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**Author(s):** Paananen, Tiina; Kemppainen, Tiina; Frank, Lauri; Holkkola, Matilda; Mali, Eveliina

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## **Reinforcement of Brand Relationships in an Omnichannel Environment: A Qualitative Study on Clothing Shopping**

Tiina Paananen

*University of Jyväskylä, Faculty of Information Technology, Finland, tiina.e.paananen@jyu.fi*

Tiina Kemppainen

*University of Jyväskylä, School of Business and Economic, Finland, University of Jyväskylä, Faculty of Information Technology, Finland, tikemppa@jyu.fi*

Lauri Frank

*University of Jyväskylä, Finland, lauri.frank@jyu.fi*

Matilda Holkkola

*University of Jyväskylä, Faculty of Information Technology, Jyväskylä, Finland, matilda.i.holkkola@jyu.fi*

Eveliina Mali

*University of Jyväskylä, eveliina.mali@gmail.com*

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# REINFORCEMENT OF BRAND RELATIONSHIPS IN AN OMNICHANNEL ENVIRONMENT: A QUALITATIVE STUDY ON CLOTHING SHOPPING

*Research full-length paper*

Paananen, Tiina, University of Jyväskylä, Jyväskylä, Finland, tiina.e.paananen@jyu.fi

Kemppainen, Tiina, University of Jyväskylä, Jyväskylä, Finland, tiina.j.kemppainen@jyu.fi

Frank, Lauri, University of Jyväskylä, Jyväskylä, Finland, lauri.frank@jyu.fi

Holkkola, Matilda, University of Jyväskylä, Jyväskylä, Finland, matilda.i.holkkola@jyu.fi

Mali, Eveliina, University of Jyväskylä, Jyväskylä, Finland, eveliina.mali@gmail.com

## Abstract

*Today's brands operate in an omnichannel environment consisting of different online and offline channels where the brand can be experienced. This qualitative study investigates brand relationship reinforcement in the omnichannel environment among customers of a Finnish clothing brand, R-Collection. The data collection was conducted in 2021 by interviewing ten customers of R-Collection. We examined the brand relationship reinforcement in four channels: brick-and-mortar (B&M), online store, social media, and second-hand. The findings show that brand relationships can be reinforced differently in these channels. In B&M stores, sensing the quality of clothing, a customer experience that meets expectations, and store atmosphere worth visiting are essential for strengthening the brand relationship. In online stores, finding the best online deal, browsing clothes for entertainment, testing and considering products before purchase decision, and feeling of exclusivity after purchase affirmed the brand relationship. Other peoples' admiration, staying informed by following the pleasant brand, well-targeted sponsored ads that provide information, and inspiring brand ambassador strengthen the brand relationship on the social media channel. Finally, in the second-hand channel, 'treasure hunting', a possibility to resell at a reasonable price and opportunity to implement a sustainable lifestyle reinforces shoppers' brand relationships.*

*Keywords: Brand relationships, omnichannel, clothing retail, brand experience, customer behavior*

# 1 Introduction

The business environment has changed into a dynamic, complex, and uncontrollable omnichannel environment for brands operating in retail. Companies could possibly better control their brands and customers' brand relationships in the past in their physical brand-controlled encounters. However, omnichannel customer behavior has changed the situation. For today's customers, the world is a showroom without walls, connecting the digital and the physical worlds into one entity (Brynjolfsson et al., 2013). The diversity of sales channels, social media, and partners in different channels influence customers' perceptions of brands. However, customers do not only have brand perceptions; nowadays, the phenomenon is understood more deeply. Customers can form a brand relationship with the brand that they perceive as meaningful or pleasing. Brand relationships have been investigated since the 1990s (e.g., Fournier, 1998). However, brand relationships and their unique aspects in the current omnichannel environment must be understood, especially when the brand has less control over customer encounters.

The interest in brand relationships and omnichannel has increased in academic studies, but they have been examined separately. Lemon and Verhoef (2016) called for omnichannel research using multiple methods, as omnichannel is emerging topic within customer experience research. However, several years later, Asmare and Zewdie (2022) still asked for more *qualitative* research on the omnichannel phenomenon. They called more qualitative studies to gain a deeper understanding of omnichannel customers and add knowledge to earlier survey-based quantitative studies. The qualitative method is especially needed to give more insight of people's real life experiences and culture. (Asmare and Zewdie, 2022) Further, Paananen et al. (2022) suggested more brand relationship research to connect the digital and physical worlds from a specific brand's perspective. In addition, Veloutsou and Guzman (2017) have asked to investigate how brands could provide a seamless brand experience throughout all physical and virtual touchpoints. Earlier research focusing on the omnichannel brand relationships is scarce. These include the quantitative studies by Yim and Han (2016) on omnichannel perception and by Gao and Huang (2021) on channel integration and engagement.

