

THE EFFECTS OF SOCIAL MEDIA CUSTOMER SERVICE ON BRAND LOVE

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ABSTRACT

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Abstract <p>The rapid rise of social media over the past decades has made it is easy for dissatisfied customers to contact brands and share their experiences, opinions, reviews and concerns instantly with the whole world. Thus, it is no longer possible for companies to hide or ignore customer complaints and requests. This means that the importance of social media customer service in managing relationships with customers is growing as well. However, it has been uncertain how customer service delivered via social media affects on customers' emotions and emotional attachments to brands and if relationships created through social media can lead to preferred outcomes, such as brand love.</p> <p>The aim of the present study is to examine the effects of social media customer service on customer relationships from the perspective of brand love. This relationship is further investigated through moderating the effects of brand trust, social presence and the valence of the service delivery.</p> <p>The study is conducted in the context of telecommunications, and the research is conducted in cooperation with a Finnish telecommunications company. A quantitative approach is selected for the study. The data (N=142) is gathered through an online survey from customers who have previously been involved in a social media customer service encounter with the brand. The data is analyzed by using SPSS Statistics as well as the PLS 2.0 software.</p> <p>This study broadens the view on brand love. Based on the results of this study, interpersonal antecedents (gratitude, partner quality and social support) can be seen as predictors of brand love in the context of social media customer service – as has previously been proved to be the case in more traditional customer service. In addition, this study demonstrates the need for brands to place more emphasis on formulating their brand contact points in social media.</p>	
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<p>Sosiaalinen media on muuttanut kuluttajien ja brändien välistä vuorovaikutusta. Kuluttaja voi tavoittaa brändin sosiaalisen median kanavissa helposti ja julkisesti – palvelusta tai tuotteesta annettu palaute on julkista ja potentiaalisesti miljoonien ihmisten nähtävissä. Samaan aikaan yritysten ja kuluttajien välinen vuorovaikutus esimerkiksi asiakaspalvelun osalta on monilla aloilla siirtynyt ainakin osittain sosiaalisen median kanaviin. Tämän vuoksi on tärkeää ymmärtää, millainen vaikutus sosiaalisessa mediassa tapahtuvalla asiakaspalvelulla ja brändin sekä asiakkaan välisellä vuorovaikutuksella on asiakassuhteeseen.</p> <p>Tämän tutkimuksen tarkoituksena on selvittää sosiaalisessa mediassa tapahtuvan asiakaspalvelun vaikutuksia asiakassuhteeseen brändirakkautta tutkimalla. Näitä vaikutuksia tarkastellaan syvemmin niin, että vaikutusten moderaattoreina toimivat brändiluottamus, sosiaalinen läsnäolo ja palvelukokemuksen onnistuminen. Asiakaspalvelun vaikutusta brändirakkauteen on tutkittu aiemmin lähinnä lähikontaktissa tapahtuvan vuorovaikutuksen yhteydessä, joten tämä tutkimus laajentaa jo hyödynnettyä ja todennettua teoriapohjaa sosiaalisen median ympäristöön.</p> <p>Tutkimus toteutetaan kvantitatiivisena kyselytutkimuksena. Aineisto (N=142) kerätään Suomessa toimivan teleoperaattorin asiakkailta verkkokyselyllä. Aineistoa analysoidaan SPSS Statistics- ja PLS 2.0 -ohjelmistoja hyödyntäen.</p> <p>Tutkimuksen tulokset antavat viitteitä siitä, että brändin edustajan ja asiakkaan välinen vuorovaikutus sosiaalisessa mediassa ennakoii brändirakkauden syntymistä samaan tapaan kuin kasvotusten tapahtuvassa vuorovaikutuksessa on aiemmin havaittu tapahtuvan. Tulokset antavat yrityksille syyn panostaa sosiaalisen median asiakaspalveluun ja sen vuorovaikutuksellisiin elementteihin asiakassuhteen vaalimisen näkökulmasta.</p>	
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1 INTRODUCTION

1.1 Study background

Let's say you have received bad service from a brand and want to let the whole world know about your experience. Just a couple of decades ago, before contemporary communication technology, this would have been a rather difficult task to execute. It has been stated that before the rise of social media, most of the unsatisfied customers did not even try to complain about the bad experiences they had with a brand because the costs of complaining were perceived to be so much greater than the potential benefits (Chebat, Davidow & Codjovi 2005). However, thanks to modern online-based social media tools and sites, it is now possible for practically anyone to express their experiences, opinions and concerns worldwide – with just a couple of casual swipes on a smartphone screen.

The rapid and drastic change in information structures has led the way for a change in power structures as well. It is no longer possible for companies to hide or ignore customer complaints and requests. Thus, it is only natural that a great amount of today's social media content is brand-related conversations produced by customers. Regarding this, Canhoto and Clark (2013) claim that organizations should better comprehend how to handle these brand-related conversations in social media. Moreover, they argue that customers in fact expect and even demand brands to interact with them across different social media platforms. Recently, brands have indeed begun to note the rise of social media and developed the processes needed to communicate with customers on these new digital platforms. Service organizations in particular have been eager to utilize Internet-based communication technology and applications to improve the cost-effectiveness, efficiency, and/or quality of their customer interface operations (Froehle & Roth 2004).

Canhoto and Clark (2013) have discovered that consumers may obtain several benefits from interacting with brands via social media and these benefits can be turned into a marketing advantage for a brand. Therefore, it seems obvious that a great number of opportunities for brands lie in the still unexplored domain of social media. This is one perspective to customer service delivered through social media. As Grégoire et al. (2015) point out, social media has enabled customers to directly access brands and their customer service. Moreover, according to them, customers often perceive communication with a brand via social media to be more convenient than traditional communication channels. Thus, the importance of social media customer service in managing relationships with customers is rapidly growing. It is not surprising that many brands, such as American Airlines, Nike, Apple and McDonald's, have adopted social media channels for the use of their customer service. In addition, as Twitter's launch of a customer service chatbot tool (Adweek 2016) demonstrates, social media platforms have begun to offer advanced tools for companies to better tackle the issue

of social media customer service. All in all, it seems evident that customer service delivered via social media channels is a growing phenomenon and thus needs to be properly investigated.

Customer service has always been about relationships and social media-based customer service makes no exception. With social media, according to customer relationship management studies, relationships between customers and brands can in fact evolve to be even more personalized than before. Thus, it seems reasonable to study the effects of social media customer service from the point of view of relationship quality. In addition, Canhoto and Clark (2013) argue that connecting at an emotional level with users of social media by interacting and bonding socially is crucial for companies that aim at following the guidelines of relationship marketing literature. Hudson et al. (2015) argue that regardless of the recognized significance of social media platforms as communication channels there is still lot to learn how customer service delivered through social media influences customers' emotions and attachments to brands and if relationships created through social media can lead to brand love or other preferred outcomes. Indeed, the present study aims to cover some of this gap by applying the relatively new customer relationship concept of 'brand love' to the context of commercial interaction in social media.

Brand love is a rather novel concept in marketing. It is closely connected with the marketing research tradition of customer-brand relationships. The most established definition comes from Carroll and Ahuvia (2006), who argue that brand love is all about the intensity of the emotional attachment that satisfied customers feel towards a specific brand. As Long-Tolbert and Gammoh (2012) clarify, brand love refers to customers' strong emotions towards a brand. They add that it has been suggested that customers forming deep emotional ties, such as feelings of love, towards brands would respond more intensely to these brands. Moreover, it has been argued that brand love explains and predicts differences in preferable post-consumption behaviors among satisfied consumers (Carroll & Ahuvia 2006). In previous research, brand love has been connected with such outcomes as brand loyalty (Carroll and Ahuvia 2006), positive word-of-mouth (Batra et al. 2012; Karjaluoto et al. 2016), resistance to negative information about the brand (Batra et al. 2012), greater repurchase intentions (Carroll and Ahuvia 2006; Batra et al. 2012) and less price sensitivity (Batra et al. 2012). Pawle and Cooper (2006) even claim that from the point of view of customer relationship marketing the goal should be to achieve customers who are emotionally attached to a brand since this is in fact the most reliable sign of a strong brand. With this perspective in mind, it is easy to understand why scholars have in recent years begun to put more and more emphasis on the concept of brand love as perhaps the strongest emotional attachment a customer can develop towards a brand.

The majority of brand love research has focused on how consumers develop feelings of brand love through interaction with a tangible product. However, as Long-Tolbert and Gammoh (2012) pointed out, brand love has not been researched in a case where the market offering is a service and not a tangible good. Indeed, their very research was the first one to investigate brand love from the point of view of the service domain. The present study will closely follow in

their footsteps in investigating the influence of interpersonal antecedents on brand love in the case of service – particularly customer service. As Long-Tolbert and Gammoh (2012) suggest, the role of service employees is often pivotal in how customers engage with a brand because they may be the only connection customers have to the brand. Therefore, the objective of the present study is highly topical and important.

The present study explores the influence of social media customer service on customer relationships from the perspective of brand love. From this point of view, this study intends to gain a better insight into the development mechanisms of business-to-consumer relationships in the context of social media. According to Whiting and Donthu (2006), previous marketing research concerning customer service has for the most part focused on traditional face-to-face service encounters. They request more research about computer-to-computer service encounters, and the present study will answer their call by examining the results of digitally delivered service encounters.

1.2 Study objective and research questions

The key objective of the present study is to investigate brand love's interpersonal nature in customer service encounters delivered through social media. The additional objective is to gain insight into the roles of the valence of the service delivery, social presence and trust in mediating and/or moderating interpersonal antecedents and brand love.

Consequently, the main research question of the study concerns how interpersonal antecedents and brand love correlate within the context of social media customer service. In addition, the present study aims to find out and determine how exactly this correlation is affected under various conditions – more specifically, when the service encounter is a success/failure and when the social presence of the brand is high/low. Furthermore, another goal of the present study is to explore how the effects of interpersonal antecedents to brand love are mediated through social presence and brand trust.

RQ1: How do the suggested interpersonal antecedents and brand love correlate within the context of social media customer service?

RQ2: How the relationship between interpersonal antecedents and brand love is affected when the brand's social presence is high/low?

RQ3: How the relationship between interpersonal antecedents and brand love is mediated through the brand's social presence and brand trust?

RQ4: How the relationship between interpersonal antecedents and brand love is affected when the service encounter delivered is a success/failure?

The present study has several contributions to customer service and brand love research. Firstly, the study contributes to the current knowledge of brand love by exploring the relationship between interpersonal antecedents and brand love. In addition, the present study investigates brand love from the point of view of the service domain and therefore extends the growing research of brand love. Secondly, the study offers valuable insight into contemporary social media studies by investigating the characteristics of social media as a customer relationship managing platform. Thirdly, the study illustrates customer service-related issues in the context of social media and relationship marketing.

The data of the present study will be collected via a survey from the customers of a Finnish telecommunications company who have previously been involved in a social media customer service encounter with the brand. The selected telecommunications company makes for an interesting and relevant case to investigate because the company actively uses social media channels in delivering customer service. The company has a separate social media orientated customer service team, which is primarily responsible for serving customers on Facebook, Twitter and on the company's own online forum. They also track brand-related online comments and participate in conversations wherever needed. The company's offerings include telecommunications, ICT, entertainment and online services.

1.3 Study structure

The structure of the study is the following. Chapter 2 discusses the theoretical framework for the present study. As for chapter 3, the methodology chosen for the study will be presented. Chapter 4 reports the results of the study, and in chapter 5 the conclusions will be drawn.

2 CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK AND HYPOTHESES GENERATION

The theoretical background of the present study will be introduced in the following chapter. In addition, hypotheses of the present study will be presented.

The research model of the present study is presented in Figure 1. The research model is based on previous literature and it suggests that the relationship between interpersonal antecedents (gratitude, partner quality, and social support) and brand love is positive within a context of social media customer service (H1). In addition, it suggests the relative influence of the interpersonal antecedents on brand love will vary depending on the volume of perceived social presence of the brand (H2). Thirdly, the model suggests that the relative influence of the interpersonal antecedents on brand love will vary depending on the volume of perceived social presence of the brand (H3). The fourth and final hypothesis suggests that the effects of the interpersonal antecedents on brand love will mediate through the perceived social presence and trust in the brand (H4).

