and empirically validated framework for conceptualizing the affective bonds that consumers develop with brands. As it emerges from a recognition that emotional aspects of brand relationships had previously been underexplored in empirical research, this model isolates emotional attachment as a discrete and multidimensional construct. Rather than approaching brand loyalty or engagement through behavioral or relational perspectives, the EBA model directly investigates the emotional experience itself. The model identifies and operationalizes three core emotional components: affection, connection and passion, which together represent the degree of emotional attachment a consumer feels toward a brand. This approach allows for a thorough investigation into how emotional closeness functions as both a driver and consequence of consumer behavior (Thomson et al. 2005).

The EBA model is particularly useful in contexts where the symbolic, expressive and experiential functions of brands are central to consumer value perceptions. It enables researchers to explore the affective dimension of consumer-brand relationships and link specific emotional profiles to consumer behaviors such as loyalty, advocacy and resilience in the face of brand failures (Thomson et al. 2005). Moreover, the model offers flexibility in application by accommodating various configurations of emotional attachment thereby enhancing its utility for analysis and strategic brand positioning. Affection represents the foundational emotional response, cultivated through consistent and satisfying brand experiences. It is associated with brand warmth, emotional comfort and familiarity which makes it a stabilizing force in brand

attachment (Thomson et al. 2005). Passion, by contrast, introduces high-intensity arousal and excitement which can be showcased in behaviors such as impulsive purchases, spontaneous sharing and elevated engagement levels. Passionate attachment not only fosters strong immediate reactions but also serves as a precursor to brand advocacy and emotional investment. Connection reflects the integration of the brand into the consumer's identity and life narrative. This deep bond implies that the brand holds symbolic meaning for the consumer, reinforcing both self-concept and social signaling. Connection is often indicative of long-term commitment and explains why consumers may continue to support a brand even after suboptimal experiences (Thomson et al. 2005).

Moreover, the EBA framework allows for flexible configurations of attachment (Thomson et al. 2005). A consumer may exhibit high levels of passion and low levels of connection, leading to intense but short-lived brand relationships. Alternatively, a high affection and connection combined with low passion may result in stable and long-term loyalty that lacks active engagement. Such distinctions are essential for advanced segmentation and personalization strategies which enable brands to tailor their communication and value propositions based upon emotional profiles. The model is also characterized by feedback mechanisms where strong attachment enhances brand experiences, which in turn reinforce attachment. This dynamic emphasizes the importance of continuous brand investment in emotional resonance across touchpoints. It supports the idea that brand attachment is not static but evolves through consumer experience, storytelling and interaction (Thomson et al. 2005).

3.1.3 Construal-Level Theory (CLT)

Trope & Liberman (2010) Construal-Level Theory (CLT) provides a useful framework for understanding how individuals perceive and interact with the world and its objects based on perceived psychological distance. Indeed, the theory conceptualizes that the way people mentally represent objects, events or situations is influenced by how psychologically distant they perceive them to be. More specifically, psychological distance can be understood in terms of time, space, social relations and hypothetical likelihood (Trope & Liberman, 2010). According to the theory, the greater this distance, the more abstractly people tend to construe the object or event in question. In contrast, when something is perceived as being psychologically close, individuals are likely to represent it more concretely (Trope & Liberman, 2010). It derives that psychological

distance actively shapes the way people engage and respond to the world. Temporal distance refers to the perception of how far in the future or past an event is. Events that are distant in time tend to be viewed in more abstract terms, while those that are imminent are represented with more concrete and detailed thoughts (Trope & Liberman, 2010). With regards to spatial distance, objects or events that are physically distant are often conceived in more abstract terms, while those that are close tend to be perceived with more concreteness (Trope & Liberman, 2010). Social distance pertains to the perceived differences in status or similarity between individuals. Events or actions that involve people who are socially distant are often construed more abstractly than those involving close friends or family (Trope & Liberman, 2010). Hypothetical distance involves the likelihood of an event happening, with less hypothetical events being represented more abstractly compared to those that are perceived as certain (Trope & Liberman, 2010).

CLT has significant implications in understanding how people make judgments. Within consumer behavior, the theory explains how psychological distance influences attitudes toward brands. When consumers perceive a brand as distant, in physical terms for example, they may be more focused on abstract and intangible benefits, whereas when something is psychologically close, they are more likely to pay attention to concrete and tangible aspects. Overall, CLT provides a valuable lens through which to examine how psychological distance affects consumer thinking and behavior. By showing that individuals adjust their mental representations based on their perceptions of temporal, spatial, social and hypothetical distances, CLT offers critical insights into the mechanisms behind consumer-brand interactions.

3.2 Socio-Cultural Communities and Values

Anderson (1983) conceptualizes communities as imagined constructs in which members perceive a sense of affiliation and collective identity despite the absence of any interpersonal contact. These communities are sustained through shared systems of representation such as language, symbols, rituals and narratives, which provide a unifying framework through which members recognize themselves and others as part of the same social body. This theoretical lens can provide a robust foundation for understanding how consumers come to identify themselves with brands as part of a larger collective or community, often without any tangible or direct interaction with other consumers. The imagined origin of these communities is particularly

relevant in the context of digital brand environments where engagement is increasingly mediated through social platforms, visual aesthetics and brand storytelling (Anderson, 1983). Consumers may never encounter other members of a brand audience but through exposure to shared cultural cues and symbolic practices, it is possible to experience a sense of community and belonging. This imagined affiliation creates ground for emotional attachment by embedding the brand within a broader narrative of shared identity and meaning. It allows consumers to experience emotional attachment not only through their individual relationship with the brand but also through their participation in a larger and culturally constructed social group. In turn, this collective experience reinforces emotional loyalty, brand advocacy and psychological investment. The imagined community thus serves as a powerful mechanism for deepening emotional closeness in brand relationships by aligning individual identity with communal affiliation and symbolic coherence (Anderson, 1983).

A complementary perspective is provided by Cova (1997) theoretical framework, which introduces the concept of linking value to account for the social dimensions of consumption. In contrast to traditional economic models that rely on use value, Cova's model suggests that brands can facilitate social bonds by enabling consumers to connect with others through shared values, identities and symbolic expressions. Linking value can position a brand not merely as a vehicle of personal identity but as a cultural mediator that generates social cohesion and communal experiences (Cova, 1997). Consumption becomes a socially embedded practice where individuals actively participate in the creation and reinforcement of community structures. Consumers do not engage with brands in isolation as they rather derive meaning from participating in collective rituals, narratives and practices that are organized around the brand. These co-created experiences contribute to the formation of tribal brand communities which can be described as fluid and emotion-laden groups bound together by symbolic consumption and collective identity. In this context, brand relationships are not just an individual commitment, but a social performance enacted through participation in a shared consumer culture (Cova, 1997).

4. Research Method

This chapter outlines the research method used to collect relevant data, the rationale behind the chosen approach and the analysis strategy employed. It begins by presenting the study's philosophical foundations, followed by the research design and justification for adopting a qualitative approach. The sampling strategy is then explained, detailing the criteria used to select and recruit participants. Next, the data collection process is described, including how the interview structure was developed. The analysis methods are then introduced, explaining how the data was examined to generate insights. Finally, the measures taken to ensure the study's quality and trustworthiness are discussed.

4.1 Philosophical Foundations

As outlined in the research purpose, the aim of this study is to explore and investigate the key drivers that drive emotional brand attachment in the emerging D2C setting and how they differ from more established traditional models. It derives that the nature of the research question seeks to examine subjective consumer experiences, emotions and perceptions, rather than objective truths. Therefore the research is grounded in a relativist ontology, a social constructionist epistemology and a qualitative methodology (Easterby-Smith et al. 2021).

As concerns the ontology, which refers to the nature of reality (Easterby-Smith et al. 2021), a relativist stance assumes there is not a single truth, but facts depend on the perspective adopted by the observer (Easterby-Smith et al. 2021). This assumption is coherent with the fact that consumer attachment and feelings towards brands are not objective and universal, but are fundamentally shaped by personal experiences and contexts. In the same vein, a social constructivist epistemology suggests that knowledge is socially constructed through interactions, language and shared meaning, rather than presented as an objective and fixed fact (Easterby-Smith et al. 2021). This approach enables a deeper understanding of how individuals make sense of their brand experiences and relationships. Building on these philosophical

foundations, a qualitative methodology is argued to be the most consistent and suitable approach for this study.

4.2 Abductive Approach

With regards to the research approach, this study adopts an abductive analytical method, which blends the elements of both deductive and inductive reasoning to provide a theoretical and flexible framework in knowledge generation (Bryman et al. 2022; Easterby-Smith et al. 2021). Unlike strict deductive approaches, which begin with a theoretical hypothesis that is tested against data or an inductive approach that derives theory only from empirical observations, the abductive approach moves between data and theory. This interplay allows the researchers to start with the existing theories while remaining open to insights that may arise from the empirical material, thus enabling the development of new theories or refinement of existing ones. At its core, abduction is a form of reasoning that seeks the most plausible explanation for observed phenomena using existing theoretical frameworks that are insufficient or incomplete (Easterby-Smith et al. 2021). It allows the researcher to interpret surprising or unexplained findings by connecting them to theoretical concepts in a way that generates new understanding (Dubois & Gadde, 2002). This makes the abductive approach particularly appropriate for exploratory studies, where the goal is not merely to confirm existing theory, but rather to expand or evolve it in light of new empirical evidence.

In the context of this research, an abductive approach was chosen as the D2C model represents an emerging field of study, particularly within the domain of consumer attachment. While the concepts of brand attachment and consumer-brand relationships are well established in B2C literature, their application to D2C settings, where brands skip intermediaries and establish direct relationships with consumers, has remained theoretically underexplored. Traditional theories may not adequately capture the nuances and dynamics of these newer brand-consumer interaction dynamics. Abductive reasoning is particularly useful when investigating phenomena that have not been thoroughly theorized, as it allows researchers to use existing theory as a starting point but not as a boundary (Gabbay & Woods, 2005). Given the research design, prior literature was incorporated for the ability to form a theoretical framework that guided the development of interview questions and the overall aim. However, this framework was not

treated as static as it was rather continuously revised in light of empirical findings which allowed for a nuanced interpretation of data that simultaneously both aligns with and challenges the existing theory (Bryman et al. 2022).

4.3 Research Design

In order to achieve the purpose of this research, a qualitative approach was adopted. This methodology allows for the collection of rich insights into consumer perceptions as well as a deeper exploration of personal narratives about consumer brand experiences (Easterby-Smith et al. 2021). More specifically, the decision to employ this approach was driven by the need, nudged by the nature of the research question, to capture deep and subjective consumer experiences and to explore the emotional and psychological dynamics that underlie consumer-brand relationships. Given the subjective and unquantifiable nature that characterizes the unit of analysis, a qualitative approach is particularly suitable compared to quantitative methods, which can limit responses to predefined and categorized answers (Easterby-Smith et al. 2021).

With regards to the individual techniques for data collection, this study employed semi-structured interviews. According to Easterby-Smith et al. (2021), qualitative interviews can be defined as directed conversations consisting of questions and answers designed to gain in-depth insights, opinions and meanings related to a given topic. Among the different typologies of qualitative interviews (i.e. structure, semi-structured and unstructured interviews), the choice of relying on semi-structured interviews was based on the necessity of ensuring a balance between structure and flexibility (Easterby-Smith et al. 2021). Indeed, this approach enabled consistency by covering central themes while allowing participants to express their thoughts freely, without limiting their responses and offering enriching perspectives beyond predefined structures (Easterby-Smith et al. 2021). In other words, unlike structured interviews, which follow a rigid set of questions, semi-structured interviews provide the opportunity to give rise to unexpected insights while maintaining a core framework necessary to accomplish the research objectives (Easterby-Smith et al. 2021). Furthermore, the flexibility of semi-structured interviews allowed to apply the laddering technique both upwards and downwards, which can lead to more profound insights into the topic (Easterby-Smith et al. 2021). The semi-structured

interviews enabled the generation, gathering and interpretation of qualitative data, i.e. non-numerical information in the form of spoken words and textual transcripts (Easterby-Smith et al. 2021). This approach provided a flexible yet focused framework that allowed interviewers to explore topics in depth while maintaining consistency across different sessions. Specifically, in this study data was the outcome of interactive and interpretive processes, as researchers craft the empirical material by engaging with participants rather than simply collecting objective responses (Easterby-Smith et al. 2021). This interaction allowed for a deeper understanding of participants' experiences, perceptions and motivations, thereby enhancing the richness and depth of the data collected. Additionally, semi-structured interviews align with the abductive approach adopted in this study, as they enable iterative data collection and analysis (Dubois & Gadde, 2002). Emerging themes from initial interviews informed subsequent questioning, ensuring that the research remained responsive to real-world consumer experiences while refining its theoretical contributions. This iterative refinement contributed to the development of nuanced insights that might have been missed with more rigid or structured data collection methods.