The research question of this study is: "*How brand relationships can be reinforced in omnichannel environment in clothing retail?*". This research aims to contribute to the above reported relatively scarce knowledge on understanding omnichannel brand relationships. Our study investigates the omnichannel brand relationships between customers and a Finnish clothing brand operating on several channels, R-Collection. Our explorative qualitative study contributes to the knowledge of brand relationship reinforcement in an omnichannel environment. The selected explorative approach suits the aims of our research because this research seeks in-depth understanding of the phenomenon. The objective is to investigate customers' real-life experiences of the R-Collection brand. This study investigates significant positive aspects reinforcing the brand relationship in different channels.

This paper is divided into six sections. After this introduction section, we present theories of omnichannel and brand relationships in Section 2. Section 3 reports the study's methodology, Section 4 presents the findings, and Section 5 reports the discussion. Finally, in Section 6, we consider the limitations of this study and present suggestions for future research.

## 2 Earlier Research on Omnichannel and Brand relationships

### 2.1 Omnichannel brands as a part of digital ecosystem

The world has evolved to digitalized global entity to customers, full of different digital ecosystems. Ecosystem consist of parties, affecting each other in differing hierarchies (Jacobides et al., 2018), nowadays, with focus of increasing knowledge and innovation generation for sustainable societies

(Pappas et al., 2018). In Senyo et al.'s (2019) definition, *digital business ecosystem* consist of digital technologies, organizations and individuals who co-create and share value through digital platforms in collaborative and competitive manner. Digitalization has brought a great variety of different devices, technologies, platforms, and channels. Due to this, Lemon and Verhoef (2016) described *omnichannel environment*, what consists of myriad touchpoints amongst a brand and its' customers. Customers interact with the brands in a variety of channels, and additionally, in a social nature with other customers (Lemon and Verhoef, 2016). Omnichannel brand can be seen as a part of larger digital ecosystem (Weill and Woerner, 2015).

Omnichannel perspective have been topic of interest only for a little while. It has evolved from multi-channel perspective (Verhoef et al., 2015) discussed in the early of 2010s (Sun et al., 2020). Rigby (2011) was the first to define omnichannel approach as '*an integrated sales experience that melds the advantages of physical stores with the information-rich experience of online shopping.*' Since then, the omnichannel perspective has been the subject of growing interest, also from the customer point of view (Gasparin et al., 2022). According to Verhoef et al. (2015), compared to multichannel perspective, the focus has moved from a sole customer-retail channel and puts the brand into focus. In omnichannel approach, cross-channel manner is usually implemented, not channel-specific (Verhoef et al., 2015).

Omnichannel perspective contemplates channels as integrated whole entity compared to multichannel perspective, where channels are consired independently (Brynjolfsson et al., 2013). Omnichannel brand or organization aims to provide a seamless customer experience through this channel integration (Ailawadi and Farris, 2017). Supporting previous definitions Beck and Rygl (2015) define that seamless customer experience can be achieved through channel and touchpoint integration across channels. Additionally, Mirsch et al. (2016) specify that data has to be shared across all the used channels, whereas in multichannel approach, there is no need to share data across different channels. However, the full integration perspective of omnichannel has been criticized by Gasparin et al. (2022) that instead of technically integrating every retail aspect, the retailer should find the optimal mix of integrated elements due to touchpoint connectivity, element type and customer experiences (Gasparin et al., 2022).

It has been suggested that the omnichannel environment can be understood by dividing it into different layers. Channels are a part of bigger digital ecosystem First, the omnichannel environment includes channels where customers and companies operate. Digital ecosystem literature view a channel as a part of an ecosystem (Valdez-De-Leon, 2019). In omnichannel retail perspective channels can be either online and/or offline channels (Mirsch et al., 2016), digital or physical (Neslin et al., 2006). The discussed channels include, for example, social media (Piotrowicz and Cuthbertson, 2014), online stores (Kemppainen et al., 2019), brick-and-mortar stores (Teixeira et al., 2022; Sousa and Voss, 2006), and second-hand outlets in online (Hinojo et al., 2022; Ferraro et al., 2016) and physical (Ferraro et al., 2016) contexts. Second, channels consists of touchpoints. Barann et al. (2022) proposed definition for omnichannel touchpoint: a customer touchpoint is a stimulus, which is accessed via interface, such as technology or a customer service person. During this encounter and interaction information between a customer and a brand transmits (Barann et al., 2022). The omnichannel retailing phenomenon enables multiple customer-organization touchpoints simultaneously (Lazaris and Vrechopoulos, 2014). Offline touchpoints has still been noted as an important encounters when the transaction involves a service (Park and Kim, 2022). Typically, the channels consist of touchpoints owned by various owners, such as the brand, partner or customer, or an external entity. The brand can't control all these touchpoints, and uncontrolled touchpoints play an essential role in customer brand experience. (Lemon and Verhoef, 2016.)