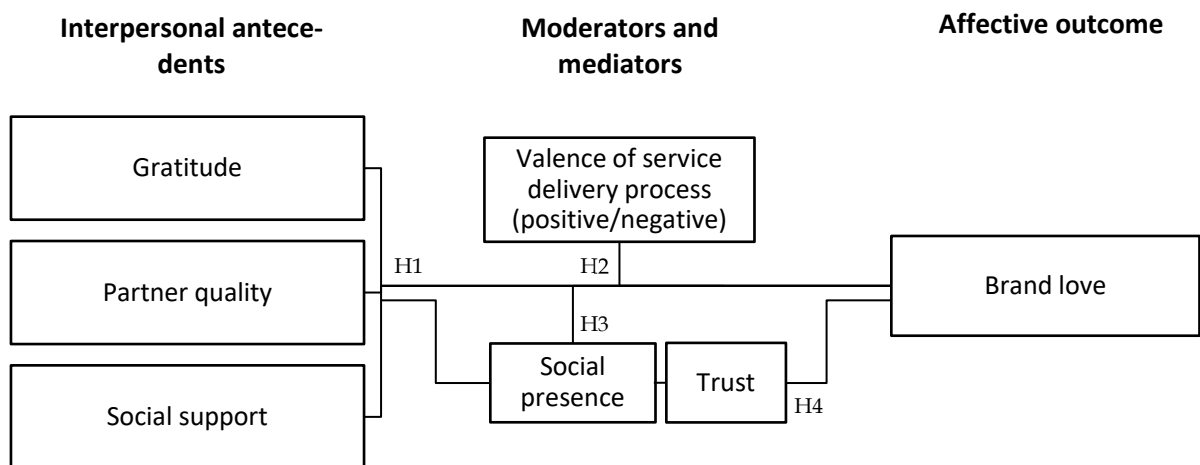


FIGURE 1 Study design

2.1 Interpersonal antecedents of brand love

The previous research concerning brand love has mainly focused on explaining brand love from the point of view of perceived characteristics of the brand and its product category (see Carroll & Ahuvia 2006). Thus, most of the emphasis has been put on investigating how interaction with tangible products effect on customers in developing a close, love-like, relationship with a brand (e.g. Ahuvia et al. 2008; Nobre 2011; Batra et al. 2012). However, as is evident from CRM-literature, servitization is a major trend in contemporary business. This stands for a shift from companies creating value through selling a product to instead creating value through services. Therefore, the importance of exploring how brand love takes shape in case of service-based customer-brand relationships is evident. This view is also supported by Long-Tolbert and Gammoh (2012), whose study was the first to apply brand love theories into the domain of services. They emphasize how important it is to investigate what kind of role service encounters play in shaping a brand love relationship arguing that in the case of companies offering services instead of tangible products the only link between a company and its customers is often a service employee. Moreover, they claim that by focusing on tangible products only limited amount of information on brand love can be gathered. Instead, they recommend that more attention should be granted to investigating how brand love is influenced by the interpersonal attributes linked to intangible services.

The present study owes much to the research conducted by Long-Tolbert and Gammoh (2012) in terms of theoretical background and research design. By closely reviewing existed literature in the fields of marketing and social psychology they form a model of brand love's interpersonal antecedents relevant in the context of service encounters. The aim of their study is to explore how these suggested interpersonal antecedents of brand love function in a service domain. They end up proposing that the interpersonal antecedents of brand love consist of such dimensions as gratitude, partner quality, and social support. By studying these three interpersonal attributes in a service context with a between-subjects experiment, they find empirical support for the proposition that when speaking service relationships, these three interpersonal antecedents certainly play an important role as drivers of brand love. Therefore, the proposed set of interpersonal antecedents of brand love seems to be valid in studying service encounters' effects on brand love, and thus the very perspective will be adopted in the present study as well.

Next, the concept of brand love will be thoroughly presented. Following that, the interpersonal antecedents of brand love will be introduced and the significance of the role of service delivery process to brand love will be discussed. As a result, the theoretical framework for investigating brand love in a service domain will be created.

2.1.1 Brand love

The concept of brand love is constructed on the basis of marketing literature on consumer-brand relationships on the one hand and social psychology literature concerning personal relationships on the other (Long-Tolbert & Gammoh 2012). Due to this deep connection to the field of psychology, brand love has been in the previous research often linked to theories from psychology. Thus, many of the terms and concepts used in brand love research are borrowed from the phenomenon of interpersonal love (Carroll and Ahuvia 2006). Especially Sternberg's (1986) triangular theory of interpersonal love is at the core of the research stream of brand love.

In their groundbreaking study, Carroll and Ahuvia (2006, 81) define brand love as "the degree of passionate emotional attachment a satisfied consumer has for a particular trade name". To further scrutinize their definition, passion and emotional attachment can be understood as the two most essential elements of brand love (Kaufmann et al. 2016). The majority of scholars approach the concept of brand love by proposing different factors included in brand love and then identifying the characteristics of brand love (Kauffmann et al. 2016).

Brand love has been distinguished from such somewhat similar phenomena as liking (Vernuccio et al. 2015), satisfaction (Carroll & Ahuvia 2006), brand involvement (Batra et al. 2012; Karjaluoto et al. 2016) positive brand attitude (Carroll & Ahuvia 2006; Karjaluoto et al. 2016) and brand attachment (Batra et al. 2012). According to Karjaluoto et al. (2016), although there are similarities between brand love and other dimensions of a consumer-brand relationship such as positive brand attitude or satisfaction, brand love is however distinct from these phenomena by indicating a stronger relationship between a brand and a consumer.

The previous research offers several options for defining and measuring brand love. The present study will follow the example of the study of Long-Tolbert and Gammoh (2012) and use Sternberg's (1997) triangle theory of love as a foundation for brand love. The triangle theory of love consists of three psychological dimensions: intimacy, passion, and decision commitment.

The view of brand love as an interpersonal love has been criticized by Batra et al. (2012), who claim that although consumers can truly love a brand, the love in question is not similar to interpersonal love. According to their findings, consumers tend to consider brand love as a less important relationship compared with interpersonal love. In addition, brand love relationship doesn't have in it the elements of altruistic (consumers are mainly interested in what the brand can do for them and not the other way around) and reciprocity (a brand doesn't love a customer back, as is the case in interpersonal love where the respondents of love in turn return their love through helpful behaviors and experiencing love toward each other's). Thus, according to Batra et al. (2012), brand love and interpersonal love are not equivalent in terms of relationship strength. In addition, they argue that brand love should be understood more as a perception of relationship than as an emotion. However, the findings of Bartra et al. appear to be worthy as far as tangible products are concerned. Moreover, as Fournier (1988)

suggests, personification of a loved object enable it to be perceived as an active side in the relationship and to reciprocate in the emotional bond. Even if a product fails to be perceived as an active side of a customer-brand relationship, it doesn't mean that service encounter can't succeed in that task. Therefore, the theory of interpersonal love, regardless of its apparent limitations, can still be considered as a useful framework for studying brand love in service domain's context.

In the previous research, several antecedents and outcomes of brand love have been detected. The self-expressiveness of the brand (Carroll & Ahuvia 2006; Karjaluoto et al. 2016), hedonic product type (Carroll & Ahuvia 2006), trust (Karjaluoto et al. 2016) and brand identification (Albert & Merunka 2013) are among the dimensions that have been found to explain customer's love-like relationship with a brand. In turn, brand love has been connected such outcomes as brand loyalty (Carroll and Ahuvia, 2006), positive word-of-mouth (Batra et al. 2012; Karjaluoto et al. 2016), resistance to negative information about the brand (Batra et al. 2012), greater repurchase intentions (Carroll and Ahuvia 2006; Batra et al. 2012) and reduced price sensitivity (Batra et al. 2012). Thus, making customers love your brand seem to be a valuable asset in business.

2.1.2 Interpersonal antecedents in service context

If the object of love is a service instead of a product, consumers' emotional attachment towards brands will mainly derive from their interactions with service employees (Long-Tolbert & Gammoh 2012). Thus, the importance of service employees in creating brand love is significant. Moreover, as Long-Tolbert and Gammoh (2012, 394) state, "service employees physically, psychologically, and emotionally engage with customers to produce the service". This engagement is carried out through such things as the tone of voice, overall behavior, and verbal or non-verbal communication (Long-Tolbert & Gammoh 2012).

Long-Tolbert and Gammoh (2012) outlined and studied three interpersonal dimensions influencing the brand love in service encounters: gratitude, partner quality, and social support. According to them, these three interpersonal antecedents are the "dominant psychological influences in the development of brand love for consumer services" (Long-Tolbert & Gammoh 2012, 394) and thus play a big role in shaping consumers' positive emotional responses toward a brand and create such approach tendencies that foster the development of deeper and stronger relationships. According to the findings of their study, a significant correlation exists between the given three interpersonal antecedents and brand love. Hence, it can be argued that gratitude, partner quality and social support constitute a valid set for anticipating brand love. Based on preceding discussion, the present study wishes to confirm the positive effect of these three interpersonal antecedents on brand love and suggest the following:

H1: The relationship between gratitude, partner quality, social support and brand love will be positive.

Next, these suggested interpersonal antecedents of brand love will be presented and discussed.

Gratitude

Long-Tolbert and Gammoh (2012, 394) describe gratitude as “a thankful appreciation for what one has received”. Gratitude includes the idea of one receiving a gift from another. The gift means in this case something which is high-cost to the person who gives the gift, valued by the receiver, is given benevolently, and doesn’t include any needs for recompense. Thus, gratitude is a good indication of positive interpersonal emotion felt towards the other. Moreover, Tsang (2006) argues that regardless of gratitude’s possible positive interpersonal outcomes, it is at its foundation above all interpersonal emotion.

In the field of social psychology, gratitude has been found to increase a feeling of connectedness to other people (McCullough et al. 2002), form a feeling of dependency (Emmons & Crumpler 2000), and increase the probability that the beneficiary likes the benefactor (Watkins et al. 2006). Moreover, in the marketing literature, Machleit and Mantel’s (2001) study reveals that consumers feel more appreciation toward a brand when they perceive the experience with brands more successful. This links to the concept of gratitude by suggesting that if a company success in delivering certain activities, such as customer service, a customer feels grateful for those actions carried out by the company. It has also been found that there is noteworthy correlation between gratitude and repurchase intentions on the one hand and between gratitude and positive word-of-mouth on the other (Soscia 2008).

Long-Tolbert and Gammoh (2012) conclude that if a company acts towards its customers in a way that is costly to the company and valued by customers, it may end in customers feeling positively about the company.

Partner quality

Fournier (1998) has researched partner quality in his seminal research on consumer-brand relationships. To him, partner quality represents one of the key dimensions in the formation of brand relationship quality (BRQ). According to him, partner quality is an interpersonal dimension which, in case of a consumer-brand relationship, is closely connected to the way consumers judge and interpret the performance of a brand in relational exchange (Fournier 1998).

As Long-Tolbert and Gammoh (2012, 394) declare, from the interpersonal point of view partner quality can be defined as “the brand’s capacity to interact with customers in ways to promote qualities such as freedom, equity and equality that are highly characteristic of an actively co-produced relationship”. To put it other way, a brand’s ability to develop and sustain beneficial customer relationships and acting within these relationships in a responsible, reliable customer-centric way, is the key to being evaluated as a quality partner (Long-Tolbert & Gammoh 2012).

Partner quality's significance in explaining brand love was first noticed by Aaker et al. (2004) in their study concerning brand partners and brand relationship quality. They argue that partner quality is an essential factor in building a consumer-brand relationship and, more specifically, is closely connected with brand love. The brand love study of Long-Tolbert and Gammoh (2012) confirms Aaker et al.'s findings, thus ensuring that it is valid to study partner quality as an interpersonal antecedent of brand love.