As concerns the limitations of the adopted methodology, we acknowledge that interviews are complex social events, not simple question-answer exchanges, which are strongly affected by the context (Alvesson, 2003). As a result, a reflexive pragmatist approach was required in order to interpret responses critically by recognizing that interviews are not neutral but are shaped both by the interview context and social dynamics (Alvesson, 2003). Similarly, qualitative research interviews have been traditionally criticized for being subjective rather than objective and for lacking scientific rigor (Kvale, 1994). Contrasting this view, Kvale (1994) argues that qualitative research interviews represent a systematic inquiry designed to explore the lived experiences of individuals in a structured and purposeful way, thus providing an effective methodology to answer the present research question.

4.4 Sampling Strategy

To ensure the collection of a rich and relevant dataset, the study adopted a purposive sampling strategy, which is a non-probability sampling technique where participants are chosen based on specific criteria relevant to the research question (Easterby-Smith et al. 2021). Purposive sampling is widely used in qualitative research as it allows researchers to purposefully select

participants who can provide in-depth and relevant insights into the research topic rather than aiming at statistical representativeness (Patton, 2002) and/or at the diversity of perspectives. This sampling approach is particularly effective for exploring emotional attachment, that is the purpose of the present research, which is highly subjective and requires detailed personal accounts into personal experiences and perceptions.

More specifically, to achieve the purpose of the present study, we identified the following inclusion and selection criteria: (1) individuals must have engaged regularly with D2C brands, either through frequent purchases, active participation in brand communities or through frequent direct interactions with the brands; and (2) participants must be aged between 20 and 45, in order to ensure that participants have independent purchasing power and make autonomous buying decisions. Moreover, the latter criterion was required to ensure a sufficient level of digital literacy (Eurostat, 2024), since D2C brands often engage with customers mainly through digital touchpoints. Furthermore, in order to accomplish a comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon and ensure diversity, various D2C brand categories were taken into account to capture a diverse range of emotional attachments.

As concerns the recruitment process, in order to connect with people who met the criteria, respondents were contacted through both online and offline channels. More specifically, recruitment strategies included: (1) direct outreach to acquaintances and individuals with a relevant connection to the research, ensuring alignment with the selection criteria; and (2) social media channels such as Instagram, LinkedIn and Facebook to identify and engage with potential participants.

A total of 13 participants were selected, generating a total of 112 pages of transcribed text. The sample size was determined by data saturation, which refers to the stage in qualitative research at which the collection of new data no longer reveals additional themes, insights or variations relevant to the research questions (Guest et al. 2006). It signals that sufficient depth and breadth of understanding have been reached and further interviews are unlikely to produce useful and novel findings (Guest et al. 2006). This decision was based on the assumption that reaching data saturation is essential to ensure the credibility and richness of the findings.

4.4.1 Table of Participants

Participant number	Interviewee	Gender	Age	Length of Interview
1	Emma	Female	28	40 minutes
2	Linda	Female	26	30 minutes
3	Kim	Male	38	28 minutes
4	Rickard	Male	32	36 minutes
5	Victor	Male	29	26 minutes
6	Helen	Female	24	27 minutes
7	Henrik	Male	45	29 minutes
8	Michael	Male	42	36 minutes
9	Peter	Male	27	34 minutes
10	Emily	Female	31	32 minutes
11	Oliver	Male	25	35 minutes
12	Philip	Male	28	25 minutes
13	Axel	Male	34	31 minutes

Table 1. Table of participants

4.5 Interviews

Given the semi-structured nature of the interviews, a flexible pre-designed interview guide was crafted aimed to balance consistency across interviews with the openness to explore emergent and unexpected topics (Easterby-Smith et al. 2021). More specifically, the interview guide was developed based on the key constructs and frameworks identified through the literature review concerning emotional brand attachment, i.e. Fournier (1998), Thomson et al. (2005), Anderson (1983) and Cova (1997). However, in accordance with the abductive approach of the study, open and unstructured questions were also incorporated into the interview guide to uncover new

insights and perspectives that can add to the existing literature, allowing participants the freedom to introduce topics and experiences that may not have been anticipated by the researcher. After the core themes were identified and the guide was developed, a pilot phase was carried out following the structure proposed by Kallio et al. (2016).

As a result, a pilot interview was conducted with one individual who matched the sampling criteria in order to test the clarity, flow and effectiveness of the initial interview guide. This field-testing (Kallio et al. 2016) preliminary pilot interview proved useful in identifying the weaknesses of the guide, such as overly abstract and not relevant questions, allowing for informed adjustments to the questions to improve clarity and effectiveness (Kallio et al. 2016). Additionally, the pilot allowed for the assessment of the estimated duration of interviews and the natural sequencing of topics. In this sense, based on feedback and observations from the pilot, corrections were made to improve the natural transition between sections, facilitating the conversation tone of the interview and enhancing the flow. These revisions helped enhance the relevance and suitability of the guide to ensure it would provide the tools to answer the research question.

The final interviews were conducted in both online and offline formats, depending on the participants' preference and availability. More specifically, a total of 8 interviews were conducted in person, in informal and quiet environments to promote openness and comfort. In these cases, face-to-face interactions allowed connecting more deeply to participants by capturing non-verbal cues (Easterby-Smith et al. 2021). However, when conducting face-to-face interviews was not possible, an online synchronous mode through meeting platforms was preferred. A total of 5 interviews were conducted synchronously via online video conferencing platforms including Zoom and Google Meets. Although mediated interviews might lack non-verbal language and translate into lower engagement level, they allowed for increased convenience, reach and accessibility for distant participants (Easterby-Smith et al. 2021). To further support participant comfort and expression, interviews were conducted in either English or Swedish, based on the language the participant felt more confident using. This flexibility facilitated more natural and valuable conversations, allowing participants to articulate their thoughts with greater ease and emotional depth, which is crucial to increase the quality of the

research. It derives that the data collected was more precise and more nuanced, particularly in discussions involving personal feelings, values and subjective brand experiences.

In order to provide participants time to reflect thoroughly upon their experiences, each interview lasted approximately between 25 and 45 minutes. All interviews were recorded with the informed consent of each participant to ensure the accuracy of the data. Recordings were subsequently transcribed using the transcription software *Klang*, which provided a first draft of each interview transcript. These automated transcripts were then manually reviewed to ensure perfect alignment with the original spoken content. In cases where the interview was conducted in Swedish, the transcript was first produced in the original language and then carefully translated into English to maintain the original meaning and context. Transcribing the interviews served several important functions. It allowed for a detailed and systematic analysis of the data, facilitated the identification of recurring themes and bettered the understanding of data during the coding and interpretation process (Braun & Clarke, 2006). As described in 4.4, the data collection continued until thematic saturation was achieved, which refers to the stage in qualitative research where the collection of new data no longer reveals additional themes, insights or variations relevant to the research questions (Guest et al. 2006). Saturation was reached after 11 interviews but two additional were conducted to confirm that no further variation or additional data emerged, thereby reinforcing the findings. Before any data was processed or interpreted for the study, the transcriptions were sent back to the participants to reduce any misinterpretation which enhances the trustworthiness of the data. After minor adjustments were made, the data credibility was enhanced and the analysis could begin.

4.6 Analysis of the Data

Following the collection of empirical data through interviews, a thematic analysis was conducted with the aim of drawing theoretical conclusions from it. As qualitative interviews are based on human dialogues and interactions, they can result in a complex set of qualitative data, which can lead to ambiguities as their analysis depends on the interpretation of the researchers (Rennstam & Wästerfors, 2018). In order to address this complexity and ensure that valuable findings are derived from the empirical data, the guidelines provided by Rennstam & Wästerfors (2018) and Braun & Clarke (2006) were considered and selected as a guide.

The analytical process began with a thorough and detailed full transcription of all interviews, which facilitated an in-depth familiarization with the dataset (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Once the full transcription was completed, the process of sorting (Rennstam & Wästerfors, 2018) followed, which dealt with the problem of chaos resulting from the unstructured nature of the transcribed qualitative data and accounts (Rennstam & Wästerfors, 2018). In this phase we engaged closely with the data in order to categorize and identify patterns and insights. This process involved looking for common themes, differences and how interviewees made sense of their experiences (Rennstam & Wästerfors, 2018). This enabled the generation and identification of initial codes, where interesting and relevant features of the data are highlighted and labeled (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

Once the information had been sorted and categorized into initial codes, the process of reducing was carried out. Using the research question as criterion, this step involved narrowing the complex material down to a more relevant and manageable set of information by focusing on the data that better suited the research purpose (Rennstam & Wästerfors, 2018). This process of condensing and refining the data represented an early stage of theme development, where the relevant remaining data and codes were grouped into meaningful themes (Braun & Clarke, 2006). After the themes had been identified and developed, the themes' reviewing phase followed to ensure that they accurately reflected the data and were coherent with the research questions (Braun & Clarke, 2006). This stage allowed the researchers to merge, split or discard some themes based on this review. In line with the abductive approach of the study, not only were existing theories used as an initial guide and comparative tool for thematic categorisation, but also emerging and potentially new themes were included in order to provide theoretical contributions on how emotional bonds are formed and maintained in D2C relationships.

Finally, the process of arguing implied the development of ideas and narratives from the collected empirical findings, justifying the themes and placing them within the research context (Rennstam & Wästerfors, 2018). In practice, this phase involved defining, naming and interpreting the themes (see Appendix B) by building an argument around them and demonstrating their significance within the broader theoretical context and the purpose of the study (Rennstam & Wästerfors, 2018; Braun & Clarke, 2006). The analysis was then finalized in

a report, presenting the main empirical findings related to the identified themes and capturing the most relevant quotes from the interviews (see Chapter 5. Empirical Findings and Analysis).

Overall, by combining Braun & Clarke (2006) structured approach to thematic analysis with the pragmatic steps of sorting, reducing and arguing outlined by Rennstam & Wästerfors (2018), the study was able to generate robust and insightful interpretations from the qualitative data. By relying on these trusted and well established analytical frameworks, the researchers aimed to reduce and limit the potential risk of biases deriving from the unstructured nature of qualitative data. In this context, attention was also paid to researcher reflexivity, acknowledging the potential influence that the researcher's perspective and assumptions can exert in qualitative analysis.

4.7 Quality of the Study

This research aims to attain credibility and trustworthiness through a deep exploration of interviewees' perceptions and feelings towards brands in the D2C setting. According to Easterby-Smith et al. (2021), in the context of constructionist designs, credibility of the study depends heavily on three main criteria: authenticity, plausibility and criticality. This means that the quality of the study depends on its ability to provide deep knowledge and understanding linked to an ongoing concern or phenomenon (Easterby-Smith et al. 2021). The semi-structured nature of the interviews enabled consistency in the process of data collection by ensuring the coverage of fundamental themes, while ensuring freedom and flexibility required for deeper insights. In addition, the large number of participants involved in the research not only allowed for saturation, but also for the inclusion and evaluation of a wide range of different perspectives, strengthening the trustworthiness of the findings (Easterby-Smith et al. 2021).

The topic of trustworthiness in qualitative research, which adopts an interpretivist or constructivist paradigm, is also discussed extensively by Bryman et al. (2022). They argue that traditional criteria used in quantitative studies, such as internal validity, reliability, generalizability and objectivity, are not properly applicable to qualitative studies due to the different assumptions underpinning each research approach. Qualitative research, as in the case of the present study, deals with rich, subjective and context-dependent phenomena, which makes evaluating research quality more nuanced and complex. To address this, Lincoln and Guba

(1985) introduced a set of criteria to evaluate the quality of qualitative research, which include: credibility, transferability, dependability and confirmability. These criteria are foundational for the present study as it aims to demonstrate the rigor, quality and integrity of its qualitative results.

