

Consumer Journey from First Experience to Brand Evangelism

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Abstract

This paper aims to access the lived reality of consumption and brands through the subjective meanings and interpretative processes of consumers, exploring how they perceive the journey from the first experience to a strong meaningful emotional bond with a brand. We follow the logic of the experience pyramid model in analysing qualitative interviews with brand evangelists, starting with the motivational level, moving on to the physical level where the evangelist meets the brand, and further to the level of experience where, if appropriate, the emotional bond with the brand manifests itself: for the customer, the brand has become experiential with a singular meaning. The experience model proved a useful research tool for understanding the consumer-brand relationship in depth. The study complements experience marketing with insights regarding the meaning of brand-related experiences for consumers, and enables marketers to understand the development of a strong emotional bond between a brand and a consumer. In addition, the results of the study shed further light on recognizing brand evangelists.

JEL classification codes: M31 Marketing

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1. Introduction

Brand evangelists communicate the character and features of a brand; that is, brand messages that traditional marketing might communicate as well, but on top of this they offer their families, friends, colleagues and communities a unique personal recommendation (Smilansky, 2009, p. 5). Research on brand evangelism has to be built on an understanding of how the consumer actually experiences the journey from the first encounter with a brand to becoming a brand evangelist.

Until now, research in this area has attempted to map the phenomenon of brand evangelism, the circumstances leading to brand evangelism, and brand-related experiences through developing and testing statistical models and using path analysis to form hypotheses about causal relationships among different variables in this area of experience (Matzler et al., 2007; Albert et al., 2008; Batra et al., 2012; Becerra and Badrinarayanan, 2013; Doss, 2014). There is clearly a need for a more balanced approach in order to holistically understand the consumer's journey from first encountering the brand to becoming a brand evangelist. Thus, the purpose of our study is to reveal the content of the individual elements of the abovementioned process – to understand the meaning of those elements.

Personally relevant and meaningful experiences can generate brand evangelism. Experience and evangelizing are tightly interwoven concepts (Holbrook, 2001). Meaningful experience (which in the language of the experience pyramid model is an experience different from those undergone before) is one of the keywords in the relatively new field of experience marketing. Experience marketing can deliver sensory, emotional, cognitive, behavioural and relational value (Tynan and McKechnie, 2009). According to the experience marketing conception, constructing experiences provides important added value for a consumer (Pine and Gilmore, 1999). The concept of experiences has attracted attention in academic research as well as being utilized in business practices. A special model for co-creating, understanding and analysing the meaningfulness of experiences in products and services, as well as for illustrating the progress of consumer experience, has been created and used at the LCEEI (Lapland Centre of Expertise for Experience). The experience pyramid model was originally constructed for tourism and travel products. The name illustrates its logic: Instead of speaking of 'a triangle' that would refer to a relationship between three sides and three angles, the authors of the model wish to highlight the presence of six experiential elements on different levels of consumer experience, and the progress of experience itself; therefore, the name 'experience pyramid' is more appropriate (Tarssanen and Kylänen, 2007).

The model is now increasingly being applied to different contexts. Vallius et al. (2007) use the experience pyramid model to analyse shared experiences in the virtual games world. Riivits-Arkonsuo and Leppiman (2013) have addressed the experience pyramid concept in the consumer online word-of-mouth (WOM) context. To our best knowledge, apart from these studies, the experience pyramid concept has not been used to analyse the consumer perspective.

This study seeks answers to the following questions: How does a consumer become a brand evangelist? How is the theoretical experience pyramid model compatible with the way brand evangelists perceive and describe their journey from the first encounter with the brand to developing a deep, meaningful experience with it? Thereby, we hope to fill the theoretical model with empirical content, taking into consideration the depth and meaningfulness of the relationship between brand evangelists and their brands.

After briefly outlining the phenomenon of brand evangelism and the concepts of consumer and brand experience, we consider the elements contributing to the formation of a meaningful experience and how the experience model may function as a useful methodological tool in this context. A detailed outline of the data collection procedure and analysis is then provided, followed by the findings. Based on the in-depth interviews conducted in this study we attempt to reconstruct what brand evangelists experience during the process of becoming evangelists. The article then concludes with a consideration of the implications of this work for consumer researchers and experience marketing.

2. Conceptual framework

2.1. Brand evangelism

Brand evangelism is a strong consumer-brand relationship that manifests itself as an extension of positive consumer-to-consumer WOM communication. Brand evangelists are committed consumers who have a strong emotional connection to a brand and spread the message about their preferred brands. Doss (2014) defines brand evangelists as ‘individuals who communicate information, ideas, and feelings concerning a specific brand freely, and often times fervently, to others in a desire to influence consumption behaviour’. According to Matzler et al. (2007), brand evangelism describes an active and committed way of spreading positive opinions and trying to persuade others to become engaged with the same brand, as ‘consumers who evangelize are passionate about their brand and feel the need to share their emotions with others.’ Becerra and Badrinarayanan (2013) see brand evangelism as ‘the active behavioural and vocal support of a brand including actions such as purchasing the brand, disseminating positive brand referrals, and convincing others about a focal brand by disparaging competing brands’. A brand evangelist acts as an unpaid spokesperson on behalf of the brand (Doss, 2014).

Numerous studies on marketing have examined the way brand evangelism functions. Doss (2014) proposes that the elements leading to brand evangelism include brand satisfaction, brand salience, consumer-brand identification, brand trust, and opinion leadership. Becerra and Badrinarayanan (2013) delineate the varying influence of two relational constructs – brand trust and brand identification – on three brand evangelism-related behaviours: purchase intentions, positive brand referral intentions, and oppositional brand referral intentions. Albert et al. (2008) examine the dimensions of brand love. Their study reveals eleven brand love dimensions: passion, a long-duration relationship, self-congruity, dreams, memories, pleasure, attraction, uniqueness, beauty, trust (satisfaction), and a willingness to declare the love. The former can be considered WOM communication. Online environments are likewise a platform for demonstrating brand evangelism (Becerra and Badrinarayanan, 2013), as online WOM communication is amplified by the speed of diffusion and the large size of the communication network of social media channels.

It is easy to see that the concept of brand love, as consumers experience it, is related to brand evangelism. Batra and colleagues (2012) in turn found seven core elements of brand love: self-brand integration, passion-driven behaviours, positive emotional connection, long-term relationship, positive overall attitude valence, attitude certainty and confidence (strength), and anticipated separation distress. Consumer love for a brand has certain

consequences, such as brand loyalty, positive WOM, resistance to negative information, and willingness to pay a price premium (ibid).

Brand evangelism is linked to consumer-brand identification, which as a concept is based on the social identification theory. Consumers sense that a brand reflects characteristics that are central to their identity. They perceive oneness with a brand and are likely to work toward the benefit of the brand. Purchase and consumption of brands enable consumers to construct their identities; brands become part of consumers' identities (Batra et al., 2012; Becerra and Badrinarayanan, 2013).