Social support

Concerning service context, social support can be understood as a brand's actions to improve the well-being of its customers and to provide all the necessary help for its customers (Long-Tolbert & Gammoh 2012). Long-Tolbert and Gammoh (2012, 395) emphasize that to be perceived as social support, a brand must "enhance the general well-being of customers as human beings rather than what it does to advance their status as exchange partners engaged in mutually beneficial market transactions".

The previous research mainly in the field of social psychology has pointed out some positive relational outcomes of social support. According to Schumaker and Brownell (1984), to support someone socially can lead to emotional happiness and healthiness on the half of the supported. Long-Tolbert and Gammoh (2012) argue that acting towards a customer in socially supportive manner can produce positive experience which leads to strong affective responses towards the brand. From the point of view of interpersonal love, social support implies the capability of making others feel valued and loved, which is obviously a significant part of the construction of love (Trobst 2000).

2.1.3 Valence of the service delivery process and brand love

According to Long-Tolbert and Gammoh (2012), service delivery performance can be described in the binary terms of success or failure. In addition, it can be argued that the total amount of positivity of a given service experience lays the foundations for building a strong relationship with a customer (Long-Tolbert & Gammoh 2012). According to Parasuraman et al. (1991), the success of a service delivery is closely connected with the expectations of a customer: successful service delivery is in question when the expectations of the customer are met whereas service delivery failure is in question when the customer experience that the company's core service has failed due to poor service. Regarding the development of brand love, it has been argued that failures in service delivery lead to customers who love a brand less intensely, see the company as less promising partner, and feel less gratitude and happiness, compared with those customers who experienced successful service delivery (Long-Tolbert and Gammoh 2012).

Long-Tolbert and Gammoh's (2012) found in their study concerning brand love in the context of service delivery, that the relationship between brand love and its interpersonal antecedents is differentially influenced by the negative/positive service encounter. Moreover, they found the relationship between

brand love and interpersonal antecedents to be asymmetrical across different service delivery process conditions. It was evident that had the service delivery process been positive, the importance in predicting brand love was greatest with gratitude and partner quality. However, if the service delivery was a failure (negative), gratitude's and partner quality's significance disappeared, and brand love was significantly predicted only by social support. (Long-Tolbert and Gammoh 2012)

Hence, the success of the service delivery seems to play an interesting role in affecting the forming mechanics of brand love in service encounter situations. However, Long-Tolbert and Gammoh's (2012) research concentrated solely on face-to-face service encounters, where the present study aims to research the same phenomenon in an online dimension. Therefore, examining whether the outcome of service delivery process has similar kind of effects on the relationship between brand love and its interpersonal antecedent is meaningful when comparing these two set-ups. Thus, the second hypothesis of the present study is the following:

H2: The relative influence of the interpersonal antecedents on brand love will vary between a positive and negative service delivery process.

2.2 Building customer relationship through social media

According to Han et al. (2016), building and managing strong customer relationships in social media is increasingly important in terms of marketing efforts and sustainability. This is due to the swift growth of social networks and the followed possibilities for consumers to communicate with wider audience. They claim that when a company fails to manage its customer relationships in social media, it may lead, in addition to obvious dissatisfaction among customers in question, to bad reputation among a broader public as well. Thus, managing customer relationships in social media includes both private and public dimensions.

Plenty of aspects exist concerning building customer relationship in social media. On the one hand, the main reason why so much emphasis has been put during recent years on managing customer relationship is the rise of CRM (*customer relationship management*) and its follower, social CRM. On the other hand, the special characteristics of social media interaction need to be considered in order to get a clearer picture of the matter in question.

2.2.1 Social CRM

Social CRM is a fresh concept created from the basis of the long-existed customer relationship marketing. Customer relationship management (CRM) evolved in the early 1990s as a result of growing amount of customer data possible for companies to collect and take advantage of. At first, CRM was considered as interesting research subject and practical application due to major paradigmatic change

in the field of marketing. The predominant point of view, where the focus of marketing was on transactions between customers and companies, had to stand down and new mindset emphasizing the importance of managing customer relationships instead of transactions, gain more ground. Later, the idea of customer-centrism at the core of CRM faded out a bit. However, it seems that a new wave of customer-centric thinking, where the potential of CRM is being used for the benefit of customers, is rising again. (Saarijärvi et al. 2013)

Given the plethora of CRM definitions, it is not reasonable to go through them all in the present study. Instead, it is adequate to state, that CRM is a more or less customer and relationship-oriented way of thinking, organizing and practicing contemporary marketing. It is interwoven to the subject of the present study by emphasizing the importance of creating and cultivating meaningful relationships with customers. In addition, interaction with customers is important part of CRM and social media customer service seems to offer a great way of deliver this interaction.

As Song and Hollenbeck (2015) claim, companies need to pay attention to platforms such as Facebook and Twitter to properly manage their relationships with customers. According to Canhoto and Clark (2013) it is important for brands interacting with customers in social media to develop a deep emotional and social bond with them in order to follow customer relationship marketing's objectives of moving focus from specific transactions to relationships. Thus, social media customer service offers on the one hand tools for companies to solve customer's troubles and share useful information in a quick and agile way. On the other hand, it provides great possibilities for bonding emotionally with customers. As Song and Hollenbeck (2015) point out, social media is the right medium to build authentic relationships with customers.

According to the research conducted by Canhoto and Clark (2013), contrary to the beliefs in previous marketing research, customers expect companies to be present and active in social media by interacting with consumers. Moreover, customers in fact invite companies to interact with them, for example in Twitter by tagging company's username into a tweet. Their findings suggest that by utilizing social media a brand can ensure it is not missing a great opportunity in developing emotional bonds with customers.

Moreover, Canhoto and Clark (2013) emphasize that customers may see social media as a channel to effectively interact with a company. Therefore, social media may aid customers by solving customers' problems, offering access to useful information, making customers perceive themselves valued, and by providing opportunities for engagement. In addition, Canhoto and Clark (2013, 539) claim that "[social media] has huge potential in customer service and can support the development of long-term relationships".

2.2.2 The interactive nature of social media

Kietzmann et al. (2011) argue that social media is about highly interactive platforms which allows people and different communities to discuss, share, and modify content created by users. In addition, social media customer service is

basically about companies bringing their service closer to customers, interacting with customers in a neutral zone, so to say. Therefore, social media customer service is by definition customer centric.

As Hudson et al. (2015) point out, there is a clear correlation between social media-based brand-to-customer relationships and positive word of mouth. Similar kind of outcomes have been detected in the field of brand love as well. Therefore, it should be in the great interest of brand managers to develop strong relationships with customers in social media. It is in the scope of the present study to investigate in which manner social media interaction effects to the perceived brand love, i.e. brand-customer relationship quality.

According to Walther (1996, 33), computer mediated communication (CMC) is interpersonal when “users have time to exchange information, to build impressions, and to compare values”. As Walther declares, interpersonality occurs similarly in CMC environment as in face-to-face situations. Walther adds that compared to face-to-face situations, CMC is no less personal – if users are expecting to have a long-term relationship. Thus, although CMC have been (and perhaps still is) thought to be a ‘cold’ or task orientated way of communicating Walther has proved already in mid-90s that this is not the case. According to him, CMC “allow us selectively to minimize or maximize our interpersonal effects” (Walther 1996, 33). Therefore, it seems reasonable to assume that the same interpersonal antecedents of brand love that were tracked to exist in face-to-face customer service by Long-Tolbert and Gammoh (2012) would exist in CMC (and more specifically in social media) customer service as well.

2.2.3 Social presence in social media

The most acknowledged definition of social presence belongs to Short et al. (1976, 65), who state that social presence is “the degree of salience of the other person in the interaction and the consequent salience of the interpersonal relationships”. Moreover, they describe social presence through the level of awareness of other person perceived in a communicative interaction. Concerning social presence in online context, Han et al. (2016, 948) define social presence as follows: “When applied to an online context, the goal of making people feel that a company is there for them can be represented as social presence”. As Gunawardena (1995) clarifies, social presence can also be understood as a scale which tells you how ‘real’ a person come across in mediated communication. Gooch and Watts (2015) have added to the theorizing of social presence by stating that social presence is a short-term feeling that can be experienced as one is communicating with another. Walther (1992) states that decline in the level of social presence makes the communication and messages included less personal.

At the beginning, social presence theories dealt mainly with video/audio teleconferencing (Short et al. 1976). Later, social presence theories have been extend to consider computer mediated communication (Walther 1992) and specifically communication taking place in social network sites (Han et al 2015; Han et al. 2016). The vast amount of research concerning social presence has been conducted in relation to mediated/distance learning (e.g. Rourke et al. 1999; Swan &

Shih 2005; Tu & McIsaac 2002) and computer science or technology design (e.g. Walther 1992). In a commercially driven research social presence has been researched particularly in connection with e-shopping (e.g. Cui et al. 2010; Holzwarth et al. 2006). However, it is important to find out the effects of social presence in a customer service situation as well.

Some researchers have claimed that social presence is solely a quality of a medium (see Short et al. 1976; Han et al. 2015; Han et al. 2016). Seen from this perspective, as Han et al. (2016, 947) note, social presence is “related to a medium’s capacity to transmit socially rich information, such as communicators’ facial expressions and non-verbal social cues”. Other researchers claim that social presence should in fact be understood as a user’s perception of the medium. Biocca and Harms (2002, 30) state that “social presence cannot really be conceptualized as a fixed property of medium. Rather, it is best conceptualized as a property of individual perceptions of mediated others, that likely fluxates during interactions, tasks, and individual differences”. Therefore, social presence can be cultivated or enhanced through different activities among CMC participants. To understand social presence as not only a quality dimension of a given medium, but from a relational communication perspective, is important because, as Gunawardena (1995) argues, this relational perspective encourages the research to examine functional and social factor as well. It can be concluded that social presence depends on the medium and the communicator.

Social presence has been proved to have an impact on the gratification received from social connection (Han et al. 2015), trust (Gefen & Straub 2003, Choi et al. 2011), reuse intention (Choi et al. 2011), and feeling of closeness (Gooch & Watts 2015). Within the field of learning, it can be stated that social presence is an important factor in improving the effects of instructions given by a teacher in technology mediated distance classes (Gunawardena 1995). Choi et al. (2011) also found out that with respect to online recommender systems, social presence affects user attitudes towards the given recommender system and user involvement in purchasing and decision-making.

Some antecedents of social presence have also been mapped. Tu (2000) states that social context, online communication and interactivity are the main dimensions behind social presence. Social context consists of elements such as task orientation, privacy, topics and social relationship. As for online communication, it includes elements such as communication anxiety and computer expertise. Interactivity consists of the performed activities and used communication styles in computer-mediated communication. As for Han et al. (2016), they categorized the antecedents of social presence to three different categories based on the previous research: user characteristics, interaction characteristics, and medium characteristics. By user characteristics, they mean that individual users’ personal skills and characteristics such as personality, motivation, and usage experience can have an influence on how those users perceive social presence. Interaction characteristics refer to the notion that social presence can be increased by technology supported social interactions. The characteristics of the given medium can also be seen to affect social presence by providing certain environmental conditions for social presence to be formed. In their previous research, Han et

al. (2015) found that communication's privacy and responsiveness affect social presence. Choi et al. (2011) argue that social presence consists of intimacy and immediacy, where intimacy stands for the closeness users feel towards other users alike and immediacy stands for the perceived psychological distance between similar users. Moreover, intimacy dimension includes the scale based on the comparison between interpersonal and mediated and immediacy dimension includes the scale based on the comparison between asynchronous and synchronous (Song & Hollenbeck 2015). According to Gunawardena (1995), the level of immediacy can be influenced for example by adopting an attitude of informality and kinship when communicating. The results of the study of Ogara et al. (2014) suggests that social presence is also affected by user experience, social influence, and perceived media richness.