## 2.2 Brand relationships

Wearing a certain brand can be a signal for other people, such as a sign of luxurious lifestyle, or supporting of local business or green values. A brand packages the core meaning of a company's existence and tells the company's story to the internal and external actors (Rowley, 2009). Clothing brands compete in global market comprised of businesses varying from local clothing brands to giant multinational clothing companies. Clothing brands can have different competition strategies to win customers from one another within the clothing market. Nowadays, brands interactively communicate their brand entities and create relationships with customers (Veloutsou and Guzman, 2017). These '*customer-brand relationships*' or '*brand relationships*' are formed between customers and brands, similarly to relationships between humans (Fournier, 1998; Mrad, 2018). The relationship between a clothing brand and a customer can be much more than regular purchases. According to Fournier (1998) brands can have a significant role in the customers everyday lives.

Brand relationships have been under interest of researchers for few decades. Fournier (1998) came to prominence with the topic investigating brand relationships from the physical product brand perspective. After that, it has been studied from different perspectives with a great interest. Various emotional relationship types have been studies, such as brand addiction (Mrad, 2018) or brand love (Langner et al., 2015; Rahman et al., 2021). Also, engagement to brands have been investigated, for example, brand attachment (Park et al., 2010) or dimensionalities of brand engagement (Khamitov et al., 2019). Digitalized world in brand relationship literature have been discussed from mobile app (Tran et al., 2021) and augmented-reality interactive technology (Huang, 2019) point of view. Brand relationships have also been investigated from the brand experience perspective (Jung and Soo, 2012). However, the omnichannel perspective is lacking.

The brand relationships exist on many scales. According to Fournier (1998) the brand relationships evolve and dissolve as time passes. Strandvik and Heinonen (2013, p.508) defined a brand relationship as '*the brand's position in terms of the customer's emotions, cognition and activities*'. Veloutsou and Mafe (2020) proposed that customers having a strong passion for a brand could form a relationship with it. On the other hand, Fajer and Schouten (1995) also noticed less emotional relationship types. However, customer can only form a brand relationship with a brand the customer knows (Veloutsou, 2007). The brand awareness has a critical place in the brand relationships because brand need to be known. In clothing brands, it is important that others also know and like the brand. One of the most popular ways to measure the strength of the brand relationship is Fournier's (1998) brand relationship quality (BRQ) model. The dimensions of the BRQ model are love/passion, self-connection, commitment, interdependence, intimacy, and brand partner quality (Fournier 1998).

Other people may also influence customer-brand relationships. In a vital brand relationship, customers who share the same love or passion for their brand can create their communities (Veloutsou and Moutinho, 2009). Brand communities specialize around a particular brand, having rituals, traditions, shared consciousness, and moral responsibility senses (Muniz and O'Guinn, 2001). These rituals are also present in the *digital* environment through online brand communities (Hsieh et al., 2022). For example, pleasant clothing item can be told for other enthusiasts in the digital platforms. Additionally, (Paananen et al., 2022) noticed how friends and other close relationships influence usage of digital brands. It can be assumed that the other people may affect in brand relationships, because clothes are usually visible for others. Therefore, the opinions of others maybe influence the brand relationship.

Emotions are one of the core aspects of relationships. Also, brand relationships include emotions (Kervyn et al., 2012), scaling from negative (Fournier, 1998) to non-intense and addictive obsession (Mrad, 2018). According to Mrad (2018) stronger emotions and behavior indicates stronger bond with a brand. In the relationships, commitment is also important. In brand relationship research, commitment can represent the brand relationship (Sari et al., 2022) or be the goal of the relationship (Velout-

sou, 2007). Additionally, Park et al. (2010) defined brand attachment as a strong bond between a brand and the self as the ultimate destination for the customer-brand relationship.

### 3 Methodology

To map customers' omnichannel experiences, we carried out a qualitative interview study. Our target group included customers of R-Collection. The case company R-Collection operates three brick-and-mortar stores and an online store. R-Collection is also active on social media, having, for example, a brand ambassador (Finnish influencer and social media persona Enni Koistinen) and a loyalty program, and it collaborates with fashion brands (e.g., VIMMA Finnish clothing brand, or Kyrö Finnish distillery company). R-Collection manufactures clothes partly still in Finland. The first manufacturing phases occur in Finland for many products, and then products are sewn in Estonia. Partly because of having domestic production, the brand is also valued in second-hand markets.

The participants were young adults aged from 26 to 30 who had made a purchase from the case company within the last four months. The four months were selected to be period where participants could remember relevant aspects related to their purchase. These young adults born in the 1990s were chosen, because they have experienced channel integration and shopping trends on their own lives. According to Holkkola et al. (2022) young people who are digital natives typically utilize seamlessly different channels and devices. This group has experience with various channels and possibility to access to the Internet via different devices. Additionally, the aim was to find the real customers of R-Collection who have bought their products, and therefore, possibly have a brand relationship. Table 1 presents information about the interviewees, their purchase, their purchasing time, and the transaction channel of the purchase and the device.