Terms like brand evangelists, champions, inspirational consumers, advocates, brand zealots, volunteer salespeople, customer apostles, and brand ambassadors, which can be found in the literature on marketing, are similar in terms of content and connotations (Doss, 2014). Brand evangelists have a strong psychological and emotional commitment to the brand. Their brand-related behaviour is characterized by (1) communicating positive information, ideas and feelings concerning a specific brand both offline (WOM) and online (word-of-web), (2) co-creating the overall brand image by actively engaging in discussions about the attributes of the brands with other consumers, (3) purchasing the favoured brand name products, (4) influencing consumer behaviour, (5) operating as an unpaid spokesperson on behalf of the brand, (6) opposing competing brands, and (7) perceiving oneness with the brand.

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Personally relevant and meaningful experiences can generate brand advocacy, loyalty, and a positive offline and online response. Consumption and brand experiences are part of real life and people often talk about their experiences to others.¹ However, what is of interest here is the meaning that the consumer gives to the brand and what it is that makes the relationship with the brand emotional and passionate, triggering the wish to share the experience.

2.2. Consumption experience and brand experience

The idea that consumer behaviour has an experiential dimension was first introduced by Holbrook and Hirschman (1982). They focus on the symbolic, hedonic and aesthetic nature of consumption and propose that consumption experience is directed toward the pursuit of fantasies, feelings and fun. Hirschman and Holbrook (1982) defined and linked constructs like multisensory experience, emotive responses, and fantasy imagery firstly to each other and then to various consumption processes. Consumption experience as such does not fulfil basic needs but involves feelings and emotions.

Consumption experience takes place over a period of time and comprises all experiences across all touch points between consumer, business and product, such as the product itself, the store in which the product is bought; engineer work, salespeople, and after-sale service (Jensen, 2013). According to Arnould et al. (2002, p. 347), a consumption experience begins with a pre-consumption experience involving searching for, planning, daydreaming about, foreseeing, or imagining the experience. The purchase experience derives from choice, payment, packaging, and encounters with service and environment. The core consumption experience includes the sensation, the satiety, the satisfaction or dissatisfaction, the irritation or flow, and the transformation. The last stage of the consumption experience involves the

¹ Findings of a study conducted among passionate car owners (Matzler et al., 2007) show that extraverted consumers are also more likely to be passionate consumers and engage in brand evangelism.

memory of the consumption experience and the nostalgia experience. An important part of a consumption experience is being able to communicate it by telling one's own story, recording the event in memorable pictures or videos, sharing these experiences in communities, writing a diary or a blog (Gelter, 2007; Kylänen, 2007). A strong experience triggers a desire to share it. Consumers evangelize their experience in order to persuade others to engage with it (Tynan and McKechnie, 2009).

Brakus et al. (2009) refer to a brand experience as sensations, feelings, cognitions, and behavioural responses evoked by brand-related stimuli that are part of a brand's design and identity, packaging, communications, and environments. Brand experience is holistically perceived and varies in strength and intensity; some brand experiences are stronger or more intense than others. Brand experiences also vary in valence: some are more positive than others, and some may even be negative. Some experiences are short-lived, some long-lasting, stored in the consumer's memory (ibid.). A good experience is memorable, extraordinary and meaningful. By exploring these "good experiences" in depth we build on and significantly complement existing empirical work in the field.

2.3. The formation of a meaningful experience

Carù and Cova (2003) distinguish between ordinary and extraordinary experiences. An ordinary experience has to do with everyday life, routines, the past, and the passive acceptance of events. An extraordinary experience on the other hand evokes emotions and transformations in individuals. Experiences are memorable events (Pine and Gilmore, 1999), and in order to leave a memory trace, they must take place outside the daily routine (Sundbo and Sørensen, 2013). Hansen and Mossberg (2013) argue that the concept of immersion appears to be one of the key elements of an unforgettable consumer experience. Only the person living the experience can define its meaning and significance (Gelter, 2007).

Meaningful experience is composed of feelings, new knowledge and beliefs acquired by the consumer through a brand, a product or a service (Gelter, 2007; Leppiman, 2010). The academic literature centres on issues such as experience production, creation and design (Boswijk et al., 2007; Kulmala, 2007; Gelter, 2007; Chang et al., 2010; Leppiman 2010).

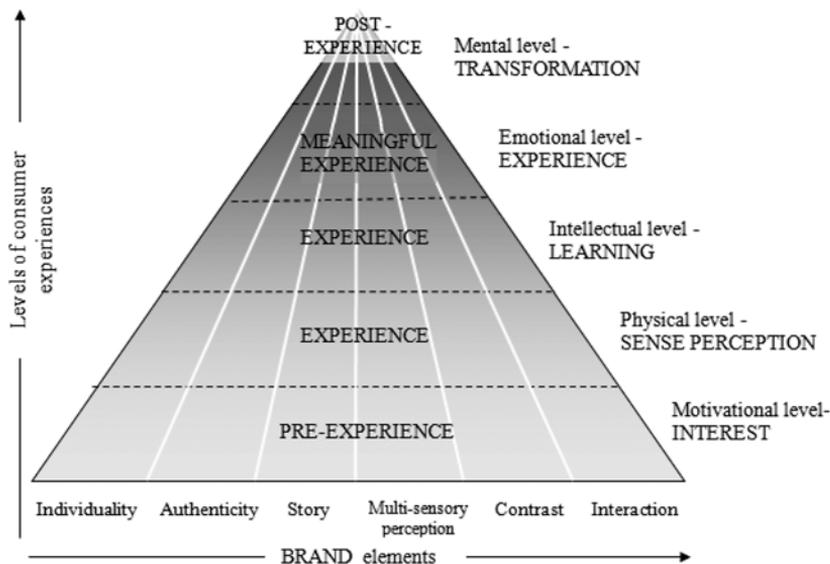
Tynan and McKechnie (2009) and Arnould et al. (2002) take a holistic look at the consumer experience and divide it in three: the pre-experience, the customer experience, and the post-experience. The consumer's experience forms through five levels of cognitive processes, namely the motivational, physical, intellectual, emotional, and mental levels (Tarssanen and Kylänen, 2007). In Tarssanen and Kylänen's theoretical model, which they call the 'experience pyramid', 'experience is regarded [as] a multisensoral, positive and comprehensive emotional experience that can lead to personal change' (ibid.) The model has two perspectives: 1) six product elements on the horizontal axis, and 2) five levels of consumer experiences on the vertical axis. Together these can create the preconditions for a meaningful experience.

The product elements on the horizontal axis of the model, contributing to consumer experience, are individuality, authenticity, story, multisensory perception, contrast, and interaction. Individuality refers here to uniqueness; that is, the same or similar product or service is not available elsewhere. Authenticity refers to the credibility of the product in the consumer's eyes. A story is closely linked to authenticity as a credible and authentic story adds significance and content to the product. Contrast on the other hand, emphasizes difference from the perspective of the consumer: the product should be different with respect

to the consumer’s everyday life. Multisensory perception refers to the fact that all sensory perceptions are carefully designed to strengthen the chosen theme. Last but not least, interaction indicates successful communication between the product and its consumers.