4.7.1 Credibility

Credibility refers to the confidence that can be placed in the truth and trustworthiness of the research findings (Bryman et al. 2022). More specifically, it is concerned with making sure that the researchers' representations of participants' views and accounts are accurate and believable, thus avoiding biases related to the interpretation of qualitative data. In this sense, credibility is analogous to the traditional criterion of internal validity, which assesses whether a study successfully investigates what it claims to (Bryman et al. 2022).

The present study aims to achieve credibility in a range of ways. First, with explicit participant consent, all interviews were transcribed to ensure accuracy in capturing responses and allowing for a thorough and detailed analysis. This step is essential as it preserves the richness of participants' narratives and ensures that nuances in language, tone and expression are documented. The transcription process ensures that no meaningful insights are lost and facilitates the analysis and the identification of recurring patterns across accounts. This process is further strengthened by the inclusion of direct quotes from participants to back up the findings and show authenticity. A second method which proves useful to ensure credibility is respondent validation (Bryman et al. 2022), which in this case consisted in sending the interviews' transcripts and preliminary findings back to the involved participants, in order to ask them if their experiences were reflected accurately.

4.7.2 Transferability

Transferability can be defined as the degree to which the findings of a qualitative study can be transferred to other settings (Bryman et al. 2022). In contrast to quantitative studies, which aim to accomplish statistical generalization, qualitative research is dependent on the specific context of study. In the case of the present study, the specific context within which the research is carried out is the D2C setting and brands. As a result, the goal of the paper is to provide a thick

description (Bryman et al. 2022) of the research context, the participants and the phenomena studied, so that the reader is provided with enough details to assess the applicability of the findings to other contexts.

Furthermore, alongside the thick description of the contextual factors, the delimitations and limits of the present study were clarified to assist the reader in the assessment of its transferability (see heading 1.4 Delimitations). In particular, while this research focuses on a specific set of D2C-driven brands, the findings may be relevant to other organizations operating in similar business models and/or organizations considering shifting to a D2C approach, particularly in industries where differentiation based on direct consumer engagement is key. Although full generalizability is not the intention of the study, the conceptual patterns and consumer perceptions uncovered in this research may provide valuable parallels or starting points for understanding emotional brand attachment in other sectors where D2C practices are emerging. In this sense, the research aims to provide the reader or future researcher with sufficient detail and insight to assess the extent to which these findings resonate with other organizational settings.

4.7.3 Dependability

Dependability examines whether the research process is logical, well documented and clearly traceable (Bryman et al. 2022). In this sense, it parallels reliability, which in quantitative research refers to the replicability and consistency of a measurement instrument or procedure (Bryman et al. 2022). Given the context-bound nature of qualitative research, which does not allow for and does not even aim at replicability, this study seeks to ensure dependability by providing a clear and transparent description of the methodological strategy adopted. Indeed, the present method section provides a step-by-step illustration of how data was collected and analyzed, justifying the methodological choices concerning data collection process, the sampling strategy and the interviews' structure. Likewise, the study adopts a systematic and transparent coding framework to categorize data into meaningful themes (see Appendix B).

4.7.4 Confirmability

Confirmability relates to the objectivity or neutrality of the data and interpretations by ensuring that the findings are grounded in the data and not influenced by the researcher's personal biases or assumptions (Bryman et al. 2022). Although it is acknowledged that pure objectivity is nearly impossible to be achieved in business qualitative research (Bryman et al. 2022), in this study confirmability was addressed through several strategies aimed at reducing biases as much as possible and ensuring that data interpretations are derived from the empirical data. First, all stages of the data analysis process were tracked, thus identifying potential sources of subjectivity. Second, as described above, sources of biases were reduced by transcribing the interviews and utilizing reliable coding frameworks to allow for greater transparency and traceability. Furthermore, direct quotes from participants were incorporated into the findings chapter to support interpretations with evidence and to allow the reader to assess the authenticity of the analysis and interpretation.

4.8 Ethical Considerations

In order to protect participant privacy, all responses were anonymized during transcription and analysis. This step was crucial to ensure that individuals could not be identified from the data, especially given the sensitive nature of some of the topics discussed. Anonymization included the removal of names, location and any other potentially identifying details that could compromise participant confidentiality. The reason why this process was conducted is to avoid any indirect identification through specific references. Identifiable information was omitted or replaced with generic descriptors. It was also clarified that participants were provided with the opportunity to withdraw from the study at any point before publication, ensuring their continued autonomy and control over their involvement. Furthermore, it is important to emphasize how the study took measures in validating the data in order to ensure correct interpretation of data and avoid misjudgement. For achieving this aim, as presented in the credibility section (see subheading 4.6.1 Credibility), the process of participant validation was carried out to let the informants see the interviews' transcriptions in order ensure that the transcripts and findings were correctly and ethically represented (Bryman et al. 2022). Finally, participants were also

informed that this study will be published on LUP (Lund University Publications), making it publicly accessible and were asked to provide their consent.

This careful handling of data helps to build trust between researchers and participants and encourages full disclosure during the interview process. When participants feel safe about how their data will be used, they are more likely to engage deeply and provide detailed responses. This approach not only complies with ethical considerations but also favours a more honest and open participation, as participants can share their experiences without concern for personal exposure (Easterby-Smith et al. 2021). Complying with these principles also reinforces the quality of the study, as ethical rigor is fundamental to the acceptance of qualitative research in academic communities (Easterby-Smith et al. 2021).

5. Empirical Findings and Analysis

This chapter presents the empirical data collected and provides a structured analysis of the material. The aim of this chapter is to outline the key observations and themes that emerge from the data in relation to the research questions. The analysis remains descriptive and data-driven, setting the stage for further interpretation in the subsequent discussion chapter.

5.1 Emotional Everyday Bonds

This theme explores how emotional attachment to D2C brands often forms through everyday moments and lived routines. Rather than grand gestures or dramatic storytelling, participants described how emotional bonds were rooted in the ordinary day where brands that supported life transitions, reinforced identity or simply worked with satisfying ease. The findings reveal four distinct sub-dimensions of this connection: *Brand-embedded Life Events & Self Extension*, *Emotional Security*, *Hedonic Pleasure* and *Psychological Proximity*.

5.1.1 Brand-Embedded Life Events & Self Extension

One of the clearest topics across the findings concerns the fact that participants tend to build deep personal relationships with D2C brands by going beyond the functional value of the products, with brands becoming embedded in consumers' life narratives. Several participants shared examples of D2C brands that evoke sentimentality since they are strongly linked to specific moments of their lives, such as childhood or adolescence, evoking a sense of nostalgia. While this dimension is acknowledged within the broader B2C context, the unmediated structure of D2C settings enhances brands capacity to actively reinforce it through direct communication and ongoing interaction. This nostalgic dimension is a powerful trigger of emotional brand attachment, as outlined by Thomson et al. (2005), where consumers form affective bonds with brands based on passion and connection. For example, Peter described the purchase of his first floorball stick and the brand as being meaningful to him:

“[...] [Brand name] was the brand of my very first floorball stick and that moment carries a lot of emotional weight. It’s my earliest memory of the sport, which is something I still practice to this day. That stick wasn’t just a product, but it marked the beginning of my hobby.” - Peter

As highlighted by Peter’s remarkation “*it marked the beginning of my hobby*”, the brand serves as a symbolic starting point of a journey. The emotional weight Peter assigns to those moments shows how brands can expand beyond their functional value and become signifiers of identity, acting as a bridge to the past. Therefore, it can be argued that these consumer-brand relationships play a role in the process of self-extension, where possessions become part of one’s identity, becoming emotionally and symbolically significant (Belk, 1988).

In a similar vein, some brands reflect what consumers are and their aspirational identities. Several participants said that brand choices are mostly intentional and expressive, with the brand fulfilling the purpose of expressing personal values and lifestyles. Axel reflected upon his brand choices based on identity alignment, suggesting that D2C brands function as identity markers and convey a symbolic badge affirming who consumers are and who they aim to become:

“The brand represents something about me because I do think that my knowledge or strive to do things in a “high quality” manner, in terms of branding, comes from [brand name]. The way they presented themselves across functions in this high-quality way is something that I like to think of myself, or at least strive towards.” - Axel

With the brand becoming a mirror of personal values, these findings reinforce Fournier’s (1998) view of brands as relationship partners, as they illustrate how consumers actively seek brands that reflect their self-concept, fostering deeper relationships. This becomes clear in Axel’s wording “*(it is) something I like to think of myself, or at least strive towards*”, which illustrates an ongoing identity project in which the brand functions as a symbolic resource and point of reference. The emotional attachment is therefore based on the brand’s ability to express a version of the self, making it an active partner in Axel’s identity formation.

5.1.2 Emotional Security

Another key dimension that emerged from the data is how emotional attachment towards D2C brands is influenced by the sense of emotional security that brands can offer. This form of

attachment is not formed solely by an identity expression nor symbolic achievement as it is more set by subtle and enduring experience of comfort and reliability. Participants described how they felt emotionally anchored to brands that consistently delivered on expectations, fostered trust and provided reassurance by either their design or usage experience. In the context of D2C, where brands interact directly with consumers, bypassing traditional intermediaries, the ability to provide emotional security becomes a critical driver of engagement. Several participants acknowledged that this sense of trust and ease is a key reason why they remain emotionally attached to specific D2C brands. When brands become reliable components of daily routines, they can create a form of emotional security that fosters long-term attachment. Emma described how her D2C subscription brand offers both convenience and predictability.

“I think that the [brand name] business model is really convenient, especially today, when you just want to click and have something arrive at your doorstep. [...] I don’t need to worry about running out, it just shows up at my doorstep. [...] it gives a feeling of control and flexibility, which makes the experience more tailored to your own routine.” - Emma

In this case, the brand does not just serve as a statement of identity or status as it is rather seen as invisible support structured into the daily life. Emma described the dimension of “*control and flexibility*” as well as the idea of “*showing up at my doorstep*”, which allows the brand to establish a sense of security. As the consumer feels taken care of, a calm and positive feeling of comfort arises and helps to anchor the brand to the consumer’s emotional state (Thomson et al. 2005). This type of attachment was also found and supported via the perception of functional and technical reliability. Helen expressed her trust to a D2C brand based on their consistent quality:

“A brand that resonates with me is [brand name]. Because it gives me a sense of reliability and compatibility. I don’t focus too much on convenience. I care more about quality. So I’d say I prefer brands that offer reliability and high quality over just being convenient.” - Helen

The emotional security is tied to the brand’s functional “*reliability*” and “*high quality*”. Consumers form attachments not just to the brand’s values or identity but to the confidence they feel when interacting with it. These findings align with Fournier’s (1998) concept of brand partner quality, in which emotional closeness is linked to the perceived reliability, honesty and care exhibited by the brand. This emotional closeness results in an increased perceived proximity

and a low construal level (Trope & Liberman, 2010), as the brand becomes part of a consumer's daily routine and thus it is experienced through concrete and familiar interactions. In the realm of D2C, brands can become so close and personally felt by consumers that they start playing a fundamental role in providing stability and guidance. Rickard for instance, described the emotional experience of engaging with his wearable health product and how the absence of this brand can cause a sense of discomfort and insecurity:

"[Brand name] gives me personalized analytics on my health status, performance and recovery with a simple and easy user interface for a fair price. Without it, I feel naked, like something's missing from my routine." - Rickard

The above insight reveals the emotional emptiness when the brand is absent, as strongly emphasized by Rickard's wording *"Without it, I feel naked"*. It indicates a marker of how deeply the brand experience is felt by an individual. These unexpected findings suggest an emotional reliance, which refers to a person's sense of continuity and order in their experiences. In this case, the D2C brand provides more than just functional value, it acts as a stabilizing presence that reinforces a daily routine and supports the user's wellbeing.

