# ORGANISATIONAL LOVE: EXTERNAL STAKEHOLDER PERSPECTIVE ON ORGANISATION SHOWING AFFECTION IN B2B RELATIONSHIP

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**ABSTRACT**

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**Abstract**

The aim of this study is to investigate love in organisation-stakeholder relationships (OSR). While brand love research typically examines stakeholders' love for brands and organisations, this study examines organisations' love for stakeholders - an outside-in perspective which is under-explored in public relations and marketing research. Building on Badham's (2020) organisation-stakeholder love framework (OSL), the aim is to explore whether stakeholders perceive an organisation's love for them, particularly the elements of passion, intimacy, and commitment.

This study consists of quantitative and qualitative research methods. The case organisation is Valo Solutions, a Finnish software company that sells B2B software solutions through a global partner network. First, responses to an online questionnaire of 63 stakeholders were analysed to discover whether love was perceived in stakeholder-organisation relationships. Second, but more importantly, 12 semi-structured interviews were conducted to more deeply investigate how OSL was applied by the case organisation. Using mainly thematic analysis, interviews were analysed to explore how love was applied by the organisation.

The study offers rare empirical insight into affection in organisation-stakeholder relationships, especially an organisation's affection (i.e. love) for stakeholders. This thesis acknowledges its limitations and offers suggestions for future research pathways that may be explored to shed further light on this novel concept.

| Key words |
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| Affection, brand love, Organisation stakeholder love (OSL), organisation-stakeholder relationships (OSRs), relationship management |

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**TIIVISTELMÄ**

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Tiivistelmä

Tämä tutkimus tarkastelee rakkautta yrityksen ja heidän sidosryhmien välisissä suhteissa (organisation-stakeholder relationships, OSR). Tavanomaisesti brändirakkautta tutkittaessa keskitytään siihen, miten sidosryhmät saadaan kiintymään brändiin tai organisaatioon. Tämä tutkimus kohdistuu harvemmin suhdetoiminnassa (PR) ja markkinoinnissa tutkittuun näkökulmaan: organisaatioiden osoittamaan rakkauteen sidosryhmiä kohtaan. Tutkimus pohjautuu organisaatio-sidosryhmärakkaus (organisation-stakeholder love (OSL) -viitekehykseen (Badham, 2020), jonka avulla tarkastellaan voivatko sidosryhmät tuntea organisaation rakkautta erityisesti kolmen rakkauden elementin intohimo, intiimiys ja sitoutuminen näkökulmasta.

Tutkimuksessa käytetään määrällistä ja laadullista tiedonkeruumenetelmää. Tapausyrityksenä toimii Valo Solutions, joka tutkimushetkellä myi kehittämiään ohjelmistoja kansainvälisen kumppaniverkostonsa kautta. 63 sidosryhmän edustajan online-kyselyn vastauksista tarkasteltiin voivatko sidosryhmän edustajat ylipäänsä kokea organisaatio-sidosryhmärakkautta. Tutkimuksen kannalta tärkein aineisto oli 12 puolistrukturoitua haastattelua, joissa selvitettiin yksityiskohtaisemmin minkälaisin keinoin yritys osoitti rakkautta sidosryhmille. Tulokset esitetään teema-analyysin mukaisesti teemoittain.

Tutkimus tarjoaa merkittäviä empiirisiä viitteitä kiintymyksen olemassaolosta B2B-suhteissa sidosryhmien näkökulmasta. Tutkimus tiedostaa sen rajoitukset ja tarpeet tulevaisuuden tutkimusta varten ja tarjoaa ehdotuksia aiheen jatkotutkimusta varten.

Asiasanat
Kiintymys, brändirakkaus, organisaatio-sidosryhmärakkaus (OSL), organisaatio-sidosryhmäsuhteet (OSR), suhdejohtaminen

Säilytyspaikka
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# CONTENTS

## LIST OF TABLES AND FIGURES

# 1   INTRODUCTION

For a long time, transactions and the money exchanged was all that mattered for the businesses and in some cases, it still is as companies are interested in how to maximise their profit through transactions. However, transactions act as a foundation to relational exchanges that are more complex and long-term in nature, and on which business relationships e.g., between buyer and seller are further developed. (Dwyer et al. 1987). This is what makes it more human and interesting.

While development of digital communication tools enabled fast globalisation, distinguishing from competitors became more complex. Companies started to lose their asymmetric power and control as change of supplier became easier. This accelerated the focus from short-term to long-term relations even further. The interest to invest in measurable, tangible assets with monetary value is switched to intangible assets as a new corporate value and growth. Intangible assets, e.g., brand and long-term positive relationships, are unique combination of non-physical assets that cannot be replicated (Lev & Daum 2004, 6).  Based on perceptions stakeholders have for organisations, intangible assets are considered as the main differentiators and competitive advantage, and thus, the focus of several marketing and management studies strategies. (Canel & Luoma-aho 2019, 67).

All organisations not only affect but are affected by the stakeholders around them, from employees to people outside the organization. Stakeholder can widely be defined as "any identifiable group or individual who can affect the achievement of an organisation's objectives". (Freeman & Reed 1984, 91). Influencer, constituency, or public is also in use interchangeably when talking about the important individuals or groups that effects on organisations performance either negatively or positively. (Freeman & Reed 1984, 90-92). Due the communications technology development public relations (PR) environment has become unpredictable and uncontrollable; organisations need to identify their most important public and strategic stakeholder groups as they have an increasing role in organisations' failure and success. Concerns and common ideas can bypass not only geographical boundaries but class, status, and culture. (Hon & Grunig 1999).

Barnes (1998) studied customer relationships and emotions in service industries and their marketing and found out that closeness was seen as a valuable construct in relationships. Closeness, or attachment, implicates the relationship is more likely to last than less close relationship that are at risk of dissolution. Increasing number of studies (e.g., Fournier 1998; Barnes 1998, Bügel et al. 2011, Chang et al. 2012) have confirmed

that affective components, such as trust and intimacy, build commitment and have a significant role also in building and maintaining relationship in business environments. Emotions are understood as one engagement dimension together with behaviour and cognition. Close relationships are characterised by positive, affective ties, emotional bond between the parties in the relationship. (Fournier 1998). Positive relationship not only enhances customers´ loyalty and retention but results as a better profitability for the organisation (Longinos Marin & Salvador Ruiz 2007) making it mutually beneficial. Close business-partnerships also increases the company value creation. Once the focus is on customer satisfaction and or/demand, companies can offer special value to their customers. As an outcome it reduces internal waste and increases additional features or services offered to the customer. (Bode & Miller 2012, 231-232). Therefore, cultivating good, long-term relationships in terms of public and stakeholder relations in marketing and management is vital for success and have become dominant strategies for business-to-consumer (B2C) and business-to-business (B2B) environments.

Studies have shown that love-like feelings can exist even between brand and customer (e.g., Fournier 1999). However, many of the studies and efforts that businesses have adopted to build, maintain, and nurture the relationships are focusing on the customers' responsibility to show loyalty and affection towards the company and / or brand. The role of organisation's responsibility to should show affection towards their most important individuals or groups of stakeholders is underexplored.

The literature review of this study focuses on evolution and ingredients of long-term, positive business relationships that previous studies around relationship marketing and management, brand love and most recent, OSL framework (Badham, 2020), have prepared the ground for. This thesis draws especially on relationship marketing and management and public relations literature and test organisation-stakeholder love framework (OSL) (Badham, 2020) that suggest organisations should love their most important stakeholders before expecting love in return.

Using Valo Solutions as a case organisation, the purpose of the empirical study is to investigate evidence for the perceptions of OSL in relationships with their network of stakeholders, Valo Partners in business-to-business environment. Valo Solutions, which in beginning of 2022 was acquired by Staffbase, is Finnish-based IT company that develops digital workplace tools that (by the time of the study in spring 2020) are implemented and sold through their global Partner network. The researcher has worked at the company since October 2017 in marketing and communications role close to the partners.

To explore whether Valo Partners perceive love from Valo Solutions and how the love is emitted from the organisation towards the stakeholders is implemented with guidance of the following research questions:

**RQ1:** How do Valo Partners perceive Valo's organisations-stakeholder-love (OSL) towards them?

**RQ2:** How is organisation-stakeholder-love (OSL) applied by Valo towards the partners?

In this study quantitative and qualitative methods are in use  First, the research examines whether love is perceived from three perspectives: intimacy, passion, and commitment by using quantitative data that is collected from European Valo Partners through an online survey. In the second phase qualitative data collection method of semi-structured in-depth interviews are conducted to explore how love is perceived, and how it is applied by the organisation from the stakeholder perspective.

# 2   RELATIONSHIPS IN MARKETING AND MANAGEMENT

To succeed in the economic, social, and environmental challenges companies are facing, understanding, and satisfying customer needs, and focusing on long-term customer and stakeholder relationship is required. The spotlight is set in customer's needs and how to improve their life through the offered services and products. (Wolf 2014, 55). Communication helps to accept a decision and trust the management that without communication might be difficult. Organisation that communicates effectively forms mutual understanding and can even change behaviour of both management and publics and ultimately develop better relationships. (Hon & Grunig, 1999).

## 2.1   Evolution from short term exchanges to long-term relationships

When exchange first started to take place, companies, the exchange partners, were small and operated locally. It allowed the executives to have personal relationships with their exchange partners and both parties had an impact on the community around. However, development of infrastructure and globalisation made organisations grew larger breaking down the relationships making businesses more interested in transactions (Grunig 1993, 121), where money is exchanged for a commodity (Dwyer, Schurr & Oh 1987). Transaction is  interaction and thus, the relationship was (seemingly) formed with continuity of transactions. (Dwyer et. al. 1987). However, exchange relationships often have unequal, asymmetric power balance that benefits mostly the seller as the seller dominates the relationship with better dependence position in bargaining situation and power to control over the customer (Dwyer 1984, 680; Slabbert & Barker 2014, 84).

To further explain relational exchange and to take individuals' perspective into account, marketing scholars first adapted Social Exchange Theory (SET) in use as it focuses on the relationship between the exchange parties (Lambe, Wittmann & Spekman 2001, 3). SET origins in the 1950's in economics, sociology, and behavioural psychology (Homans 1958). Relational interdependence develops through the interactions the exchange partners have over time. Interaction between people is exchange, and exchange is either tangible (goods or money) or intangible (social amenities). In a social exchange people giving much try to get much back which influences the balance of the exchange. If the expected interaction costs are too high compared to the potential benefits and rewards, the parties might choose not to start the relationship at all. Positive economic and social outcomes increase trust and commitment, the core variable of SET. Development of trust allows moving from discrete transactions to relational exchange. Companies

receiving high level of rewards considers the relationships worth maintaining which makes them committed and further investing in producing mutually desirable outcomes. (Lambe & al. 2001, 5, 11, 21-23).

Although companies started to create structural and social bonds through retention and loyalty programs, it increased difficulty for the buyer to exit and change the supplier in B2B relationship. Customer might feel locked in the relationship as the costs to exit the relationship are too high which from buyers' perspective is not a positive relationship. (Turnbull & Wilson in Barnes 1998, 769). However, successful relationships are fair and equitable for both parties (Ki & Hon 2008, 5) to which customer enters and stays willingly by attaching positive associations due perceiving some benefits. (Barnes 1997, 767). Genuine and positive relationship are interdependent; all parties involved **mutually agree on it,** and collectively affect, define, and redefine the relationship. (Fournier 1998, 344). Trust is a cornerstone of relationship commitment enabling development of successful and long-term relationships. (Buttle 1996, 8).

As human factor was understood important also in successful businesses, studies started to adopt from social and psychological theories. Perceiving e.g., closeness is always subjective and thus, only the ones in the relationship can determine how close they perceive the relationship is. Therefore, when measuring closeness, respondents' self-assessment of the relationship is a matter of subjective estimates. (Barnes 1998). Therefore personal preferences affect and needs to be taken into consideration as customer may wish to engage in diverse ways in customer-organisation relationship based on the type of business or industry. Whereas some seek for warmth and friendliness from the relationship, others feel satisfied, loyal, and involved without feeling of closeness. Fostering the relationship to be close might not even be necessary in all long-term customer relationships (Barnes 1998, 770) and therefore ability to listen, empathize, and to identify common ground acts as a solid ground when defining the type of relationship (Kent & Taylor 2002, 30 – 31). To take personal preferences and emotions into account many academics (e.g., Fournier 1998; Bügel, Verhoef, Buunk 2010; Zarantello et. al. 2016) adapted interpersonal relationship as a ground for studying relationships and Stenberg's Triangular Theory of Love (1984) with elements of intimacy, passion and commitment is used to study affection even further in business context.

Over the course of approximately 70 years business relationships have evolved from straight-forward, transaction-focused asymmetrical relationships into complex, co-creational relationships where the stakeholders are involved, and human dimensions are taken into consideration. Summarising the development in Table 1 below, the Social Exchange Theory (SET) was first taken into use to explain the shift from transactions to relational values that was followed by new marketing discipline, Relationship Marketing (RM). In the 2000's collaboration is even further developed from to and for

customers with them due service-dominant logic (SD – logic) in which customers be-come value co-creators and the importance of mutually beneficial relationships are taken as granted.

TABLE 1: Evolution of business relationships from 1950's to 2020's

| Timeframe (approx.) | 1950-1990 | 1980-2020 | 2000 - 2020 |
|---|---|---|---|
| Relationship type | Transaction / Exchange-based Straight-forward, dominated by seller | Relationship- fo-cused, complex reciprocal, two-way | Experience-based, complex, affectionate, involving |
| Duration of relation-ships | Short-term | Long-term | Long-term |
| Communication flow | One-way, asym-metric | Two-way | Two-way, sym-metric |
| Theories built on | Power, depend-ency | SET, interpersonal relationships, RM | SD-logic, OSR, OSL |
| Collaboration | Competitive From, By | To, For | Cooperative With |
| Triggers | Infrastructurisation | Communication technology de-velopment, cus-tomer loyalty, globalisation | Ever-growing chal-lenges of changing business environ-ments, complexity and dynamics of markets, demand-ing customers |
| Competitive advantage | Tangibles such as product quality and price | Intangibles; brand, trust, commitment, relationship | Intangibles, value co-creation, collaboration |
| Emotions | Not considered | Affection acknowledged, brand love | Affection and love |

In the following literature review sections, some of the concepts from the table above are introduced in more detail. Relationship Marketing (RM) is introduced first, as it prompted the evolution from short-term transactions-based business to embracing long-term relationships. The chapter 2 is dedicated to relationships in business and evolution of affection in them. Sector 2.1.2 Brand love introduces strong affection between brands and consumers. In management functions relational aspects was first brought to Public

Relations. As the empirical study of this thesis is based on relationship management, and more precisely on Public Relations, it is presented in sector 2.2.1 followed by Organisation-publics relationships (OPR) and organisation-stakeholder relationships (OSR). Finally, in the sector 2.3 organisation-stakeholder-love (OSL) framework is introduced, which builds especially upon brand love study yet changes the perspective from inside-out to outside-in.