The vertical axis consists of the motivational, physical, intellectual, emotional, and mental levels of consumer experiences. On the first level, the motivational level, the interest of the consumer is awakened. On the next, the physical level, the consumer experiences and perceives the product through the five senses. The intellectual level means learning (Leppiman and Puustinen-Niemelä, 2006), thinking, applying knowledge, and forming opinions. The emotional level is where one undergoes the meaningful experience. On the mental level, a positive and powerful emotional experience may lead to an experience of personal change, either in the physical state of the consumer, in his/her state of mind, or lifestyle (Tarssanen and Kylänen, 2007; Leppiman, 2010).

Figure 1. The analytical model of consumer’s journey adapted from Tarssanen and Kylänen (2007) and Tynan and McKechnie (2009), and complemented by the authors.



In order to understand the consumer’s journey from the first experience to becoming a brand evangelist, and the meaning he/she has given to the brand, we draw on an analytical model (Figure 1). Integrating the dimensions of the experience pyramid (Tarssanen and Kylänen, 2007) into the model, we start observing the consumer’s journey by taking a look at his/her first experience. We are interested in the way brand evangelists become aware of their brands in the first place and what they know about their brands before that.

3. Research methodology

In order to understand the consumer-brand relationship in depth as well as the drivers that are involved in a consumer becoming a brand evangelist, a qualitative approach was applied. The basis of successful, meaningful interviews is the possibility to create a relationship between researchers and interviewees, enabling the latter to feel that he/she is being taken seriously (Mayring, 1999, p. 51). Through conversations we can learn about other people's experiences, dreams, feelings, and hopes and the world they live in. The qualitative research interview is 'an interview where knowledge is constructed in the interaction between the interviewer and the interviewee' (Kvale, 1983, p. 2).

Taking the process whereby meaningful experience is formed as a starting point, and in particular the experience pyramid model (Tarssanen and Kylänen, 2007), the research team worked out theory-driven open-ended interviews to give the interviewees the opportunity to express their thoughts and feelings and to speak of their experiences. Face-to-face in-depth interviews were carried out in a semi-structured manner by MBA and MA students from the Tallinn University of Technology, who participated in a marketing research course during the spring and autumn semesters in 2013. Each student chose an interviewee from his/her own social network. The interviewers were carefully briefed before they conducted the interviews. The material, collected in this interactive way, was further processed systematically. Since the aim of the analysis was to analyse text, the interviews were recorded, following the principle of minimising the storage of data (Flick, 2002, p. 250) – no cameras were included, as it was not expected that visual information would be of interest. The same applied to the transcription of the data – linguistic and suchlike accuracy was not prioritised as the material would have lost clarity, and therefore, complicated the analysis without contributing to finding out the meaning of the experiences. The transcripts of the recorded interviews were produced by each interviewing student.

For the present study, the triangulation principle is of great importance. Triangulation means combining different research methods, data, sources, and theories (Denzin, 1988). Denzin and Lincoln (1998, p. 3–4) distinguish between four types of triangulation: multiple data sets, multiple theory, multi-method and multi-investigator (Leppiman 2010, p. 114). True to the last principle (Mayring, 1999), the text that emerged was read in parallel by two researchers, one of whom was well aware of the theoretical background of the consumer-brand relationship and one less so, in order to compare the categories that emerged in the systematic and, at the same time, innovative reading process. The categories that either researcher came up with were discussed and carefully compared with the experience pyramid model. Such an approach enabled the interviewees (i.e. their subjective realities) to have maximum impact on the results of the study as the theoretical knowledge informing the study did not dominate and yet was present throughout (Kraimer, 1995; Flick, 2002).

The material collected in the study included 45 interviews, carried out by 45 students. All in all the interviews resulted in 390 pages of data. An interview lasted on average about 40 minutes. Thirty-three interviewees resided in Estonia and were interviewed by students who selected them from their own social networks. Twelve interviewees resided abroad (in Germany, Lebanon, Poland, France, and Brazil) and were interviewed by students of an international MBA. The extracts from interviews in Estonian that we use as examples were translated into English for the article; in the case of the interviews carried out in English the original transcription was left unaltered. The interviewees included 23 females and 22 males.

The first stage of analysis involved all 45 interviews, the second 13; the selection of those 13 is explained below. The age of the informants ranged from 19 to 36. Thus, the majority of them belong to Generation Y, the Net Generation, which consists of people born between 1982 and 1994, who have a strong sense of independence and autonomy. They are emotionally and intellectually expressive, innovative, and curious (Hawkins and Mothersbaugh, 2013, p. 125). Brand names are important to members of Generation Y, and they tend to remain relatively loyal to a brand (Napoli and Ewing, 2001). They have started their career; some of them are married and have children. The ratio of Estonians versus participants of other nationalities played no role in our analysis as we did not notice differences on that scale in the interviews, as the Estonian informants belonging to Generation Y grew up with the brands that are well known among the same age groups in countries with highly developed economies, and unlike older Estonian generations, the Estonian Net Generation has never experienced the deficit of goods that was characteristic of the Soviet economy. Therefore, all the interviewees were members of Generation Y and can be seen as possessing similar patterns of thinking, feeling, behaving and expressing themselves when it comes to brand-related behaviour. The interviews did not aim to find out underlying cultural differences in brand-related behaviour.

The quality of the collected data depended on the communication skills of individual interviewers, which varied, thus accounting for some loss of potential data, for example through lack of previous interviewing experience. This resulted in difficulties for some interviewers in maintaining a smooth discussion, some forgetting to treat the interview script as a flexible guideline, while others could be seen at times to be using suggestive or leading language in their questioning, resulting in the answers to these questions being eliminated from the study. However, the collected material shows that the interviewers were in general able to create an atmosphere of trust and the research objects were therefore open and honest, as the topic covered was not perceived as dangerous or sensitive (Mayring, 1999; Flick 2002). The interviewers themselves assessed the procedure in general as dynamic, flowing, interesting, and pleasant, including funny moments, which made the interview feel cosy and friendly. Therefore, the risk of using students as interviewers was justified in terms of the fact that it facilitated access to a wide circle of Net Generation consumers, especially as the aim of a qualitative study is not reach a certain number of respondents.

In reading the transcribed interviews, our theory-based suspicion that not all interviewees can be considered brand evangelists, and that the quality of the collected data does not enable us to determine this, was confirmed. Our aim was to analyse how a brand obtains a meaning for the consumer that is strong enough that the consumer becomes a brand evangelist. The interviews were read by two researchers in parallel who decided independently which of the interviews could be classified as dealing with brand evangelism. The final criteria that helped us select the interviews that were included in the actual analysis were born in dialogue; that is, we compared the way in which some interviews featured recurring elements (for example, an interview being full of superlatives, usually from beginning to end), while in other interviews, these elements did not appear at all. In this way, we systematically worked out a joint system for identifying brand evangelists. Using the three categories mentioned below as criteria, we filtered 13 brand evangelists from the 45 interviews.