Short et al. (1976) argue that the significance of social presence is higher in case of the low level of service recovery compared with the high level of service recovery. This means that the degree of social presence itself doesn't imply how good or bad that medium or company's presence is. Moreover, as Song and Hollenbeck (2015) state, the increase in complexity and ambiguity of the service encounter situation leads to increase in social presence's significance related to communication outcomes. If a customer contacts a company requiring a response in a straightforward issue, social presence will not influence the communication outcome as much as in the case when responding to the customer contains complex and non-routine communication activities from the company. Thus, the importance of producing a high level of social presence in social media customer service is evident to companies, because customers tend to use social media especially as a channel to voice problems and seeking quick answers to their more or less complex problems (Song & Hollenbeck 2015). To be able to solve these problematic situations in a promptly and quick manner can be a mission impossible for many companies. However, even though the desired service delivery outcomes cannot always be acquired, companies can communicate in empathetic, human and interpersonal way (i.e. the high degree of social presence), which in turn leads to positive communication outcomes. On the other hand, one can argue that building a close relationship (i.e. brand love) with a customer is a complex task, which therefore cannot be achieved without the sufficient level of social presence.

According to Gunawardena (1995), it is possible to cultivate social presence in computer mediated learning situation through the development of the learning environment, behavior of the participants and moderation. Thus, as Tu (2000) argues, social presence should be understood as a medium's subjective quality. This holistic view of the creation of social presence allows one to understand social presence as a something that can be enhanced by not just the development of the medium and the related technology, but by interpersonal communication and interaction. As Tu (2000, 27) claims, "social presence is required to enhance and foster online social interaction". Thus, it could be argued that the way a firm's customer service acts in social media affects the perceived amount or quality of social presence, which, in turn, influences development of a customer-brand relationship.

As Song and Hollenbeck (2015) argue, by adding human warmth and empathy to a company's communication with a customer through different verbal cues (e.g. using 'I' instead of 'we') increases company's social presence and affects positively to customer's attitudes and feelings towards a company. This view is closely connected with the idea of interpersonal antecedents of brand love provided by Long-Tolbert and Gammoh (2012). They note that, in the context of service, service employees' tone, demeanor, and verbal (and nonverbal) communication are the building bricks of the brand and customer-brand relationship. Through gratitude, partner quality and social support, which they determine to be the interpersonal antecedents of brand love in the context of service, a brand can shape its customer emotional reactions towards the brand. Moreover, these three interpersonal antecedents can be understood to be the key factors in producing a human, warm, and empathetic image of the brand during a service encounter. However, unlike in Long-Tolbert's and Gammoh's study about face-to-face service encounters, it is important in the present study to pay attention to company's social presence as well. Long-Tolbert and Gammoh (2012) observed only the direct effects from interpersonal antecedents to brand love. In the case of online mediated communication (such as social media customer service), it is relevant to consider the indirect effects as well and especially consider the importance of social presence as a mediator between interpersonal antecedents and brand love.

Social presence is linked to interpersonal antecedents by the human warmth and empathy dimension that is so essential to the interpersonal antecedents (Long-Tolbert & Gammoh 2012) but which has also been mapped to be closely related to social presence as well (Song & Hollenbeck 2015). Thus, it seems reasonable to think that interpersonal antecedents of brand love correlate with the perceived strength of brand's social presence. From the perspective of the present study, it is important to note the significance of the interactivity in the development of social presence. Tu (2000, 30) argues that "[w]hen an immediate response is expected and is not received interactivity is less and social presence decreases". Also, the interpersonal antecedents are all based on the interaction delivered between company and customer. Thus, the way a company's customer service interacts with customers in social media can play an important role in the creation of the company's social presence in each social network. This, in turn, can greatly affect customer-brand relationship building.

Social presence is also closely related to relationship building and emotional outcomes of an interpersonal interaction such as brand love. The high degree of social presence is said to influence the relationship forming between the parties (e.g. a company and a customer) in question (Han et al. 2016; Gooch and Watts 2015). Han et al. (2016) state that users' perception of the social presence of a given company in social media is created through certain antecedents within the interaction between users and the company's social media account. The affective and cognitive outcomes of the social presence formed during this interaction then influence the customer-brand relationship building. Gooch and Watts (2015) argue that high levels of social presence support the relationship through the increased feelings of closeness. Therefore, it can be argued that at least some

effects from interpersonal antecedents to brand love are mediated through social presence.

On the other hand, social presence can also be seen to moderate interpersonal antecedents' effects on brand love. Whereas the degree of social presence can be interpreted as how 'real' the other person is perceived during communication, it can be argued to have a role in signifying the correlation between interpersonal antecedents and brand love. Moreover, if a company's social media customer service employee is during the service encounter seen more as a real person, it makes sense to think that the significance of the interpersonal antecedents is greater in comparison with situation where the company's response in social media is perceived to come from a non-human entity. Thus, the present study further suggests that:

H3: The relative influence of the interpersonal antecedents on brand love will vary depending on the volume of perceived social presence of the brand.

It makes an interesting case to study social presence in social media customer service situations. Social media customer service is still mainly text-based communication; most of the social media channels offer a texting opportunity to users to connect with each other (e.g. Facebook Messenger). Text-based communication also suits very well to consumers contacting brands mainly because it is time-efficiency and ease of use. However, the possibilities of using non-verbal cues and communicating empathy and intimacy are very limited in text-based communication, which in turn makes it quite a challenging form of communication for companies and service providers to master. Moreover, social presence is the key factor in the process of building customer-brand relationships and therefore it is important to research how social presence is expressed in social media customer service situations. As Song and Hollenbeck (2015, 614) note, when using text-based communication, companies "must rely on well-crafted verbal cues to convey social presence and richness". Through the increased degree of social presence in social media brands can present themselves as more human-like entities to customers, thus meaning that the conditions for the interpersonal relationship building (and specifically brand love) are better. Therefore, the relevance of social presence should be considered when the brand love in a social network is concerned.

Short et al. (1976) measured the volume of certain mediums' social presence with the semantic differential technique, where they asked experimental subjects to rate the communication medium on several seven-point bipolar scales. The scales were such as IMPERSONAL---PERSONAL or COLD---WARM. Since Short et al.'s study the definition of social presence has slightly changed, and different measurement items have been developed. In the present study, Gefen and Straub's (2003) and Han et al.'s (2016) five-item Likert scale measurement will be utilized.

2.2.4 Brand trust

Without trust, building a strong customer-brand relationship is rather difficult. According to Morgan and Hunt (1994), trust is a crucial part of any relational exchange. It can be stated, based on Lau and Lee (1999), that trusting someone indicates willingness to develop positive behavioral intentions towards the trustee. Moreover, Morgan and Hunt (1994, 23) define trust “as existing when one party has confidence in an exchange partner’s reliability and integrity”. In addition, trust is often linked with the aim of decreasing risks and uncertainty (Lau & Lee 1999; Matzler et al. 2008). Matzler et al. (2008) even note that there is an agreement across different disciplines that uncertain and risky situation is in fact the prerequisite for trust to exist. Therefore, trust is a way of minimizing risks and vulnerability. Karjaluoto et al. (2016) explain brand trust as the affective experience of a customer towards a brand which in turn results in a customer to rely on the brand and its performance. This means that a consumer’s brand trust is developed during the experiences and encounters with a brand (Karjaluoto et al. 2016).

Brand trust leads customers to form a strong emotional bond with a brand (Chaudhuri & Holbrook 2001). This, in turn, has several positive outcomes (Karjaluoto et al. 2016) and is one of the key factors in the development of brand love (Albert et al. 2008; Albert & Merunka 2013).

From the present study’s point of view, it is relevant to consider brand trust as a significant part of the research model. Trust connects interaction (i.e. interpersonal antecedents), partner evaluation (i.e. social presence), and relationship building (i.e. brand love). It has been presented that social presence is an antecedent of trust (Gefen & Straub 2003, Choi et al. 2011), which in turn has a great impact on relationship building between a brand and a customer (Morgan & Hunt 1994; Karjaluoto et al. 2016; Chaudhuri & Holbrook 2001). Therefore, it is reasonable to research the role of brand trust in the context of social media customer service while linked to brand love and social presence. In addition, it seems safe to estimate that some effects from interpersonal antecedents via social presence on brand love are mediated through brand trust. Based on these arguments, the fourth and final hypothesis of the present study is the following:

H4: The effects of the interpersonal antecedents on brand love will mediate through the perceived social presence and trust in the brand.

3 METHODOLOGY

Methodology concerns finding the answers to the formulated research questions (Metsämuuronen 2006, 71). The research method is a technique for collecting the data needed to study the research questions (Bryman & Bell 2007, 40). Therefore, methodological choices should always be based on the objectives of the study (Hirsjärvi et al. 2005, 128). The following chapter discusses the methodological choices of the present study. First, the quantitative research method used in this research is presented. Further, the case selection is explained and finally, data collection and analysis processes are discussed.

3.1 Quantitative research

The aim of the present study is to follow theorized hypotheses about relationships between different theoretical constructs and reach a conclusion from a group of observations. Therefore, the research design of the present study is quantitative and explanatory by nature. An explanatory study aims at finding causal relationships that explain the reasons behind an observed phenomenon (Hirsjärvi et al. 2005, 129).

Research methods are commonly distinguished between quantitative and qualitative methods. According to Bryman and Bell (2007, 28), despite the faced criticism, quantitative/qualitative distinction is useful in classifying and defining different research methods. The basic distinction between these two methodological tendencies is that quantitative research concerns measurements whereas qualitative research does not (Bryman & Bell 2007, 28). Thus, quantitative research emphasized quantification in the both collection and analysis of the data. Quantitative research also put emphasis on the testing of theories by containing a deductive stance to the relationship between research and theory. In addition, quantitative research strategy incorporates the practices and norms of the natural scientific model and thus incorporates a view of social reality as an external, objective reality (Bryman & Bell 2007, 28).

The use of quantitative research in explanatory study provides several benefits. First, quantitative research is based on measurement, which in turn allows a researcher to achieve the better reliability and validity of the study. Furthermore, the results of a quantitative study should be possible to generalize the specific findings beyond the individual cases that constitute the sample. The aim of a quantitative research is rarely only to describe things as they are but instead to explain why things are as they are. Therefore, one of the main benefits of quantitative research is the examining the causes of a phenomenon – it allows to examine causal relationships. In addition, quantitative research should be quite easy to replicate. (Bryman & Bell, 168–171)

In addition to the several methodological benefits of quantitative research a great deal of criticism has presented as well. First, quantitative research is said to be not able to notice the dissimilarities between the social and natural world. Moreover, the measurement process of quantitative research is criticized for possessing “an artificial and spurious sense of precision and accuracy”, meaning that the connections between the measures and the concepts they are supposed to explain are not real but assumed. In addition, quantitative research is criticized for relying too heavily on instruments and procedures which in turn alienates the research from everyday life: for example, in case of a survey study, respondent’s knowledge for answering the questions may not be adequate for the survey to measure things it is supposed to measure. Overall, quantitative research is said to constitute a static view of a social world that is in fact separate from the people – individuals – who are ones who make up that world. (Bryman & Bell, 173–174)

The quantitative research model was employed in the present study because it offers the necessary methodical tools to adequately grasp the research problem and formulated research questions.

3.2 Data collection and practical implementation

A survey is a commonly used quantitative research strategy where standardized questions are asked at the same time from a great amount of people (Hirsjärvi et al. 2005, 125; 184). According to Hirsjärvi et al. (2005, 186), a quantitative survey suits well for gathering data about facts, behavior, knowledge, values, attitudes, beliefs, and opinions. The disadvantage of the survey is the possibility that respondents misunderstand questions or lack the knowledge to needed to answer the question (Hirsjärvi et al. 2005, 174).