5.1.3 Hedonic Pleasure

Another meaningful dimension is the experience of hedonic pleasure which involves feelings of joy, delight or sensory satisfaction that arise through engaging with a D2C brand's products or services. While emotional security centers on predictability and comfort, hedonic pleasure captures a more affective side of brand interaction. Several participants described how D2C brands sparked a sense of happiness, contributing to attachment by creating moments of emotional uplift that enhanced everyday life. The empirical data showed how the emotional connection was driven by the enjoyment of using a product that performs with quality and feels satisfying in everyday life. Michael reflected on the pleasure he finds in the brand's product:

"The car is, according to me, very fast, safe and practical for my usage as I use it a lot when driving at work. [...] It's still a very enjoyable product and I like the sense of quality and performance that it has." - Michael

Michael highlighted the sensory and experiential enjoyment of the product itself: “[...] is very fast, safe and practical”. This form of pleasure, grounded in design and user satisfaction, aligns with the affection dimension in Thomson et al. (2005) framework. While the experiential consumption theory (Holbrook & Hirschman, 1982) emphasizes symbolic, emotionally rich brand experiences such as fantasy, fun and emotional arousal, these findings complicate that view. Emotional pleasure in this case does not derive from symbolic branding or escapism, but from practical satisfaction and performance-based enjoyment in daily tasks. While the experiential consumption theory (Holbrook & Hirschman, 1982) emphasizes symbolic, emotionally rich brand experiences, these findings complicate that view. Emotional pleasure in this case does not derive from symbolic branding or escapism, but from practical satisfaction and performance-based enjoyment in daily tasks.

5.1.4 Psychological Proximity

The inherent characteristics of D2C settings imply a structural physical distance between brands and consumers, which results from the lack of physical retail presence and human intermediaries. However, findings show how brands can still elicit emotional attachment either by fostering abstract and emotional thinking through value-laden storytelling or by minimizing the perceived distance leveraging product integration and exclusivity. These findings can be interpreted through the lens of CLT (Trope & Liberman, 2010), which posits that psychological distance influences how individuals mentally construe brands. The results also reflect the dimensions of EBA (Thomson et al. 2005) and BRQ (Fournier, 1998), including connection, affection, interdependence and intimacy as core emotional dimensions of attachment.

Within this context, several participants described how they feel emotionally close to D2C brands because of their mission, values and storytelling. The following quote by Emma provides a meaningful example:

“[Brand name] got a lot of attention early on because it was connected to the body positivity movement. [...] They also collaborated with a foundation supporting women. [...] So it felt like joining something bigger than just buying a product. It made something really simple feel meaningful. [...] It feels like a kind of companionship.” - Emma

Here, Emma's statements such as *"It felt like joining something bigger than just buying a product"* and *"It feels like a kind of companionship"* provide evidence of her appreciation for the brand that goes beyond the use value of products, as she is emotionally invested in what the brand stands for. Through the lens of CLT (Trope & Liberman, 2010), it can be argued that the brand leverages purpose-driven storytelling and moral alignment to trigger connection and affection on an higher and more intangible level, further reinforcing the components of the EBA model, where emotional bonds are rooted in shared meaning and value resonance (Thomson et al. 2005). These findings also support Fritz et al. (2017) notion that brands perceived as authentic and value-driven are more likely to generate emotional closeness, despite the absence of physical or human touchpoints.

On the other hand, an interesting insight that emerged from the findings is that some D2C brands manage to reduce the perceived distance by interacting with consumers as part of their daily routines, simulating interpersonal closeness. Victor shared:

"Everything connects through the [brand name] infrastructure. They know what I have, what I use. It's almost like they're watching out for me." - Victor

This ongoing interaction reduces psychological distance and increases emotional salience, eliciting warmth and a sense of proximity. In saying *"They're watching out for me"*, Victor expresses how a D2C brand can act as a guardian and companion as it becomes clear how the lack of intermediaries can effectively create a sense of presence and emotional closeness, reframing the brand relationship as exclusive and one-to-one (Trope & Liberman, 2010). These experiences exemplify Fournier (1998) concept of interdependence, where frequent interactions foster emotional depth. Kalayci et al. (2024) further support this finding, noting that D2C brands foster exclusivity and intimacy by controlling the entire customer journey.

5.2 Consumer-Led Relationships

This theme explores how emotional connection to D2C brands is shaped by consumers ability to navigate and personalize the brand relationship on their own terms. Participants emphasized the importance of control, simplicity and brand experiences that align with their expectations,

preferences and routines. The findings reveal three subthemes: *Individualized Brand Interaction*, *Convenience and Frictionless Engagement* and *Value-Based Brand Loyalty*.

5.2.1 Individualized Brand Interaction

A recurring theme from the interviews concerns personalization and individualized brand interactions. The extant theories positions that unlike traditional B2C models, where brand engagement is more mediated and generic, D2C brands are able to promote a sense of customization over the customer journey, building emotional bonds through tailored interactions (McKee et al. 2023; Kalayci et al. 2024). In addition, the BRQ (Fournier, 1998) and EBA (Thomson et al. 2005) frameworks argue that personalized interaction enhances feelings of intimacy, affection and connection. However, the findings from the interviews showcased contrasting results, with participants taking different stances. On the one hand, Rickard acknowledged a strong sense of positive personalization when interacting with the D2C brand:

“[Brand name] is 100% personalized to the person wearing it. And continuously calibrates to changing body metrics to give you the most personalized data available.” - Rickard

On the other hand, Victor highlighted how communication not always feels personal and tailored:

“[...] emails and other mass communications feel generic. Just adding your name to a newsletter isn't real personalization. Personalization increases when I reach out to the company, but you can perceive it less the other way round.” - Victor

Victor criticized the shallow nature of brand-driven algorithmic personalization by commenting, *“Just adding your name to a newsletter isn't real personalization”*. These findings only partially support the general brand conception of personalization as a key driver of emotional bonding in D2C settings (McKee et al. 2023; Wu et al. 2023). Similarly, they only partially align with the notion that customized offerings diminish psychological distance by making the brand experience feel concrete, personal and relevant (Trope & Liberman, 2010).

In contrast, participants clearly expressed greater appreciation for D2C brands when personalization was not one-way and brand-initiated only, but when they could exercise agency

to control and tailor the level of it. This fostered feelings of empowerment, ownership and intimacy with the brand. For example, Kim noted that:

“[Brand name] don’t reach out with personalized spam emails or pushy campaigns, which I actually like. It feels like I’m the one choosing them, not the other way around.” - Kim

The statement *“I’m the one choosing them, not the other way around”* clearly reveals the consumer’s agency over the personalization process. It reflects a more dynamic and bidirectional nature of individualized brand interaction within D2C, where emotional closeness is shaped through consumers’ ability to actively control their own experiences. In line with Fournier (1998) interdependence dimension and Thomson et al. (2005) notion of affection and connection, control over personalization strengthens the relational quality between consumers and brands.

5.2.2 Convenience and Frictionless Engagement

Participants frequently emphasized how the convenience and ease of interacting with D2C brands has influenced their attachment. Convenience in this context was not only defined by speed or automation but also how the experience was deemed as being effortless and free of unnecessary complications. The absence of any third-party dealer or physical intermediary showcases how D2C brands can exert more control over the user journey, making it easier for consumers to access, manage and consume products or services, contributing to a deep form of emotional satisfaction.

Kim described the process of engaging with a sports equipment brand not only as a purchase but as a seamless entry into a system. His comment points to the ease with which he was able to access new products, updates and relevant content from the brand:

“With these products, I want to feel secure and trust that the brand itself is responsible, not some middleman. If something goes wrong with the product or I need support, I want to know who to turn to. That kind of directness makes me feel more confident in the whole experience.” - Kim

Kim’s wording *“I want to know who to turn to”* and *“Directness makes me feel more confident”* clearly exemplified how the D2C brand successfully offers him direct and uninterrupted access to an experience which starts from product launches to athlete content without the need for

external research or shopping comparison. This makes the process of engaging with the brand feel streamlined and cohesive, encouraging continued involvement.

For Henrik, convenience was tied to trust in product functionality and performance. His experience reflected a confidence in the product's reliability and a sense that no extra effort was required to make it work as intended:

“It’s not about status. It’s that the brand knows the environment it’s made for. Their jackets are built for real conditions, like avalanche reflectors. That’s what I care about. It makes me feel prepared.” - Henrik

While his statement doesn't intend to say convenience directly, the implication can be made about how the product works well in the settings it was designed for. The idea that *“the brand knows the environment it’s made for”* reduces friction, uncertainty and effort. The brand's intimate understanding of user needs means that the brand makes Henrik *“feel prepared”*, who does not need to modify or adapt as it just works and in turn enhances the ease of use and the emotional confidence in the relationship. Across these examples, participants described multiple forms of convenience, from streamlined and intuitive product ecosystems to design clarity and straightforwardness. In each case, D2C brands were able to remove unnecessary complexity and foster a sense of ease and control. These frictionless engagements contributed not only to customer satisfaction but also to an ongoing willingness to engage with the brand (Leimstoll & Wölflé, 2021).

5.2.3 Value-Based Brand Loyalty

In the D2C landscape, value-based brand loyalty has emerged as a pillar and foundational dimension of emotional attachment across the interviews. As consumers increasingly seek more than functional benefits from brands, shared values and ethical responsibility become fundamental in shaping long-term brand relationships. According to the participants, most D2C brands leverage direct engagement to communicate not only product attributes but also the deeper values they embody, aiming at reinforcing the emotional closeness with consumers. Indeed, consumers are more likely to develop lasting bonds to brands that resonate with their personal beliefs and ideals which can be reflected in Fournier (1998) BRQ model dimensions of self-connection and intimacy. Emma captured this alignment clearly when describing her loyalty:

“[Brand name] is actually made for women, not just by design or color, but in the overall purpose and messaging. They don’t just say ‘Here’s a pink razor’. They connect it to womanhood, to self-care. [...] [Brand name] adds meaning to something very simple. And I think they make other brands look ridiculous. Those brands just release a pink version of a men’s razor and raise the price, without offering anything more. [...] They actually care, and they show it. [...] They’re doing it in a way that’s thoughtful, respectful and authentic.” - Emma

As McKee et al. (2023) highlight, these findings support that D2C brands have a unique opportunity to craft more authentic experiences directly by skipping intermediaries, fostering a more personal and value-based loyalty. Indeed, by adding *“meaning to something very simple”* in a *“thoughtful, respectful and authentic”* way, D2C brands that project an authentic image build deeper trust and emotional attachment, especially when consumers see that their actions are genuinely aligned with proclaimed values (Loureiro et al. 2017).

Another important facet of value-based loyalty is rooted in ethics and sustainability. Consumers are not just evaluating brands on the basis of product quality and functionality, but are also judging their social and environmental impact. As concerns around sustainability and corporate ethics grow, brands that incorporate these principles into their operations resonate with consumers (Loureiro et al. 2017). Axel, for instance, provided meaningful insights about his favorite D2C brand environmental focus:

“I feel a very strong emotional connection to [brand name]. It is a brand that believes in the changing mobility with a mission of ‘creating a zero-emission society’. This alone is extremely inspiring. [...] The combination of a unique product and a mission to reduce emissions was so pure and inspiring and something that I wanted to stand behind, creating a strong emotional connection.” - Axel

For Axel, the company’s mission was *“inspiring and something (he) wanted to stay behind”* and therefore buying from this brand was an act of affiliation with a sustainability-driven community. Here, the brand relationship goes beyond the product itself. As Anderson (1983) theorized through the concept of imagined communities, consumers form emotional attachments through shared narratives and collective ideals, even without direct interaction with other community members. These value-based connections reinforce trust, which is central in D2C settings (Wu et

al. 2023). Without the reassurance traditionally provided by third-party retailers, D2C brands must cultivate emotional trust directly and autonomously. Ethical practices and value alignment provide a basis for this trust, enhancing brand's authenticity and consumer attachment over time (Loureiro et al. 2017). Value-based loyalty also supports broader emotional engagement by reducing psychological distance between brand and consumer. Drawing from Trope and Liberman (2010) CLT, brands that share and enact consumer values are felt as psychologically closer, enabling consumers to construe them more concretely, personally and emotionally close.