4. Findings

4.1. Filtering brand evangelists

The first stage of the qualitative content analysis provided us with three new categories for recognizing brand evangelists: (1) (the use of) superlatives, (2) passion (in the speaker's tone), and (3) distinction. The first two of these categories are new to scholarship in the field, while the third is consistent with previous research. We used these categories as criteria that enabled us to filter the brand evangelists among the interviewees from those who could not be considered brand evangelists.

The features that characterize the speech of brand evangelists are as follows:

Superlatives: The use of superlatives and the presence of a visibly high emotional charge. The interviewees who fall into this category tend to use superlatives and keep returning to the topic of their selected brand without the interviewer requesting this. They speak of their brand in a passionate and emotional way:

(---) well, most Mercedes have a really nice classy, sporty or sexy look and ... all of the Mercedes are really strong cars (---) it's a very nice elegant car, it's a very strong car, it can be, like, be really nice sporty styles (---), and it's really, like, [a] reliable, safe and fast car. (Male, 28)

(---) the stores [Zara] normally are very attractive, organized, they have a good service. And the products are also very beautiful, fits perfectly with my style. The service is very good (---) very big, very attractive stores, very bright, good lightening design, (---) very nice clothes collection. (Female, 30)

This festival [Trzy żywioly] is unique. I couldn't find another similar event in Poland. This place is very special and unique. You are surrounded by happy people who [have] experienced a lot, who have a big knowledge and are very eager to share (---) this knowledge. (---) It is very tempting to follow those people. (Female 22)

It's hell nice! [VANS] I really liked what I found in the store. (Male, 21)

In these examples, the use of words like 'really, very' or 'classy', 'sporty', 'attractive', 'perfectly', 'unique' etc. stands out, conveying an emotion and implying that the interviewee is making an effort to impress the person he or she is speaking to.

Passion: The interviewees falling into this category seemed to need to speak about the selected brand. The brand evangelists spoke about recommending the brand to other people without that question having been asked. They spoke about the social media channels they use for sharing the brand, about uploading pictures, writing stories and suggesting that friends check out brand-related videos on YouTube:

I recommend this event [Trzy żywioly] on Facebook showing my pictures and writing about my experiences. A lot of people ask about it and want to join me [at the] festival the next time. (Female, 22)

They create an amazing atmosphere. For example, visit YouTube, and watch VANS videos, you'll understand! (---) And get some VANS shoes! (Male, 21)

(---) if my daughter wears their clothes and I upload pictures into my blog, I write there that her clothes are from [Polarn O. Pyret]. (Female, 22)

One of the brand evangelists went as far as calling himself a brand importer and emphasized that he keeps his friends informed and updated about the brand:

(---) when I hear of a new mobile phone model [Samsung] and pictures of that have leaked out (---) then I've shared that information – maybe someone is interested. (---) In a way I consider myself an importer. If I read something somewhere, I let others know as well. (Male, 28)

One brand evangelist felt the need to introduce the Estonian brand she is passionate about outside Estonia and also emphasized its singularity. She was conscious of feedback on the brand and happy if this was positive:

If I visit someone abroad, I will definitely take some Kalev chocolate with me. And I've had loads of feedback! (---) everybody has liked it a lot. For example the white chocolate with blueberries – there's nothing like that anywhere in the world! (Female, 25)

Another participant mentioned that she invites friends to shop with her by telling them about prices and products:

I always tell and recommend to my friends [Zara], and always invite them to come with me to the store. For sure I would be talking about the beautiful products and prices. (Female, 30)

The meaning of the brand can be so strong for the consumer that he/she starts to identify with it. Just like the following brand evangelist who recommends that her father buy her mother the same perfume that she has as she assumes that her parents associate it with her and that the fragrance makes them think of her:

(---) Mum has a Chanel perfume now thanks to Dad. (---) Thanks to the brand they think of me more than before. (Female, 29)

Distinction: Positive distinction of the selected brand compared to other brands by the interviewee. Existing quantitative research shows that one of the characteristics of brand evangelism can be the positive distinction of a brand compared to competing brands (Becerra and Badrinarayanan, 2013; Doss, 2014). The qualitative approach enables us to see how emotionally the comparison is done and examine the interviewees' choice of words. Many of the interviewees showed support for their brand by criticizing other brands:

Everything they [VANS] do is amazing, not like others brands with ridiculous ads or unpleasant staff. (---) Forget expensive brands like DG who just means you're rich and we don't care about it! (Male, 21)

From the moment that I saw them [Polarn O. Pyret] and touched their products, I felt as if other baby clothes were rags compared to them. They are solid and make a lasting impression. (Female, 22)

The interviews showed that comparisons are always favourable towards the selected brand, but do not have to be as negative towards the other brands as in the former example. The following is a fairly positive comparison:

Leica preserves its spirit and has a long history, doing the same thing in a minimal but beautiful manner – it's brilliant! Sony, Canon, Nikon ... those systems change and they change fast, they concentrate on functions, not on simplicity. (Male, 36)

Of course I tried a lot of cars. I drove like ... my parent's, my sister's, my girlfriend's car; my friends' cars and like ... I never had like ... the same comfortable and like ... enjoyable experience as in my Mercedes. (Male, 25)

The next section of this paper analyses the interviews with the 13 brand evangelists that we filtered from the 45 interviews conducted, investigating in depth the journey of the consumer from their first experience with the brand to the moment they become brand evangelists.

4.2. Levels of consumer experience

In this section we analyse the way the interviewees describe the environment in which they underwent their experiences as consumers (the physical level), how the experience developed (the intellectual level), which experiential elements (individuality, authenticity, story, multi-sensority, contrast, or interaction) their brands offer them, and how they speak about those elements. Subsequently, we aim to gauge the meaning of the brand for the interviewees – the meaning that makes the relationship with the brand both emotional and passionate, triggering the wish to share the experience. At the same time, we take a look at the stage of the experience pyramid model that involves a transformation on the mental level and brings about both a change in consumer behaviour and new values. We are interested in discovering how the brand evangelists talk about this transformation. We consider how the interviewees talk about their first encounter with the brand, and observe the way they perceive their journey to establishing a close emotional relationship with the brand through various levels of experience.