### 2.1.1 From 4Ps to Relationship Marketing

In the first business relationship studies within the marketing field in 1970's, relationship was considered as long-term associations, contractual relations, and joint ownership; planned and reliable repeat business (Dwyer, Schurr and Oh 1987, 11). Until the 1990's business relationships were mainly based on economic aspects. Exchange, single anonymous transactions where money is exchanged over to a measured asset, was a key measurement for success. Discrete transactions with minimal communications and straight-forward actions did not result to further commitments nor relational facets. (Dwyer et al. 1987),

To create value for customers, marketing can be defined as "managing profitable customer relationships". Lasting customer relationships that create value are necessary to any company as customers are reassessing their relationships with brands carefully. (Kotler 2013, 24-25, 27). Initially marketing was actions that satisfied organisational objectives of profitability and customer requirements by distribution and exchange of goods. The processes included planning and executing activities that helped organisations to identify customers and create exchanges with them from a transactional viewpoint. The popular marketing mix 4P (product, price, place, promotion) was the first outside-in perspective that focused on the actions to satisfy the customer. However, the customer centricity was based on suppliers' conditions of short-term customer acquisitions rather than long-term customer retention. The original 4P was targeted at tangible goods from toothpaste to cars where service or relationships were not considered at all. (Gummesson 2017, 17; Buttle 1996,1; Baron, Conway & Warnaby 2010, 4-5, 69). One of the 4Ps, product positioning that takes the product attributes into account, is today evolved into a brand positioning that also take customers' perceptions and behaviour into consideration. (Story 2020, 243).

Once the customer perspective was considered it was found out that their willingness to form and have close relationship involves more than just transactions. (Barnes 1998, 767-769). Importance of interaction and relationships set the focus also from short-term exchanges to long-term, mutually beneficial relationships. Relationship Marketing (RM) became a standard in B2C marketing in 1990's fundamentally changing the marketing paradigm from transactional to relational. Commitment to the product was replaced by

customer loyalty as it emphasizes the "personal nature of the commitment of the customer to the firm and/or its employees" (Buttle 1996, 4; Baron, Conway & Warnaby 2010).

RM can be defined as marketing activities directed towards establishing, developing, and enhancing successful relationships, networks and interaction that exists for example with employees, owners, distributors, and external stakeholders such as channel members, competitors, and other influencers. It takes account the lifetime value (LTV) of the customer and partnering with strategic customers. (Gummerus & al. 2017, 2; Buttle 1996; 1,3, Gummesson 2004, 136). The purpose of Relationship Marketing is to retain the customers worth retaining. Relationship Marketing strategies focuses on building and maintaining long-term relationships through communication and collaboration and creating and delivering value to and by customers. Building balanced and mutual relationships is vital in B2B too, as relationships with other organisations in the channel affect businesses performance directly or indirectly.

From seller perspective, successful Relationship Marketing requires consistency, reliable performance, and up-front investments to meet the immediate and future needs of the customer that prevents them from changing the supplier. If actual costs overweight the benefits from the relational exchange and the customer is not contributing positively to company performance, the customer is not worth retaining. For these customers transaction marketing, that can be defined as zero relationship marketing where price, and sometimes the image of the company, are the only factors that link the buyer and seller together, is sufficient. (Gummesson 2004, 136 - 137)

Customers are increasingly demanding, which makes marketing environment more complex than ever. On top of excellent products and services, and mutually beneficial relationships, customers now expect positive **experiences.** Increasing number of studies are focusing on service-dominant logic (S-D logic) which emphasizes intangible resources and the service as the most fundamental basis of exchange. Production is no longer **to** or **for** customers as RM has suggested, but **with** customers as they become value co-creators rather than the target. (Gummesson 2017, 17-19). It focuses on the relationship between goods and services in which through high-level customisation goods are turned into services. S-D logic further changes the service-thinking from supplier-centric emphasizing the importance of relationship aspects of two-way communication, listening, and dialogue even further. (Baron & al. 2010, 6, 71, 74-75). Sheth (2017, 7-8) suggested RM to evolve from "share of wallet" to "share of hearts": going beyond economic and functional value to bonding with customers on an emotional plane which requires more holistic understanding of customer on top of their attitudinal and behavioural dimensions.

### 2.1.2 Brand love

Dwyer (1987) was one of the firsts to use elements from interpersonal, affective relationships in business relationship study using metaphors from marriage while investigating how discrete transactions (casual dating) could lead into a committed relationship with shared goals and mutual dependency. Affection and emotions were first studied in unidirectional setting by exploring the relationship between customer and object, specifically brand. Fournier (1998) studied brand as a relationship partner in a scenario where brand is animated, humanized, or somehow personalized to see whether consumers can have feelings towards brands. In her seminal work, Fournier (1998, 343) stated that by surpassing personification qualifications, consumers can inanimate brands as if they were human characters and thus can create (positive), common interpersonal feelings towards brands. Fournier found out that emotional commitment with strong loyalty is common across strong brand relationships. Overall, affective components such as commitment and intimacy play a role when it comes to relationship stability. Customers may even feel love towards a brand that manages to occupy a special place in their lives. (Fournier 1998, 348). Despite the lack of objective existence, as brand cannot act, think, or feel, and nature of the brand-consumer relationships, brands can trigger emotional responses (Smith & Zook 2019, 44).

Brand love is extremely positive emotions towards a brand that includes gratification and consumer-brand connection (Zarantonello, Formisano & Grappi 2016, 815). Having multiple different interpretations, Albert et. al (from Zarantello et. al 2016, 808) suggests that brand love consists of two macro-dimensions of "affection" and "passion". Affection is expressed e.g., through the closeness the consumer feels towards the brand (intimacy), long-term relationship (duration) and the brand which are associates with memories and dreams. Passion gives pleasure and idealisation with magical nature of the relationship that the consumer has for brand. Rossiter (2012) separated brand love from interpersonal love by defining it as deep affection for the branded product with anticipated separation anxiety if the desired product is not available.

For organisation, strong brand is important as it act as a critical success factor. It distinguishes competing services by creating sustainable competitive advantage. It is not only an implication of a good quality but an intangible asset stretching from physical to psychological aspects. Brand is entwined to everything the company does from customer service to social responsibility and environmental topics and political neutrality. It is the purpose and the passion that drives everything the company do. Six brand components of brand equity, essence, experience, identity, personality, positioning, promise, role, values, and vision all are integrated. (Smith & Zook 2019, 32, 45-46)

For customer, brand is a holistic experience. It is a unique collection of perceptions cus-
tomers hold in their minds in rational and emotional aspects. It does not only save cus-
tomers time and reduce perceived risk when they can choose the brand they trust, but it
can appeal in their own aspirations and ideal self. It is everything a customer (or any
stakeholder) sees, feels, and experiences from packaging to advertising, from customer
service to any discussion with the brand's representative. Thus, the brand experience is
muchly out of organisations hands. (Smith & Zook 2019, 32-33, 44)

To have strong affection towards the brand, accepting brand as a contributing relation-
ship partner to further accept behavioural significance of marketing actions is needed.
Interestingly, assigning personality qualities and inanimation of brands to a certain ex-
tent does not seem to be problematic for consumers. Instead, brand can fulfil aspirations
by reflecting to them and acting as a badge of (desired) self-image, by helping to define
who they are and projecting those to others. Meaningful consumer-brand relationships
are holistic and qualified via perceived ego significance of the chosen brand rather than
through involvement or product categories. Customers feel closer to brands that satisfy
their personal and social needs. (Fournier 1998, 344-345, 366). Using brand personality
companies emphasize personality by attributing human personality traits to brands.
With this link, consumers can develop intense, emotional responses resembling com-
mon interpersonal feelings also towards objects. (Smith & Zook 2019, 32-33, 40-41, 45;
Story 2020, 243) However, the relationship is fragile, and anything can damage or even
destroy the trust. (Schmid & Huber 2019. Furthermore, in their quantitative study, Zar-
antello, Formisano & Grappi (2016, 819) found out, that the bigger the brand gets, the
more brand love dilutes and vice versa. The researchers suggest it could be a cause from
moving away from niche of consumers towards mainstream, multiple audiences.

### 2.1.3 Triangular Theory of love in business studies

To study consumer-to-brand/organisation affection, Psychologist Stenberg's Triangular
theory of love (1986) is adopted by many scholars as a reference point to brand love
(e.g., Fournier 1998; Bügel et al. 2011, Yim et al. 2008). In the theory, love is viewed
from three components that together forms a triangle. In a loving relationship towards
family, friends, or lovers, the three components (Stenberg 1986, 120 - 122) are:

1. **Intimacy** which refers to feelings of closeness, connectedness and bondness; ex-
   perience of warmth deriving from emotional investment. It includes e.g., experi-
   ences of happiness, being able to count on loved ones in times of need, sharing
   of oneself, and intimate communication.

2. **Passion** which refers to a drive leading to romance: physical attraction and sexual consummation, motivational involvement. It is a "state of intense longing for union with the other" including psychological and physiological arousal.
3. **Decision / Commitment** which encompasses in the short run the decision that one loves someone and in the long-term results in cognitive decision of commitment; to stay in that love.

Love is not static but develops during the relationship. The importance and emphasis of the components varies based on the relationship length and type and out from those, Stenberg defines eight kinds of love. Arousal and other passion-based components are unpredictable but in the short-term, romantic relationships play a key role. In close, long-term relationships emotional involvement and the cognitive decision / commitment are stable but require time to be established. For example, in nonlove kind of love none of the three components exists. Companionate love is evolved by intimacy and decision / commitment elements which are long-term and in committed friendships physical attraction, the main source for passion, has died out, if ever excited. (Sternberg 1986, 120, 124).

By applying Stenberg's Triangular theory of Love, Yim, Tse and Chan (2008; 741, 752) investigated components of intimacy and passion in customer-firm-affection in high touch service sectors of fast-food restaurants and hair salons. They found out that intimacy and passion, on top of commitment, are influencing and strengthening especially loyalty intentions whereas transactions are more (solely) passion driven.

A few years later, Bügel & al (2011, 248) studied whether love is relevant in commercial relationships in less personalized and more mass-market oriented sectors of banking and telecom in the Netherlands. They investigated the existence of intimacy, passion, and decision / commitment to examine the role of construct intimacy in customer-to-organisation relationships. In their quantitative research results passion had a low communality and low factor loadings and hence, was dropped from the context of brand love. Bügel et al (2011) reduced Stenberg's Triangle of Love (1986, 119) to a straight line in a customer-to-firm relationship. Out of the three components, two major dimensions characterize the customer-to-firm relationships:

- **Customer intimacy** (formed by combining passion and intimacy) evolves during the relationship, and contributes to customer commitment beyond other factors
- **Commitment** to continue a relationship and a mere emotional evaluation

However, Langner, Schmidt & Fischer (2015, 632) found out that arousal, part of the passion component, can be as intense in brand love than it is when evoked by a close friend. Thus, brand love is the most emotionally intense relationship between customer and brand. Feelings of love in brand-consumer relationship varies between warmth and affection to obsessive dependency where brands can be seen irreplaceable and even separation anxiety might occur. Consumers who have fallen in love with a brand have greater brand loyalty and commitment. They have positive word-of-mouth and resistance to negative information, forgiveness of failures and are extensively involved by participating in brand communities to meet like-minded people. In most intense cases, love for brands is such strong that they are considered indispensable and even fear of loss might occur. Therefore, long-term relationships with highly emotional connections have profitable outcomes for brands. (Langner et. al. 2015; Fournier 1998, 364).

However, even though similarities and strong feelings between customers and brands exist, there is no direct equivalence of the emotional nature of these types of relationships. Some academics have even argued against strong emotions in customer-to-brand relationships, as the starting point is always transaction-based with habitual buying process with less personal interaction. (Bügel et al. 2011, 248) Nonetheless, people define themselves through e.g., projects, concerns, and themes. Cultivation of brand relationships can affect one's concept of self and purposive brand relationships also add and structure meaning in person's life (Fournier 1998; 346, 359) and thus can be very powerful for the organisation.

## 2.2    Relationship Management

The shift from reputation management towards relationship management has become the focus in public relations (PR). PR is literally about building relationships with publics, and hence is a crucial part of relationship management. Yet, it is often confused with the marketing function. Whereas marketing is responsible for increasing sales, the market share and interacting with the customers, PR has a wider role in issues that arise from a range of corporate performance and thus, communication expertise in conflict resolution, negotiation and crisis mitigation is needed. The one-way communication marketing typically practices is designed to influence in consumers buying behavioural and is not enough to manage consequences and externalities. If one-way communication is practiced with PR, it exposures organisations to greater risks from publics and their counteractions to problems and consequences. (Tam & al. 2022, 190-191). If PR is empowered to take part to the strategic decision-making instead of having only interpretive role, it enhances organisational outcomes. (Tam & al. 2022, 184, 188, 193).

Businesses entering relationships have different goals and expectations. One might focus on relationship development while another is more interested in profit or market share. (Lambe & al. 2001, 9). Relationship Management should therefore derive from dedication-based "want-to" relationships built on trust, instead of being dependence derived "have-to" relationships. Dependence and trust are important assets in relationships between B2C and B2B customers and suppliers (Chang et al. 2012, 941).

Expectations, both positive and negative, and managing them affects organisations' relationships with their stakeholders. When expectations are met, it acts as a solid foundation to build trust, legitimacy, and favourable reputation. Unmet stakeholder expectations can be destructive and, e.g., hurt the reputation and legitimacy. Furthermore, unfulfilled expectations cause dissatisfaction and negative engagement and might result in the termination of a relationship. Hence, organisations should identify and monitor expectations to keep up with changes in the environments they operate in. (Olkkonen & Luoma-aho 2019, 281-284)

First, companies need to meet internal expectations and needs as internal reputation is crucial to company's reputation and overall perception of service and brand (da Costa & al. 2019, 3). Employees who are willing to form relationships with other stakeholders are likely to engage in proactive service performance. (Patterson, Kerrin, & Roissard 2009 from Da Costa & Loureiro 2019, 3). Normative commitment arises from employee expectations and reflects what customers feel they should do. It is strongly correlated with affective commitment, desire-based positive feeling of attachment. Engaged employees working in the customer interface can therefore contribute to the customer's affective commitment, loyalty and reputation. (Dean 2007, 163-164). If employee expectations are not met, there is a risk of resignation(s) that consequently jeopardizes building long-lasting relationships with stakeholders (Buttle 1996, 12) too. Thus, before focusing on external stakeholder relationship management, managing employee expectations and engagement comes first. reflecting to external stakeholder relationships as well.