The present research was implemented by an online survey. Such an online survey has various advantages, such as quickness, possibility to gain large amount of data at once, effortless access to collected data, good data quality and low price (Birks & Malhotra 2007, 274). However, online surveys have some drawbacks too. Most of all, it is impossible to make sure that all the respondents have answered the questions with a careful and honesty (Hirsjärvi et al. 2005, 184). In general, surveys’ methodological disadvantage is the possibility that respondents misunderstand questions or lack the knowledge to needed to answer the question (Hirsjärvi et al. 2005, 174).

The data of the study was collected via online survey from customers who had previously participated in a customer service encounter on the case company’s social media channels. The survey was implemented during the time between 16.3.-5.4.2017. In total, 142 responses were received.

The data was gathered using two social media sources: 1) Facebook (targeted and sponsored post) and 2) Twitter (targeted and public tweets). The survey was delivered to respondents via the case company’s social media channels. A post including a short motivation text with a hyperlink to the survey was

posted on the company's Facebook page and targeted to such a customer's who had been previously in touch with the company. The Facebook post was sponsored with a view to gathering more coverage within the targeted group. The Facebook post reached over 3700 potential respondents. On Twitter, a short direct tweet with a motivation text and link to the survey was tweeted and targeted to customers who contacted the company during the time window. In addition, a similar public tweet was tweeted two times from the company's customer service account. Customers were motivated to take the survey by raffling an OnePlus 3 mobile phone. Taking the survey took approximately 15 minutes. The survey was conducted in cooperation with the case company and the data was collected using SurveyPal software.

3.2.1 The questionnaire

A questionnaire is one of the most common tools used to conduct a survey (Davies 2007, 82). All the items of the present study's questionnaire were measured through formerly validated scales, i.e. all the theory related questions were taken from prior peer-reviewed journals. Therefore, the items used in the questionnaire were already tested and built around the theory in use. Because the questionnaire was targeted to Finnish customers and all the journals where the items were taken from were written in English, the questions needed to be translated into Finnish. During the translation, close attention was paid to preserve the original meanings of the questions. However, wording was slightly changed in a couple of questions for ensuring a good fit of the items in this context.

The questionnaire constituted of 8 different question groups and in total of 49 questions or statements. In addition, two optional contact information questions related to the raffle were provided at the end of the questionnaire. The questionnaire began with 12 demographic and background questions asking basic information about the respondents' gender, age, customership, social media habits, and latest customer service encounter. At the end of the questionnaire three questions related to the questionnaire's validity were asked.

Brand love was measured using 11 items adopted from Sternberg (1997) and Long-Tolbert and Gammoh (2012). In case of interpersonal antecedents, items measuring gratitude were based on Tsang (2006) and Long-Tolbert and Gammoh (2012), items measuring partner quality were adopted from Aaker et al. (2004) and Long-Tolbert and Gammoh (2012), and the items relating to social support were adopted from Trobst (2002) and Long-Tolbert and Gammoh (2012). Social presence was measured with 5 questions adopted from Gefen and Straub (2003) and Han et al. (2016). As for trust in company, the items were based on designs presented by Newell and Goldsmith (2001) and Han et al. (2016). In addition, the valence of service delivery was measured with two simple questions about the delivery of the latest customer service encounter in social media.

All the multiple-indicator items presented in the questionnaire were measured on 1-7 Likert scale (1 = totally disagree, 7 = totally agree). The items were mixed for minimizing common method bias. In addition, questions were

provided in small groups of approximately 4 to 8 questions per one page. All the questions were compulsory to attempt. All the items of the questionnaire are provided the appendix.

3.3 Data analysis

The collected data was transferred from SurveyPal to IBM SPSS Statistics for closer analysis. The data was first prepared by cleaning it from the items not having relation to the present study. At this point, data was also checked for every item and this way it was ensured that there had not been occurred any data lost during transfer. Because of the compulsory nature of the questions, no missing values existed in the data. In addition, randomly selected cases were checked between Webropol and SPSS for making sure that the values were correct in SPSS and that cases included rational answers.

After preparations, basic statistical analysis was conducted to the data, i.e. frequencies and distribution percentages were calculated. Explanatory factor analysis was then performed using SPSS and SmartPLS to seek possible factor structures and to see if the data includes items which could be unfavorable to the following analysis. The purpose of explanatory factor analysis is to categorize collected data and responses into distinct groups, latent factors (Metsämuuronen 2006). Explanatory factor analysis is meant to conduct without the presumptions about the factor structure (Karjaluoto 2007). Thus, with factor analysis, even numerous separate items can be composed to smaller set of factors.

Moreover, hypotheses were tested with a confirmatory factor analysis carried out using partial least square (PLS) structural equation modeling with SmartPLS (Ringle et al. 2015). According to Metsämuuronen (2006, 617), structural equation modelling (SEM) suits well for analyzing the relationships between different factors. Confirmatory factor analysis on the other hand can be understood as a subcategory of structural equation modelling. Confirmatory factor analysis is a specific method that differs from explanatory factor analysis by concentrating on confirming whether the given data supports the model and hypotheses constructed based on a chosen theory (Metsämuuronen 2006, 615).

4 STUDY RESULTS

In this chapter, the results of the study will be presented. First, demographic and background information are scrutinized. Next, the descriptive statistics of the data, the explorative factor analysis, the measurement model, and the structural model are explained.

4.1 Demographic and background information

The majority of all 142 respondents were male (62%). The largest age group was adults aged 36 to 45. This group made up 31% of the total number of respondents. The second largest age group (26,1%) consisted of 26–35-year-old respondents. Only 2,8% of the respondents were under 19-year-old. The duration of the customer relationship varied heavily. Most of the respondents had been customers to the company for one to six years (32,4%). Only 3,5% of the respondents were not customers at all. Interestingly, as much as 15,5% of the respondents had been customers for longer than 16 years. However, the significant majority of the respondents (76,1%) had contacted customer service more seldom than monthly and according to the survey only 3,5% of the respondents were in touch with the customer service on a daily basis. The reason for vast majority of the latest customer service contacts was either question (55,6%) or fault situation (40,8%). In addition, positive feedback was the reason for contacting customer service in 9,2% of the cases and negative feedback 8,5% of the cases. Most of the respondents (71,8%) used social media 1–4 hours per day. 21,1% of the respondents used social media more than 5 hours per day. These results are presented in more detail below in the Table 1.

TABLE 1 Demographic and background factors of the respondents

	N	%
Gender		
Female	54	38
Male	88	62
Total	142	100
Age		
15–18	4	2,8
19–25	14	9,9
26–35	37	26,1
36–45	44	31

(continues)

TABLE 2 (continues)

46-55	19	13,4
56-65	14	9,9
Over 65	10	7
Total	142	100
Customer duration		
Under 1 year	12	8,5
1-6 year	46	32,4
7-11 year	30	21,1
12-16 year	27	19
Over 16 year	22	15,5
Not a customer	5	3,5
Total	142	100
Frequency of contacts in customer service		
Daily	5	3,5
Weekly	4	2,8
Monthly	25	17,6
Seldom than monthly	108	76,1
Total	142	100
Reason for latest customer service contact		
Question	79	55,6
Fault situation	58	40,8
Positive feedback	13	9,2
Negative feedback	12	8,5
Other	16	11,3
Total	178	100
Frequency of daily use of social media		
Less than 1 hour per day	10	7
1-2 hours per day	52	36,6
3-4 hours per day	50	35,2
5-6 hours per day	19	13,4
More than 6 hours per day	11	7,7
Total	142	100

At this point, it seems sufficient to say that the majority of the respondents (64,8%) agreed or totally agreed that the questions of the questionnaire were easy to understand. However, 45,0% of the respondent agreed or strongly agreed that the length of the questionnaire was appropriate whereas 37,4% of the respondents disagreed or totally disagreed to that very same question.

4.2 Descriptive stats of the data

Means concerning the items of the present study seemed to be rather high. Means were without exception above 4,0 on a Likert scale 1-7. High figures are especially visible in items concerning gratitude (GRAT), partner quality (PQ), and social support (SS) which together are supposed to constitute interpersonal antecedents of brand love. In addition, means of the items concerning the valence of the service delivery (VSC) were notably high as well. (Table 2)

However, responses did not distribute evenly. All the standard deviations were quite high, approximately from 1,5 to 2,0. High standard deviations imply that the responses are not focused very close to the means (Karjaluo 2007). The skewness figures were all negative which means that the distribution of the responses is distorted to the left (Karjaluo 2007). However, only five items (GRAT1, GRAT2, GRAT3, VSC1, VSC2) had lower than -1,0 skewness value which in turn implies that the skewness is not particularly strong. In addition, it is prominent that several items had negative kurtosis values indicating distributions having flatter peaks than the normal distribution (Karjaluo 2007). (Table 2)

TABLE 2 Item details

ITEM	MEAN	STD. DEVIATION	SKEWNESS	KURTOSIS
BL1	5,19	1,628	-0,932	0,197
BL2	5,22	1,589	-0,870	0,248
BL3	4,77	1,643	-0,604	-0,208
BL4	4,33	1,725	-0,214	-0,767
BL5	4,54	2,037	-0,360	-1,035
BL6	4,78	1,693	-0,487	-0,443
BL7	4,08	1,957	-0,047	-1,070
BL8	4,26	1,927	-0,202	-1,034
BL9	4,20	1,881	-0,268	-0,942
BL10	5,20	1,699	-0,941	0,148
BL11	4,92	1,740	-0,679	-0,304
GRAT1	5,67	1,640	-1,273	0,832
GRAT2	5,54	1,649	-1,260	0,925
GRAT3	5,51	1,753	-1,185	0,597
PQ1	4,94	1,558	-0,475	-0,059
PQ2	5,13	1,656	-0,873	0,251
PQ3	4,95	1,686	-0,723	-0,051
PQ4	5,13	1,671	-0,879	0,203
PQ5	4,92	1,682	-0,581	-0,402
PQ6	4,75	1,590	-0,586	0,016

(continues)

TABLE 2 (continues)

SP1	5,08	1,648	-0,831	0,175
SP2	4,80	1,599	-0,527	-0,310
SP3	4,41	1,625	-0,322	-0,317
SP4	5,06	1,621	-0,925	0,496
SP5	4,91	1,589	-0,645	0,049
SS1	5,27	1,529	-0,896	0,639
SS2	4,52	1,588	-0,298	-0,375
SS3	5,16	1,704	-0,885	0,075
TC1	4,94	1,692	-0,588	-0,381
TC2	4,75	1,621	-0,495	-0,295
TC3	4,83	1,718	-0,594	-0,407
TC4	4,75	1,626	-0,495	-0,426
VSC1	5,47	1,725	-1,205	0,594
VSC2	5,39	1,697	-1,132	0,545

4.3 Factor analysis

At first, the factor analysis the correlation between each of the items was examined. According to Blaikie (2003), items which correlate very strongly (above 0,90) with any of the other items can cause trouble for further analysis. Blaikie also suggests that items having very low coefficients with other items should be excluded from the future analysis (Blaikie 2003). Most of the items in the present study correlated nicely between each other as the lowest coefficient value was 0,405. There was, however, two cases where the correlation between two items slightly exceeded 0,90, but as these items were to measure the same factor (SP and VSC), it was decided that none of the items should be eliminated during this phase.

Moreover, as is suggested by Metsämuuronen (2006, 588), both Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin's (KMO) and Bartlett's tests were conducted. KMO values above 0,90 are considered an excellent base for the analysis (Karjaluoto 2007) and in this case the result of the KMO value was 0,964. In addition, Bartlett's test rejected the null hypotheses with the sig. value being below 0,01 and thus indicating that there was enough correlation between the variables within a factor (Karjaluoto 2007). Thus, the results of these tests implied rather good preconditions for further analysis.

In addition, communalities were estimated to see how strongly indicators loaded on a specific factor. It is generally recommended that communality values should be more than 0,30 (Karjaluoto 2007). Communality values varied between 0,577–0,865 indicating that all the items loaded strongly on their main factor.