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4.2.1. The remembered emotion: From pre-experience to the first experience

Almost half of the brand evangelists became acquainted with their brand already in childhood: therein lies the roots of their close connection to the brand. The home environment, relatives, and schoolmates played a role in this, as well as the child's ability to catch on to the fact that the brand was perceived as something special by others. Because of the singularity of the brand for them today, they have either preserved or constructed a strong memory of the first encounter, as in the following interview example:

When I was a little boy and I heard about Samsung, I knew that it is going to be one of my favourite brands... And, surprise, that's what happened! (Male, 28)

Sometimes other family members had owned products of the brand and thus the encounter was inevitable:

Well, this brand ... like it runs in our family, basically everyone got a Mercedes, basically I was brainwashed since I was a kid. (Male, 24)

Such childhood memories often include a strong positive emotion related to the first experience – an emotion that has helped the first encounter to lead to a passionate brand relationship:

My uncle had an old-style Mercedes and the first time I drove a car, it was with that. I was a little boy with no driving license (---) When I remember my childhood, I remember the brand and that first encounter and I have dreamed of it since then. I had seen Mercedeses before, on TV and in magazines and in town, and the moment my uncle let me drive his car, I put it all together! (Male, 28)

A similar emotion can be detected in the next example: the candy that was received as a present was in strong contrast with the economic hardship of the family, and therefore, the moment remains with the interviewee as something very special, related to a strong feeling of happiness:

My family was not really well-off. My Godmother worked in a shop and gave me a Ferrero Rocher bonbon. That was very, very precious for me; my Mum would not have brought me that. I was ecstatic! (Female, 27)

In the following example, on the other hand, the memory related to economic hardship is present as a negative emotion, as envy and desire:

In school, either in the third or fourth class, basketball became super popular. Everybody had fancy basketball shoes from Nike or Adidas ... (Male, 25)

Some memories of the first experiences with the brand do not go as far back as childhood; the emotion present in them is nevertheless strong. The yearning for belonging and owning can be recalled in a positive way, and later turn into the first experience with the brand. Many interviewees spoke of having waited a long time for the brand to become available in their home country. H&M was such a brand for the Estonian informants: so far shopping experiences with H&M were associated with travels to desirable destinations in Western Europe like Helsinki and Stockholm. The interviewee from Brazil expressed her feelings in a similar way in relation to Zara: the memory she preserved included a yearning for the European brand and positive holiday experiences:

I heard a lot about Zara before, from friends who used to travel abroad and always arrived in Brazil with maaaany bags from Zara (---) My first experience was in 2007, when I travelled to Barcelona for vacations. Before that I had already heard a lot about this brand, so I already was very curious to try it. And, in Spain you can find a Zara store everywhere, (---) Yes it was special for me, mainly because I was in holidays, and during holidays the willingness to buy and try new experiences is greater! But since 2009 Zara opened its filial in São Paulo, so I am very happy to have it much more accessible now. (Female, 30)

Finally, the interviews revealed that sometimes the first experience of the brand is in a way a second-hand one; that is, the feeling, the desire, emerges from a source such as a film. For the following interviewee, the awareness of the desire to own a brand that she calls 'perfect' goes back to a film:

I had seen the logo of the brand Chanel before. But then I watched the movie about the life of Chanel. This awakened my interest in that company (---) And I discovered the Coco Chanel Mademoiselle perfume that was perfect for me. It had everything I had been looking for (---) I can find no perfume equal to that. (Female, 29)

The stories told by brand evangelists about their first encounter with the brand and/or the way they met the brand as children or adults are different; however, they share a common denominator: they all involve strong stimuli and intense, gripping emotions.

4.2.2. Physical level and sense perception

In the experience pyramid model, the physical level refers to the second stage after the motivational level. The interviewees mentioned different contexts in which the multisensory experiences that support the brand had been experienced and which made the brand special for the interviewees.

It has been established that the consumer experiences and perceives the product through the five senses on the physical level (Tarssanen and Kylänen, 2007; Hansen and Mossberg, 2013). This was evident in the interviews in this study, which included, among other things, excellent examples of the significance of multisensory experiences for consumers and how this multisensory supports their connection to the brand.

For example, a young man speaks of the smell of expensive leather. He is of the opinion that although other cars have leather upholstery as well, a Mercedes can be distinguished from others by its unique smell, which is superior to that of other cars.

That car has a singular smell. It is ... let's say, expensive, the smell of leather. The smell differs from the way other cars smell, those with leather upholstery (---), they smell different, not as good as the Mercedes. The smell made me like the car even more. (Male, 28)

The same man described experiences related to colours, cosiness, tasty coffee at the Mercedes-Benz sales and service agency – a set of multisensory elements that have made him feel special:

It is nice and neat, clean there; a very cosy beige colour that makes a very positive impact and definitely ... beautiful, colourful, cool cars. (---) And you are certainly offered good coffee there ... the coffee is good. I feel, if I may say so, like a king there. (Male, 28)

The experiences described in the following interview are similar: the young woman has picked up on the sweet smell and the beautiful display of goods in the chocolate store, as well as the friendly service:

(---) the Kalev sweets store (---) if you enter the store, the aroma there ... it awakens the senses of taste and smell immediately ... and very good service and a wide selection of products ... the way it all is displayed there ... I'd say very ... customer friendly. (Female, 25)

An Apple store offers an almost complete multisensory experience: one can touch the products, listen to music there, and be surrounded by extraordinary interior design. The young man in our interviews who could be considered the brand evangelist of Apple, gladly expressed his feelings about his experiences in Apple stores – experiences that gave him the strong, gripping feeling that it is made just for him:

I'd say they have a welcoming store, a very helpful team, the shop design ... it is all very welcoming, especially in the right Apple store somewhere abroad. The shops are very stylish and inviting. The main stores are especially stylish, made of glass. In the Apple store in London for example they play very good jazz music. You have the possibility to touch and try everything first hand. It all seems ... somehow as if it were made for you. (Male, 25)

For one interviewee, the children's clothing brand Polarn O. Pyret offers a visual and tactile experience, which conveys a sense of authenticity around the brand:

You hold the cotton and it really is 100% cotton, strong textile and you wash it and in 100 years it still looks exactly the same. You can boil it in the washing machine and it is still exactly ... you feel with your hand that it is a product that has its seam made nice and neat

and there is nothing that would make it wear out; and the colour of the cloth does not fade. (Female, 22)

The festival Trzy żywioly, an event that brings together a number of different cultures, offers experiences for all the five senses, and brand evangelists of the event, as expected, notice this. Moreover, the festival creates a strong feeling of belonging, of being together with others.

Tastes of sophisticated and exotic dishes, the sound of foreign music, colours of clothes from different countries and the smell of meals and incenses from all over the world (---) People who take part in this event can feel this event [with] all their senses. They can touch it, they can feel it. (---) This is a place when you have deep interactions with people. You talk with them, spend a lot of time with them and share your life and views. You create a trace that is visible and usually results in establishing a long-term relationship. (Female, 22)

The interviewee describes the feeling of being together and the value it holds for her and what she imagines herself gaining from that: an exchange of experiences, and therefore, learning through your own experiences and those of others.

As these examples show, the brand evangelists gladly shared the sensory experiences they have had with their brands on all possible levels; the feelings associated with sensority were shown to be strong and important to them.

4.2.3. Intellectual level and learning

Within the experience formation model (Tarssanen and Kylänen, 2007), the intellectual level of an experience refers to learning, thinking, applying knowledge and forming opinions. A good brand provides the consumer with the possibility to learn something new, to develop, and gain new knowledge.