5.3 Belonging in the Brandscape

This theme highlights how D2C brands become emotionally significant through their role in social meaning-making and identity signalling. Participants described how brand choices reflect group belonging, value alignment and subtle forms of distinction within peer contexts. The findings reveal three sub themes for this connection: *Social Comparison and Status Positioning*, *Participation in Brand Community and Social Proof* and *Trust and Relationship Endurance*.

5.3.1 Social Comparison and Status Positioning

Across the findings, emotional brand attachment to D2C brands was shown to be influenced not only by internal and individual identity alignment but also by how brands positioned consumers in relation to others. Several participants described emotional ties as formed through social comparison and a desire for status signaling. These mechanisms contributed to emotional value by allowing consumers to feel differentiated from, culturally adapted within or aligned with aspirational groups. These observations align closely with Belk (1988) how possessions form an extended self and Fournier (1998) dimension of self-connection in which brands serve as symbolic tools for personal and social identity construction. Henrik offered a clear example of how early emotional attachment to a premium brand was shaped by perceived social exclusivity and the brand's ability to enhance status within peer environments:

“Yes, a jacket I had back in my youth. Not many others had it back then. It was new, exclusive, good design and quality. The price also added to the status feeling which made me feel good.” - Henrik

The brand's exclusivity, design and pricing combined offered symbolic status. The emotional reward in this case was closely tied to the recognition that the brand marked him as distinct in a positive way by the description of *"It was new, exclusive, good design and quality"*. This supports Thomson et al. (2005) concept of connection where brands become integrated into social and personal narratives, thereby reinforcing attachment through relational value. It also illustrates the role of social positioning as part of the emotional landscape of attachment which is consistent with Cova (1997) theory of linking value, which suggests that brands can foster social distinction and connection simultaneously. This also reflects Fournier (1998) relational dimension of brand partner quality as well as intimacy, where emotional ties form when brands allow consumers to feel socially understood and personally aligned. Kim described his relationship to a D2C golf brand as partly driven by how different brands symbolized distinct social personas within a particular cultural setting. His emotional connection was formed through what the brand allowed him to express:

"You pick the brand for what it says about you. If I compare [brand name] to other premium brands within golf. [...] I feel like if you choose [competitor brand name 1], you're a bit more, it's attached a bit to the personality that you're more stylish. You're more trying to be cool and their design is a bit more clean. But [brand name] is maybe more linked to quality and power which makes them very modern in that sense. And then if you choose [competitor brand name 2], that's a very classic competitor that you're more maybe traditional. [...] You become a user; you want to be a [brand name] player. It becomes a part of your identity." - Kim

The act of brand choice is shown as socially coherent, connecting to Belk (1988) extended self and Fournier (1998) self-connection. Emotional closeness is supported through brands acting as identity proxy which enables consumers to perform their desired social roles. The differentiation between brands in terms of modernity, tradition and style shows how consumers draw on symbolic meanings to engage in social comparison, further anchoring emotional attachment.

Taken together, while prior research has recognized the role of brands in identity construction and symbolic affiliation (Belk, 1988; Cova, 1997; Fournier, 1998), the findings presented here offer a novel perspective by showing how emotional attachment is co-constructed through a combination of social comparison, digital community participation and responsive brand behavior in the D2C context. This reveals that emotional closeness is not solely a result of

internal identity alignment, but is increasingly negotiated through peer validation and platform-based interactions.

5.3.2 Participation in Brand Community & Social Proof

A significant common theme emerging from the interviews relates to how D2C brands build emotional attachment through encouraging participation in brand communities and validation through social proof. These mechanisms reflect the increasingly social and cultural nature of consumer-brand relationships, where emotional loyalty is shaped not only by individual resonance but also by community and social engagement. According to Anderson (1983), imagined communities emerge through symbolic cues, language and shared narratives, even when physical interaction does not take place. In the context of D2C brands, given the nature of brand interactions, brand communities are formed mostly through online spaces, enabling consumers to feel part of an imagined collective. This further aligns with Cova (1997) notion of linking value, where brands create social bridges and foster tribal behaviours between individuals. The interview data strongly supports this. For example, Peter described his engagement within brand-based communities with other individuals:

“I’m part of a Facebook group called ‘[Brand name] Owners’ where we share updates and discuss. It’s a great way to connect with others who appreciate the brand. [...] I think it’s really insightful. I believe that many of us can feel a sense of pride as many in the forums feel like we are part of something premium and that creates a lot of positive discussions and feedback.” - Peter

The findings highlight how participating in a brand community fosters pride, emotional resonance and a sense of belonging. Peter captured this dynamic when describing how participation in a brand forum fostered emotional resonance and pride, stating that many users felt *“part of something premium”* where *“positive discussions and feedback”* contribute to a shared sense of contribution. As described by Brodie et al. (2011), online brand communities represent a source of both recognition and affirmation, offering consumers more than just practical information and promoting emotional engagement.

Within the realm of brand communities and social proof, it emerged from most interviews that User-Generated Content (UGC) plays a central role in the mechanisms of trust development and

authenticity towards D2C brands. Consumers no longer rely only on uni-directional brand communication but increasingly refer to peer-generated content and reviews to shape their opinions. As highlighted by Dellarocas (2003), where online feedback mechanisms enhance credibility, validation and emotional commitment. This is significantly important in the process of trust formation towards D2C brands, where interactions take place mostly online through online platforms missing face-to-face communication and the presence of human counterparts. Kim exemplified this by saying:

“When I bought the [product name], I read a lot of user reviews. People warned that the colored paint wore off. So I chose the chrome version instead. That community insight shaped my decision.” - Kim

Kim exemplified this by emphasizing how the “*community insight*” directly shaped his product decision. His reasoning directs to the functional trust and emotional reassurance gained through shared knowledge, demonstrating how validation from others becomes an essential trust mechanism. According to Dessart et al. (2015), UGC not only supports product decisions but enhances emotional involvement by fostering trust. In this context, while Anderson (1983) and Brodie et al. (2011) positions community as a largely symbolic or identity-affirming construct, these findings emphasize a tendency to a more pragmatic and trust-building function within D2C. Participants value communities less for symbolic group identity, and more for functional validation, emotional reassurance and feedback loops.

5.3.3 Trust and Relationship Endurance

Participants described how emotional brand attachment to D2C brands is deeply rooted in long-term stability and consistency. According to them, consumer-brand relationships often rely on reliable performance, performative service and brand behaviors that signaled care and continuity for their customers. Such dynamics reflect partner quality, commitment and interdependence where brands behave in ways that support and sustain an enduring emotional bond (Fournier, 1998). Victor reflected on his interaction and described how ongoing loyalty stemmed from consistent care and support:

“[...] I trust them to handle potential issues better than other companies, but if they don't, then it would hurt my trust in them. [...] So far, the customer service has been really good at solving my

problems. I've had a few different issues and like they've all always been very helpful, like as much as they can over chat and over phone and everything.”- Victor

This illustrates how emotional investment can be sustained through relational behavior. His use of phrases like *“has been really good at solving my problems”* and *“they’ve all always been very helpful”* which underscores partner consistency and the feeling of being valued over time. These elements resonate with Fournier (1998) notions of commitment and love/intimacy, where brand actions contribute to emotional loyalty even as usage patterns shift. Moreover, some participants reported a contradictory experience in this context. For example, Peter’s experience underscores how emotional continuity is not simply created and maintained through a low effort habitual use, but it highlights how the brands must commit to an ongoing quality of the relational exchange.

“If the brand makes a mistake and it has a negative impact on me, I will be disappointed but I think the way it reacts can make the connection feel more human and trustworthy. It shows resilience and sincerity, that the bond between us is real..” - Peter

This shows how, without responding or demonstrating that they care, the consumer is left to carry the relationship alone, which can ultimately weaken emotional investment and affect the brand’s ability to act as a stable emotional presence by the usage of specific terms as *“resilience”* and *“sincerity”*. As a result, the lack of engagement might interrupt the possibility of brand-self integration (Thomson et al. 2005). On the other hand, when the brand proves successful in responding to failures or customer disappointment, it can further strengthen the emotional attachment. This is particularly true for D2C settings, where communication channels are more direct and responsiveness becomes both more visible and more critical. Showcasing how the emotional bond can be even further reinforced, Linda described how emotional connection was actively maintained and strengthened by her cosmetics brand through responsive service and adaptation to customer feedback:

“A bronzer broke once, I emailed them and got a new one quickly. They also responded to criticism about their Advent calendar and made improvements the next year. [...] It’s not expensive for them to fix something, but it matters to me.” - Linda

Her emphasis on the emotional importance of feeling acknowledged and respected can be seen as crucial. Actions in resolving a functional issue and publicly responding to wider feedback

contributed to a sense of attentiveness and care. These behaviors align with partner empathy and reliability which is interpreted as a key dimension of Fournier (1998) brand relationship quality. In Linda's narrative "*It's not expensive for them to fix something, but it matters to me*", even relatively minor incidents in terms of either a broken product or product criticism, became emotionally significant because of how the brand handled them. The response was interpreted not only as good service, but as a sign that the brand listened, remembered and acted. Her comment also reflects a more subtle form of commitment maintenance, where the brand sustains emotional continuity by reinforcing the consumer's role as a valued partner. The brand's decision to handle issues and improve the offering was understood as a relational gesture, not just a correction. This contributed to a feeling of symbolic alignment and dependable emotional presence, which supports brand-self integration and fosters resilience in the emotional relationship. In the D2C context, the findings diverge from Lemon & Verhoef (2016) and Van Doorn et al. (2017) arguments, which tends to emphasize the importance of human intermediaries and in-person services for building trust and emotional bonds. Instead, our findings show that D2C brands can achieve emotional continuity and intimacy entirely through digital and unmediated interactions, provided they act responsively and consistently. These insights contribute a novel dimension to existing research on emotional brand attachment by emphasizing the role of relational responsiveness and social validation as co-constructors of emotional closeness in D2C settings. This finding expands current understandings of partner quality (Fournier, 1998) by illustrating how trust and emotional continuity are now negotiated publicly and interactively, often in real time.

6. Discussion

The next chapter provides an interpretation of the empirical findings described in the previous section in the light of the theoretical frameworks and existing literature presented earlier in the study. By linking the results to prior research, the discussion seeks to deepen understanding of the drivers through which emotional connections are formed within D2C settings. To this aim, a critical reflection on how the results correspond with or challenge prior research is conducted to highlight the study's unique contributions and uncover new insights into emotional brand attachment towards D2C brands.

6.1 Key Findings

This study set out to explore the emotional mechanisms and drivers that underpin consumer-brand emotional relationships and bonds within the fast growing D2C model. Through a rich and abductively guided thematic analysis of consumer narratives, the findings reveal that emotional brand attachment within D2C settings does not appear to arise solely from traditional symbolic strategies or brand-initiated efforts. Instead, emotional attachment develops as a multifaceted and co-constructed process which is shaped by the interplay between consumer autonomy, routine integration and social-symbolic engagement.

First, the findings demonstrate that emotional attachment is often founded in the ordinariness of everyday life. Participants described brands as emotionally significant not only because of affective storytelling or dramatic gestures but rather because they became closely interwoven into personal habits and daily routines. For example, several instances were brought up where brands were closely associated with personal rituals and life events, thus reflecting a deeper psychological and personally resonant integration. Such interactions with brands were not limited to product functionality but extended to feelings of reliability and emotional stability. Whether through subscription-based services, seamless usability or functional reliability, brands acquired emotional weight through their invisible presence which is quietly supporting the

consumers' lives while reducing the effort and mental load, acting as a source of comfort. This form of dependability is pointed to an underexplored pathway through which emotional attachment can shape in D2C environments.

Second, the emotional attachment in D2C appears to be co-authored rather than delivered. Interviewees described how they proactively engage with D2C brands that reflect their individual values and identities, rather than passively receiving marketing messages. Indeed, according to the participants, value congruence and alignment fostered a sense of integrity and reinforced the consumer's self-concept through D2C direct brand interaction. While personalization is highly regarded in the context of emotional branding, participants repeatedly described frustration or indifferences towards generic and imposed personalization. Instead, emotional attachment resonated towards the ability to control, shape or limit the relationship on their own terms. Emotional bonds to D2C brands were strengthened not through any algorithmic intimacy but through consumer-driven customization and the feeling of being invited rather than being pursued. Emotional loyalty did not emerge as a reaction from persuasive stimuli, rather as a result from relational empowerment.