Next, an exploratory factor analysis was performed with SPSS. As Karjaluoto (2007) suggests, principal axis factoring and varimax rotation were used. Varimax rotation minimizes the number of variables loading heavily on a factor

and thus makes it easier to interpret the result as every factor has a smaller number of important variables (Karjaluoto 2007). As is usually the case in exploratory factor analysis, the number of potential factors was not fixed beforehand (Eigenvalue 1 criterion). At this point, however, problems began to arise. Factor analysis was driven multiple times but only two factors were extracted which is quite a small number considering that based on the theory in use the model was supposed to be comprised of seven different factors. It was right away evident that items related to company trust and brand love loaded on one factor (with the exception of BL1 which was due to this later excluded from the analysis) and then basically all the rest of items loaded on another factor. All primary loadings were 0,630 or above. However, there were several cross-loadings where loadings were above 0,300. The two factors formed during exploratory factor analysis ("Other" and "Brand love") explained 77,67% of the total variance cumulative as the first factor explained 43,20% of the total variance and the second factor explained 34,47% of the total variance. The results of factor analysis are reported in a more detailed manner in Table 3.

TABLE 3 Factor loadings

ITEM	FACTOR 1	FACTOR 2	COMMUNALITIES
GRAT3	0,861		0,849
GRAT2	0,854		0,809
GRAT1	0,847		0,807
SP1	0,834		0,827
VSC2	0,817		0,806
PQ4	0,813		0,865
SP4	0,812		0,804
VSC1	0,801		0,761
SP5	0,797		0,812
PQ3	0,785		0,829
PQ2	0,775		0,697
SS1	0,748		0,645
SS2	0,719		0,691
SP3	0,717		0,732
PQ1	0,712		0,577
SP2	0,708		0,692
SS3	0,681		0,782
PQ5	0,662		0,673
PQ6	0,650		0,618
BL1	0,649		0,784
BL5		0,886	0,849
BL8		0,868	0,825
BL9		0,867	0,825
BL4		0,847	0,845

(continues)

TABLE 3 (continues)

BL7	0,835	0,800
BL11	0,810	0,841
TC3	0,796	0,873
BL10	0,756	0,740
TC4	0,731	0,821
BL6	0,718	0,819
TC1	0,698	0,764
TC2	0,688	0,809
BL3	0,631	0,766
BL2	0,630	0,773

4.4 Measurement model

After conducting exploratory factor analysis and examining factor loadings it was evident the proposed model of the present study would not be a good fit. However, the data was transferred to SmartPLS and composed following the model based on the theory presented in earlier chapters of the present study. In other words, confirmatory factor analysis was executed through partial least squares structural equation modeling.

The analysis was first conducted with all proposed items, although it was obvious that some of the items were supposed to leave out of the conclusive model. Only the two items related to the valence of the service were left out beforehand because these items had meaning only from a moderating point of view which was not important at this phase of the study.

As is presented in the Table 4, values concerning reliability and validity were very good (the lowest Cronbach's alpha value was 0,86, the lowest composite reliability value was 0,915, and the lowest AVE value was 0,750).

TABLE 4 Cronbach's Alphas, composite reliabilities and AVEs of the original model

FACTOR	CRONBACH'S ALPHA	COMPOSITE RELIABILITY	AVE
Antecedents of brand love	0,969	0,973	0,750
Brand love	0,974	0,977	0,793
Brand trust	0,961	0,971	0,894
Gratitude	0,953	0,970	0,915
Partner quality	0,939	0,952	0,768
Social support	0,861	0,915	0,782
Social presence	0,956	0,966	0,850

However, as was expected, correlations between different factors were way too high, as is presented in Table 5. Therefore, the proposed model was not a good

fit. Because of this, it was acknowledged that the original model based on the theory could not be tested with partial least squares structural equation modeling.

TABLE 5 Latent variable correlations of the original model

FACTOR	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Antecedents of brand love (1)	1,000						
Brand love (2)	0,812	1,000					
Brand trust (3)	0,835	0,938	1,000				
Gratitude (4)	0,944	0,719	0,736	1,000			
Partner quality (5)	0,980	0,801	0,833	0,880	1,000		
Social support (6)	0,928	0,794	0,798	0,872	0,904	1,000	
Social presence (7)	0,953	0,814	0,824	0,866	0,907	0,901	1,000

After it was confirmed that the proposed model would not be suitable for analyzing through partial least squares structural equation modeling, the only option was to modify items, factors and/or the whole model to find a more analyzable version. Items and factors were excluded, modified or standardized in a manner presented next.

Because items related to brand love and brand trust were so heavily loading on the same factor (see Table 3) it was decided to drop out the brand trust related items altogether from the model. Then, brand love related item BL1 was excluded because it didn't primarily load on the same factor as the other brand love items. Furthermore, items BL2, BL3, and BL6 were excluded because of their high cross-loadings values. After these modifications, the brand love factor was fairly coherent and ready to be used in further analysis. However, there were still severe problems with the factor structure. Based on factor loadings there was only one factor along with the brand love factor. Basically, all the rest of the items loaded on this other factor which, despite several attempts, could not be divided into factors following the theory in use. Thus, to form a somewhat usable model it was necessary to settle for the so called two factor model. In other words, the factor named "Other" consisted of items related to gratitude, partner quality, social support, and social presence. Furthermore, items PQ1 and PQ6 were additionally excluded in SmartPLS since this modification reduced the correlation between the two factors of the modified model.

All these procedures resulted in a model of two factors where brand love is explained by a factor including almost all the rest of the items. All items left loaded well to these two factors constituting a model far more analyzable compared to the original one. As we can see in Table 6, correlations between the model's two factors were suitable. In addition, all relationships were significant as t-values exceeded the recommended 1,96 and thus achieved statistical relevance. This model was then tested in a following manner.

TABLE 6 Latent variable correlations of the modified model

FACTOR	Brand love	Other
Brand love	1,000	
Other	0,735	1,000

The internal consistency reliability of the modified model was measured by using both Cronbach's alpha and composite reliability tests, as is recommended (Metsämuuronen 2006, 66; Hair et al. 2014, 102). According to Metsämuuronen (2006, 65–66), both values indicate the internal consistency of a model. In addition, according to Hair et al. (2014, 101), composite reliability is more recommendable indicator in partial least squares structural equation modeling. Cronbach's alpha values of the modified model exceeded 0,90 for both factors implying good reliability for the model as values above 0,80 are usually seen as a sign of good reliability (Cortina 1993). Also, the composite reliability values of both factors exceeded the required 0,70 (Hair et al. 2014, 102) indicating high reliability. The average variance extracted (AVE) measure was then used to examine convergent validity. Since the AVE values of both factors exceeded 0,50 it could be stated that the construct explains more than half of the variance of its indicators (Hair et al. 2014, 103). Detailed results of these tests are presented in Table 7.

TABLE 7 Cronbach's Alphas, composite reliabilities and AVEs of the modified model

FACTOR	CRONBACH'S ALPHA	COMPOSITE RELIABILITY	AVE
Brand love	0,971	0,976	0,854
Other (GRAT, PQ, SS, SP)	0,979	0,776	0,776

4.5 Structural model

Usually in this chapter, the hypotheses of a study would be tested using structural model evaluation. With the structural model the relationship between latent variables can be examined and explained. While building a structural model one should consider both the sequence of the constructs and the relationships between them. These 'primary issues' represent the hypotheses and their relationship to the theory which is being tested which makes them critical to the concept of modeling. (Hair et al. 2014., 33)

However, as was presented in the previous chapter, the original model of the present study was not a good fit – although it was built on theory concerning brand love. Consequently, it is impossible to test the following hypotheses.

H1: The relationship between gratitude, partner quality, social support and brand love will be positive.

H2: The relative influence of the interpersonal antecedents on a brand love will vary between a positive and negative service delivery process.

H3: The relative influence of the interpersonal antecedents on a brand love will vary depending on the volume of perceived social presence of the brand.

H4: The effects of the interpersonal antecedents on a brand love will mediate through the perceived social presence and trust in the brand.

Thus, although it can be seen from Figure 2 that the path coefficients of the original model are somewhat high and it would be tempting to speculate with these values, none of these hypotheses were accepted as such.

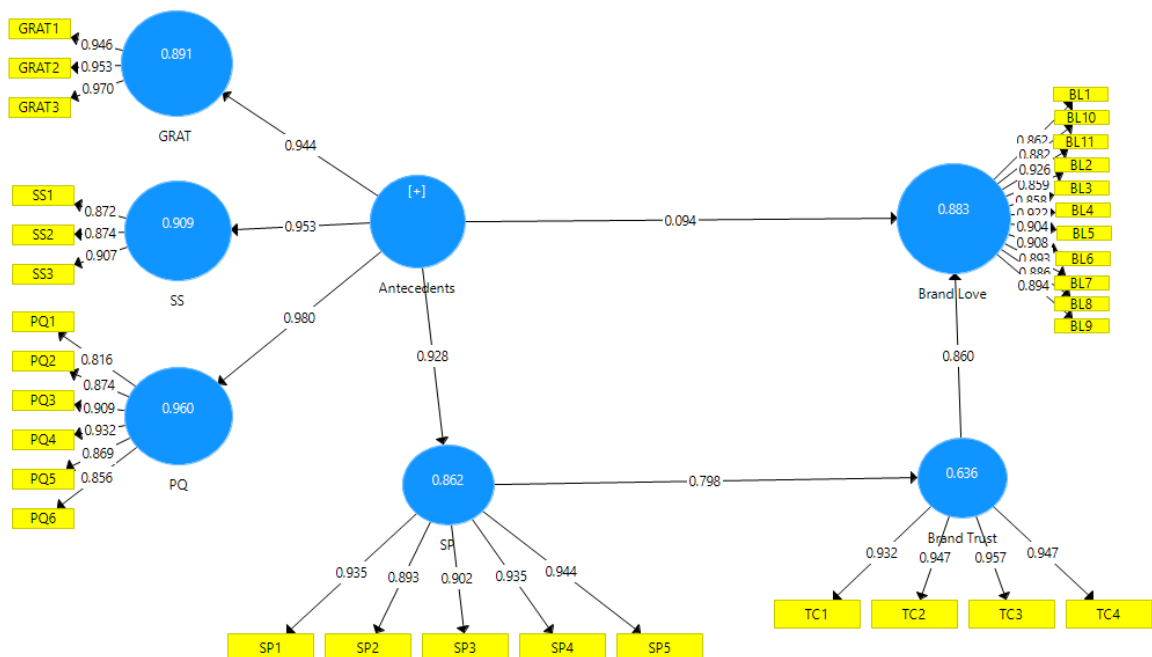


FIGURE 2 The structural model based on theory

Instead, in the light of earlier analyses, it seems adequate to merely state that everything there was to test in the present study was this very simplified model consisting of just two factors, as is seen in Figure 3. Next, the structural model of the modified model is scrutinized.