Once one has become interested in the brand and is aware of this interest, one may begin to read about it, seek out further information and worry about how it is doing on the market. The following is an example from an interview in which the brand evangelist ponders how her brand was able to survive the economic depression:

They have a study group of designers for its collection. I heard they are a strong fashion store worldwide, they are present in every continent. And also that ZARA belongs to a Spanish group of stores (Inditex Group), which has constantly growing sales revenue, and also very good position in the stock market, despite the Spanish crisis. And I think it's thanks to the popularity of ZARA worldwide. Yes, I am more aware about the company's history and reputation. (Female, 30)

The detail she offers suggests that she may also talk about this in her everyday life; for example, when inviting friends on a joint shopping trip, as she hinted elsewhere in the interview.

The Apple brand evangelist in our study revealed that he seeks information from forums he considers trustworthy and where he expects to find answers to his questions. Once again we can see how a brand is pitted against other brands. Here, as in the previous example, it is easy to imagine how the message might be spread in everyday life by the brand evangelist:

(---) I have found out a lot about their second-hand market. You can sell all their products for a very good price later. As far as I know other companies don't have a second-hand market like this. I can't imagine selling a Dell laptop after having used it! Apart from

that, the Apple forums function very well, they are well monitored and you always get answers to your questions there. (Male, 24)

The following example shows how a young man we interviewed found out about the product range of his favourite brand. It can be assumed that he also shares this information, which is obviously important to him, with other people interested in jogging:

When I bought this warm sports undershirt, I found out that they [Nike] have different shirts for warm and cold climates, that for the warm climate they offer breathing and cooling shirts. First I thought: one and the same shirt, who cares what you do with it (---) but actually you have a choice. If you do more sports in winter, then you'll buy a shirt that keeps you warm and if you go jogging in autumn, you need quite a different kind of shirt. (Male, 25)

The examples presented here comprise seemingly objective, rational messages (for instance, that the products have a good second-hand market, or are good in different climatic conditions) that the brand evangelists use in advocating their brands. However, it is the combination of these arguments and the emotional element – the brand evangelists relate positive personal experiences – that makes the message convincing when used in everyday communication with the aim to push a brand. These are the tools that brand evangelists use in promoting a brand.

4.2.4. Emotional level and experience

A meaningful experience happens on the emotional level; it is through emotions that the experience becomes meaningful. The brand evangelists we interviewed integrate memories into the story of their brand, emphasize the strong tie between themselves and the brand, and assure the listener that the brand is special and perfect:

It was my first car. (---) it resembles a lot, especially from where I come from [Lebanon] ...this car and from the point of view that it was my first car ... so it was like something special to me. So I always have this connection to that car. And the brand itself, it just speaks for itself, Mercedes is a worldwide known luxurious brand ... new cars, old cars, it doesn't matter. When you see Mercedes, you just think like ... reliability, you think luxury, you think comfort, you think just a really good car. (Male, 25)

The same young man explains why he made a repeat purchase of a Mercedes-Benz – it is a similarly emotional description, full of superlatives. As it is a brand that communicates luxury and enables a person to identify with a certain social class, the interviewee does not fail to mention this:

I experienced the car for around 5 years, and [it] was, like, really handy and it always supported anything that I wanted, supported, like, my social status, [it] is everything, so ... that's why I was a re-buyer from them. It's a social status, it's a very nice elegant car, it's a very strong car, it can be, like ... be really nice sporty styles... and it is really, like, reliable, safe and fast car, so yeah what else do you need in a car. (Male, 25)

The brand may also boost the brand evangelist's self-esteem and get them compliments from friends:

I'm happy to have discovered that brand [VANS]. My friends often tell me that I'm well dressed. (Male, 21)

At the same time, the brand can have a comforting effect; buying it can be experienced as giving oneself a gift:

If I don't like something and I'm unhappy and feel that I have to pamper myself, then I go and buy myself a box of Ferrero Rocher. (---) If I take the box and switch on a movie that makes me cry, then I sort of cure my mood with that. (---) I am giving myself a gift. (Female, 27)

The story that began with the first experience of the brand in childhood (for example the uncle letting the boy drive the Mercedes-Benz) – a singular moment that the adult man telling the story keeps reliving in his memory and conveys strong emotions and meaning. The dream came true and the singular moment can be relived again and again. He is able to relive the meaningful experience simply by buying petrol:

You can use the brand to create your own personality. It is simply ... there's no effort in it, you just think that ... you close your eyes and there's your dream. All you got to do is buy petrol and drive! (---) And now I live inside that moment. (Male, 28)

The examples above show that brand evangelists are in a way immersed in their brand, fused with it – it makes it possible to talk of fate, to boost self-esteem, to improve their mood and to relive the special moment from their past over and over again.

The stories brand evangelists tell clearly convey the strong emotions and passionate attitudes they hold towards the brands. An example of this was the story about cameras manufactured by Leica, which seemed on the surface to be more reserved, like a calm and philosophical consideration – less obviously emotional. However, powerful feelings were nonetheless expressed and respectively created in the communication partner by using strong links to the brand: World War II, Vietnam War; or majestic metaphors like 'the king of cameras'. Moreover, the abstract illustrates the immersion of the brand as the interviewee feels that a part of him is saved in the picture, and speaks of a singular emotion that a connoisseur presumably recognizes in pictures made with a Leica:

World-renowned photographers have used Leica for taking photos and have praised its quality (---) Many pictures that we see nowadays have reached us through the photo media (---) pictures of World War Two and of the Vietnam War (---) where Leicas were used (---) when the object lens takes the photo, then I feel as if I were in it myself. Maybe the professionals of the world can identify which pictures are made by Leica. I don't say that I could ... It depends also on what's in the picture although I am sure I'd recognize the certain emotion on the picture and would want to know what is the fingerprint of Leica. The history behind the photos makes Leica the 'king' of cameras. (Male, 36)

This story told with such emotional charge and mental effort shows what the interviewee has learned from his brand and how the way he thinks has changed over the time. Therefore, the brand offers a singular, meaningful experience for the consumer, an extraordinary and meaningful experience that generates emotions and can transform the individual.

4.2.5. Mental level and transformation

On the mental level, a positive and powerful emotional experience may lead to an experience of personal transformation, either in a person's physical state, state of mind, or lifestyle (Tarssanen and Kylänen, 2007; Leppiman, 2010). The interviews analysed in this study contained an insightful instance of how the brand encouraged the brand evangelist to take a second look at

her values and start realising her dreams – in addition to having enriched her life with mental and emotional experiences. Here the interviewee talks about the festival of cultures:

I couldn't find another similar event in Poland. It was special for me cause I met people who had the same hobbies like me, I could improve my knowledge about geographic foreign culture and I discovered new interesting things. Since that moment I have been inspired. I have started travelling more and I realized my dreams (---) I improved my geographic skills. I met a lot of interesting people who encouraged me to travel, visiting new places. I'm more open minded and I'm not afraid of undertaking new ventures and task. I'm not afraid of new [things]. Festival provides great background for meeting people and to settle relationships. It both festival and people changed my life. (Female, 22)

A change in the individual's way of thinking is also obvious in the story where the consumer dropped the products he had been buying until then when he discovered his favourite brand, VANS:

I learned one big thing: you don't need to spend a lot of money to have nice clothes! I used to buy expensive goods, but I can't do it anymore. (Male, 22)

Thus, becoming a brand evangelist can bring about a change in the way a consumer thinks. An experience becomes meaningful, and the brand evangelist feels the need to speak about it in an emotional and colourful way to his friends, and share the experience in social media channels.