Understanding and meeting customer expectations is vital in the formation, maintenance, and evaluation phase of the relationship. In the formation stage, according to SET, relational partners choose to engage with others by taking account the expected costs and rewards while assessing whether to enter the relationship in the first place. Secondly, in relationship maintenance stage discrepancies between expectations and experiences results in dissatisfaction. (Olkkonen & Luoma-aho 2019, 285) As expectations change over time there is a need for continuous, and direct information flow to succeed (Buttle 1996, 12). Companies that either meet or exceed expectations contribute to satisfaction, maintaining and expanding the relationship (Lambe & al. 2001, 24).

Already in 1975, Dill forecasted the move from stakeholder influence towards stakeholder participation. (Freeman & Reed 1984, 90). Symmetrical, two-way communication is a tool to build, nurture, and maintain behavioural relationships and manage expectations. When the stakeholders are empowered in organisational decision-making by having a voice before and after (Kent & Taylor 2002; Tam & al. 2022, 187), customers are willingly in the relationship. Also, on top of the three elements of love, honesty and reliability, components of trust appear to help to develop feelings of love in consumer-to-business relationships (Zarantonello et al. 2016).

### 2.2.1 Public relations

Public is referred to as a range of organisation-centred internal and external publics the organisation is dependent on such as employees, investors, suppliers, and distributors. (Smith & Ze Zook 2020, 392). Public is *anyone* while stakeholder is *someone having a stake* in the organisation, without whose support the organisation would cease to exist (Freeman 1983, 89). Publics have potential of becoming, stakeholders as well (Voss 2006, 93) and the distinction between public and stakeholders is not explicit and often used interchangeably. However, public relations and stakeholder relations are often separated in organisational functions. UK's Institute of Public Relations (IPR) defines public relations as "the planned and sustained effort to establish and maintain goodwill and mutual understanding between an organisation and its publics". (Smith & Ze Zook 2020, 392). PR is about interacting with publics, scanning multiple environments, and managing issues. However, it is often confused with marketing that creates the markets and interacts with customer publics. (Tam & al. 2022 ,184, 188, 190)

Public relations have two competing perspectives in literature. First, and more traditionally PR is considered symbolic actions of what the organisation says about itself. This perspective aim to influence how publics interpret the organisations' behaviour after the fact through e.g., the image, reputation, brand, and identity, and thereby secures the power of the decision-makers who choose those behaviours. The one-way communication including media relations, publicity and messages creates a buffer for the organisation and its environment, allowing the organisation and its managers to behave in the way they want to without interference from the publics. In the second, behavioural, strategic management perspective, PR executives helps to manage the behaviour of organisation instead of only interpreting the after-facts. (Tam & al. 2022, 186-187). However, the publics might have different goals than organisations. Therefore those organisations that listen and collaborate with their key publics and stakeholders before making their final decisions make overall better decisions. Additionally, if the public do not support the goals or decisions, they typically oppose management efforts which might result in issues or even crises. (Hon & Grunig 1999). By emphasizing two-way communication to understand problems and interests of the publics gives publics a voice in management

decisions both prior and after the decisions are made. Together with symbolic actions, this bridging activity helps to build relationships with stakeholders adding to the environmental scanning, research and listening. (Tam & al. 2022, 186-187). To be effective, organisations need to achieve goals that are valued both by management and strategic publics from inside and outside the organisation. (Valentini et al. 2012).

Quality outcomes are the most meaningful measure to evaluate the effectiveness and value of these relationships (Ki & Hon 2008, 19). Also, expectation management is vital part of enabling, managing, and developing intangible assets in public relations. (Olkkonen & Luoma-aho 2019). However, PR actions might take long time before leading into action and therefore are difficult to measure (Hon & Grunig 1999). Even though the importance of quality relationships and managing them have been long studied and understood, the strategic importance of public relations is undervalued. PR and its executives still struggle to influence and involve in strategic planning and organisational decisions. If PR is not empowered to strategic management, it hinders down the contribution PR could have for organisational success through their expertise. (Tam & al. 2022; 184, 190, 200).

### 2.2.2 Organisation-public relationships (OPR)

One key aspect of organisation performance is its relationships and reputation. Quality relationships is an outcome of effective PR actions and good reputation is a by-product of long-term, quality relationships (Kent & Taylor 2002, 30 – 31). Furthermore, technology and the tools it provides have increased the importance of organisational transparency. Transparency derives from openness, trust, corporate social responsibility (CSR) and ethics. It can be gained when organisation intentionally and voluntarily makes negative and positive legally releasable information available to the public. From the stakeholder perspective, organisational efforts should strive to score high on sharing substantial information, participation, accountability dimension and low on holding information for themselves. Successful transparency becomes a critical relational characteristic especially in times of situations with declined trust. However, transparency is only useful when it increases understanding and is perceived by the stakeholders. (Rawlins 2009).

Several studies (e.g., Kent & Taylor 2008; Ki & Hon 2008) have found similarities from successful interpersonal communication skills in relationships and organisation-public relationships. Both relationship types share multiple key relational features such as control mutuality, trust, and commitment. Ledingham and Bruning (1998; 56, 58) investigated 17 different interpersonal relationship dimensions, derived from earlier marketing studies, to identify the dimensions that impact the process of creating, developing, and maintaining good organisation-public relationships. They found out that organisational

activities such as building trust, demonstrating involvement investment and commitment, and maintaining open communication impacts the stay-leave decision and thus, have a positive impact on organisations' competitive environment. Value of organisation-public relationships (OPR) have value at an organisational level as quality relationships can act as a key precursor of favourable reputation and also increase organisation's profit prominently. (Yang & Grunic 2005, 307).

Organisations desiring for long-term, stable, and satisfying relationships with their strategic publics should cultivate their relationships. The ability to listen, empathize, and to identify common ground can act as a solid ground when building relationships. (Kent & Taylor 2002, 30 – 31). To maintain and foster positive and stable relationships, scholars have proposed cultivation strategies. Emphasizing the organisations' cultivation efforts, Ki and Hon (2008, 6 – 9) introduces six relationship cultivation strategies adopted from Hon and Grunig's (1999) six elements of long-term relationship. These are:

1. Access: the ability to reach the other party. Degree of effort that an organization puts into providing communication channels
2. Positivity: anything that is done to make the relationship more enjoyable such as cheerful and nice behaviour, polite communication and uncritical behaviour towards the other party involved
3. Openness / disclosure: proactive and constructive relationship maintenance action with direct discussion, where opinions, concerns thoughts and feelings, satisfaction and dissatisfaction about the relationship are shared honestly. Openness is vital component of trust and satisfying relationship. It also provides information about the nature of the organization and the relationship quality.
4. Sharing of tasks: organisations and its publics solving joint or separate problems. This element effects on commitment and satisfaction.
5. Networking: organisation's effort to build network with same group of publics.
6. Assurances: demonstrating that organization is committed to maintaining the relationship helps to show they value the key stakeholders, effects on trust and commitment.

The strategy is considered as a two-way cultivation strategy where parties involved use these with each other. As the first step however, these should be adapted first as the organisational effort making this strategy one of the rare ones that takes organizational responsibility into account.

Dialogue, and especially dialogic commitment, emphasises even further the balanced relationship between the organisation and its publics. Dialogical communication is spontaneous interaction based on participants' own beliefs, values, and attitudes, and it seeks to understand the positions of others. Dialogue is unrehearsed and unscripted, and hence unpredictable. Involving trust, risk, and vulnerability it can be also misused through e.g., manipulation or exclusion. To succeed in dialogue, empathy,

supportiveness, and confirmation acknowledgement is vital to make public feel the organisation can "walk in their shoes" and where individuals and publics are treated as colleagues more than outsiders. Through diverse views, a biproduct of dialogue is often disagreement which might result in conflicts and impoliteness and destroying trust. Hence, dialogic commitment might be considered as a risk. However, it rewards with stronger organisation-stakeholder relationship as it creates understanding minimizing uncertainty and misunderstandings and contributes to a more ethical approach towards publics. Organisations embracing two-way relationship and dialogue will also know in advance if public disagree on issues and can improve organisational effectiveness. However, dialogue might not be possible, practical, or even required in all cases and sometimes practitioners lack, for example, freedom or time to respond with collaborative tactics. (Kent & Taylor 2002, 24-2-26).

### 2.2.3 Organisation-stakeholder relationships

As well as OPR, organisation-stakeholder relationship (OSR) research is examining the building and nurturing positive relationships with stakeholders (Badham, 2020, 4). Slabbert and Barker (2014, 72-73) define organisation-stakeholder-relationships as "the result of the management of common interests between the organisation and strategic stakeholder(s) over time in order to achieve mutually beneficial goals through a high degree of reciprocity and continuous two-way symmetrical communication", where stakeholder interest is taken into a consideration when making organisational decisions. Instead of being one-to-one or one-to-many, two-way symmetrical communications are responsive, collaborative problem solving, interdependency, timeous feedback, openness, and consistency in messaging. (Theunissen, 2019).

Mitchell et. al (1997, 865-867) introduces Stakeholder identification model that helps identifying the types and define which stakeholder group(s) should be prioritized over others in the dynamic and situational uniqueness. Identifying three stakeholder *attributes* of power, legitimacy, and urgency, can help prioritizing stakeholder management actions. For example, stakeholders that do not present any of the attributes are categorised as nonstakeholders. Authority can be gained with power and legitimacy and stakeholders possessing all attributes are "Definitive stakeholders" that requires immediate priority from managers. (Mitchell & al.1997; 874, 878).

Luoma-aho (2015) identified three types of stakeholders: faith-holders, hateholders, and fakeholders. Most meaningful stakeholders are faith-holders; positively engaged stakeholders who trust the organisation and are willing to recommend it and stay loyal in good and troubled times. Hateholders are the opposite of faith-holders. They dislike or even hate the brand due to negative experiences, such as unresponsiveness, and failure of service which leads to dissatisfaction and negative emotions from regret and

dissatisfaction to sadness and anger. Anger can lead to negative engagement behaviour that can harm the organisation through e.g., negative word-of-mouth. Fakeholders are artificially generated, unauthentic stakeholders that act as either faith- or hateholders. For example, unethical public relations practioners or lobbyists might take advantage of fakeholders. Also, in increasing amount customer reviews are generated through fake-holders due the rising trust of "people like me". Whereas it is important to keep faith-holders satisfied, hateholders should be seen as potential future faith-holders. Fakehold-ers on the other hand are non-human, but usually fake profiles in social media, and therefore there is no way to build relationships with them. (Luoma-aho 2015).

Stakeholders affect organisation's ability to thrive and ultimately, survive. Therefore or-ganisations invest great deal of resources while trying to keep stakeholders' affection positive. However, engagement is not necessarily only positive as negative attitudes can similarly contribute to negative engagement. (Luoma-aho 2015). The level of affection is often measured in an event of crisis, as it commonly arises especially strong negative emotions which can have a reputational thread. At its best, crisis is an opportunity to strengthen the ties in the relationship. (Coombs & Holladay 2005, 264). Therefore, rec-ognising the types of stakeholders and their urgency is vital to be able to focus on those that matters the most.

## 2.3  Organisation-stakeholder love (OSL)

Each relationship is bi-directional where both parties affect and are affected by the con-text they are affected (Fournier 1998). It has been acknowledged that the perception of the existence, and the intensity of the relationship can be different and more complex from consumers perspective than it is from the organisation's perspective. Mutually beneficial, close relationship requires engagement from both sides. Yet, majority of the studies focus on how to make the customer committed to a long-term relationship.

However, in his organisational-stakeholder love (OSL) framework, Badham (2020, 10) goes further by arguing that organisation should have the main responsibility as "organi-sations should not expect stakeholders to display favourable and close affection for an organisation without considering how the organisation might display a similarly favour-able response." The OSL framework integrates brand love theory, including Stenberg's theory of love, and relationship management research, especially OSR, together. Bad-ham (2020, 12) defines OSL framework as

> affective orientation of intimacy and commitment an organisation initiates and nurtures towards internal and external stakeholders for the purpose of giving them the best possible value in the or-ganisation-stakeholder relationship (OSR).

As seen in the Figure 1 below, emotions in an organisation-to-stakeholder (whether internal or external) relationship do not only flow in a singular direction from stakeholder to organisation, but deeper and more intimate relationship can be gained by pursuing bi-directional organisational love. Rather than only seeking for stakeholder affection, organisations should give love through emotional reciprocity.
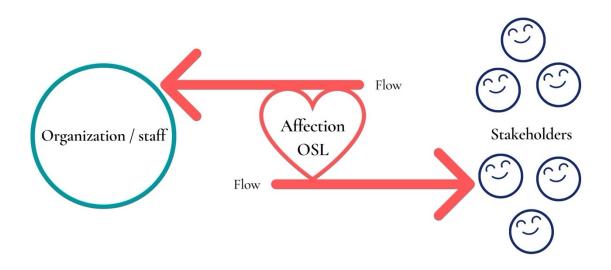


FIGURE 1: Organisation-stakeholder love framework affection flow. Adopted from Badham (2020)

Based on relationship cultivation strategies, that was introduced in sector 2.2.2, Badham proposes OSL to be cultivated and managed by organisations for example via employee training programs and suggests the following as precepts of OSL:

- Organisations should take the responsibility to initiate and cultivate the relationship with stakeholder individuals or groups whether they feel the same towards the organisation or not
- The intensity of intimacy and commitment should be adjusted based on the stakeholder wishes, and they should be able to opt out from a relationship that they do not feel comfortable being at
- Stakeholders should be treated as valued relationship partners with ability to collaborate in decision-making process affecting on them

Barnes (1998, 769) wondered whether customer relationship can be genuinely formed with a company, especially if customer never get to interact with an employee whom with the interpersonal relationships are formed with. Furthermore, employees' feeling of comfort predicts their affective commitment towards organisation. Those customers that get to interact with employees, can perceive the comfort as a positive customer focus, leading to a feeling of attachment and desire to maintain the relationship. Through

responsive communications, where customer opinions are asked and feelings monitored, affective attachment can also be generated with customers. (Dean 2007, 164). The OSL framework (Badham 2020) goes further by suggesting that organisations can be conceptualised and people representing the organisation can initiate and maintain loving relationship with stakeholders. Employees can have different level of intimacy, passion and commitment with individuals or groups such as customers, partners, and investors.