	Gender	Age	Purchase time, before	The purchase	The transaction channel	The device or the store	Interview time, min
P1	Female	27	2 weeks	Jacket, trousers	Brick-and-mortar store	Helsinki city	45
P2	Male	30	1 week	Jacket	Instagram online store	Smartphone	29
P3	Female	26	1 week	Beanie, sweater, skirt	Online store	Tablet	38
P4	Female	27	3 months	Skirt	Retailer's online store	Smartphone	52
P5	Male	26	4 months	Hat	Brick-and-mortar factory outlet store	Kajaani city	36
P6	Male	28	3 months	Jacket	Brick-and-mortar factory outlet store	Kajaani city	54
P7	Female	28	2 months	Trousers	Tori.fi C2C online marketplace application	Smartphone	42
P8	Female	26	2 weeks	Trousers	Online store	Computer	34
P9	Female	26	1 week	Jacket, 2xshirt	Online store	Smartphone	56
P10	Female	28	2 weeks	2x trousers	Online store	Computer	72

Table 1. Background information of participants and their purchase from R-Collection

The interviews were conducted via Microsoft Teams due to the COVID-19 pandemic in 2021. Information saturation determined the number of interview participants, and no more participants were recruited as new information ceased to emerge. The interviews followed a semi-structured manner advised by Myers and Newman (2007), in which a question script is prepared, however, allowing addi-

tional questions. The participants were asked to describe their general shopping habits in the interviews, including their omnichannel behavior. After that, the interviewer asked the participants to talk about their purchases from R-Collection. The interviewer briefly presented an omnichannel customer journey example to support achieving a detailed narrative of the purchase process with different touchpoints from information seeking to post-purchase. As Myers and Newman (2007) suggest, we recorded and transcribed all interviews. Next, we analysed the data using the Atlas.ti qualitative analysis software tool. The data was processed mainly inductive approach explained by Thomas (2003), where our categories resulted from coding process. First, we identified the channels that the participants have used in their omnichannel shopping experience. These included: online store (58 counts), second-hand (28 counts), brick-and-mortar (56 counts), and social media (58 counts). Secondly, for each main channel, we linked relevant channel-related manifestations of brand relationships. We wanted to be able to find what was remarkable related to *reinforcing* the relationship. Thirdly, after multiple rounds, we found patterns of reinforcing elements of brand relationships per channel. These brand relationship reinforcement aspects are bolded in Findings chapter under every channel. We present the results of this analysis in the next chapter in more detail.

## 4 Findings

In our analysis, we were able to identify relevant four channels: 1) brick-and-mortar, 2) online store, 3) social media, and 4) second-hand. The brand relationship experiences occurred within these four channels with relationship reinforcement manifestations. The brand relationship reinforcements per channels are reported below in more detail.

### 4.1 The brick-and-mortar (B&M) stores channel

The findings show that brick-and-mortar stores are an important service channel affecting the brand relationship. Brick-and-mortar stores offer the customers a chance to experience the brand physically and face to face. The B&M stores visited by the participants included the R-Collection stores in Kajaani (factory outlet) and Helsinki and an in-store brand department in the department store Stockmann in Helsinki.

**Sensing the quality of clothing.** The participants visited the brick-and-mortar stores when they wanted to sense the products (fabric, quality, fit or feel) and try on clothes. The sensing of clothes was an important aspect when building the brand relationship with the clothing brand. The R-Collection's brand was considered to be of high quality. Furthermore, quality clothes are perceived as pleasant to buy, and quality clothes are also preferred to show one's identity to others. Sometimes products were considered extremely pleasing, and some participants reported touching clothes triggered '*maniac excitement*'. Finding the products that feel right can also be a long-term task: the process take a long time.

*"For example, this T-Shirt I'm wearing, I used a lot of time to find an as good quality cotton shirt as possible. I went to touch the shirts wanting to feel how the fabric was. (...)" - (P7, female)*

**The store atmosphere is worth visiting.** The participants usually planned their visits to the R-Collection's B&M stores. The R-Collection's B&M stores were described as having a '*warm atmosphere*' or '*minimalistic*', which indicates the importance of store atmosphere in brand relationships. A visit to a B&M store was reported to affect the brand relationship, especially if the experience was positive or exceeded expectations. Visits to B&M stores were also reported to provide nostalgic experiences, as they reminded some participants of childhood experiences and a long brand relationship with R-Collection.