Lastly, despite the absence of physical presence or direct human interaction, the findings unveil the relevance of belonging, recognition and shared meaning in fostering brand attachment. In fact, several participants described how their engagement with D2C brands extended beyond the individual level as they established emotional bonds through symbolic participation and social belonging in brand communities, cultural alignment and shared values. These communities, often mediated through digital platforms, reinforced emotional bonds by embedding the brand in a larger collective experience. Similarly, social proof mechanisms, such as online reviews, influencer marketing and user-generated content, played a significant role in building trust and emotional validation. Additionally, participants emphasized that emotional trust in D2C relationships is primarily built through consistent brand behaviour across all touchpoints and over time. Unlike traditional B2C settings, D2C environments are largely digital and lack human intermediaries, which makes reliability and predictability in daily interactions crucial for establishing lasting emotional bonds. As a result, trust and perceived brand reliability over time become central to the durability of these attachments, even in the face of occasional negative experiences.

6.2 Reconsidering Emotional Drivers in D2C Brand Relationships

The table presents seven emotional dimensions of brand attachment identified through the empirical findings. Each is outlined with key characteristics based on participant accounts for D2C brands and contrasted with how B2C attachment is described in existing literature.

Emotional Driver	D2C Brand Attachment (Empirical Findings)	B2C Brand Attachment (Literature-Based)
Empowered Personalization	Consumers appreciate control over interactions, preferring customizable engagement over algorithmic and brand-driven targeting.	Brand-led personalization and storytelling, assuming passive consumer reception (Fournier, 1998; Carroll & Ahuvia, 2006).
Functional Dependability	Reliability, usability and frictionless services are central emotional triggers, what the brand consistently does in consumers' everyday lives.	Emotional attachment through experiential cues and brand symbolic expressiveness (Holbrook & Hirschman, 1982).
Functionally embedded emotionality	Seamless integration into daily life, with brands acting as stable and invisible support.	Attachment linked to affective branding, expressive interactions and symbolic experiences (Thomson et al. 2005).
Psychological Proximity	Psychological closeness arises from continuous, low-friction interaction and functional presence.	Psychological proximity is created through physical presence or concrete brand tone (Trope & Liberman, 2010).
Active Participation	Emotional loyalty emerges from participatory engagement and community involvement.	Attachment results from consistent symbolic messaging and repeated exposure (Thomson et al. 2005).
Social Belonging	Attachment is shaped by cultural alignment, peer validation and community-led symbolic experiences.	Linking value (Cova, 1997). Individual identity projection via brand symbolism (Belk, 1988).
Value Alignment	Brand values matter, but emotional trust is built through consistent delivery, responsiveness and brand behavior.	Brand trust is linked to communicating values and ethical claims (Loureiro et al. 2017).

Table 2. Overview of emotional drivers in brand attachment shown alongside empirical findings regarding D2C and established B2C insights from existing literature.

This table provides evidence that emotional brand attachment in the D2C model cannot be fully interpreted and explained by traditional emotional branding mechanisms developed within B2C contexts. Established frameworks such as Thomson et al. (2005) EBA model and Fournier (1998) BRQ model, alongside a broader body of work (e.g., Park et al. 2010; Carroll & Ahuvia, 2006) emphasize affective drivers such as affection, passion, connection and interdependence as central to strong consumer-brand relationships. While this study acknowledges the relevance of these foundational insights, the findings suggest that within D2C environments, emotional attachment may emerge through complementary but distinct mechanisms. Specifically, attachment is not only formed through symbolic affective levers, but also through empowered personalization and functionally embedded emotionality, including a degree of functional reliability and security. These dimensions reflect a shift in how emotional closeness is generated in an intermediary-free context.

6.2.1 Empowered Personalization

Personalization, which is often presented as a vital aspect of contemporary brand-consumer relationships (Kalayci et al. 2020; McKee et al. 2023), was revealed to be an uncertain driver of emotional closeness in these D2C unmediated contexts. Although personalization is theoretically linked to increased self-relevance, which in turn enhances brand affection (Thomson et al. 2005), participants expressed a degree of dissatisfaction when personalization was described as automated, data-driven or shallow without individual effort. Instead of feeling recognized or valued, consumers often described such personalization as manipulative, implying that the brand is not being genuine which resulted in emotional distancing. This reaction points to a critical flaw in the presumed causal link between personalization and attachment, revealing that the mere presence of tailored content does not guarantee emotional engagement. In these cases, the emotional ineffectiveness of personalization can be understood through the lens of consumer empowerment. Empirical data revealed a consistent preference for self-determined interaction, with an user-initiated or customizable form of personalization. This suggests that emotional attachment does not emerge from being targeted by the brand, but from being enabled to interact on one's own preferences. Indeed, the study proposes that consumer autonomy is a necessary condition for the emotional attachment to emerge and for brand love to develop in the D2C context. Emotional closeness in D2C, in this view, is not only about frequency of contact but

about structural respect for consumer agency which is a condition that shapes whether or not emotional brand attachment is even possible.

6.2.3 Functionally Embedded Emotionality

The study also implies that functional reliability plays a critical emotional role within D2C. Participants described how consistent product performance, reliable service delivery and frictionless processes generated a form of emotional safety, one that embedded the brand into daily routines and created a sense of emotional stability. While these insights resonate with Fournier (1998) notion of partner quality, they demonstrate that affection and trust can arise not only from relational gestures, but also from dependability. Indeed, the findings suggest that within D2C environments, hedonic pleasure is still relevant but tends to emerge less from symbolic expression and more from the experiential qualities of everyday use. Thus, rather than being shaped solely by abstract or identity-driven brand narratives, participants described emotionally rewarding and joyful moments rooted in routine interactions, indicating that the hedonic dimension is mainly tied to the functional characteristics of D2C brand experiences. These findings partially challenge the symbolic dimension of the experiential consumption model proposed by Holbrook and Hirschman (1982), as this form of emotional attachment is established through psychological ease, predictability and habits, which emerged throughout the empirical material as a significant dimension of how participants relate to D2C brands. This interpretation can be seen through the lens of Giddens (1991) concept of ontological security, which refers to a stable emotional state rooted in the predictability of routines and trust in consistent systems. In the context of D2C relationships, brands are not merely sources of self-expression but operate as stabilizing agents, offering continuity and low-effort reassurance in the background of daily life. Emotional closeness in these cases is not constructed through exceptional experiences but through the reliable repetition of functional performance, which provides the consumer with a sense of control and cognitive ease. Particularly, the brand's ability to deliver on its promises becomes an emotionally meaningful act, which contributes not only to trust, but to a deeper sense of psychological connection. As a result, the absence of the brand can produce a feeling of nakedness, vulnerability and disruption. Even if the attachment is not rooted in deep symbolic meaning, the consistency and emotional lift the brand experience delivers can transform it into a source of existential reassurance in the consumer's everyday life.

It derives that a novel insight emerging from this study is the identification of an additional emotional driver specific to D2C settings. A form of brand attachment rooted in what can be termed and described as *functionally embedded emotionality*. While the participants report that identity alignment and symbolic meaning continue to play a central role in shaping consumer-brand relationships in the D2C environment, findings suggest that emotional attachment within these settings also stems from the brand's reliable and seamless integration into consumers' everyday lives. In fact, this attachment does not emerge through overt symbolic engagement, but through subtle and often unnoticed interactions such as automation, subscriptions and frictionless services that generate a sense of emotional security and proximity. Rather than replacing symbolic mechanisms, the functionally embedded emotionality complements them, pointing to a layered structure of emotional bonding unique to the D2C context. This adds to dominant narratives in the emotional branding literature, which primarily emphasize affect-driven, symbolic and identity-related mechanisms of attachment (Fournier, 1998; Thomson et al. 2005). Indeed, while the BRQ model (Fournier, 1998) emphasizes dimensions like intimacy, love/passion and self-connection, and the EBA model (Thomson et al. 2005) highlights affective elements such as affection, passion and connection, the present findings introduce a complementary layer to these frameworks. Participants often expressed arousal to D2C brands not only through moments of heightened engagement, but through the reliability that automated routine brand interactions brought into their lives. In other words, present findings demonstrate that within D2C contexts, even low-engagement and automated touchpoints can foster emotional meaning over time through their role in reducing cognitive fatigue and supporting daily life. This insight is particularly novel as it questions the long-standing dichotomy between utilitarian and emotional consumption, as traditionally framed by Holbrook & Hirschman (1982). Therefore, what might be described as utilitarian features can elicit affective responses typically associated with symbolic consumption. For D2C brands, this means that building emotional relationships does not solely depend on value-laden symbolic expression, but also on being seamlessly embedded into consumers' habits and daily lives.

6.3 Theoretical Contributions

6.3.1 Functionally Embedded Emotionality: A New Dimension of Emotional Brand Attachment

A central theoretical contribution derived from this study is the identification of *functionally embedded emotionality* as an unexpected and previously underexplored dimension of emotional attachment in the D2C context. This form of bonding arises not from symbolic storytelling or overt emotional cues but from a brand's seamless integration into the consumer's everyday life. It emerges that emotional connections to D2C brands can be formed through habitual and reliable brand interactions, including examples such as subscription services, intuitive interfaces and consistent product performance. These dimensions collectively generate feelings of emotional security, comfort and trust.

This new dimension contributes and expands the existent literature on emotional brand attachment and consumer-brand relationships. Unlike the affective relationships frameworks proposed by models such as Thomson et al. (2005) EBA and Fournier (1998) BRQ, emotional closeness in D2C was frequently linked to the brand's ability to reduce cognitive load and invisibly support consumers' routines. By doing so, the brand becomes emotionally significant as its dependability creates psychological proximity and stability. This questions the symbolic-utilitarian divide articulated by Holbrook and Hirschman (1982), suggesting that functional features can evoke strong emotional responses and foster durable attachment within D2C.

6.3.2 Empowered Personalization: Agency as a Precondition for Intimacy

A second key contribution of this study lies in reframing the theoretical understanding of personalization. Within emotional branding literature, personalization is commonly regarded as a driver of intimacy and relevance, enhancing emotional ties between consumers and brands. However, in the D2C context, the study finds that personalization alone does not foster attachment unless it is accompanied by consumer agency. Participants frequently expressed detachment or resistance toward algorithmically imposed personalization that lacked

transparency. Instead, emotional closeness was cultivated when consumers felt that personalization was optional, user-initiated and reflective of their own needs and preferences.

This distinction reveals that, within D2C environments, empowered personalization is critical for emotional bonding. The perception of control is essential and only when consumers are able to shape the interaction themselves, personalization becomes a strong source of emotional bonding to brands. In this sense, personalization functions as a platform for autonomy. This reframing introduces agency as a theoretical precondition for intimacy, suggesting that emotional attachment in D2C arises not from being known, but from being respected as an active participant in the relationship.

6.3.3 Supporting Mechanisms: Social Belonging and Consistent Trust

While functional embeddedness and empowered personalization constitute the primary theoretical contributions of this study and the novel mechanisms through which emotional attachment forms in D2C contexts, the study also identifies social belonging and behavioral consistency as two supporting processes that reinforce and sustain this bond.

It emerges from the research that within D2C symbolic participation in brand communities, shared narratives and user-generated content can encourage the development of emotional ties. Even in the absence of physical contact and human presence, brands were able to foster imagined affiliation and community experiences, confirming theoretical insights from Anderson's (1983) imagined communities and Cova's (1997) linking value. Emotional closeness was co-created through peer validation and communal engagement, especially in cases where consumers internalized brand values as extensions of their own identities.

Additionally, trust in D2C settings emerged not from singular service encounters or only from abstract brand claims, but from sustained behavioral consistency. Emotional bonding is built through the brand's ability to align words and actions across time and touchpoints, thus creating a sense of authenticity. This reinforces the importance of routine dependability as a component of emotional brand relationships and supports a more dynamic perspective on trust formation within the emotional branding literature.