# 3    DATA AND METHODOLOGY

## 3.1    Case Valo Solutions

As a case organisation this study use Valo Solutions, Finnish-based technology company. First Valo product was established in 2011 when a Finnish-based Microsoft Consultancy company Blue Meteorite got sick of re-inventing the intranet after building them from same elements time after time for a decade. An intranet-in-a-box called Valo Intranet was created to meet generic intranet needs to reduce the cost and time that intranets required due to long and expensive customizations and to focus customisation of the unique customer needs. In 2015, a team of seven people started to develop, build a partner network and market Valo as the business was expanded to international markets. In 2021, Valo's product portfolio consists of six digital workplace solutions built on top of SharePoint and Microsoft Teams. Consultancy business was sold and the company continued as Valo Solutions employing over 60 people globally. In 2022 Valo Solutions was acquired by Staffbase.

Implementing Valo's solutions for organisations require not only strong Microsoft expertise, but the ability to offer services in e.g., consulting in change management, and the use of new digital tools. Therefore, from the beginning of internalization, Valo decided to build the business around a partner network that exclusively sells and implements the solution(s) locally to the end customers. Valo Partners and their performance are vital for Valo's business, and hence, they are the most important external stakeholder group for Valo. Therefore, on top of focusing on product development, they offer support for partners' marketing, selling, and implementing efforts. All Valo Partners are Certified Partners. Once the partner has successfully reached certain criteria in e.g., in sales, they will become Premium Partners that will unlock some benefits certified partners do not have.  In April 2021, Valo had a network of 300 delivery partners in over 30 countries from which roughly 20 enjoyed the Premium Partner status.

Valo maintains its relationships with partners through several communications channels and efforts. At a personal level, partners' main touch point is their Partner Manager. Partner Manager is the single point of contact that stays connected with Premium Partners via regular, occurring meetings or with others based on demand. With technical topics, Valo offers first-hand support for partners. Occasionally, partners are also interacting with some representatives from the marketing department, Product Owners, or Technical Partner Managers. Information and news are shared also via mass communications such as news published at the extranet portal, sending newsletters, and

organising webinars or more comprehensive online events. With end customers, Valo communicates mainly through the partners and hence, the feedback loop from end-users to Valo and vice versa circles through the partners.

Valo organises annually several events to keep their partners engaged. The annually held Valo Summit's purpose is not only to discuss Valo's business, but to provide a place where partners can meet, network, and share their knowledge with peers, and to build deeper relationships with Valo's employees. As part of Valo Summit, Valo organises Valo Partner Awards where partners can nominate themselves in four distinct categories. Due Covid-19, Valo Summit, and all other events were organised virtually in 2020 and 2021. To foster relationships and the community outside the events, Valo provides online community in Microsoft Teams. Teams' channels are open to all partners, and they are encouraged to discuss with Valo Team and other partners on those channels.

To stand out in the IT business-to-business environment, Valo brand with bright colours and slogan "Fall in love with your intranet" was established in 2015 as part of the internalisation. That time, other brands in the software business were seen, according to Valo's Chief Marketing Officer T. Manninen (interview 29.4.2021), conventional, and formal with their brand and communication style. Valo wanted their brand to be seen authentic, and easy-to-approach to everyone. The brand aimed to bring colourful moments to employees' lives "because in the end every business is all about people and how we are connected to each other", as Manninen described. Word "love" was often used in Valo's marketing and communications. The concept and hashtag #ValoLove was introduced in 2017 in Valo's social media channels and is used not only by Valo, but also adapted by stakeholders including partners, other community members, and customers.

> I feel that already the word love is very strong and rarely seen in the B2B sector, to be honest. What we are showing with that word on a daily basis is that we are always willing to go the extra mile and really giving our best in the team, and with our partners, and also for our customers who are using our products. Love as a word is giving a promise and we want to succeed and keep that promise. (Manninen, T. interview 29.4.2021)

For partners, #ValoLove is not considered only as a "marketing gibberish". In 2020's satisfaction survey conducted for all Valo Partners, out of 50 responses to the open-ended question about Valo Love it was often described as "working together", "strong community", or "Valo Team always being helpful".

## 3.2    Data collection and analysis

Selected research method(s) serves the needs to answer the research question(s) (Valli & Aarnos 2018). Usually when collecting data for this kind of research, only one research method, qualitative or quantitative, is being used. However, instead of excluding one method while using the other, taking advantage of both can create an interactive continuum improving the quality of the research. (Newman, I. & Benz, C. 1998; 10, 14-15)

In this research, the data is collected using a mixed method of quantitative and qualitative data collection. Quantitative research, that was conducted first on a form of online survey, aims for objectivity with systematic approaches. In this case, the aim of the quantitative method was not to find affirmation on certain hypothesis, which is often the case in quantitative data collection, but to seek whether love is perceived in the first place. With the online survey it was possible to reach more stakeholders than by only using qualitative methods.

However, to also answer the research questions of "how", using multiple choice questions is not sufficient. Therefore, the second part of the research was conducted using case study, a qualitative research method, as this research method gives thorough insights of how the respondents perceive situations. (Allen, Titsworth & Hunt 2009, 3). Hence, qualitative data collection is used here as the primary source of the results whereas quantitative data collections is a secondary, supporting method.

The organisation has close to 2,000 partners globally in more than 40 countries that would have qualified for the questionnaire and the interviews. However, only European partners were asked to fill out the survey for three main reasons. First, Europe has been case organisations business area for longest and thus, is the largest. Therefore, collecting data is easy and has the most variance in length and type of partnerships. Second, (working) cultures and communications vary between different business areas based on Partner Management and cultures and hence might affect the results in a way that could not be taken into consideration in the results. Third, participants for the interviews were collected from the respondents of the questionnaire and considering the researcher was in Europe, it was convenient that interviewees were also located approximately at the time zone as the researcher.

### 3.2.1 Online Questionnaire

Quantitative data is collected to understand a particular phenomenon as a whole and how it could be generalised to a larger population with precise analysis of data (Allen & al. 2009, 3-4). The quantitative method can be defined as an approach using systematic observations that is intentional, replicable, and valid. Data is collected intentionally, systemically and should be replicable for another researcher to gain similar results. A questionnaire is a quantitative data collection method, where respondents are answering the same questions in the same order. It allows asking standardized questions from many respondents in a short timeframe without big resource investments. (Saunders & Lewis 2008, 148-149). Here, an online questionnaire with multiple choice questions was in use to allow multiple responses with low investment in time to collect the data. The aim was first to understand whether the phenomenon, organisation-stakeholder love and the elements of intimacy and commitment, can be perceived to begin with, and secondly, enable generalization in this research context's larger population than the interviews alone would have enabled.

The survey was conducted using Webropol online survey and reporting tool, that is available for all Jyväskylä University students. Other digital communications tools in use were case organisation's property. The questionnaire's questions and the measurement scale are predominantly adapted from Bügel et al.'s brand love theory questionnaire (2008, 252) that explores brand love from a customer-to-organisation approach. As the purpose of this research was to investigate organisational stakeholder love, nine of the questions were reversed from inside-out perspective to outside-in perspective. The original and reversed questions are introduced at the Table 2. Reversing questions enabled investigating the (brand) love in partner-organisation relationships from the stakeholders' point of view. For example, original question of "I have a good understanding with (brand X)" was in the questionnaire reversed as "Valo understand us". All questions in the online survey were based on a 5-point Likert scale, where 1 (one) equal "Strongly disagree", 3 (three) equals neutral and 5 (five) is "Strongly agree". In Bügel et al.'s questionnaire commitment-related questions were based on 7-point Likert scale. However, here all questions use the 5-point scale to first, make it more straightforward to the respondents and second, to make the results more comparable between the different components of love in this research.

TABLE 2: The adapted questionnaire from Bügel et al.'s love questionnaire questions

| Component of love | Bugel et. Al. Brand love questionnaire | Scale | OSL questionnaire (i.e., this research) | Scale |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| **Intimacy** | I have a confidential relationship with XYZ | 1-5 | Valo has a confidential partnership with us | 1-5 |
| **Intimacy** | I attach much value to XYZ | 1-5 | Valo values us | 1-5 |
| **Intimacy** | I have a good understanding with XYZ | 1-5 | Valo understands us | 1-5 |
| **Passion** | I am fascinated by the things XYZ does | 1-5 | Valo is enthusiastic about us and what we do | 1-5 |
| **Passion** | I am very enthusiastic about XYZ | 1-5 | Valo is enthusiastic about us about our partnership | 1-5 |
| **Commitment** | To what extent do you intend to remain a customer with XYZ? | 1-7 | Valo intends to remain partnering with us | 1-5 |
| **Commitment** | To what extent do you feel 'committed' to ZYX? | 1-7 | Valo is committed to serving our needs long-term | 1-5 |
| **Commitment** | How often do you consider switching to another XYZ? | 1-7 | Valo would not consider switching to another partner as a replacement to us | 1-5 |

Respondents were recruited by sending email to all Valo Partners that were from Europe. The initial invitation to fill out the online questionnaire was sent out March 4, 2021, to 1091 (N) contacts taken from the organisation's Customer Relationship Management database. The email included a brief introduction to the topic, a link to a hidden page inside the extranet with further details about the study, and the actual link to the questionnaire. One reminder email about the study was sent to the same contact list on March 16.

The questionnaire was open 22 days from March 4 to March 26. Some contacts were also reached individually to persuade them to fill in the questionnaire. These contacts were either hand-picked by their Partner Manager or by the researcher whenever she was in contact with partners in other matters. The questionnaire was conducted anonymously to ensure respondents felt safe to answer truthfully on the topics in question. This was important as the researcher represented the organisation in stake.

The aim was to have at least 50 responses to measure if the organisation-stakeholder-love was perceived among European Valo partners in the first place. A total number of 78 stakeholders started the survey, and 63 (n) respondents from 15 European countries completed the survey. The sample size of 63 (n) respondents gained from the total number of the population size 1091 (N), represented 5.8 % of the European Valo Partners. 19 respondents represented Certified Partners, and 44 respondents were Premium Partners.

**Data analysis**

Due to the low sample size, the quantitative study has relevance in this specific environment only and cannot be generalized outside the context of this study. Thus, it has only internal, but not external credibility. (Valli & Aarnos 2018) Due to the same reason quantitative research is used to only measure statistics, frequent values, and central tendencies. Frequent values are used to explore the frequency, e.g., the percentage of respondents that "Strongly Agree" with the given statements. Secondly, central tendencies and especially mean, the average of set of the values obtained from the questions, is calculated to investigate the intensity of the perceived elements of love. (Allen et. al. 2009, 19). More advanced statistical methods, such as correlations, and ANOVAS, are not in use as such analysis goes beyond the scope of this research.

Even though conducted first, the findings from the online survey were used to support the findings from the second, qualitative part of the study, semi-structured interviews and answer the first research question. Hence, in the results (to be introduced in Chapter 4) are not divided by the research method but by the themes.

### 3.2.2 Semi-structured in-depth interviews with thematic analysis

The quantitative method helps to create or refine a theory. However, it provides only answers to "if" questions but not for the "how" questions. Qualitative research was necessary to understand how OSL is perceived. Case study is one of the most used qualitative research methods. Case study is an empirical study that aims to understand a case, whether it is an individual, group of people or as in here, a network of partners that are connected through the case organisation. It is heavily based on the examinee's own experiences. In general, case studies are not generalized but only explain the case. However, it can act as a steppingstone towards a generalization. (Metsämuuronen 2011, 224). Here, the aim is to find how the OSL is applied in the closed network by the organisation and hence, using the case study is sufficient research method to use.

Interviews are commonly used data collecting method in qualitative research. By using interviews with open-ended questions to collect data, it is possible to gain understanding

for the how's.  For this research's intention, interviews with semi-structured questions that allows amending the questions or their order was used as the subject was intimate and emotional and there was a need for illustrative examples to explain the how's. (Metsämuuronen 2011, 221, 245).

The interviewees were volunteers picked from the online questionnaire respondents. After filling out the questionnaire, the respondents were guided to independent landing page where they were asked to fill in their email addresses if they were available for the interviews. The separate landing page ensured the anonymity in the online questionnaire as the ones giving their emails could not be linked to any specific survey response.

13 semi-structured interviews were conducted out from the 20 volunteers. Seven respondents that volunteered were not either included in the results or interviewed at all. One interview was used as a test, four volunteers represented the same company from which only one was selected for the interview, two respondents never replied for the interview request, and one volunteer cancelled the scheduled interview on a last minute.

Interviewees represented case organisation's stakeholders from seven European countries, from which 11 interviewees were from non-native English-speaking countries. The length of the partnership varied from less than a year to over four years. Three interviewees worked in technical roles and thus, were mainly in contact with Valo Support, Technical Partner Manager and Product Owners. 10 interviewees had a business-centric role, being in contact mostly with their Partner Manager and marketing department. Frequency of involvement to Valo's businesses and interaction with people through meetings, submitted support tickets or taking part to (online) events varied between currently passive to daily.

Interviews were conducted online between March 22 to April 7, 2021 using Microsoft Teams as the meeting platform. Online interviews were chosen for three reasons. First, interviewees were scattered in multiple European countries and secondly, Microsoft Teams enabled recording of the interviews and storing the collected data, such as the recordings, audio files and transcripts, in researchers' work-related, yet personal and password-protected cloud service One drive. Third, all interviewees were Certified Microsoft Partners and familiar with the chosen tool. The same services were used in all other partner-related information storage and hence, was seen as the safest solution from security perspective.

After the date and time were agreed, the meeting invitation including link to the one.to.one meeting was emailed to the interviewee. As an additional information, interview questions, a brief introduction to the organisation-stakeholder love (OSL)

framework, and links to Privacy Policy documents located at the researcher's cloud service were also included in the invitation. The email was sent at least three working days prior to the interview to allow interviewees time to familiarize with the research concept and questions.

The interviews were constructed in three segments. First, the researcher briefly introduced the topic and definitions of the key words i.e., intimacy, passion, and commitment. The first questions were related to generic topics of e.g., how long the interviewee had been partnering with the case organisation and what was their opinion considering affection in business environment. In the second part, six questions derived from the components of love, and the online questionnaire were asked. Introduced in Table 3 in detail, e.g., for the intimacy-related statement in online questionnaire of "Valo values us" the question in the interview was formed "How does Valo show they value you?". All questions in the interviews started with "How does or how could.." . However, after the first three interviews it was noted that the interviewees focused more on problem solving and how to improve in the future. To focus on the past and current situation, for the remaining 10 interviews "*or could*" was dropped off. Also, questions about interest were added after the first three interviews. The interviews took between 30 – 50 minutes and were conducted in English.