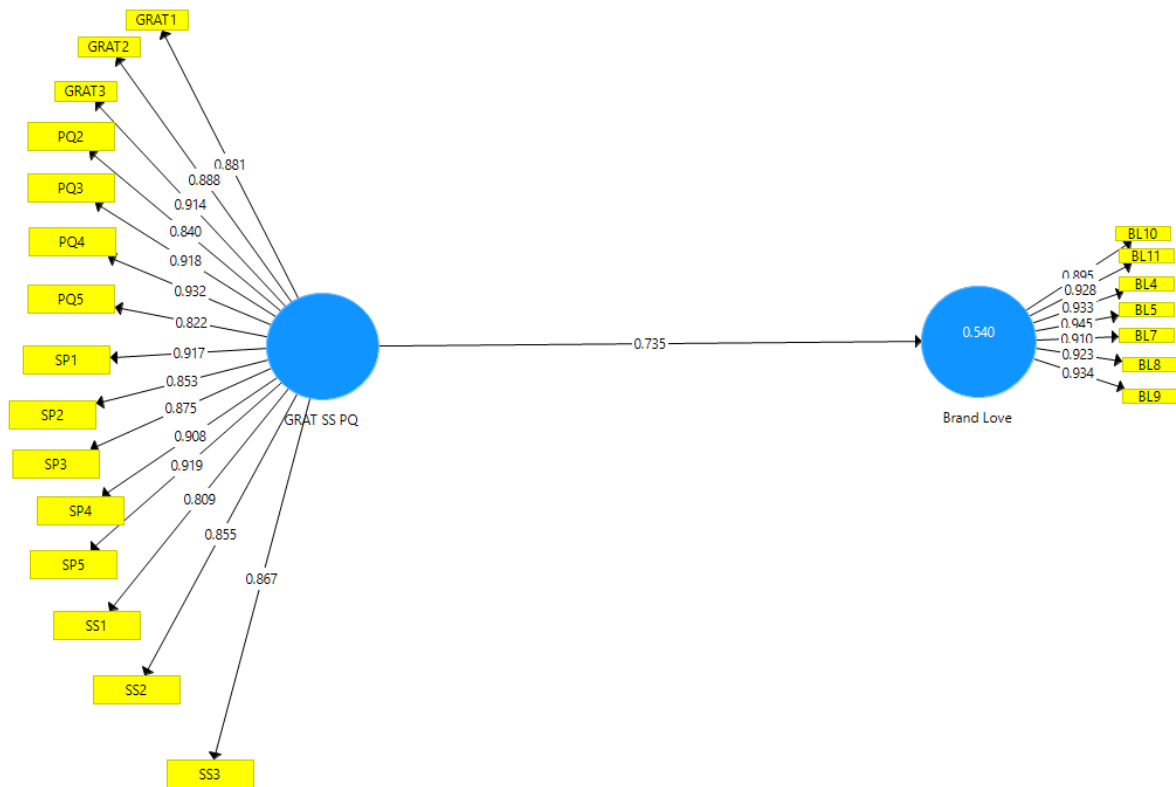


FIGURE 3 The structural model based on factor analysis

4.5.1 Direct effects

From the modified model, it can be seen that the factor consisting of items related to the interpersonal antecedents of brand love (gratitude, partner quality, and social support) and the perceived social presence of the brand predict brand love quite heavily ($\beta = 0,735$, $p \leq 0,01$). Path coefficients indicate the strength of the relationships between the latent variables in the structural model. If path coefficient values exceed 0,20, they are thought as significant. (Hair et al. 2014, 86, 93) In other words, 73,5% of the variance of brand love is explained through the other factor of the model.

Along with the path coefficient it is important to examine the coefficient of determination, ergo R^2 value. Considering the present study, the combined effects of the model explained 54,0% ($R^2 = 0,540$) of the variance of brand love. R^2 value ranges from 0 to 1 and the higher the value, the better the model's predictive accuracy (Hair et al. 2014, 175). The predictive accuracy of the model can be thus understood as at least average, since according to Hair et al. (2014, 175), in researches focusing on marketing issues R^2 values of 0,50 are considered as moderate.

4.5.2 Moderating effects

One of the hypotheses of the present study stated that the relative influence of the interpersonal antecedents on brand love will vary between a positive and negative service delivery. Although the original model was declared as not fitting for further testing the moderating effects of the valence of service delivery were examined. First, it appeared that the more positive the perceived service delivery had been, the more interpersonal antecedents explained brand love. However, this effect was not statistically significant ($p < 0,05$).

Next, the relative influence of the interpersonal antecedents was considered. It turned out that the valence of the service delivery had statistically significant positive effect on gratitude and partner quality but not on social support. This implies that the way the influence of the interpersonal antecedents on brand love is constructed indeed depends on the perceived valence of the service delivery. Thus, these findings would have supported the hypothesis in question (H2).

5 DISCUSSION

In this final chapter of the present study, the empirical findings are concluded in relation to the previous studies. In addition, the research questions are answered and managerial implications are proposed. Moreover, the present study is evaluated by its reliability and validity, and the limitations of the research are discussed along with presenting the opportunities for future research.

5.1 Theoretical contributions

Brand love is a novel marketing concept constructed on the premise of marketing literature on consumer-brand relationships and social psychology literature concerning personal relationships (Long-Tolbert & Gammoh 2012). As Long-Tolbert and Gammoh (2012) clarify, brand love refers to customers' strong emotions towards a brand. In recent years, scholars have begun to put more and more emphasis on the concept of brand love as a strong emotional attachment a customer can develop towards a brand. Thus, the importance of brand love and its composition are acknowledged not only in academic but also in managerial marketing discussions.

While the majority of brand love research has focused on how consumers develop the feelings of brand love through interaction with a tangible product, the purpose of the present study was to investigate brand love from the point of view of the service domain and thus extend the research on brand love. The influence of social media customer service on brand love was chosen as the point of view for the present study. This perspective was intended as a way to gain better insight into the development of the mechanisms of business-to-consumer relationships in the context of social media.

The main objective of this research was to investigate the interpersonal nature of brand love in customer service encounters delivered through social media. Thus, the study was concerned with how interpersonal antecedents and brand love correlate within the context of social media customer service. The additional objective was to gain insight into the roles of the valence of the service delivery process, social presence and trust in mediating and/or moderating interpersonal antecedents and brand love. The present study aimed to find out and determine how this correlation is affected under various conditions - more specifically, when the service encounter is a success/failure and when the social presence of the brand is high/low. Furthermore, another aim of the present study was to explore how the effects of interpersonal antecedents are mediated through social presence and brand trust to brand love.

The following research questions were formulated on the basis of the presented research problems:

- *How do the suggested interpersonal antecedents and brand love correlate within the context of social media customer service?*
- *How the relationship between interpersonal antecedents and brand love is affected when the service encounter delivered is a success/failure?*
- *How the relationship between interpersonal antecedents and brand love is mediated through the brand's social presence and brand trust?*
- *How the relationship between interpersonal antecedents and brand love is affected when the brand's social presence is high/low?*

The main result of the present study supports the view which was presented in the research conducted by Long-Tolbert and Gammoh (2012): gratitude, partner quality and social support play an important role in driving brand love in service relationships. The present study extended this view by noting that these same interpersonal antecedents are valid predictors of brand love in the context of social media customer service as well. Thus, answering the first research question of the present study on one hand confirms the results of the previous research and on the other hand extends this theoretical construction to a new environment, that is, social media. Altogether, interpersonal antecedents proposed by Long-Tolbert and Gammoh (2012) seem to be relevant predictors of brand love both in face-to-face and online customer service encounters.

According to Long-Tolbert and Gammoh (2012), the relationship between brand love and its interpersonal antecedents is differentially influenced by the negative/positive service encounters. Somewhat similar results were evident in the present study as well. It became evident that the more positive the service delivery had been, the more interpersonal antecedents seemed to explain brand love. Moreover, it turned out that the valence of the service delivery had a statistically significant positive effect on gratitude and partner quality but not on social support. In light of the present study, the way the influence of interpersonal antecedents on brand love is constructed depends on the perceived valence of the service delivery. These findings comply with the results presented by Long-Tolbert and Gammoh (2012).

In addition, the present study aimed to examine the relationships between interpersonal antecedents and the brand in light of its high/low social presence and the way the relationship between interpersonal antecedents and brand love is mediated through the brand's social presence and brand trust. However, because of the unfit of the original structural model, these research questions could not be answered. Nevertheless, the path coefficients from interpersonal antecedents via social presence and brand trust to brand love are seemingly high, as presented earlier in Figure 2. Perhaps these findings indicate that brand love is indeed linked to its interpersonal antecedents through social presence and brand trust. However, as was stated, this is only a speculation as the proposed model could not be tested with partial least squares structural equation modeling.

All in all, the results of the present study support the hypotheses, although these hypotheses could not be tested in the proposed way. It seems certain that brand love can be explained with the dimensions chosen for this research model. Solely for this the results are interesting as they support the views presented in earlier brand love research.

The present study has several contributions to the present brand love theories. Firstly, the study contributed to the existing knowledge of brand love by exploring the relationship between interpersonal antecedents and brand love. In addition, the present study investigated brand love from the point of view of the service domain and therefore extended the growing research on brand love. Secondly, the study offered insight into contemporary social media studies by investigating the characteristics of social media as a customer relationship managing platform. Thirdly, the study illustrated customer service-related issues in the context of social media and relationship marketing.

5.2 Managerial implications

The managerial purpose of this study was to examine the conditions of engaging customers in a more effective way through social media customer service and thus possibly increasing customers' overall value. In addition, this study aimed at giving managers insight into how customer service encounters in the context of social media can be valuable opportunities for building strong relationships with customers. All these goals were achieved at least moderately as the study shed light on how brand love is constructed in a social media environment.

These findings serve as encouragement to brands to put more emphasis on how they formulate their brand contact points in social media, for example, in customer service encounters. As has been presented in this study, social media customer service is an effective way to build emotionally loaded relationships with customers. It could even be hypothesized whether social media customer service can be an almost direct substitute to face-to-face encounters in terms of interpersonal dimensions. Combined with the fact that organizing social media customer service is much more effective than traditional face-to-face customer service, this would mean that brands exploiting social media customer service can obtain a head start in engaging their customers emotionally with the brand.

In light of this study, it is evident that interpersonal dimensions such as gratitude, partner quality and social support along with the social presence of the brand have a great impact on perceived brand love in the context of social media. If a customer's interaction with a brand's social media customer service employee is seen as positive in terms of the interpersonal dimension, there is a better chance that the customer will be emotionally engaged with the brand in question. Thus, brands should emphasize such methods of interaction in their social media customer service procedures which give customers a sense of gratitude, partner quality and social support.

In general, the present study broadens the view of brand love not only as a concept but also as a sign of a strong brand. Pawle and Cooper (2006) claim that from the point of view of customer relationship marketing the goal should be to achieve customers who are emotionally attached to a brand since this emotional attachment is the most reliable measure of a strong brand. The findings of this study can hopefully help managers utilize brand love more effectively from the point of view of brand management.

5.3 Evaluation of the research

In evaluating the present study, both reliability and validity should be considered. According to Metsämuuronen (2006, 64), reliability refers to the repeatability of a study, whereas validity indicates if a study truly concerns the issues it is intended to concern. Furthermore, the quality of research design can be evaluated through four dimensions: construct validity, internal validity, external validity and reliability (Yin 2014, 45–46). Next, the present study will be evaluated through these four dimensions.

Construct validity indicates whether the correct operational measures have been chosen for the concepts in question (Yin 2014, 46). According to Yin (2014, 46), it is crucial to define specified concepts and then relate them to the objects of the study and to recognize operational measures that match the utilized concepts. In formulating the original hypotheses of the present study, previous theories with hypotheses and research questions of a similar kind were carefully considered. In addition, all the items and measures used in the present study were adopted from renowned peer-reviewed studies. However, as was stated in chapter 4.4, these items correlated between each other too heavily, which led to abandoning the original research model. Thus, the construct validity of the original model could not be tested through the average variance extracted (AVE), the Fornell-Larcker criterion or cross loadings, to mention a few valid tests (Hair et al. 2011). The new model modified on the basis of the conducted factor analysis did, however, pass all these tests.

At this point it is appropriate to speculate why the correlation between the various factors exceeded the acceptable level and why the items did not load on factors as was expected. One of the most evident reasons is the size of the sample. As only 142 responses were achieved, the items and factors could not be measured as accurately as the proposed model would have demanded. Another reason could be the similarity between the different dimensions of the model. Brand trust, brand love, social presence and interpersonal antecedents are, theoretically speaking, close to each other, which (combined with the small sample size) resulted in heavy cross-loadings and high correlations. Metsämuuronen (2006, 64) has stated that theoretically similar items should correlate more than theoretically dissimilar items. All the items presented in this study have a strong theoretical basis, and thus expectation was for them to load on the formulated factors

as anticipated. This kind of outcome is unfortunate but, in the end, somewhat acceptable as the present study is a master thesis level study.