*“Well, R-Collection has been quite familiar for me for a long time, like, I already had their products in elementary school (...) Also, my family roots are from Kajaani [the factory outlet town], and it has always been a thing that when you go to that direction, then you also have to visit the factory outlet. (...)” – (P6, male)*

**A customer service that meets the expectations.** Participants expect exceptional customer service when visiting the brand's B&M stores because of the effort that visiting takes. B&M stores were mainly used for trying out the products, highlighting the importance of a brand's store as a brand relationship channel. A competent customer service provided with joy is essential for building the brand relationship in B&M stores. The participants expected something special from the brand's store - something that they could only get from the clothing manufacturer.

*“I had an opportunity to visit a factory outlet, and it felt nice, like going to a bakery and buying freshly baked bread from there. (...)” - (P5, female)*

## 4.2 The online store channel

The findings show online stores as an excellent means to create brand relationships with customers. The online stores discussed by the participants included the online store of R-Collection and reseller online stores, such as Katoko.fi. However, the participants usually favored the brand's own store.

**Finding the best online deal.** Online stores enable easy comparison of product prices and information, reinforcing brand relationships as customers can ensure the best deal. Finding the best deal online for the desired clothing item may raise excitement.

*“(...) I got excited, that yes, now the skirt is on sale. Like some hunter-gatherer instinct awakens, or like I've found a treasure before anyone else, and the clothing item was also praised.” – (P4, female)*

**Browsing clothes for entertainment.** Customers want to ‘flirt with the products’, in the other words, to explore them by browsing before commitment and a purchase decision. Participants considered browsing products as entertainment, and as a way to spend time. The browsing experience was pleasant because the number of products presented in the store was deemed appropriate: it was relatively easy to browse through all the items. A visual and enjoyable online catalog can reinforce the brand relationship because the product range is suitable for skimming through at once.

*“I like, for example, R-Collection's online store, or Nanso's, or similar other with a smaller product range. For example, Zalando's offering is so large, and it's still too much if you try to limit your search. Then I feel overwhelmed, and my excitement suddenly stops, as I can never find what I'm looking for. Or did I even want it? But somehow, it is limited and simple, and surely the easy way of combining clothes makes buying easy.” – (P10, female)*

**Testing and considering products before purchase decision.** Online clothing shopping comes with a different level of ‘commitment’ compared to buying from a physical B&M store. The purchase does not feel as complete. Online stores can reinforce the brand relationships by offering the possibility to test clothes, as the made online purchase decision is not final, and the ordered products can be returned. The decision to return an online ordered clothing item is more effortless than in B&M shopping, and it gives time for a buyer to decide whether a product is pleasant or not.

*“Buying from the online store does not feel as impulsive as when you go to [a brick-and-mortar] store and grab an item of clothing, and then you just suddenly buy it. It goes similar in the online store (...) when buying from an online store, it takes a couple of days while I'm still considering my purchase. Or even weeks.” – (P9, female)*

**Feeling of exclusivity after purchase.** It was shown that a feeling of exclusivity could contribute positively to the brand relationship. The notion that other consumers want to purchase the same products

strengthens the feeling of a good purchase decision and the brand's value. There can also be a competitive setting associated with the brand's products. Hence, it can give the customer some special pleasure if one manages to catch a product for oneself before others.

*"(...) When I've made a nice purchase, I look in the online store to see if the product is yet sold out. And I did this with this purchase, too. I went to R-Collection's online store to see if the piece of clothing was sold out. I noticed it was sold out, which made me very happy. I felt satisfaction that many others had also wanted the product, and me having such a good taste. And luckily, I bought it because I couldn't get it anymore later." – (P4, female)*

### 4.3 The social media channel

The findings presented social media as an excellent possibility for brand relationship-building. The relationship can be built directly through the brand's own social media, or brand ambassadors.

**Staying informed by following the pleasant brand.** Participants followed R-Collection on Instagram because the style of the social media communication was considered visually pleasing and exciting. The brand trusts the quality of products, which also radiates to customers, such as *'we know these are good products'*. R-Collection's social media presence affirmed the brand relationship as an up-to-date and inspiration channel.

*"(...) But on Instagram, I follow certain brands, such as R-Collection, and from their [Instagram] stories, for example, can see that new products have arrived." – (P9, female)*

**Inspiring brand ambassador.** The brand's cooperation with a brand ambassador Enni Koistinen affected the participants' brand relationships. Participants followed the influencer for entertainment, style influence, clothing inspiration, or *'high appreciation'*. Interviewees got inspired by the clothing and looks of celebrities wanting to *'rock the similar outfit'*, on the other words, wear same outfit fashionably. The brand ambassador's Instagram feed was one touchpoint in some participants' buying process to see how the desired outfit could be matched with other clothes or accessories. R-Collection's brand ambassador matched with the brand and the audience, affirming the brand relationship. Participants reported *'admiring Enni'* or were *'hooked on Enni'*, and therefore, the participants' brand relationships were influenced by her.