TABLE 3: The equivalent questions in questionnaire and in the interviews

| Element of love | Online Questionnaire | Interview Question: How does.. |
|---|---|---|
| **Intimacy** | Valo values us | Valo show they value you? |
| **Intimacy** | Valo understands us | Valo show they understand you and your business? |
| **Passion** | Valo is enthusiastic about us and what we do | Valo show enthusiasm towards you? |
| **Commitment** | Valo intends to remain partnering with us | Valo show they intend to remain partnering with you? |
| **Commitment** | Valo is committed to serving our needs long-term | Valo show they are committed to you now and in long-term? |
| **Commitment** | Valo would not consider switching to another partner as a replacement to us | Is there any reason you might think of Valo would consider switching to another partner as a replacement to you? |

Before starting the recording, the interviewees were asked if they wanted to keep the interview confidential between the researcher and interviewee. This question aimed to ensure interviewees could be as open and honest as possible even though the interviewer was case organisation's employee. Also, the researcher reminded the interviewees that

during the interview, the researcher did not represent the organisation but solely acted as a researcher. Hence, she did not take a stand on topics she might have done in work-related situations.

After the interviews, all video recordings (.mp4) were transformed into audio files (.mp4a) and in the following weeks transcribed using Microsoft Word's automated transcript service. Transcribing is needed to enable analysing verbal data. The transcribing process acts as the first important phase of data analysis where more thorough understanding of the data is created. For thematic analysis there is no guideline to follow when producing the transcript, however the transcripts should retain the information in a way which is "true" meaning even a comma can alter the meaning of data. (Braun & Clarke 2006, 87). The automatic transcripts were also manually reviewed to correct the mistakes the automated transcription made. At the same time, names and other identifying details were deleted from the transcripts. The manual stage took an average of three hours per interview.

**Data analysis**

Thematic analysis is a widely accepted and recognized method for analysing almost any qualitative data. It is very flexible in terms of theoretical framework, research questions and sample size. (Braun & Clarke 2013, 176). There is no standard method for quantitative research nor one correct way to analyse the data and find the meanings and implications out of them, but the methods acts more as tools. The quality of analysis is in the hands of researcher, e.g., via the knowledge around the research topic and ability to use the analytic tools such as coding while analysing and constructing the meanings expressed in interviews (Kvale 2007, 103).

To be able to analyse the data, one must "immerse" to it, and become familiar with the dataset's content. (Braun & Clarke 2013, 201). While approaching the data, the researcher can use either deductive or inductive method. The deductive method relies strictly on the collected data whereas in deductive analysis method the researcher has some preliminary ideas of the themes that might occur in the interviews. (Hirsjärvi & Hurme 2015, 136) The researcher had, at the time of interviews, worked at the case organisation in stakeholder communications for over three years which made the discussed topics familiar. Furthermore, the researcher had met seven of the interviewees personally at events at least once prior to the interview. One interviewee was familiar from online meetings and with three interviewees the researcher had no prior engagement with. Indeed, given the fact the researcher had been employed for the organisation and had established personal relationships with some of the interviewees, some presumptions, beliefs, and subjectivity for the discussed topics existed even prior to the

interview. In this research, only the researcher analysed data and therefore, it cannot be guaranteed that all subjectivity over the matter would have been excluded from the interpretations. Here, the analysis was made following mainly inductive analysis as the topic was familiar to the researcher.

While reading the data, it is important to be active, analytical, and critical to be able to be analytically sensitive and see beyond the surface. (Braun & Clarke 2013, 203). The purpose is not only to analyse what is told, but to also interpret and speculate what is said in between the lines. This method usually extends the data rather than compresses it. (Hirsjärvi & Hurme 2015, 137). However, only words being said is considered enough in most business studies. (Eriksson & Kovalainen 2008, 85). From the transcribed data researcher made some interpretations of some words in use, and for example repetitions were eliminated and long pauses not considered while interpretations were made.

Already during the interviews, the researcher started to take notes and make observations of topics that seemed relevant and often occurring in the interviews. This is normal in interviews that the researcher is conducting herself. (Hirsjärvi & Hurme 2015, 136). During the transcription phase some level of understanding and loose impressions of the data were written down on a paper as keywords and phrases. Different elements recurring across the dataset answering the research questions are usually most meaningful, yet not necessarily the ones that occur most frequently. (Braun & Clarke 2013, 223).

To find meanings from the data, researchers have several different methods, or tools, to choose from. Coding, attaching one or more keywords to enable identifying statements, is often used and acts as a key aspect of content analysis e.g., in computer-assisted analysis. Coding helps to categorize the interviews and reduce the statements so that they can be e.g., quantified and then compared with frequency of other themes found. Categories can be developed in advance from the theory, or they can arise ad hoc during the analysis. (Kvale 2007, 104). It is not rare that interview analyses are made without following any selected analytic method. Instead, the researcher chances between different analytic techniques ad hoc. This bricolage technique combines some, or even all, analytic methods while seeking the deeper understanding and lucidity for the data. (Kvale 2007, 115) Ad hoc and bricolage interview analysis is what describes best the analysis being made here. Taking advantage mostly of thematic analysis, which is based on coding and categorizing and forming themes out from them, other methods were not excluded even though not actively in use either.

# 4    RESULTS AND ANALYSIS

The study was conducted to answer two research questions concerning organisation-stakeholder love and the possible perception of it using Valo Solutions as the case organisation and its Valo Partners, who acts as a re-seller for the organisation´s digital workplace solutions, as the stakeholders.

**RQ1:** How do Valo Partners perceive Valo's organisation-stakeholder-love?
**RQ2:** How is organisation-stakeholder-love (OSL) applied by the company?

First, the overall attitude towards affection in business relationships is examined to set a frame for the following analysis. The results are then presented research question at a time. The first research question is analysed first through the components of love, customer intimacy, and commitment based on the data from the online questionnaire and findings from the interviews. After, the results are introduced by themes and their categories that were discovered from the interviews, supported by data from online questionnaires (if applicable). After, the second research question is answered by analysing both quantitative and qualitative data.

As can be seen from the results, some themes and categories might seem artificial as the detected facets for affection were intertwined creating a unique and fragile whole where one theme can support or weaken the other.

**Stakeholders' viewpoints of affection in business environment**

Love is a personal feeling. Before asking the OSL-related questions in the interviews, question about interviewees' opinion about the affection in business-to-business was asked. In general, interviewees believed that B2B partnerships can run without affection yet most interviewees agreed on the positive effect of affection on building and nurturing the relationships.

> -- people buy from people they like. So I do think that goes somewhere, you know, we all want to feel appreciated and when we feel appreciated then we tend to do more for that person.-- (Interviewee 7)

> I guess it's something that you have to feel and also if you do not feel confident with a partner, it makes no sense to make a partnership 'cause if you're not on the same level --- so it's people to people business and a technical thing. So maybe your technical solution is the best on the market, but what if the team is not able to bring it to the road and to bring the message on so I really like the Valo Love. (Interviewee 9)

The added value of affection was subjective, and varied between the interviewees. For some, the less-formal relationship with the case organisation was unusual yet refreshing way of doing business. Nonetheless, no interviewees expressed negative attitude

towards affection. The affection the organisation revealed made the interviewees feel good.

However, for some interviewees the idea of affection was new in their business environment and country they operated in and for some, it felt foreign.

> I think love is actually quite a strong word for something like this and you don't really work quite often hear these words in in B2B relationships -- when you are really in a partnership that should allow both partners to benefit from each other, I think it's really important that both partners respect each others and listen to their opinions.-- it seems quite logical to connect this illogical thing that it is called love can be actually defined some sort of logical to be mapped to business world so. Yeah it could work that way, but I'm not really sure how I can relate myself to this. (Interviewee 2)

Like stated in the methodology part, and being one of the precepts of OSL, successful relationship is something that both parties enter voluntarily. Also, defining together the processes of how to nurture the relationship is important as what one appreciated and saw as a mean to show affection did not work for other.

> I'm quite quickly annoyed by those affection things but the way Valo does it is a good way. So it must be fun, it must be a friendly approach or just person to person when you promise things you have to do them and don't promise too much. Just promise less and do more without promising so to speak then so yes it is important and the fun things are important. (Interviewee 4)

## 4.1 Valo Partners perceptions of Valo's organisation-stakeholder love

The intensity of affection, i.e., love, was measured using quantitative research method of online questionnaire (see Appendix 1). Results were examined from the average scores the 63 respondents gave for nine different arguments around customer intimacy and commitment. Love was perceived if the given average score in the 1-5 scale was above 4.

As seen in the Figure 2 below, the intensity of the perceived love varied between the three elements of love measured. The average score of intimacy was 4.10, and passion 3.89. Commitment averaged 4.00. Out from nine questions, in four the average score was above four (from 4.08 to 4.25), and in five it was close to four (from 3.84 to 3.98). In all nine questions the most answered score, median, was four. With the overall average of 4.01 it can be stated that organisation-stakeholder love was perceived in this organisation-stakeholder relationships.

Confidence about the partnership from organisations' side was perceived strongest (with average of 4.25) whereas enthusiasm, part of passion, was the least perceived element with average of 3.83. The difference between the lowest and highest scores was 0.41.

| Question | Count | Average | Confidence interval | Median | Standard deviation |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 9. Select the option you think describes the best how Valo feels towards your companyI feel that: Valo has a confident partnership with us | 63 | 4.25 | 4.05 – 4.46 | 4 | 0.82 |
| 10. Select the option you think describes the best how Valo feels towards your companyI feel that: Valo values us | 63 | 4.16 | 3.95 – 4.36 | 4 | 0.83 |
| 11. Select the option you think describes the best how Valo feels towards your companyI feel that: Valo understands us | 63 | 3.9 | 3.73 – 4.08 | 4 | 0.71 |
| 12. Select the option you think describes the best how Valo feels towards your companyI feel that: Valo feels good about its relationship with us | 63 | 3.98 | 3.79 – 4.17 | 4 | 0.77 |
| 13. Select the option you think describes the best how Valo feels towards your companyI feel that: Valo is enthustiastic about us and what we do | 63 | 3.87 | 3.64 – 4.11 | 4 | 0.94 |
| 14. Select the option you think describes the best how Valo feels towards your companyI feel that: Valo is enthustiastic about our partnership | 63 | 3.83 | 3.6 – 4.05 | 4 | 0.93 |
| 15. Select the option you think describes best how Valo feels towards your companyEven if Valo has had a less than positive experience with us, I feel that..: Valo intends to remain partnering with us | 63 | 4.16 | 3.99 – 4.33 | 4 | 0.7 |
| 16. Select the option you think describes best how Valo feels towards your companyEven if Valo has had a less than positive experience with us, I feel that..: Valo is committed to serving our needs long-term | 63 | 4.08 | 3.89 – 4.26 | 4 | 0.75 |
| 17. Select the option you think describes best how Valo feels towards your companyEven if Valo has had a less than positive experience with us, I feel that..: Valo would not consider switching to another partner as a replacement to us | 63 | 3.84 | 3.62 – 4.06 | 4 | 0.9 |

FIGURE 2: Averages, medians and standard deviation to questions related to three elements of love

## 4.1.1 Intimacy

The intensity of perceived customer intimacy was measured by examining the average score from three intimacy related questions and three passion related questions (see questions 9 – 14 in Figure 2 above) in the online questionnaire. With the average of 4.00 the results supports the perceivance of customer intimacy among the respondents.

Confidence was shown by making long-term investments as in offering some benefits and investing in resources to maintain partner resources like the Teams community and Partner Portal. The organisation trusted the stakeholders to operate their pace and style, try new approaches and handed leads to them. Furthermore, lack of pressure to close the deals indicated also that the organisation understood the partner. Organisation gave time and made sure they were available to close the deal, if needed, which was seen as a positive sign of confidence and understanding. As one interviewee explained:

> But the main part, doing service projects for the customer, then giving the best possible quality and the best possible outcome for the customer. – You [Valo] understand that, and there's no pressure from you in in sales, so it's more like "Let's do it together." Let's keep the momentum up, but there's no pressure to do it as fast as quickly and as big as possible. So it's more like, "Hey, we know it's a good solution, we know you can do it, it will come. We are patient." And that's very nice. That's a lot of understanding. (Interviewee 10)

Being transparent and open, giving positive feedback, and recognising partners by organising annual award ceremonies indicated the organisation valued the interviewees. Most remarkably, interviewees felt valued when their feedback was listened or asked. However, it lacked some proactivity and those interviewees who did not feel their

opinions or feedback were asked, were hoping to be asked to share their feedback more frequently. As one interviewee states:

> Always when I meet somebody, like Partner Manager -- I feel that they trust in my mindset, that they like to hear my feedback. They wanna get my ideas I pushed already there. So this thing I think, I feel valued by Valo people you know. They give me the feeling that they liked what I'm thinking about. --  (Interviewee 9)

On a reducing matter, interviewees that lacked personal connection from organisations side were hoping to hear from the organisation at least occasionally to feel valued.

Interviewees did not necessarily feel the organisation understood their business well enough, as the business-related discussion rarely covered topics outside the core business of the organisation. Even though interviewees felt their feedback was well-received, the further actions were not necessarily transparently shared nor quickly reacted on. Slow reaction time made interviewees feel the organisation did not understand the urgency of the topic especially to the customer. If the organisation acted based on the given feedback, it made interviewees feel understood.

> -- cause most of the time we receive some feedback about the various products from our customers and if Valo understands OK, these are the needs for the customers and we are going to implement them. It shows that the feedback is not going into nothing I guess. (Interviewee 2)

The enthusiasm was perceived as an overall "can-do" attitude from organisations employees they were in contact with. The organisation's representatives got excited about interviewees ideas and worked hard to help them to close the deal or support with a difficult customer even outside the usual office hours. Interviewees described the people they were in contact with as responsive and going further than required or expected by the interviewees. As one interviewee explains:

> it didn't feel so much as a business relationship, it didn't feel as much as there as a pure business relationship. There's an excitement to it. There was a lot more conversation and you know, I might speak to -- directly, even in WhatsApp. There was a real feel of being part of a relationship, part of something. Whenever there was an interaction, I would feel very excited about the fact that I was a Valo Partner. I would genuinely feel like I wanted to do more and I concede that like the relationship going long-term and that was because I felt that I'd had that back. I guess I felt involved. (Interviewee 3)

Also, events were mentioned as a great place to show enthusiasm and make the interviewees feel they are part of the business. and they were promoted inside the companies for people who did not have the chance to participate them.