The purpose of the internal validity as a commonly used measure of a study's validity is to investigate the causal relationships (Yin 2014, 47). The causality of the constructs in this study is based on findings and suggestions from previous research, which is a firm reason for making these causal assumptions. Furthermore, although the present study is not an experimental study and therefore probably not the most suitable one for testing causality (Metsämuuronen 2006, 64), there is a solid basis for acknowledging the internal validity and theoretical justification of the present study.

External validity refers to how generalizable the results of a study are (Metsämuuronen 2006, 64). The sample in this case was modest in size, as only 142 responses were received. There are several possible reasons for this. From a motivational perspective, the questionnaire could have been considered as too long or boring, or perhaps the prize was not as attractive as it should have been. Also, using only the teleoperator's Facebook and Twitter pages to deliver information about the survey may have in the end affected the number of potential participants. However, just by looking at the demographic and background information, it is apparent that, overall, the data was distributed quite evenly and major anomalies did not exist. Therefore, apart from the sample's smallish size, these results are interpretable, at least in the Finnish business to customer context. All in all, the answers received can differ from the results of other studies conducted in other contexts and/or cultures.

As was stated, reliability concerns the repeatability of a research. If a researcher follows the same procedures as described in the research, thus conducting a corresponding case study, the results and findings should be similar (Yin 2014, 48). To reach good reliability, detailed documentation during research is required (Yin 2014, 48). The process of the present study was carefully explained in its entirety from the theoretical background to the utilized methodology, the study approach and the final findings.

5.4 Limitations of the research

The present study has several limitations. At first, it is important to take note of the fact that the original research model could not be tested. Thus, care should be exercised when making conclusions based on the results presented. This is by far the most significant limitation of the present study.

In addition, there are some limitations regarding the methodology. As the data was gathered through an online survey, which was distributed through social media, it is not completely certain that all respondents had been involved in a social media customer service encounter with the teleoperator. Furthermore, it is not possible to make sure that the respondents answered every question honestly or that they had fully understood every question. As Hirsjärvi et al. (2005, 174) point out, a survey's methodological disadvantage is the possibility that

respondents misunderstand questions or lack the required knowledge to answer the questions. That is the case with the present study as well.

It should also be noted that because the survey was published in Finnish, all the questions adopted from previous literature needed to be translated. Although the profound meaning of every item was considered during the translation process, there is always the possibility that the translation is not completely equivalent to the original.

Also, the specific setting of this study has its limitations. The results of the present study concern only relationships between one brand and its customers. Therefore, it is difficult to know if the mechanisms of brand love and its antecedents would work similarly had the brand been different. In addition, it is noteworthy that only two social media platforms (Facebook and Twitter) were included in the present study, and thus there may be a difference in how brand love is composed, for example, on Snapchat or Instagram.

5.5 Future research

As brand love can be understood as the most reliable measure of a strong brand (Pawle and Cooper 2006), it should be considered as one of the most prominent research subjects in the field of marketing. In light of the present study, it is sufficient to say that there are many possible directions for future research concerning brand love and/or social media customer service.

First, a similar study with a bigger sample size and more cases (i.e. brands) would be a start in confirming and expanding the views presented in this study. The findings of the present study hinted at interpersonal antecedents proposed by Long-Tolbert and Gammoh (2012) seemingly being relevant predictors of brand love in online customer service encounters. However, more research is required about the topic in order to verify these findings. In addition, future research could focus on examining how the effects of interpersonal antecedents are mediated to brand love through concepts such as brand trust. It would also be interesting to see how the composition of brand love differentiates between various brands (offering different kind of services and/or products).

Whiting and Donthu (2006) have requested more research about online customer service encounters. With this study, some progress has now been made in understanding social media customer service, but many questions are still waiting to be answered. As people communicate with brands more and more via social media, the importance of understanding the mechanisms behind the interpersonal dimensions of social media customer service continues to increase. Therefore, it would be interesting to see future research exploring the relationship between social media customer service encounters and electronic word of mouth as well.

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APPENDIX 1

Survey in English

YOUR GENDER?

Female/Male

YOUR AGE?

15-18

18-25

26-35

36-45

46-55

56-65

More than 65

HOW LONG HAVE YOU BEEN A CUSTOMER TO THE BRAND?

Less than one year

2-6 years

7-11 years

12-16 years

More than 16 years

WHICH OF THE FOLLOWING PRODUCTS OF THE BRAND YOU USE?

Product 1

Product 2

Product 3

Product 4

Product 5

Product 6

Product 7

I don't use any of these products

HOW OFTEN DO YOU CONTACT THE BRAND'S CUSTOMER SERVICE?

More seldom than monthly

Monthly

Weekly

Daily

HOW FAR FROM YOUR RESIDENCE THE CLOSEST OFFICE OF THE BRAND IS LOCATED?

0-25 km

26-50 km

51-75 km

76–100 km
More than 100 km
I don't know

ON AVERAGE, HOW MUCH DO YOU USE SOCIAL MEDIA ON DAILY BASIS?

Less than one hour per day
1–2 h
3–4 h
5–6 h
More than six hours per day

WHICH OF THE FOLLOWING SOCIAL MEDIA ACCOUNTS OF THE BRAND YOU FOLLOW?

Twitter
Facebook
Instagram
Other
I don't follow the brand in social media at all

WHEN WAS THE LAST TIME YOU CONTACTED THE BRAND'S SOCIAL MEDIA CUSTOMER SERVICE?

Today
During this week
During this month
During past 3 months
During past 6 months
During this year
More than 1 year ago
I have not contacted the brand's social media customer service

WHICH OF THE FOLLOWING SOCIAL MEDIA CHANNELS WAS USED DURING THE LATEST CUSTOMER SERVICE ENCOUNTER? (YOU CAN CHOOSE MORE THAN ONE OPTION.)

Facebook
Twitter
Other

WHICH OF THESE DEVICES YOU USED TO COMMUNICATE WITH THE CUSTOMER SERVANT?

Smartphone
Tablet
Computer

WHAT WAS THE REASON FOR YOUR CONTACT?

Question

Feedback
 Reclamation
 Other

BRAND LOVE (based on Sternberg 1997; Long-Tolbert and Gammoh 2012)

- BL1 I have a warm relationship with the company
- BL2 I am able to count on the company in times of need
- BL3 I feel that the company really understands my needs
- BL4 I greatly value having the company in my life
- BL5 I would rather use the company than any other telecommunications company's service
- BL6 I find the company to be a very attractive commercial partner
- BL7 I cannot imagine another telecommunications company service making me as happy as the company
- BL8 I cannot imagine ending my relationship with the company
- BL9 My commitment to the company is unwavering
- BL10 I plan to continue in my relationship with the company
- BL11 I view my relationship with the company as a good decision

GRATITUDE (Long-Tolbert and Gammoh 2012: based on Tsang 2006)

- GRAT1 I am thankful for how I was treated by the company's social media customer service
- GRAT2 I am grateful for the service the company's social media customer service provided me
- GRAT3 I am appreciative of the service I received from the company's social media customer service

PARTNER QUALITY (based on Aaker et al. 2004; Long-Tolbert and Gammoh 2012)

- PQ1 If the company's social media customer service makes a mistake, it will try its best to make up for it
- PQ2 I know I can hold the company's social media customer service accountable for its actions
- PQ3 I can always count on the company's social media customer service to do what is best for me
- PQ4 The company's social media customer service is reliable
- PQ5 Given my image of the company's social media customer service, letting me down would surprise me.
- PQ6 A brand failure would be inconsistent with my expectations

SOCIAL SUPPORT (based on Trobst 2000; Long-Tolbert and Gammoh 2012;)

- SS1 The company's social media customer service displays much patience when dealing with me.
- SS2 The company's social media customer service cares about my overall well-being.

SS3 The company's social media customer service provides the needed help when I have problems.

SOCIAL PRESENCE (based on Gefen and Straub 2003; Han et al. 2016)

SP1 There is a sense of human warmth in the company's social media customer service

SP2 There is a sense of sociability in the company's social media customer service

SP3 There is a sense of human sensitivity in the company's social media customer service

SP4 There is a sense of human contact in the company's social media customer service

SP5 There is a sense of personness in the company's social media customer service

TRUST IN COMPANY (based on Newell and Goldsmith 2001; Han et al. 2016)

TC1 The company is honest

TC2 The company makes truthful claims

TC3 I trust the company.

TC4 I believe what the company tells me

THE VALENCE OF SERVICE DELIVERY

VSC1 In your opinion, how was the customer service delivery?

VSC2 In your opinion, how well the customer service was delivered?

APPENDIX 2

Survey items in Finnish / Väittämät suomeksi

BRÄNDIRAKKAUS

- BL1 Minulla on lämmin suhde Yritykseen
- BL2 Voin tarpeen tullen luottaa Yritykseen
- BL3 Koen, että Yritys todella ymmärtää tarpeitani
- BL4 Arvostan suuresti sitä, että Yritys on elämässäni
- BL5 Käytän mieluummin Yrityksen kuin minkään muun teleoperaattorin palveluita
- BL6 Minusta Yritys on hyvin houkutteleva kaupallinen kumppani
- BL7 En voi kuvitella, että mikään muu teleoperaattori tekisi minut yhtä iloiseksi kuin Yritys
- BL8 En voi kuvitella päättäväni suhdettani Yritykseen
- BL9 Sitoutumiseni Yritykseen on horjumatonta
- BL10 Suunnittelen jatkavani suhdettani Yrityksen kanssa
- BL11 Koen, että suhteen luominen Yritykseen on ollut hyvä päätös

IHMISUHDOKORRELAATIT

- GRAT1 Olen kiitollinen siitä, miten Yrityksen someasiakaspalvelu kohteli minua
- GRAT2 Olen kiitollinen Yrityksen someasiakaspalvelun minulle tarjoamasta palvelusta
- GRAT3 Arvostan Yrityksen someasiakaspalvelusta saamaani palvelua

- PQ1 Jos Yrityksen sosiaalisen median asiakaspalvelu tekee virheen, se yrittää parhaansa mukaan hyvittää virheensä
- PQ2 Tiedän, että voin pitää Yrityksen sosiaalisen median asiakaspalvelua vastuussa tekemisistään
- PQ3 Voin luottaa siihen, että Yrityksen sosiaalisen median asiakaspalvelu tekee aina mitä on parhaaksi minulle
- PQ4 Yrityksen sosiaalisen median asiakaspalvelu on luotettava
- PQ5 Yrityksen sosiaalisen median asiakaspalvelusta muodostamani käsityksen perusteella pettymyksen tuottaminen yllättäisi minut
- PQ6 Yrityksen sosiaalisen median asiakaspalvelun epäonnistuminen ei vastaisi odotuksiani

- SS1 Yrityksen sosiaalisen median asiakaspalvelusta välittyy kärsivällisyys asioidessani sen kanssa
- SS2 Yrityksen sosiaalisen median asiakaspalvelu välittää yleisestä hyvinvoinnistani

SS3 Kun minulla on ongelma, Yrityksen sosiaalisen median asiakaspalvelu tarjoaa tarvitsemani avun.

SOSIAALINEN LÄSNÄOLO

- SP1 Yrityksen sosiaalisen median asiakaspalvelusta välittyy inhimillinen lämpö
- SP2 Yrityksen sosiaalisen median asiakaspalvelusta välittyy seurallisuus
- SP3 Yrityksen sosiaalisen median asiakaspalvelusta välittyy herkkätunteisuus
- SP4 Yrityksen sosiaalisen median asiakaspalvelusta välittyy inhimillinen kanssakäyminen
- SP5 Yrityksen sosiaalisen median asiakaspalvelusta välittyy ihmismäisyys

LUOTTAMUS YRITYKSEEN

- TC1 Yritys on rehellinen
- TC2 Yritys esittää totuudenmukaisia väitteitä
- TC3 Luotan Yrityksen
- TC4 Uskon mitä Yritys sanoo minulle

PALVELUKOKEMUKSEN ONNISTUMINEN

- VSC1 Millainen asiakaspalvelutilanne mielestäsi oli?
- VSC2 Miten hyvin asiakaspalvelu mielestäsi onnistui suhteessa odotuksiisi?