*"(...) Maybe my love for R-Collection is a little based on Enni's lovely [Instagram] stories, where she has photographed clothes with her dad. (...)" – (P1, female)*

*"(...) I went to see how it [the beanie] looks when Enni wears it and if there are any other nice seasonal new clothes. (...)" – (P3, female)*

**Well-targeted sponsored ads that provide information.** Instagram is a fruitful way to maintain brand relationships because customers are following the brand and because they enjoy felicitous ads. The participants considered relevant brand ads *'interesting'* or *'useful'*, sometimes leading to purchasing a product. Otherwise, ads increased interest in the brand or their products and the participants wanted to stay on tuned for the brand. Advertisements created to serve the brand's audience can reinforce the brand relationship because they stand out and give relevant information or inspiration.

*"One night, I was browsing Instagram, and then a sponsored ad with a nice jacket was shown. It was so pretty that I opened it [ad]. Then it looked like it could fit me, so I ordered it. It was so nice and reasonably priced, about 120 €, so I decided to buy it. (...)" – (P2, male)*

**Other people's admiration of clothes.** The participants' brand relationships with R-Collection were reinforced by other people when they admired the participants' lovely garments in social media posts. This admiration encouraged their purchase decision or supported their brand identification since it indicated that they had excellent taste in clothing brands, creating opportunities to humblebrag.

*“(...) I posted a picture on Instagram where I was wearing that skirt, and my friend asked where I bought it. It felt nice because it is nice when someone wants [to buy] something I also have.” – (P4, female)*

#### 4.4 The second-hand channel

The findings indicate that second-hand stores can be essential channels from the brand relationship perspective. The second-hand channels mentioned by the participants were both digital (online) and brick-and-mortar (offline) channels. The participants used B&M second-hand stores for browsing cheap impulse purchases, as online second-hand stores were more ‘*curated*’ and ‘*easier to deal*’ via second-hand online stores or Apps. The second-hand digital channels included digital customer-to-customer (C2C) selling platforms. Tori.fi is an online marketplace where customers can sell and buy everything online, including clothes. Zadaa, Tise and vahankaytetty.fi are C2C fashion and clothing marketplace platforms. All these second-hand marketplaces have a website and a mobile application.

**Possibility to resell at a reasonable price.** Usually, the participants first tried out the desired second-hand clothing in a brick-and-mortar store or a friend's clothing item to get the correct size, when it was possible. However, since branded products have a reselling value, buyers are not concerned about the right size or whether they like the clothing, if they were not able to try the clothing item anywhere. Brand products can easily be resold if they are not the correct size or pleasant. The possibility to resell reinforced the brand relationship because the brand's products have a reselling value and are worthy of hunting. Additionally, second-hand stores complement R-Collection's stores as they offer possibilities to get access to products at lower prices. Second-hand stores can have old colors or models no longer available in R-Collection stores. Second-hand shopping can create an excellent possibility for nostalgic or budget purchases – what R-Collection can't bring their customers.

*“(...) I thought that, if one buys some branded second-hand clothing, it can usually be resold if it's not good for some reason.” – (P7, female)*

**Opportunity to implement a sustainable lifestyle.** The second-hand market is a standard part of clothing shopping for some participants of the study. Participants reported, for example, that ‘*one-third of my clothing purchases are second-hand*’. Second-hand shoppers of this study were concerned about the number of products purchased due to environmental issues, making branded second-hand shopping a way to enjoy buying clothes and approving ecological conscience. The participants avoided fast fashion and desired sustainable, high-quality, long-lasting brands, which they considered R-Collection to represent. Second-hand purchases reinforced the participants' brand relationships with R-Collection as they perceived their products as high-quality clothing. Especially in online second-hand stores, high-quality brand products are considered.

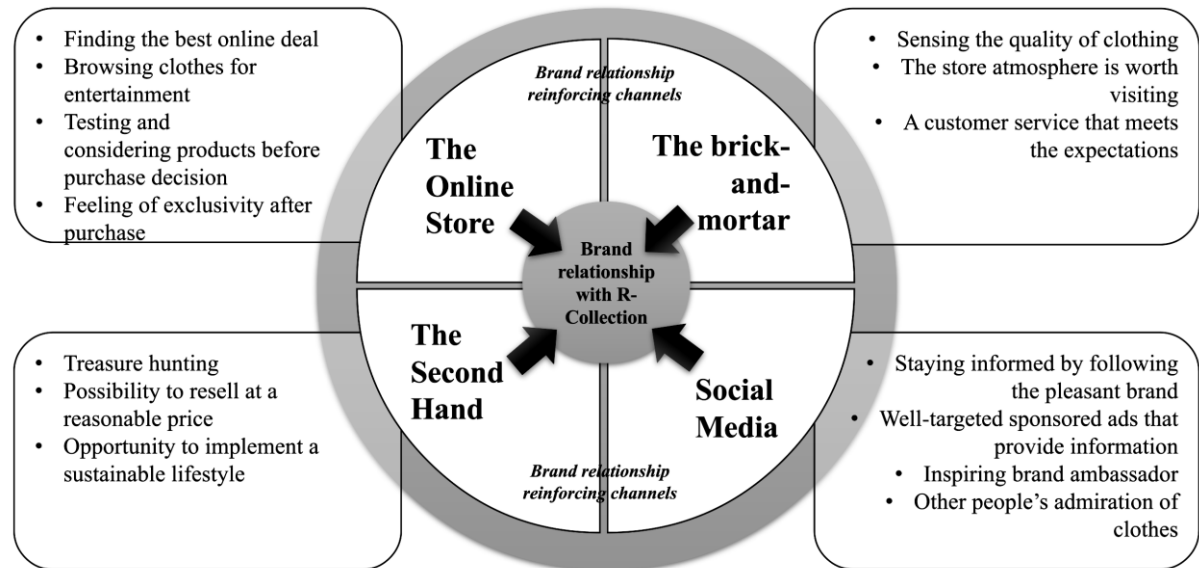
*“Previously, I had R-Collection's anorak bought from a second-hand store. From that, I felt that it [the clothing item] is of such high quality, even it is old.” – (P10)*