> -- I remember I wasn't unfortunately there for one of those Valo Summits yet, but I remember our employees always talking about those summits like yeah, Amsterdam was quite nice for example, and they really felt good about the relationship with Valo. (Interviewee 2)

### 4.1.2 Commitment

The average score from all commitment-related questions was 4.00 meaning commitment from organisation was perceived from stakeholder perspective. The respondents were most confident with the intention the organisation remains partnering with them. The least confidence was perceived with the consideration of switching to another partner as replacement for stakeholder. No respondent disagreed with the statement of "Valo intends to remain partnering with us", neither did the interviewees express concerns the organisation would exit the partnership.

Involving stakeholders in business processes or decision-making was perceived as a strong sign of commitment from the organisation. Organisation arranged time for one-to-one discussions and invited to take part in group discussions around product development and sharing business insight through digital channels. Being available in times of need, no matter the role, was also positively affecting to the perceivance of commitment. However, to show more intention to stay in the partnership, more than anything else interviewees were hoping to receive more personal attention if they were not happy with the current level of it.

> maybe to have these regular discussion and meetings with partner management of course, maybe would be something which would be the first step in this so I'm not 100% happy now as it is but it's not so negative. (Interviewee 6)

Also, showing interest and appreciation to the interviewees indicated that the organisation felt there was potential in them, and they want to invest on the relationship.

> They give us the feeling that we are valuable and that we are needed for their success and they do (Interviewee 4)

The confidence of the organisation to not switch to another partner as a replacement was the lowest among the commitment-related questions. The possible lack of revenue as a cause to switch made interviewees hesitant. Also, some of the interviewees did not feel they were equally treated e.g., by their Partner Manager compared to other partners in their country which caused a decrease in the confidence.

> our former Partner Manager in the past had a really good relationship with one of our main competitors, so getting Valo-related support at that time was more difficult. Then we got another Partner Manager, that was more positive but then covid hit so we couldn't do all that much together, but it was good to have someone locally as well who is a bit more neutral across partners (interviewee 1)

## 4.2     Personal attention contributes to OSL

To answer research question 1: "How do Valo Partners perceive Valo's organisations-stakeholder love (OSL) towards them?" two different themes were found that contributed to perceived OSL. As seen from the Table 4 below, Personal attention and it's three categories of frequent meetings, availability, and involvement contributed positively to the perceived love. Possibilities to engage in personal discussions cross-departmentally was intertwined to many of the components that enabled perceiving organisation-stakeholder love. Even though interviewees had many communications channel to follow and interact with the organisation's employees, when it comes to the perception of affection, the personal attention was mentioned most often. Interviewees that got to speak with several key people directly instead of having only one point of contact added feeling of commitment and importance of the ideas and feedback the interviewee had as organisation invested in being available in times of need.

TABLE 4: Themes and their categories for how stakeholder love is perceived

| Theme | Personal attention |
|---|---|
| Categories | Frequent / recurring meetings<br>Availability<br>Involvement |

Frequent, and preferably recurring, 1-to-1 meetings or lack of them either enhanced or weakened the perception of intimacy. Interviewees that had frequent meetings and discussions with representative(s) from the organisation felt heard and valued.

> -- the most good experiences I have in the one-to-one meetings and conferences and personal talks or in the Helsinki Winter Meetup -- (Interviewee 9)

Similarly, the interviewees that did not have frequent discussions expressed they would appreciate more personal attention from the organisation. Occasionally given proactive personal attention from the organization made stakeholders feel they were (still) appreciated and remembered as an individual partner which at its best resulted activating the passive stakeholder ultimately, feel loved.

> I don't feel that I've been particularly active, and I guess this is probably gonna sound a bit corny, but I guess, 'cause of the context of this conversation, it's a two-way thing. So, because I've not been particularly active as a partner, I don't feel a lot of intimacy there, but I also don't feel there should be because I'm not bringing anything to the part to the relationship. (Interviewee 3)

The personal attention combined with frequent, at least monthly meetings, increased the perceived love among the online questionnaire respondents too, as seen in the Figure 5 below. In the figure respondents are divided in four groups based on the reported meeting frequency they had with the organisation. Dark blue group represents all

respondents (n=63), respondents from orange group (n=42) had either monthly (n=19), bi-weekly (n=18) or weekly (n=5) meetings, representatives of green group (n=21) had occasional meetings and yellow group at the bottom (n=23) had bi-weekly or weekly meetings. The green and yellow groups that had the biggest difference in their meeting frequency had also the biggest difference in the average of the intensity the intimacy was perceived. The average in green group overall was below four, whereas for the yellow group who enjoyed meetings most frequently the average was close to 4.5. Most significant difference was in the perceived enthusiasm from organisation towards the partnership.



**9. Select the option you think describes the best how Valo feels towards your company**

I feel that:
Number of respondents: 63

FIGURE 3: Intimacy perceived by four different groups

Concurrently, interviewees who had met and discussed with the organisation's employees at the events, yet did not currently have recurring meetings, wanted more attention from the organisation. Interviewees felt organisation did not have enough time to engage in relationships in personal level in an extend they hoped. This caused dissatisfaction especially among the Premium Partners who expected to receive more effort and attention from the organisation than other partners.

> -- we are not so close as we have been before, so I think it would also be a good idea to strengthen that with more regular meetings because I'm sure if we would have a monthly meeting, we would have enough to discuss—( Interviewee 6)

The lack of events decreased even further the possibilities to have personal attention. Overall, lack of personal attention made stakeholders feel distant and disconnected to the organisation and thus, less loved.

> it's important to work proactively on building a relationship also with a partner, and so in that sense, I really value the fact that we are a Premium Partner and that we can get some face-to-face time from everyone from Valo. (Interviewee 1)

Outside the organised meetings, interviewees perceived great availability from the organisation. Especially when they got to discuss directly with Product Owner, or C-level member, made them feel appreciated.

> I had the meeting --  last week and you never feel that sometimes you might feel that they are busy, but they always find time to have a chat or to answer questions and try to discuss potential solutions to issues or new functionality and whatever it might be, so that's really good I think. Accessible I think. I think the most of the people working at Valo is accessible. And I think that's the key for both success to maintain that accessibility. (Interviewee 5)

Involvement was a strong indication of commitment from organisation's side. Organisation involved stakeholders in their business through different functions e.g., by giving public presence to the stakeholder in their website and social media channels which added to the feeling towards being trusted and valued. Inviting stakeholders to co-host an event or a webinar especially added to the commitment. These marketing actions made interviewees feel good and confident about the relationship and distinguished the organisation from other similar partnerships.

> I think we also went to some conferences together. Yes, we did, -- you provided us with stuff so that was pretty nice. That's also very rarely happening in the industry that an ISV says, hey well, let's do this together. Well, because most of the time they want to be present themselves on a conference or want to. Or not interested in doing this together and so you've been very open about that, and that's nice. (Interviewee 10)

The organisation also involved interviewees by asking feedback through digital channels e.g., through satisfaction surveys.

> I think you're doing a lot and you're giving us a lot of possibilities to bring in our opinion. (Interviewee 8)

More impactful it was when interviewees were asked personally for ideas and feedback especially for product development. Involving stakeholders in product development through taking in ideas and feedback for the products and implementing them showed long-term commitment, and interviewees also felt the end-customers were taken into consideration.

> " -- our company had some sort of deeper partnership with Valo because we I think in the first steps of developing [product] -- nevertheless there was some partnership and I think it's really shows the commitment that Valo actually values us and are committed to us in a long term. (Interviewee 2)

Involvement made interviewees feel the organisation was not only committed to the interviewee but at its best made them feel as part of the organisation.

> So it's good to have the Valo team then available in also willing to do so, not only putting it through the support desk, but really want to go to deep dive in it and to solve it. And not somewhere in the timeline or for nine months or so. No, next week we will have the update. (Interviewee 11)

However, while some interviewees felt happy with the involvement level, some interviewees experienced decrease or complete lack of being involved. Especially from 2020 onwards when on-site events were cancelled, some interviewees felt there were no opportunities to attend interactive sessions anymore as they either did not exist, or they were optimised to "wrong" time zones from the interviewee's perspective. This led to insecurity the organisation was not interested in interviewees' opinions anymore but on the contrary, was perceived internally focused and closed or preferring other partners.

> I really, really miss the interaction of designing features or stuff, gathering the feedback from partners before they develop something. You know this is something I'm missing, and I guess there are other partners which are more involved, and I don't know how to get into this circle. Interviewee 9

Together with lack of uncertainty to whom to give the feedback to, where the feedback went and if the feedback was considered, made stakeholders feel excluded. Similarly, the feeling of being left out decreased the feeling of commitment from the organisation side.

## 4.3 Organisation-stakeholder love (OSL) applied by the organisation

The second research question was: **"How is organisation-stakeholder-love (OSL) applied by the company?".** Many interviewees described the organisation as "partner-oriented" as interviewees perceived organisation-stakeholder love from the organisation. As seen in the Table 6 below, findings of how organisation applied OSL are themed and categorised by the concreteness of the actions. Tangibles and especially at events the organisation succeeded showing organisational love, enthusiasm, and commitment

towards the interviewees as they required investments and enabled opportunities to foster the relationships and create joint memories. Offering leads to help to succeed in sales was also application of organisational love for interviewees. Transparency, or lack of it either added or decreased the applied love. Authenticity was the way the employees interacted with the stakeholders; it was seen casual, fun, and made stakeholders feel welcomed to the network. Exceeding expectations category is partly overlapping with Organizing events category but applies also to topics outside events where organisation was considered to go "extra mile", and hence is distinguished as an own category in Intangibles category.

TABLE 5: Themes and categories for the applied organisation-stakeholder love

| Theme | Categories for the theme |
|---|---|
| Tangibles | Organizing (on-site) events<br>Handing out leads |
| Intangibles | Transparency<br>Authenticity<br>Exceeding expectations |

When the relationship was strong, the interviewees felt trusted to do the business in a way they wanted to, and even to test new approaches and be open in return. This was applied by the employees who were engaged to the stakeholders and excited about their success and genuinely caring of how they did. Any kind of additional action had the potential to make the interviewees feel the organisation was investing on them.

> I guess that you invest in your partnership so you bring your time 'cause I guess you have other things to do than posting in the partner channel that you have something new that is coming up. (Interviewee 8)

This also distinguished the organisation from other similar relationships the interviewees were involved as the organisation was focused on the relationship rather than only on transaction and sales.

> There is a lot of engagement from the Valo side which is very much appreciated and shows that you [Valo] care about partners very much which is also not standard in the industry. There's a lot of partners who are too much further away from us, so we sell their stuff, but that's it. (Interviewee 10)

> the relationship is not only centered around selling the software. Because that's basically the kind with a lot of the bigger ISVs. They're only focused around the sales part, and when that is done, don't care. -- They're on the phone every day trying to find out when you finally close the sales or close the deal and it's not the same with Valo (Interviewee 10)

**Tangibles**

Most concrete way to apply organisation-stakeholder love was to organise on-site events for the stakeholders. In general, at events stakeholders felt welcome whether they were new or old partner, from a small or a larger company. They had the possibility to connect not only with the organisation but with their peers as well. As seen in the Figure 7 below, those respondents (n=31) that had been in physical events Valo Summit or Valo Winter Meetup), gave better average score in all three components of love than the ones (n=32) who had not attended events. In intimacy-related questions the average for the ones who had not attended events the average was 4.03 and those who had been it was 4.18. For passion-related statements the average of the ones that had not attended events was 3.81, and for those who had been in events it was 3.98. For perceived commitment the average for non-attendees was below the level of affection, 3.90 whereas the ones that had attended it was 4.16.

| | Attended Valo Events in–person or online: Yes, I've attended Valo Summit or Valo Winter Meetup (2019 or earlier) | N | Mean | Std. Deviation | Std. Error Mean |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| average intimacy | No, I haven't | 32 | 4.031 | .5105 | .0902 |
| | Yes, Valo Summit or Valo Winter Meetup | 31 | 4.183 | .8248 | .1481 |
| average passion | No, I haven't | 32 | 3.813 | .7426 | .1313 |
| | Yes, Valo Summit or Valo Winter Meetup | 31 | 3.978 | .9227 | .1657 |
| average commitment | No, I haven't | 32 | 3.896 | .6131 | .1084 |
| | Yes, Valo Summit or Valo Winter Meetup | 31 | 4.161 | .7975 | .1432 |

FIGURE 4: Comparison of averages between the ones that had not attended events (n=32) and the ones who had (n=31)

At on-site events interviewees had the chance to discuss openly with the key people face-to-face which enabled building new and nurturing the existing relationships. By organizing small, intimate roundtable discussions and other interactive sessions at them, the organisation enabled several stakeholders at once to ideate and work together while enhancing the feeling of being trusted and valued.

> -- the other things are just during the event -- So you have a get-together with one or two of the Valo people of your choice to discuss topics and they give feedback immediately. --  and they also give insights in and then at that time in what they're working on-- Yeah just things which are cooking in the Valo kitchen. (Interviewee 4)

Interviewees that visited the events met multiple members from the organisation and had discussions also outside business topics that enabled establishing and deepening the personal relationships. In general, at events the stakeholders felt welcome whether they were new or old partner, from a small or a larger company.

> The summits were really strong events, and I mean the personal summits of course. I remember -- our first summit as completely new Valo partner, I think a few months before, but we had so strong and good feeling there and I think this at the personal summits showed their strongest love in this context we discuss here because Partner Insights webinars, Teams discussions, Yammer discussions, yes OK of course, but it's not so strong as the summits have been. (Interviewee 6)

As events also included more informal content, on top of the business content, events were seen as a place to also have fun, which resulted the interviewees felt the organisation was partner-focused and thus, made them feel more satisfied and engaged with the relationship.

> -- of course there were business related slots and such things, but the main goal, I think was the non-business relationships to influence positively and to feel good because the business context we could do everyday. (Interviewee 6)

From 2020 on, no events were organized which made the stakeholders that had joined the organisation's events before, feel there was something missing from the applied love. As some interviewees expressed, the organisation was "event-focused", and lot of emphasis was put on them to foster the relationships and absence of events caused a decrease on perceived love. Stakeholders that had attended events, were hoping to have them back in the future and the ones that have only heard of them, were looking forward to attending them one day.