4.3. Elements of consumer experience

As consumers construct experiences, they tend to refer to the elements of a product (in our case a brand) that correspond to components in the experience pyramid: the significant elements of the consumer experience are individuality, authenticity, story, multisensory perception, contrast, and interaction. Together, these components can create the preconditions for a meaningful experience (Tarssanen and Kylänen, 2007). In order to identify if and where these elements of consumer experience occur in the interviews conducted with brand evangelists, it is useful to consider how they have been defined by Tarssanen and Kylänen themselves (definitions below in italics) in their experience pyramid:

Individuality refers to uniqueness, i.e. the same or similar product/service is not available elsewhere. Several instances of individuality appear in the interviews; for example, although several car manufacturers have their cars fitted with leather upholstery, the upholstery in the Mercedes-Benz is described as the only one with a unique smell. Trzy żywioły, a festival of cultures, is depicted as the only one of its kind in Poland by its brand evangelist. The white chocolate with blueberries produced by Kalev is said to be like nothing else in the whole world. One young lady is of the opinion that one can find no perfume equal to Coco Chanel Mademoiselle. Finally, other brands of baby clothes are dismissed as 'rags' compared to those made by Polarn O. Pyret.

Authenticity refers to the credibility of the brand determined by the consumer himself. This message is resoundingly clear in the interviews: Mercedes-Benz cars are called reliable, safe, and fast. Polarn O. Pyret products are characterized as made of 100% cotton. Apple forums are perceived as trustworthy.

A credible and authentic *story* adds significance and content to the brand. This element is also evident in the data analysed in this study: one brand evangelist reports that it was the film about the life of Coco Chanel that raised her interest in the brand. World-renowned photographers are mentioned as users of Leica cameras, while pictures of World War Two and the Vietnam War are also claimed to have been taken by this brand of camera.

Contrast emphasizes difference. The product should be different with respect to the consumer's everyday life. As with the other elements, we find evidence of this in the data: a brand evangelist recalls how her Godmother gave her a Ferrero Rocher sweet that she imagined her mother would never have bought her. The festival was described as 'special' by the interviewee as she met people there who had the same hobbies as her.

Multisensory perception refers to the fact that all sensory perceptions are carefully designed to strengthen the chosen theme. As mentioned already, this element pervaded the interviews: a brand evangelist recalls the smell of expensive leather in a Mercedes-Benz as well as the good quality of the coffee in the sales agency. Another interviewee talks of the smell of chocolate and the impression that the display of products made on her visual senses. The good music and stylish interior of the Apple store have been noticed and remembered by the brand evangelist. The experiences that the festival guest has retained in her memory involve all five senses: smell, taste, sound, touch, visual images.

Lastly, *interaction* means successful communication between the brand and its consumers. Completing the pyramid, this final element of experience was also present in the interviews: A consumer claims that a customer feels like a king when in a Mercedes-Benz agency. Another interviewee recalls feeling as if it were all made for him in the Apple store. The evangelist advocating the chocolate brand describes the chocolate store as customer friendly. The festival is described as an event providing great opportunities for meeting people and entering new relationships. And finally, another brand evangelist feels the need to disseminate information about new Samsung products.

5. Discussion

This article explored how an experience becomes meaningful, how brand evangelists speak about the role of the brand in their lives, and how the brand transforms their consumption habits, attitudes and way of thinking. We used the logic of the experience pyramid (Tarssanen and Kylänen, 2007) to analyse the interviews, beginning with the motivational level where the brand first catches the interest of the consumer, moving on to the physical level where he or she actually encounters the brand, and then to the level of experience where it becomes clear whether an emotional connection to the brand is developed or not. If the emotional connection appears, the brand has become experiential; it has obtained a singular meaning for the consumer. A further intensified bond with the brand can change the way the consumer thinks.

Our analysis centred on the concept of brand evangelists. It is highly probable that the interviewees talk about many of the things that they talked about in the interviews in their everyday life as well. In order to promote a brand, brand evangelists modify their tone of speaking about the brand experience; that is, they apply the right level of emotionality for that purpose. At the same time, they bolster their pro-brand arguments by referring to their own experiences as a buyer.

If we look at the brands that the brand evangelists talked about, we see that strong, mostly international superbrands dominate the selection: among others, there were two confectionery brands (the international producer Ferrero Rocher and the Estonian brand Kalev), a luxury brand (Chanel), a sports equipment brand (Nike); three clothing brands, Polarn O. Pyret, Zara and VANS, the last of these specializing in skateboarding apparel; and three technology brands (Samsung, Apple and Leica). Two evangelists spoke about the premium car brand Mercedes-Benz and one about an event, a festival of cultures (Trzy żywyoty). The stronger, the more attractive and the more desirable a brand is, the more the consumers talk about it and the higher the probability that brand evangelists will be able to persuade members of their social network that the brand is unique and worthwhile. Therefore, brand evangelism is in a way a built-in characteristic of superbrands, or rather it is earned, as brand evangelism is driven by consumer passion and emotions and cannot be bought (Becerra and Badrinarayanan, 2013).

How might other producers be able to generate brand evangelism and design their brand as experiential? To answer this we must return to the findings of the study: What did the brand evangelists experience when becoming evangelists? What distinguishes a meaningful experience from other experiences? For example, a brand evangelist, a young man, describing the advertising messages of his brand, recommended that the interviewer watch VANS videos on YouTube and, in comparison, described the advertisements of other brands as downright ridiculous and the personnel in the stores of other producers as unfriendly. This is symptomatic of brand evangelists: most of them describe the personnel in the store of their brand as friendly and competent, the shop design as beautiful, the display and the music as well chosen. The products are described as high quality and unique. The information that the brand evangelists have sought out and found; for example, through the Apple forum (which is perceived as trustworthy) or from reading about the history of Leica (which is perceived as a success story), is effectively integrated into the narrative that they have of the brand. Marketers can make use of all these values in their brand communication. Besides that, a good brand offers a story. Brand evangelists complement the general story of the brand with their own brand-related story. They do this in an emotional and suggestive way that is bound to make an impression on listeners who might then begin their own journey with the brand – from awareness and interest all the way to evangelism.

According to Kilian (2010), complex multi-sense brand signals are obtained by combining several brand elements. The sensorial component has been shown to constitute the most important component for several experiential brands (Gentile et al., 2007; Schmitt, 2010). Our research reveals that the feelings related to the sensorial are strong and important for brand evangelists. The set of multisensory elements that the brand and its sales locations offer, as well as the service which the brand evangelists perceive as individually tailored and excellent, make them feel special and amplify the feeling that something about the experience (for example the service or the decor) is made just for them, strengthening the bond between the evangelist and the brand.