**Treasure hunting.** Second-hand shopping emerged as long-term searching for a specific product. The desired clothing item - the ‘*treasure*’ - could be hunted for a long time - even ‘*for a year*’. If the desired brand item was not sold online, it was considered a sign of an excellent long-term purchase, a ‘*timeless classic*’. The participants even glorified treasure hunting. The brand relationship was further strengthened when participants confirmed their desired purchases by other people, who gave their admiration of the great treasure found. These affected the experienced quality of the brand and, therefore, the brand relationship.

*“When I tried to look for that [clothing item] second-hand, I noticed that people just don't sell them, even if I had searched for it from many places. It was a sign for me that people do not want to sell them and that it clearly is a timeless classic.” – (P1)*

## 5 Discussion

This study investigated brand relationship reinforcement in an omnichannel environment. The focus of the study was to bring detailed and in-depth knowledge on the subject. To sum the results up, a visualized summary of the findings is represented in the following Figure 1.



**Figure 1 Summary of results: Brand relationship reinforcement in omnichannel environment**

As the above Figure 1 illustrates, the brand relationship can be reinforced differently in every channel. The findings show that the brand relationship reinforcement differs within the four channels, mainly because each channel has different controllers (e.g., the brand, the second-hand seller, or social media actors). This notion is similar to the idea presented by Lemon and Verhoef (2016), who described that brands possess multiple channels, and there are varying possibilities for controlling the different channels. For example, the brand controls the brick-and-mortar channel (brand stores) because the brand creates its own service environment, including the atmospherics and how products such as clothes are presented to the customers. On the contrary, the second-hand channel is controlled externally by individual sellers and service providers of digital platforms. The online store channel and the social media channel both have multiple owners.

**The brick-and-mortar channel.** Firstly, the results on brick-and-mortar brand relationship reinforcement showed three critical points for this channel: sensing the quality of clothing, store atmosphere worth visiting, and a customer service that meets the expectations. From the brand's point of view, the brick-and-mortar is a safe space. The brand has the control of its' physical presence in the stores. The channel's strength is that the brand can decide how to reinforce the brand relationship, for example, create a visual B&M environment, putting effort into customer service quality, and putting the clothing items on display for sensing.

**The online store channel.** Brand relationship reinforcement through the online store channel represented four points: finding the best online deal, browsing clothes for entertainment, testing and considering products before purchase decision, and feeling of exclusivity after purchase. The online store channel has multiple owners and, thus, numerous controllers for brand relationship. The brand does not have control over customer's browsing for entertainment or how they feel exclusivity. However, the brand has control over offering the best online deal for its' customers, as well as displaying their

product catalogue online in appealing way. Appealing product catalogue was defined to be restricted in number of choices. The brand can have control whether it offers the possibility to test their products before final purchase decision. Additionally, limiting product availability might have an effect that customers feel of exclusivity after their purchase. The brand relationship can be reinforced in online store channel via using emotive communication that reinforce feeling of exclusivity, and by using pleasant visuals.

**The social media channel.** Brand relationship reinforcement on social media raised four points: staying informed by following the pleasant brand, well targeted sponsored ads that provide information, inspiring brand ambassador and other people's admiration of clothes. The social media channel has multiple owners, thus controllers in the brand relationship. To get the brand relationship reinforced, the brand needs to know how they make their social media appearance pleasant and how their sponsored ads should be targeted and created to please their audience. Also, the brand ambassador is out of control of the brand. Even if the brand collaboration has a framework with rules and contract, most of the social media content that followers see is what the influencer makes and publishes. A carefully selected brand ambassador reinforces the brand relationship by beloved appearance and inspiration. Other people's admiration of clothes is fully externally controlled and owned, but important part from the customer perspective. Wearing the right branded clothes can improve customer's self-perception and therefore reinforce the brand relationship, as the brand's products may be perceived as part of customers' self-image.