> -- of course it would be nice to meet in a Partner Summit -- instead of having a Partner Summit in Teams. So I think partners that have been partners for a longer time and some have taken part in those physical events are experiencing even more Valo Love than we are --. (Interviewee 5)

> --and I think this at the personal summits showed their strongest love in this context because Partner Insights webinars, Teams discussions, Yammer discussions, yes OK of course, but it's not so strong as the summits have been -- (Interviewee 4)

The impact of onsite events stood out as an applied customer intimacy throughout the interviews. As seen in the Table 5, those respondents (n=11) that had both frequent meetings on a bi-weekly or weekly basis and had attended events perceived love the most from the organisation as the average throughout all questions was at least 4.4. The highest average was 4.6 with the perceived value and lowest average score was 4.4 with the perceived understanding. Median was five in five out of six questions. This shows that the investments in resources (time and money) contributes to perceived love.

TABLE 6: Perceived love was strong among respondents that enjoyed frequent meetings and had visited events

| | Strongly disagree | Disagree | Neither agree nor disagree | Agree | Strongly agree | Total | Average | Median |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Valo has a confident partnership with us | 0 | 0 | 1 | 3 | 7 | 11 | 4.5 | 5.0 |
| | 0.0% | 0.0% | 9.1% | 27.3% | 63.6% | | | |
| Valo values us | 0 | 0 | 0 | 4 | 7 | 11 | 4.6 | 5.0 |
| | 0.0% | 0.0% | 0.0% | 36.4% | 63.6% | | | |
| Valo understands us | 0 | 0 | 1 | 5 | 5 | 11 | 4.4 | 4.0 |
| | 0.0% | 0.0% | 9.1% | 45.4% | 45.5% | | | |
| Valo feels good about its relationship with us | 0 | 0 | 1 | 4 | 6 | 11 | 4.5 | 5.0 |
| | 0.0% | 0.0% | 9.1% | 36.4% | 54.5% | | | |
| Valo is enthustiastic about us and what we do | 0 | 0 | 1 | 3 | 7 | 11 | 4.5 | 5.0 |
| | 0.0% | 0.0% | 9.1% | 27.3% | 63.6% | | | |
| Valo is enthustiastic about our partnership | 0 | 0 | 0 | 4 | 7 | 11 | 4.6 | 5.0 |
| | 0.0% | 0.0% | 0.0% | 36.4% | 63.6% | | | |
| Total | 0 | 0 | 4 | 23 | 39 | 66 | 4.5 | 5.0 |

Interviewees felt trusted when they were given leads that were generated from the organisations' inbound marketing actions. Every lead handed over to them instead of another partner in the same country indicated not only trust but commitment towards their expertise.

> One way would be to pass leads so you're all you're always going to want to bring in people who you trust to do and sell and promote your product. (Interviewee 3)

> if you look at the things which are scarce, which you choose to pass our way, which is basically leads, then obviously you wouldn't do that unless you had trust in us, so the fact you do that and that you're also willing to invest time in us. (Interviewee 7)

Also, some interviewees expressed that not getting leads from the organisation was a sign of distrust, indicating something was possibly wrong with the partnership.

**Intangibles**

Voluntary transparency and openness, that linked strongly to the personal attention and frequent meetings, indicated to the stakeholders that organisation trusted them. The feeling was mutual, and the stakeholders that had established more close relationship with the organisation also expressed they were able to be open and honest.

> If it wasn't trust then I wouldn't have told -- that. But I told her having this conversation, does this cause any issues? I don't want to cause any issues because you know of our relationship so. I think if you have that kind of openness in a conversation that's demonstrating trust.(Interviewee 7)

Exclusive partner webinars, in which future product roadmaps and business updates

were shared, interviewees felt the organisation was open transparent added to the perception of transparency and confidence. However, interviewees that enjoyed personal attention were seeing better transparency than the ones who relied on mass communications. Instead of just focusing on solving a problem, interviewees that had recurring meetings felt there was time to discuss about timely topics as well. Even criticism was welcomed and accepted constructively by the organisation without fear of repercussion. Bi-directional transparency and openness added confidence to be open in return and feel that the organisation was interested in the interviewees' feedback and opinions too.

> I never had a feeling of one of the other people that they were shocked or personally attacks or something like that. They always shouts that they understand what we're saying and that they wanna help out on that. (Interviewee 12)

> Well, on the business level, a lot of it depends on regular communication and transparency. The feeling is that [Valo] already always been very honest but also about stuff that doesn't work. Sometimes we found out together and sometimes we found out without you. But then in communication it was very transparent. That's very nice and you should keep up I think. That's showing love. (Interviewee 10)

The ones that relied on mass communications through e.g., newsletters and Teams threads and discussions, felt lack of openness and transparency. Organisation's vulnerability, incompleteness and business processes were not shared as openly as interviewees would have wanted to.

> We as a partner of course are looking into that and what's going on there with Valo, is everything OK? Will they do their strategic exercises and if us partners are clear strategy or is everything broken down? (Interviewee 6)

There was also uncertainty of why and how some decisions were made. Combined especially with the absence of two-way communications, the lack of openness throughout business functions caused insecurity and worry about the organisations, and thus, the whole partnership´s future.

> -- and then the communication was not always good or also the product quality wasn't always good -- and in this phase the communication was not always perfect. So there are always a lot of marketing communication but sometimes you need more insights. Something that maybe don't write in a newsletter or in a Microsoft Teams -- / Interviewee 13

Stakeholders felt the organisations representative were authentic; they were true to their selves, values, and "Valo Love". Interviewees felt welcomed to the network from the very beginning, and in return they felt safe to express their feelings truthfully and without filters. They cheered for the stakeholders' successes which made interviewees feel they were one team working together towards the same goal. Representatives of the organisation seemed to enjoy their jobs that radiated as a good energy towards the interviewees. The atmosphere in interactions was relaxed and fun, overall less formal than usually in business relationships.

> The personal connection to the team is where when you trust that somebody in the background has the mindset to do it good not only to earn money also to do good solutions. (Interviewee 9)

Exceeding expectations was one facet to perceive love from the organisation. When talking about love in general, the expectations for it are high and to perceive love, one must give more than expected.

> Yeah, It's actually quite difficult as we also already mentioned that love is quite a strong word. So I think they've achieved to some sort of degree. They have the right incentives, but to really speak of love, I think that they need to go the extra mile. (Interviewee 2)

Organisation offered more than expected, which was seen as an adding contributor to the OSL. The investment e.g., in resources to make stakeholder's job easier, was seen as an act of commitment from the organisation. Especially if there were issues with product quality, the additional effort in terms of resources and being available also during evenings or even weekends to solve the issues was highly appreciated.

> -- they also do things which they should not have to do to fix the problem. So, example they could do with Microsoft article for example or just send the article to us and then we can fix it but no, they create a PowerShell script for it or they create a movie for it or they create something for it to get just those extra steps to make it much easier for us and that's also valued a lot – (Interviewee 4)

Organisation cooperated with the stakeholders by fulfilling requests and testing suggested ideas. Organisation offered opportunities to be heard and discuss through satisfaction surveys, small group meetings such as roundtable discussions, or through the digital channels where all stakeholders were included and invited to share their feedback and ideas openly with the whole network. This, together with multiple facets identified before, added to the unusual experience when interacting with the organisation compared to their other partnerships.

> It didn't feel so much as a business relationship, it didn't feel as much as there as a pure business relationship. There's an excitement to it. There was a lot more conversation and you know, I might speak to [people at Valo] directly, even in WhatsApp there was a real feel of being part of a relationship, part of something. And at that point it definitely felt equal in terms of the giving and receiving of of the love. Whenever there was an interaction, I would feel very excited about the fact that I was a Valo Partner. -- I wanted to do more and I concede that like the relationship going Long term and that was because I felt that I'd had that back. I guess I felt involved and I felt included and I felt valued as a as a partner and that wasn't to do with leads. It wasn't to do with revenue and that was purely to do with the conversations and the thing and the interactions I was having with the people within Valo. (Interviewee 3)

Furthermore, the interviewees that had been in the relationships prior to pandemic expected things to go back as they used to be. As a few key people collaborating closely with the stakeholders had left the company, interviewees were expecting to form similar, close relationships with the new people over time if they would only get the chance to meet them or have opportunities for discussion with them online. Also, if interviewee had expectations about nurturing and involving stakeholders to the business processes from the organisation and they were not met as interviewees expected, lowered the perceived affection.

When I'm imagining it from one year ago until now, comparing with all the years before, that's maybe the toughest thing. How to create this and the decision making together. And that's what we have missed (Interviewee 11).

So -- this personality, you know, whole Valo shows they value me, that they are close to me. (Interviewee 9)

## 4.4    Principle of give and take

One of the organisation-stakeholder love framework's precepts suggest that cultivating love should primarily, if not even only, be organisations responsible whether stakeholders feel the same or not. However, no interviewee particularly expressed they expected organisation to take the full responsibility on *giving* and cultivating the relationship. Instead, interviewees believed in genuine reciprocity and balance; the more you give, the more you receive and give back.

However, the personal attention and all other investments towards the stakeholders without any expectations added to the feeling of being valued member in the network.

> you know showing more one to one communication so it's a bit like the intimacy converse though question is it's just showing there's still an interest in how [interviewee's company] is doing, how [interviewee's company] is progressing, et cetera. That would show there's still an interest on Valo's side, and therefore that would therefore obviously imply that there is a want to continue the relationship and to maintain it. (Interviewee 3)

Same proactivity applied also for interviewees who were not seeking attention actively from the organisation. Especially those interviewees that followed only mass communications, asking how the stakeholder were doing or if they needed any help, or invited them to events personally gave a boost adding to the organisational love. Furthermore, if they did not need any further attention, they still appreciated being enquired after occasionally as it indicated interest from the organisation.

> I might not be very active or generate a lot of business value now but if they see the potential in us and therefore proactively want to invest time to help that business growth 'cause they like me as a partner. They like me as a person. They like our approach, our attitude and think this partner could be a real advantage for Valo then we will proactively take that person and help them grow their business. (Interviewee 10)

If interviewees felt the relationship was unbalanced, they mostly felt organisation was giving out more. Furthermore, if the stakeholder had not done any sales yet, or the organisation pushed hard to help with difficult customer case, interviewees felt it was their turn to contribute to balance the relationship even though it was not expected from them.

> Valo is giving.  I think I have the feeling that you are giving all those things without expecting something back except for of course at least that much need to be to be Premium Partner of the Year. You don't expect that much back from your partners and therefore again just giving

> partnership. Of course, we are trying to give as much back as possible but it's not expected from your end. (Interviewee 4)

Interviewees were willing to contribute more if they were only asked to. They wanted to be challenged by the organisation to perform better and share their expertise with the organisation whether related to better local visibility at the market, solving a problem or sharing their feedback about the product development. Ultimately, the partnership was seen at its best when it was genuinely cocreational and involving.

> You know it's all about balance, so this has a mutual direction and then everybody involved has his own responsibility. It's like a marriage, you cannot give it from a one person to the other person. You have to do it both. (Interviewee 11)

Currently passive interviewees did not expect the organisation to be more active towards them as they were not being active themselves. Instead, they felt they did not necessarily deserve the attention. However, they believed the organisation's activity would pick up if the stakeholder would activate too.

> I don't feel that I've been particularly active, and I guess this is probably gonna sound a bit corny, but I guess, 'cause of the context of this conversation, it's a two-way thing. So, because I've not been particularly active as a partner, I don't feel a lot of intimacy there, but I also don't feel there should be because I'm not bringing anything to the part to the relationship. (Interviewee 3)

# 5    DISCUSSION

The objective of this master's thesis was to explore affection, i.e., love, in organisation-stakeholder relationships from stakeholder's perspective. Using Badham's Organisation-stakeholder love framework (OSL, 2020) as a guideline, the two-phase empirical study looked evidence of whether organisations can emit love and especially, how it is perceived by its external stakeholders.

Earlier studies that have adopted social exchange theory and interpersonal love have already evinced that close and intimate relationships are possible to establish also in business environment. For example, SET emphasises how customer sacrifices short-term benefits to maintain long-term relationships. Furthermore, studies on brand love have proved customers can form emotional bond also in unidirectional setting brand being one of the relationship partners.

However, the attention in previous studies has been on customers' affection towards the organisation. Bidirectional nature of relationships is acknowledged, and mutual commitment discussed, but the emphasis is on customer commitment and loyalty. Organisation-stakeholder love (OSL) sets the spotlight into organisations responsibility of being affectionate making it a new perspective to research affection in business relationships.

## 5.1    Conclusions

Organisation-stakeholder love (OSL) framework argues that "deeper and more intimate relationship can be gained by pursuing bidirectional organisational love" where the organisation has the biggest responsibility of showing love. Most importantly, stakeholders should expect love first from the organisation before organisation should expect love back from them. The findings from this study verifies the positive effects of bi-directional nature of the relationships. No interviewee believed it is only either organisations or the stakeholders' responsibility but is indeed build on reciprocity. However, the more the organisation gave, the more stakeholders wanted to give back. And the more the organisation gave without expecting anything back, the more stakeholder *wanted* to give back without being obligated to do so.

**Conclusions on how Valo Partners perceive Valo's organisation-stakeholder love**

Taking advantage of quantitative and qualitative research methods, the results give positive indication that love can be perceived in business-to-business context, and makes impact as an organisational effort. The results from the online survey indicates

stakeholders perceive love. In the questions where the arguments were constructed taking advantage of Bügel's Brand Love study and mirrored to fit the outside-in-perspective the average of all nine intimacy, passion and commitment related questions was 4.01, varying from lowest average of 3.83 (enthusiasm) to highest average of 4.25 (confidence).

For research question 1, "**How do Valo Partners perceive Valo's organisation-stakeholder-love?"** interviews revealed several ways the stakeholders perceived love. Results from both the online survey and interviews shows the biggest impact to affection is gained when organisation invested time and resources to personally interact frequently with the stakeholders. Those respondents who enjoyed frequent meetings gave overall higher scores and averages, close to 4.5, in the online questionnaire than the ones who did not have frequent meetings. Respondents that had occasional meetings averaged below 4, under the defined threshold of perceiving affection.

OSL framework argues that people representing the organisation can initiate and maintain loving relationship with stakeholders and therefore personal relationships should matter in business context. The findings of this study supports the argument as personal attention was a powerful way of showing commitment and not only build trust towards stakeholders but also to form personal relationships. At the time of the interviews the case organisation was employing around 60 people. Also, most of the interviewees represented small-and-mid-size businesses. Thus, there were only a handful of points of contacts between the organisations and its stakeholders enabling establishing long-term relationships between the individuals. Interestingly, interviewees that had one-to-one discussions with the organisation's representatives also used their first names instead of the titles or departments they worked at. Furthermore, some of them were in contact with the employees through personal instant messaging tools outside the office hours, even during the weekends. This indicates they had established close personal relationships with the employees, even emotional bond.