6.4 Managerial Implications

This study provides relevant guidance for managers and practitioners who are seeking to strengthen emotional brand attachment in D2C settings. The findings suggest that attachment is not primarily generated through symbolic storytelling but through the brand's role in consumers' everyday routines, values and self-directed engagement. As discussed for the theoretical contributions, a key managerial implication is the importance of functional embeddedness. Emotional value arises when brands integrate into daily life by being consistent and reliable where subscription models, seamless usability and dependable product performance contribute to this effect. Managers should focus on reducing friction and offering experiences that support the consumer without demanding attention. Emotional closeness is often an outcome of trust and predictability rather than overt emotional messaging.

The study also highlights consumer autonomy as a fundamental driver. Rather than algorithmic personalization, consumers favor the ability to shape their experience, meaning how to choose when, how and to what extent they engage with the brand. Managers should emphasize user-controlled customization, flexible interactions and apply engagement strategies. Emotional loyalty develops when consumers feel empowered and respected, rather than when they feel hunted or targeted. Social-symbolic mechanisms further reinforce attachment. Even in the absence of physical touchpoints, D2C brands can foster emotional bonds through digital community-building, shared values and social proof. Supporting user-generated context, encouraging peer reviews and partnering up with credible influencers that can reinforce identity alignment and emotional validation. These cues for participation can enable consumers to feel part of something larger than the actual transaction. Consistency across brand behavior is critical in sustaining emotional trust, as in D2C environment directness replaces human mediation, meaning that brands are judged dynamically over a longer period of time. Managers should act and ensure that the coherence is in alignment with messaging and service across all touchpoints. Prompt issue resolution, transparency and alignment between stated values and lived experience are essential for fostering a long term emotional credibility.

6.5 Broader Implications

The managerial implications of this study should also be viewed in the context of broader transformations in consumer culture and marketplace expectations. As outlined in *The Future of Consumption* (Bäckström et al. 2024), future consumer relationships are being shaped not only by technological advancement but also by rising demands for sustainability, wellbeing and ethical interaction, which are becoming central to how consumers evaluate brand relevance and form lasting emotional bonds.

Our finding of *functionally embedded emotionality* aligns with a consumer landscape where emotional value is increasingly derived from brands that support cognitive and emotional ease. Today's consumers often seek brands that reduce friction, provide stability and integrate into everyday routines without adding complexity. As Bäckström et al. (2024) suggest, the emotional economy of the future will prioritize mental clarity and time efficiency. D2C brands that adopt smooth, reliable and transparent service models may become emotionally indispensable.

The second key finding, i.e. *empowered personalization*, also reflects the broader shift toward consumer agency in digitally mediated environments. As consumers become more aware of how their data is used, emotional attachment will depend on how personalization is experienced. Our findings suggest that emotional attachment strengthens when consumers are provided with control. Brands that offer flexible, user-led personalization demonstrate respect for the consumer's boundaries, which in turn reinforces emotional trust and connection.

7. Conclusion

This final chapter concludes the study by summarizing the key findings derived from the research. It reflects on the theoretical and managerial contributions of the study, acknowledges its limitations and proposes directions for future research.

7.1 Research Findings

This study set out to explore what drives emotional brand attachment in the Direct-to-Consumer (D2C) model. More specifically, given the intrinsic structural differences of this increasingly popular model compared to more traditional mediated frameworks, it was asked: *What are the key drivers of emotional brand attachment in the D2C model?* The findings showcase that attachment within this setting is not primarily a result of brand-initiated symbolism or persuasive marketing, as it could be for more traditional settings. Instead, emotional brand attachment within D2C emerges through a co-constructed process between brands and consumers, with two novel dimensions identified as central to emotional bonding: *Functionally embedded emotionality* and *empowered personalization*. These unexpected findings question existing assumptions in the emotional branding literature and suggest a reconfiguration of how emotional value is created, experienced and maintained in D2C.

A key insight from this research is that emotional brand attachment in D2C contexts often originates from a brand's seamless integration into consumers' everyday routines. Rather than being cultivated through expressive campaigns or symbolic storytelling alone, emotional closeness is formed through habitual, low-effort and reliable interactions that foster psychological comfort and routine security. This phenomenon, conceptualized as *functionally embedded emotionality*, captures how emotional attachment can be rooted in predictability, reduced cognitive load and emotional safety. It derives that functional reliability, ease and trust emerged as emotionally meaningful in their own right, producing a form of attachment grounded in everyday reassurance and continuity. While symbolic and identity-driven mechanisms remain

present, this study shows they are complemented by a subtler emotional logic, where brands serve as stabilizing agents in consumers' lives. In D2C contexts, this layer of attachment reflects a deeper ontological security, where the absence of the brand causes a feeling of emptiness and disconnection. By introducing *functionally embedded emotionality* as a distinct emotional driver, this study extends current emotional branding literature, offering a perspective especially relevant to intermediary-free brand environments.

The second key conclusion of this study lies in the re-evaluation of personalization as an emotional driver in D2C branding. While personalization has been widely theorized as a fundamental aspect of emotional closeness, the findings challenge this assumption within D2C brand environments, as not all personalization is equal. When personalization was interpreted as automated, intrusive or shallow, it failed to generate intimacy. On the contrary, it often triggered skepticism and emotional detachment. By contrast, emotional closeness is fostered when consumers can control the relationship on their own terms. This dimension, conceptualized in the study as *empowered personalization*, locates emotional bonding on the consumer's agency. Participants valued brands that invited rather than pursued them, allowing them to decide how and when personalization for the interaction to occur. The opportunity to shape the level of engagement was described as a form of respect and psychological comfort, which in turn strengthened emotional attachment. The clear implication is that personalization within unmediated D2C environments must be participatory and flexible, not imposed or manipulative acting as non-genuine.

Taken together, the two key theoretical contributions, i.e. *functionally embedded emotionality* and *empowered personalization*, highlight a shift in emotional branding logic within D2C models. Whereas B2C theories typically emphasize emotionally charged and symbolic engagement, the D2C landscape appears to favor emotional value that emerges from a brand's active role in lived experience and respect for the consumer's agency..

7.2 Limitations

A key limitation of this study lies in its geographic and cultural scope. All participants in the study were based in Sweden. While Sweden offers a relevant setting for studying emotional brand attachment in D2C contexts as it is a digitally advanced and consumer-oriented market

where D2C brands are well established and widely adopted, the findings may not be fully transferable to other environments in terms of cultural adaptations and technological advancements. Consumer expectations, emotional expressions and digital behaviors can differ significantly across countries, especially in regions with contrasting values, retail infrastructures or levels of digital maturity. Although the findings provide valuable insight into D2C brand relationships, they should be interpreted with caution when considering applications beyond the Swedish or broader Scandinavian context. Another important limitation concerns the coverage of industries represented in the study. While efforts were made to ensure brand and industry diversity spanning from lifestyle, fashion, personal care and mobility, it is important to acknowledge how the sample does not comprehensively represent all types of D2C industries. Highly commoditized sectors, luxury categories or service-based D2C offerings may involve different emotional triggers and consumer expectations. Moreover, the focus was placed on product-based D2C brands rather than service-dominated models (e.g. software or wellness platforms), which may influence how functional embeddedness and empowered personalization operate as emotional drivers.

Additionally, the study's methodological design emphasizes qualitative depth over statistical generalizability. While this aligns with the abductive and exploratory nature of the research, the sample size and subjective narratives limit the extent to which these findings can be broadly applied. Indeed, the emotional dimensions discussed are highly contextual and personal.

7.3 Future Research

The findings of this study introduce *functionally embedded emotionality* and *empowered personalization* as two central and exclusive emotional drivers in D2C brand relationships. While these dimensions were developed from a diverse sample of Swedish consumers, several areas remain underexplored, offering potential for future research to develop, contextualize and expand their theoretical reach. One particular direction lies in investigating that the level of product involvement plays in shaping emotional brand attachment mechanisms. Indeed, it remains a relevant question whether these emotional dynamics hold true in high-involvement product categories where purchasing decisions are more emotionally loaded. Future studies should examine whether functionally embedded emotionality operates differently when

consumers are interacting with high involvement D2C offerings such as healthcare, mobility, education or finance. In such settings, emotional attachment may be less about seamlessness or dependability, but more about assurance and trust in brands' expertise for the individual. Similarly, empowered personalization may take on new dimensions in high-involvement contexts, where consumers may demand not only control but informed guidance, customization depth and ongoing dialogue with the brand. Exploring how emotional attachment is shaped by the cognitive and emotional intensity of different product types would allow for a more differentiated and scalable model of D2C emotional branding.

A second key opportunity lies in exploring the temporary development of emotional brand attachment. This study offers a direct view of consumer narratives from the participant at a given specific moment, but emotional attachment is inherently dynamic and responsive to change. Research over time could track how functional embeddedness and empowerment evolve over time and what types of brand behavior, such as loyalty programs, personalization models and service recovery can reinforce or weaken the emotional bonds. Particular attention should be paid to how emotional relationships endure or adapt during key transition points, such as switching life stages through rites of passage, encountering brand failures or shifts in product use frequency.

Finally, the brand-side perspective also presents a valuable direction for future research. While this study privileged the consumer voice to understand how emotional closeness is experienced, it remains unclear how D2C brands themselves conceptualize emotional attachment. It is vital to comprehend and understand how the brands interpret and operationalize concepts such as embeddedness and autonomy. Including insights from marketers, product designers and executive management could surface the organizational realities and trade-offs involved in delivering emotionally appealing D2C experiences at scale.

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9. Appendix

Appendix A: Interview Guide

1. Demographic information

After a short description about the study:

- How old are you?
- What is your occupation?

2. Emotional brand attachment

- Can you think of a brand that you feel emotionally connected to? What makes it stand out to you?
- Do you remember the first time a brand felt personal or special to you? What made it feel that way?
- Are there particular values or messages that make a brand feel more meaningful to you?
- Is there a brand you used to care about emotionally, but don't anymore? What changed?

3. D2C context

- Can you tell me about a brand you buy from directly through their own website or store without using a retailer or marketplace?
- What makes you choose to buy directly from this brand instead of going through a retailer or marketplace?
- How long have you been using this brand and how often do you interact with it?

4. Emotional brand attachment to D2C brands

- When you think about the (D2C) brand you mentioned earlier, how would you describe your emotional connection to it? What feelings come up when you think about this brand?
- Do you feel like this brand represents something about who you are or how you see yourself?
- Have you noticed any personalization in your interactions with this brand?

5. Brand relationship quality

- Are you excited about this brand? Do you talk about it with others or share it?
- If another brand offered something similar, would you still stick with this one? Why?
- Do you feel like the brand gets/understands you as a customer? In what way?
- If this brand made a mistake or failed you once, would you still feel you could rely on them to handle things well and deliver on their promises? Why or why not?

6. Social and community dimensions

- Do you feel like you're part of a group of people who also like this brand?
- Have you ever interacted with the brand or its fans online, like on Instagram or forums? What was that like?
- Have online reviews or other user-generated content influenced how you feel about the brand?

7. Closing Reflections

- If this brand disappeared tomorrow, what would you miss the most?
- Is there anything else about your connection to this brand that you think is worth mentioning?