**The second-hand channel.** Finally, the second-hand channel indicated three aspects for brand relationship reinforcement: treasure hunting, possibility to resell at a reasonable price, and opportunity to implement a sustainable lifestyle. The second-hand channel is entirely externally owned and controlled. It is an essential channel for a brand because it generates value that the brand itself cannot produce. Clothing items already sold out may be found on the second-hand channel, allowing for brand lovers to embark on a treasure hunt for products they desire, reinforcing the brand relationship. These treasure hunts may positively affect the resale value of the products, hence improving the brand relationship of the seller. Ecologically conscious customers want to make purchases through service channels which they perceive as sustainable. Hence, if the brand's products are sold in second-hand channels, it can reinforce the brand relationship with customers with sustainable lifestyle: brand's products can be purchased with a clear conscience.

To conclude, the findings of this study show that a brand's omnichannel presence consists of both physical and digital channels, in line with previous research by Sousa and Voss (2006). The physical and digital channels support each other, and the customers' buying experience can include a combination of multiple channels – different channels and touchpoints are utilized during the customer journey; before, during and after the purchase (Lemon's and Verhoef (2015). Especially, before purchase Instagram ads (social media channel) raised an interest to buy or find out more. Also, the physical channels were used to test out the clothing items before purchase. After the purchase, the information was sought from online store or Instagram, for example, for inspiration how to match the clothing item, or justifying the purchase for themselves. Therefore, the channels have interdependencies with each other during the whole journey, meaning coherent brand presence for the customer despite the channel. The idea of a '*seamlessly integrated experience*' (Verhoef, 2015) was observed from customers' perceptions, because the brand R-Collection was recognized similarly in each channel: high of quality, domestic, valued and appreciated despite the channel where the brand was encountered. Based on the findings, it is concluded that every channel in the omnichannel environment has its' own special elements that need to be taken into consideration when discussing brand relationships. It is suggested that the brand relationship should be reinforced channel by channel taking into account the special characteristics of each channel, as well as the related challenges and opportunities.

## 5.1 Managerial implications

The omnichannel environment has its pros and cons for brands. It provides additional channel possibilities, but on the other hand, the brand can not control all the channels and all aspects of all the channels. The brand relationship can be reinforced in different channels, but the nature of the channel should be considered. Uncontrollability should be accepted and even considered as a strength. For example, second-hand markets create value-adding possibilities for a brand's customers. Value is built with quality products that have a long lifecycle and thus are desired by customers because they can be resold in second-hand markets. A classical clothing item is always fashionable and therefore desired amongst customers. Sustainable lifestyle shoppers also want to shop without a guilty conscience. Thus, these customers want to commit to a quality product brand, being ready for treasure hunt.

On the other hand, a brand can choose where they want to have control. The brick-and-mortar purchase moment at a brand's store should consider excellent customer service, a visually pleasant store, and please customer's different senses. Customers want to feel the clothing items. However, customers rarely visit the stores, which is making a brand's online presence necessary. In social media, sponsored ads should please their audience and give what the target audience craves. Whereas commercial ads are experienced rather disturbing than compelling, thoughtful ads reinforce brand relationships. Social media influencers are one mean to advertise a brand's products, and long-term co-operation with these seems more effective than an one-time commercial co-operation. Customers want to see brand *ambassadors* who genuinely use and love the brand and their products. The brand should also ensure the best deal online on the online store compared to other online stores.

Additionally, the brand should provide its customers a low commitment way to shopping, because the feeling of commitment is different in an online environment compared to buying in the physical channel. Returning or changing the product should be made easy because the customer is still considering whether they want the clothing item or not. However, from an environmental point of view, detailed product information, informative product images, and size charts could reduce the return of products back and forth. It seems that customer behavior in clothing retail has changed in a way that glorifies sustainable lifestyle and consumption.

## 6 Limitations and Future Research

This research brings qualitative customer-centric information of the omnichannel phenomenon, which was asked in previous studies (e.g., Asmare and Zewdie, 2022). However, this research has its' limitations. Firstly, this study is limited to the case company R-Collection and its' customers concerning clothing fashion retail in Finland. Secondly, due to the qualitative nature of this study, it presents descriptive findings only, are not meant to be generalized. The findings of this study are consisting of individual participants' experiences, the participants consisting of 26-30-year-old Finnish adult R-Collection's customers.

Future studies could qualitatively examine omnichannel customer behavior experiences of other cases and demographic groups. Moreover, it would be valuable, for example, to conduct experimental research on omnichannel behavior. Also, positive, or negative brand experiences in an omnichannel context could be investigated to increase the in-depth understanding of omnichannel brand relationships. Additionally, fashion retail research should examine sustainable ways to enable consuming clothing items, for example, more research from the second-hand point of view.

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