> And along the way, some personal relationships have filled up so, and that's something that you'd like to nurture and keep so it's very nice and yeah, along the way stuff happens and that's where you get emotionally involved -- so you suddenly realize that you're also affected by that. There is some kind of bond there, although I try to keep it not too emotional. / Interviewee 10

However, building and maintaining relationships has become more complicated and difficult as people are not able to meet and to discuss like they used to have. The meetings that used to be held face-to-face are often held online and events moved to webinars. The accelerated digitalisation is also reversing the orientation back from relations to transactions and new inventions around self- and contactless service. In its entirety, the volume of online services and transactions, that enables single transactions and makes changing suppliers easy, are growing both in B2C and B2B. (Cassia et al., 2021)

Together with the use of artificial intelligence e.g., in chat bots to replace human contact reduces interaction with people to a minimum. Even though it might save time and money when there is no need to travel or have human resources to serve people, it is in contradict with the findings in this study about importance of the time people spend in personal encounters.

The intimacy component of love (is in the core of loving relationships having a big role especially in long-term close relationships. Stenberg, 1986). Considering that feelings of connectedness, bondedness and closeness promotes the intimacy, and in the light of these findings, it is unlikely to have affectionate relationship without a great contribution from the individuals involved in them. Therefore, it seems unlikely to large enterprises to pursue intimate stakeholder relationships in the first place if there is no possibility to form close relationships in the first place. Therefore, Zarantello's & al.'s (2016, 808) finding which suggest brand love is stronger towards small brands than big brands can also be true in organisational love and be one of the factors that enables stronger perception of affection.

Results are also supporting one of the three OSL precepts argues that stakeholders should be treated as valued relationship partners with ability to collaborate in decision-making process affecting on them. Many interviewees felt involved with possibilities to affect e.g., on the product development through one-to-one discussions or roundtable discussions. Especially the ones that had had the possibility before and felt they had lost it, expressed their dissatisfaction about the changed situation. The commitment from organisation side was more strongly expressed if stakeholders were asked to contribute, e.g., by sharing a booth at an event. If they were able to share their expertise with the product development, they felt their expertise was appreciated.

**Conclusions on how organisation-stakeholder love is applied by the company**

Many interviewees expressed that the organisation was exceptionally good at applying love towards the stakeholders, especially compared to other similar organisations they cooperated with. For the second research question of **"How is organisation-stakeholder-love (OSL) applied by the company?"** the perceived love was a combination of tangible and intangible efforts that the organisation and the individuals put towards the relationships. However, some stakeholders acknowledged that as the organisation was fully dependent on the partner network, they had no other option than to invest in the relationships.

The events that the organisation organised for the stakeholders were especially seen as "act of love". Additionally, when the organisation organised events, stakeholders felt

the organisation invested in the relationships which adds to engagement and a want to return the investment back and be worth of the trust. The organisation offered more than just the business context, enabling collecting shared memories which made the relationships more meaningful, even fun, than in usual business relationships.

In this case environment, the investments to time and resources enabled creation of reciprocal relationships with open and transparent two-way discussions. As noted in earlier research around organisation-public relationships and organisation-stakeholder love, the findings of this research support the importance of transparency where organisation voluntarily and openly share even vulnerable information in applied organisational love. Showing vulnerability, weaknesses and struggles is important and even though some stakeholders were happy with the level of transparency, some stakeholders were hoping for more transparency about the situation the organisation was at the time of interviews. Even though there were no direct distrust expressed towards the organisation, uncomfortableness and worry existed. Lack of transparency made stakeholders feel they were not trusted and more insecure about the relationship.

Intangible assets are hard to measure. However, the result of this study gives preliminary evidence that affection has an impact also in business-to-business relationships as it can add to trust and commitment which helps to deepen the relationship. When interviewees discussed negative issues, they also expressed loyalty, even empathy without intention to end the relationship. This is often an outcome of brand love, expressing commitment towards the brand and resistance to negative information towards it (Zarantello & al. 2016, 808)

To sum up, organisation-stakeholder love was considered as an added value in the partnership. Just like any interpersonal relationship, also the business relationships require effort and nurturing emphasising the personal contribution from all parties involved. The more interactive the relationship is and the more both parties are actively contributing to it, the better the intimacy and commitment are perceived and reciprocity gained.

## 5.2 Limitations and future research suggestions

In the qualitative research method part, the biggest limitation is the low sample size. The focus of this study was to explore means of how organisation can emit affection to their stakeholder, not to investigate the intensity of OSL or whether it can be measured. Hence, only averages are used as a guidance to evaluate whether love is perceived in this research environment. Even though the results do show evidence of OSL, the results cannot be generalised. Hence, further study is required with more respondents

from different business environment to study whether it is something that, for example, bigger corporations, can emit.

The most significant limitations related to the actual research questions are caused first by the abstractive and intangible nature of the research topic and secondly, the interview as the main research method. According to phenomenographic research, that this study also is close to, *perception* is a dynamic phenomenon and might be considerably different based on e.g., age, culture, experiences, and sex. (Metsämuuronen 2011, 240). Love is very personal and subjective feeling. Depending on culture and people, the word love is either frequently in use whereas for others it is carefully cultivated and used only with the very closest people. Furthermore, love in business-to-business relationships is barely researched, let alone discussed publicly. However, in this research environment love was somewhat familiar for the stakeholders as it was often exposed in the organisation's brand and communications e.g., in the "Fall in love with your intranet" slogan. Nevertheless, for some interviewees affection in the business context was difficult and even uncomfortable topic to discuss about. As one interviewee described: "*..it seems quite logical to connect this illogical thing that it is called love can be actually defined some sort of logical to be mapped to business world so yeah, it could work that way, but I'm not really sure how I can relate myself to this*." Another interviewee stated: "*So that's ["love"] of course was a new thing we hadn't met before with any partner with any product and on the one hand, it's not usual--*".

The overall unfamiliarity of the topic was seen in answers where the focus was switched to talk about more practical topics e.g., product development issues rather than the abstract topic of perceived affection. However, the results might be more encouraging towards perceived affection and love than in an environment where love, even as a word, is barely or never used. Given how subjective and private feeling and perceiving love is adds a layer of complexity and uncertainty to evaluate the intensity of the perceived affection in the context.

On top of the abstract nature of the topic, certain limitations exist when interviews are used as a research method. Interview is always a unique and dynamic situation. Hence, what was captured at these interviews cannot be replicated in another situation. To create coherent truth and the results to be reliable would mean exploring the same person in two different situations, or by having same results by two different researchers. (Hirsjärvi & Hurme 2015, 185). Subjectivity and effects from personal perceptions are impossible to avoid in a research situation where manual interpretation is needed. This, however, is difficult for inexperienced researchers. Here, there is uncertainty for example whether a pause is caused by looking for an appropriate word in English, or if it is due hesitation over giving an honest answer. Some interviews included long silences,

hesitations, and some answers started with "I don't know". However, due to the limitations of researcher's ability to make interpretations, they were ignored, and focus was put purely on what was said aloud.

Moreover, the fact that researcher also worked in the case organisation can be double-edged. On one hand, one could argue she was immersed to the research environment which helped to understand the bigger picture. On the other hand, it is impossible to estimate how much her own experiences biased the interpretation of the data, or if the familiar researcher effected on interviewees answers. Therefore, the results from the objective data gained from the online questionnaires that leaves less room for interpretations, plays a role when estimating whether perception of love existed in the first place.

To gain more reliable and valid results from love in a business context, conducting further studies with organisations that are not so openly expressing love in the first place would be ideal. Also, narrowing the case inside one culture/country might eliminate the biggest differences between perception of love and the intensity of it to a minimum. With an abstract topic like this, more careful explanation to ensure interviewees really understand the topic prior to the interviews would be ideal. For future studies, researcher outside from the research environment or a co-researcher to analyse the qualitative data might be ideal. It would also be interesting to study whether the strong, affective relationships effect on return-on-investments positively or are good relationships something that are in the company values only.

As the case company and representatives from the partner network were mainly small companies, further study about the topic in different, and bigger case environments is needed. The question of "is OSL something that can be perceived or emitted through large enterprises?", needs further study in larger business environments as well. The findings from the study suggests no, however it does not supply an answer to the question of whether love is something that can be emitted by the organisation instead of the people in it. Here, love is characterized mostly as part of people's nature, although many interviewees described the organisation is different from other similar organisations they work with. As one interviewee said it: "It [love] is in Valo's DNA". Even though the study cannot provide a definite answer whether the love comes from individual or organisation, formation of organisation-stakeholder-love depends on people. Whether it is a nudge towards an inactive stakeholder or a short informal discussion while solving a ticket, the love ultimately stems from the time the employees are able and willing to spend with the stakeholder directly or indirectly. And the time they can contribute towards the stakeholders depends on the organisation and how much value they put in cultivating the relationships and valuing the intangibles. Should it be called love or just investing in relationships, is another discussion to have.

Many interviewees agreed that love must stem from the company culture, yet at the same time it is heavily dependent on those people stakeholder happens to be interacting with. If love is in the culture, but the representative from the organisation is not naturally a "people-person", is that a showstopper? And on the other hand, even though love would not stem deep from the culture, but is emitted through individual efforts, can that be interpreted as coming from the whole organisation? The question already Buttle (1996, 11) asked: "Can customer develop relationships with organisations, or must relationships always be interpersonal?" and the argument in OSL of conceptualising the organisation remains unanswered. Conducting a study of perceptions of OSL from employees' perspective and examining whether it is further emitted to external stakeholders could help to understand whether the perceived love is an outcome of a healthy company culture and organisational love towards its employees or if it is based on individual effort or sum of both.

The survey and the interviews were conducted during a time when businesses were only beginning to adapt to the remote and hybrid work caused by the global COVID-19 pandemic. Events were held online, but there was still hope it was only temporary and things would go back as they were before March 2020. However, mid-August 2022 it seems likely that online meetings are replacing many of the face-to-face meetings also in the future, which in this research was found to be essential aspect for developing affection in B2B relationships. Also, none of the theories or articles in the literature review explicitly discuss or explore the importance of personal, face-to-face interaction in the business relationships. Therefore, requires further study, especially now the remote meetings are increasingly replacing the traditional on-site visits. Will remote meetings jeopardise the affection in the relationships in the long run or are businesses able to accommodate to the "new normal" without any negative effect on the relationships? Further study is needed to explore how relationships can be nurtured, and affection emitted especially, or even solely, in online environments.

The direction and importance of relationships, and how to foster them, might change altogether again already in the very foreseeable future. Whether the direction is towards improved focus as importance of intangible assets and especially relationships as the best competitive advantages or towards more self-service, time and resource effective business is yet to define.

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## APPENDIX 1: Online questionnaire

Valo Partner Perceiving Valo Love

Mandatory fields are marked with an asterisk (*) and must be filled in to complete the form

**Country you operate in: ***

**Valo Partner Level ***

- Certified Valo Partner
- Valo Premium Partner

**How long has your company been a Valo Partner (approximately)? ***
- Less than 6 months
- 6 months to less than a 1 year
- 1 – 2 years
- 2 – 3 years
- 3 – 4 years
- More than 4 years

**How long have you been personally working with Valo? ***
- Less than 6 months
- 6 months to less than a 1 year
- 1 – 2 years
- 2 – 3 years
- 3 – 4 years
- More than 4 years

**How frequently are you personally in contact with someone in Valo Team (Partner Manager, Support Agent, or someone else)**

- Never
- Occasionally only
- Approximately once a month
- Approximately bi-weekly
- on a weekly basis

Select the option you think describes best how Valo feels towards your company

**I feel that..***

Scale: 1: Strongly disagree,  2: Disagree, 3: Neither agree nor disagree, 4: Agree, 5: Strongly agree

- Valo has a confidential partnership with us
- Valo values us
- Valo understands us
- Valo feels good about its relationship with us
- Valo is enthusiastic about us and what we do
- Valo is enthusiastic about our partnership

**Select the option you think describes best how Valo feels towards your company**

Even if Valo has had a less than positive experience with us, I feel that..*

Scale: 1: Strongly disagree,  2: Disagree, 3: Neither agree nor disagree, 4: Agree, 5: Strongly agree

- Valo intends to remain partnering with us
- Valo is committed to serving our needs long-term
- Valo would not consider switching to another partner as a replacement to us

# APPENDIX 2: Definition of components of love and interview questions

**Organisation-stakeholder love in Valo – Valo Partner context**

Some definitions to help you understand the aim for the study better:

Definition of Organisation-stakeholder love (OSL):

*Organisation-stakeholder love (OSL) is the affective orientation of intimacy and commitment an organisation initiates and nurtures towards internal and external stakeholders for the **purpose of giving them the best possible value in the organisation-stakeholder relationship.***

The love in OSL stems from three dimensions of love based on Stenberg's triangular theory of love that explores consumer's love for brands;

**Intimacy** refers to feelings of closeness, connectedness and bondedness in loving relationships and includes feelings that essentially give rise to the experience of warmth in a loving relationship.

**Passion** refers to the driving force that leads to romance and other related phenomena in loving relationships and therefore is considered the motivational component in loving relationships.

**Commitment** is a cognitive element involved in the decision to love someone and to maintain that love. Commitment is defined as "the extent to which one party believes and feels that the relationship is worth spending time to maintain and promote".

## QUESTIONS

### GENERAL

- What's your title at your company and how does that link to Valo?
- How frequently are you involved in Valo business and what kind of interaction you usually have with Valo?
- How long have you personally been involved in partnership with Valo?

Do you find added value in affection, eg., love in B2B relationship or do you think business relationships are only transaction-based? Can you describe why you feel that way?

### INTIMACY (and passion)

- How does Valo show they value you?
- How does Valo show they understand you and your business?
- How does Valo show more enthusiasm towards you? (passion)
- How does Valo show interest in you? (asked from 10 interviewees)

- How does Valo show they feel good about their relationship with you?

**COMMITMENT**

- How does Valo show they are committed to you now and in long-term?
- How does Valo show they intend to remain partnering with you?
- Is there any reason you might think of Valo would consider switching to another partner as a replacement to you?

The last questions are to see if Valo succeeds in OSL in either organisation, community, or individual level

- How do you see the scale over giving over receiving love; is Valo giving or receiving it to/from you? Why?
- Do you feel included in Valo's business decision-making process? Is that level enough?
- Do you think Valo has succeeded in OSL either in organisation or community level? Yes/No, why?
- If love can be felt only at an individual level, who (as in title or role) should show the love towards you? Does C-level matter? *(Note: added to the list of questions for the last 7 interviews)*
- Is there someone from Valo Team (no need to mention names) that has succeeded in it and can you give examples of how that is shown by them?
- Is there anything else you'd like to say about the topic that was not yet discussed?