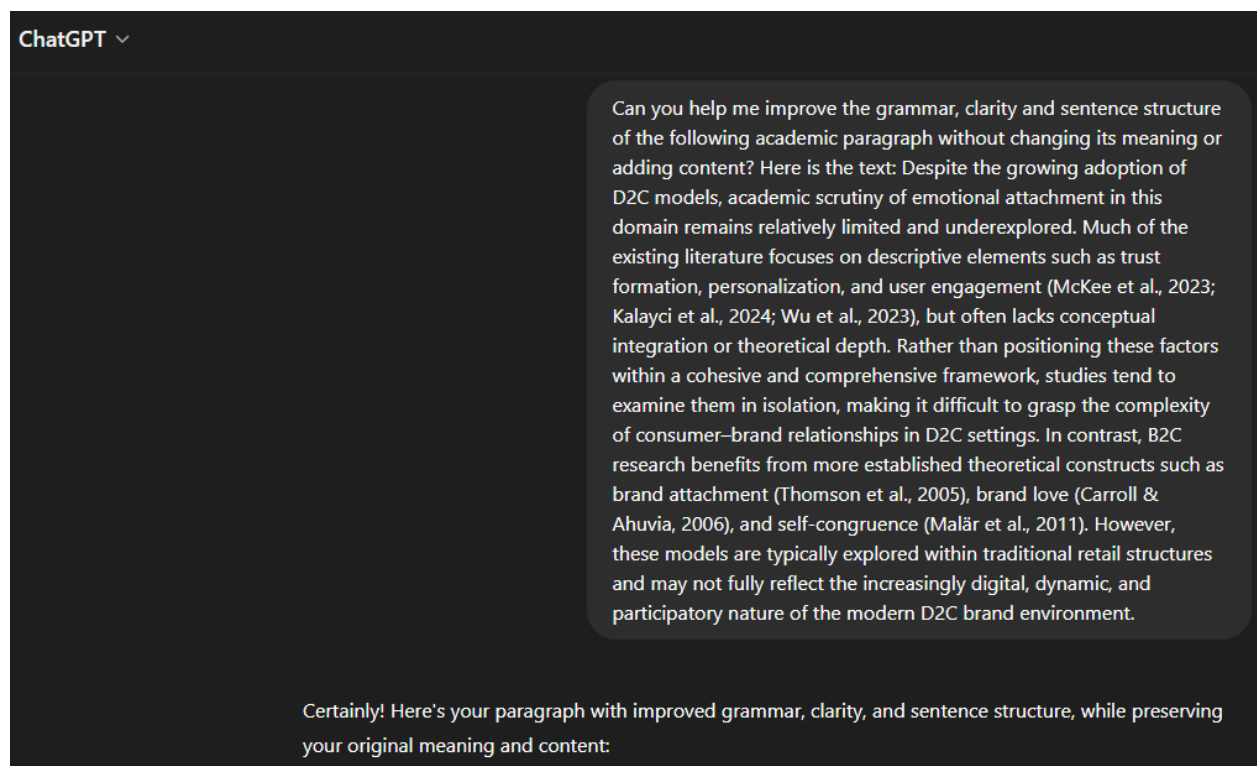
Appendix B: Thematic Coding of Empirical Data

Code	Sub-theme	Main Theme
Emotional nostalgia	Brand-Embedded Life Events & Self Extension	Emotional Everyday Bonds
Identity alignment		
Symbolic achievement		
Comfort	Emotional Security	
Quality assurance		
Reliance		
Joy	Hedonic Pleasure	
Delight		
Ongoing interaction	Psychological Proximity	
Exclusivity and directness		
Personalization control	Individualized Brand Interaction	Consumer-Led Relationships
Tailored offering		
Ease of access	Convenience and Frictionless Engagement	
Automation		
Shared values	Value-Based Brand Loyalty	
Ethics & sustainability		
Peer influence	Social Comparison and Status Positioning	Belonging in the Brandscape
Trend sensitivity		
Aspirational affiliation		
Community recognition	Participation in Brand Community & Social Proof	
User-generated content		
Image consistency	Trust and Relationship Endurance	
Brand responsiveness		
Long-term resilience		

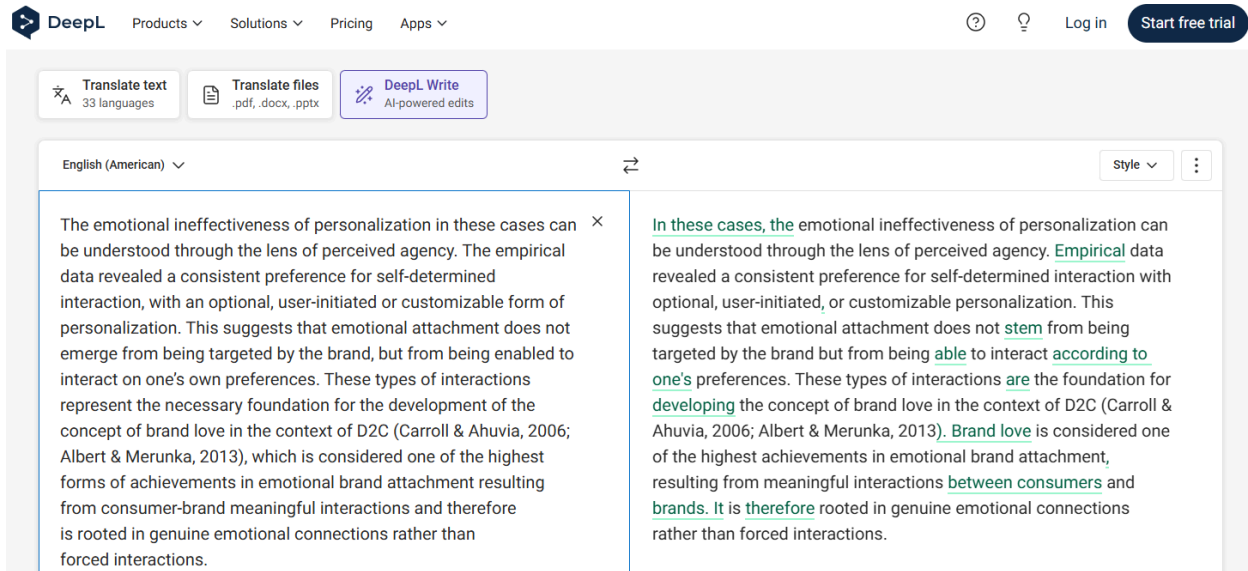
Appendix C: Declaration of AI Use

In the development of this study, generative AI was used as an aid tool. The following section outlines how AI was used by providing specific examples, in a way that aligns with ethical academic standards, without replacing the student's own intellectual contribution. At no point was AI used to generate original content, write full sections, fabricate citations or independently analyze raw data.

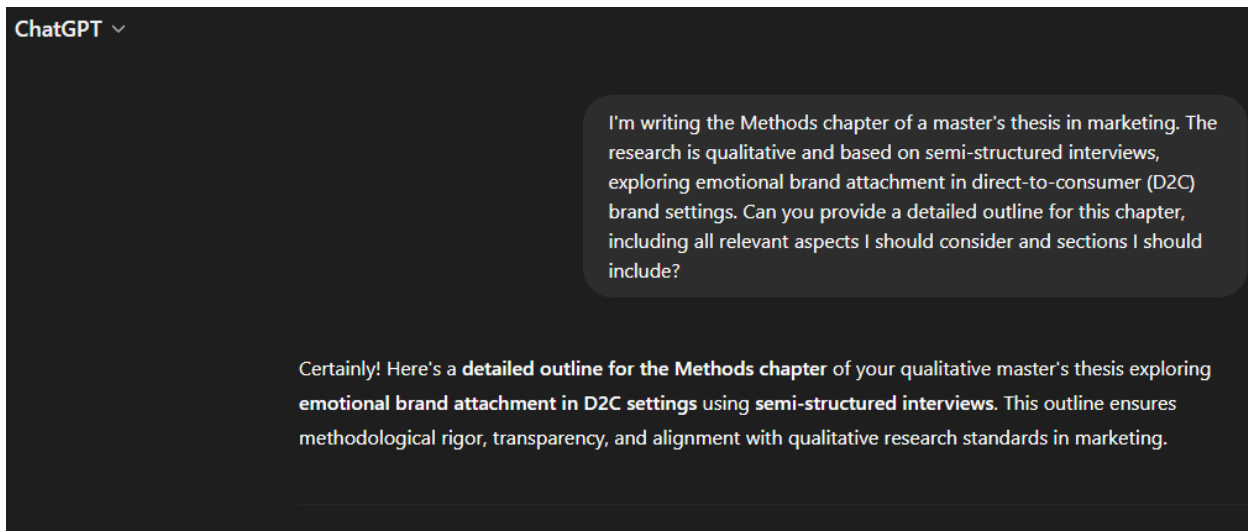
- 1) Grammar and language correction: AI was used to identify and correct grammatical errors, improve sentence structure and enhance overall fluency of the writing. All suggestions were manually reviewed and selectively implemented to preserve the original meaning and tone. See the following screenshot as an example:



- 2) Paraphrasing and rewording for clarity: AI was consulted to rephrase complex or ambiguous sentences in a more concise and readable manner. The input remained original and was not auto-generated. Similarly, AI suggestions were manually examined and only accepted when deemed valid and valuable. See the following screenshot as an example:



- 3) Idea structuring and brainstorming: during the planning phase, AI was used to generate potential outlines and structures for chapters. These outlines served as inspiration and were adapted to reflect the authors' specific interpretations. See the following screenshot as an example:



- 4) Identifying relevant literature: AI was used to assist in the discovery of relevant academic articles and research streams related to key study topics. The tool provided suggestions based on keywords and conceptual queries. However, all literature was reviewed, critically evaluated and manually selected by the researcher. See the following screenshot as an example:

emotional attachment and B2C

Show Copilot steps ▾

Summary

Emotional Attachment and B2C

Emotional attachment in the context of business-to-consumer (B2C) relationships plays a significant role in influencing consumer behavior and loyalty. Here are the key insights based on the provided abstracts:

Importance of Emotional Attachment

- **Consumer Loyalty:** Emotional attachment is crucial for fostering consumer loyalty. It has been shown to positively influence both attitudinal and behavioral loyalty, which includes repeat purchases and positive word-of-mouth [1] [2] [3].
- **Trust and Commitment:** Emotional attachment enhances trust and commitment between consumers and brands. This trust is essential for maintaining long-term relationships and can mediate the effects of marketing strategies on consumer loyalty [1] [3] [4].
- **Brand Experience:** Positive brand experiences can strengthen emotional attachment, which in turn boosts brand loyalty. This is particularly evident in service industries such as banking, where emotional attachment significantly impacts customer retention [2].

Mechanisms and Strategies

Ask a follow-up question



Search AI's quality of results may vary. How it works

Share feedback

References

Reference 1

Effects of relationship bonding strategy on customer loyalty under B2C e-commerce environment

Li Z.

International Review on Computers and Software

71

2012

Reference 2

Brand experience and emotional attachment in services: The moderating role of gender

Khan I., Rahman Z.

Service Science 71 2017

Reference 3

Consumer-retailer emotional attachment: Some antecedents and the moderating role of attachment anxiety

Vlachos P.A., Theotokis A., Pramatori K.,

Vrechopoulos A.

Feedback

- 5) Summarizing academic texts: AI was used to summarize selected theoretical articles to support the initial understanding of key concepts. These summaries were not quoted or cited in the study nor replaced the reading and engagement with the original texts. See the following screenshot as an example:

ChatGPT ▾

 **Consumer's and their brands.pdf**
PDF

Please summarize the key arguments and theoretical concepts from the attached article. I need a high-level overview to help me grasp the main ideas before reading the full text myself. Do not generate direct quotes or citations.

The article "Consumers and Their Brands: Developing Relationship Theory in Consumer Research" by Susan Fournier (1998) explores how consumers form relationships with brands, drawing from interpersonal relationship theory to understand these consumer-brand bonds. Here's a high-level summary of the key arguments and theoretical concepts:

- 6) Clarification of theoretical concepts: AI was used to clarify the meaning and scholarly use of core concepts to improve and support understanding during the literature review stage. This supported the development of the theoretical framework, but all interpretations and applications of theory were independently written. See the following screenshot as an example:

make a clarification of the CLT theory on proximity by Trope & Liberman

Certainly! Here's a clear and concise clarification of **Construal Level Theory (CLT)** on **proximity** as developed by **Trope and Liberman**:

Construal Level Theory (CLT) and Proximity

Construal Level Theory (CLT), formulated by **Trope & Liberman**, explains how **psychological distance** affects the way individuals mentally represent events, objects, or actions. Psychological distance includes **temporal**, **spatial**, **social**, and **hypothetical** dimensions.

Proximity and Spatial Distance

- **Spatial proximity** (physical closeness or distance) is one of the key forms of psychological distance.
- CLT posits that when something is **spatially near**, individuals tend to construe it at a **low level**—meaning in **concrete, detailed, and contextualized terms**.
- When something is **spatially distant**, it is construed at a **high level**—more **abstract, generalized, and decontextualized**.