Vallius et al. (2007) used the experience pyramid as a framework for analysing how a group of players form shared experiences in a virtual game world. They investigated the ways in which perceived experiences matched the experience pyramid in real life as the model had been constructed first of all for tourism and travel products, and therefore, the hierarchical structure of the elements of an experience could in this case have turned out to be a limitation. According to the pyramid, the first three levels of experience must be reached

before emotional responses occur; however, in some game sessions the players reported strong emotional experiences before even having learned how to play the game due to audio-visual elements used in the game. Our study offers proof for this line of reasoning. Our results suggest that the experience pyramid goes beyond the hierarchical structure originally conceived for it – it is instead an open architecture model. The levels of the experience pyramid consist of experiential elements, each of which (for example authenticity or contrast) might constitute the dominant element throughout all the levels; that is, throughout the consumer's journey. This conceptualization also supports our understanding of the model as an open architecture experiential model with movable 'dividing walls'. The advantage of the open architecture model is its customizability, changeability and openness (Leppiman et al., 2013).

The concept of designing experiences has so far mainly been used in creating services in the tourism, hospitality, architecture, digital media, culture and entertainment sectors (Tarssanen and Kylänen, 2007; Leppiman, 2010; Pine and Korn, 2011; Sundbo and Sørensen, 2013). Schmitt (2010) analyses experiential stimuli, attributes, and their touch points as part of product design by global and local brands. The framework of experience design and experience marketing should not be limited to fields of business already including a strong experiential dimension (involving, for example, new experiences, new knowledge, being together with others, strong and memorable emotions), such as the festival of cultures, Trzy żywioły, which was included in the data analysed in our study. The concept of designing experiences can be consciously used in brand building and integrated into marketing communication for various products and services.

Once a customer has become interested in his or her 'own' brand, he or she starts to read about it, seeks out further information about it and worries about its future. The controlled, rational aspects of the message (like facts about the brand) combined with the emotional element (brand-related experience and feelings – the brand evangelists rely on positive personal experiences when speaking of the brand) are bound to result in a convincing message when used in everyday communication aimed at boosting a brand. These are the tools that brand evangelists use in promoting a brand. They integrate memories into the story of their brand, emphasize the strong bond between themselves and the brand, and assure the listener that the brand is special and perfect.

Among other things, the brand can boost the self-esteem of brand evangelists and win them the admiration of friends. This constitutes another emotion-based element in the consumer-brand relationship. Brand evangelists in a sense immerse themselves in their brand, fusing with it, making it possible to talk of fate, to strengthen self-esteem, to give oneself a gift, to improve one's mood and to relive the special moment over and over again. Evangelists love to tell stories about their brand and about their meaningful experiences with the brand; they tell them in an emotional vein and with considerable mental effort, gladly pointing out how the brand has enriched their world and changed the way they think.

6. Conclusions and implications

This study sheds further light on the characteristics whereby brand evangelists can be recognized. Our analysis shows that these individuals use superlatives and speak of their brand in a passionate and emotional manner. Existing quantitative research has indicated

that one of the possible characteristics of brand evangelism is the positive distinction of a brand compared to competing brands. Qualitative research can, on the other hand, point out how emotional the comparison is as well as analyse the specific choice of words. It is important to recognize this as we expect that brand evangelists will use the same suggestive tone when discussing the brand with their friends, family members, fellow students, colleagues, and people with whom they share hobbies, in short, in their everyday life, thereby promoting the brand and influencing the purchase decisions of members of their social network. Based on our results, we offer marketers some insights into how people speak about their favourite, most preferred, beloved brand, and how a tight emotional bond with the brand develops.

The study reveals that the roots of the close connection to the brand often lie in childhood. The home environment, relatives, or fellow schoolmates influence the child's ability to get switched on to the brand, perceiving it as special for a variety of reasons. Later, as the brand has obtained a special meaning for the brand evangelist as an adult, he or she will either have preserved or constructed a strong memory of the first encounter with the brand. Even if the memories of the first encounter do not go as far back as childhood, the emotion present in them is equally strong. The yearning for belonging and owning, and the long wait for the brand to become available in one's home country can be remembered in a positive light, and later be turned into what one recalls and preserves as the first experience with the brand.

Regarding implications for consumer researchers, our findings suggest that an experience model that takes into account all the elements at all levels of a meaningful experience can be used as a research tool for planning and analysing studies in order to understand the consumer-brand relationship in depth. The concept of the experience pyramid has not been addressed in the brand-consumer context so far, as it was developed for a different purpose. If we stop seeing the model as a hierarchical one and treat it as an open architecture experiential model, it becomes both universal and multifunctional in analysing the consumer's journey. The model helps us to understand how consumers perceive brands, and what leads the consumer to become a brand evangelist. It provides an insight into the meaning of brand-related experiences for consumers and how consumers perceive and understand the theoretical concepts of brand authenticity, story, individuality, interaction, contrast, multisensory perception, and meaningful experience, which may have implications for experience marketing. Each of these concepts have been investigated and theorized in a number of studies. For instance, Schallehn et al. (2014) indicate in their empirical study that authenticity is perceived when a brand is consistent, continuous and individual. Being consistent means that the brand fulfils its brand promise. Napoli et al. (2014) have found that authenticity is built around perceptions of heritage, nostalgia, cultural symbolism, sincerity, craftsmanship, quality commitment, and design consistency. Thinking of further research, it is important to know the meaning that is attached to authenticity by those with a strong emotional bond to the brand, and how they speak of it. In order to fill the theoretical experience model with solid empirical content, more detailed empirical studies and theoretical discussion are needed.

With a view to future research, it is also important to consider the limitations of the present study. The qualitative interviews were carried out by students who had no previous experience with this kind of data collection. It enabled us to collect an extensive amount of data in a short time but the transcriptions of the interviews show that in spite of the students' efforts, their lack of experience caused a loss of data as the moderators often did not know

how to work with an interview guideline. Consequently, it is likely that many experiences that the interviewed brand evangelists would surely have shared with the moderator remained hidden in the interviews. However, the amount of usable data was more than sufficient for a valid analysis, and offers a basis for further, deeper qualitative and quantitative studies in the field.

While our investigation focused on the behaviour of individuals belonging to Generation Y, the consumer population now also includes consumers from Generation Z and soon from Generation Alpha, who reveal a change in values and consumption patterns. Their journey to brand evangelism is also worth approaching in a detailed manner, and an open architecture experiential model, the experience pyramid, is likely to offer invaluable insights into their behaviour.

This study marks the first engagement with the concept of the experience pyramid in the brand-consumer context. Our findings reveal the experience model to be a useful research tool for gaining an in-depth understanding of the consumer-brand relationship and of the consumer's journey from the first brand experience to becoming a brand evangelist. The new categories for recognizing brand evangelists, that is, the use of superlatives and passion in verbal statements about the brand in question, constitute a further contribution of the study to research on this topic.

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