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Permission-based Email Marketing for Customer Engagement

A qualitative study on how email marketing and relational factors influence consumers' non-purchase behaviors

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Abstract

Email marketing is not a new concept within marketing, it has been used by companies as a cost-effective way to incentives purchases for decades. However, during the past few years, there was a shift in the way email can be used. Today, it is also a way for companies to directly communicate with customers and through it create more long-term customer relationships. Previous research within the subject has had a focus on examining the effect of email marketing on purchases. However, with the new additional email practices, which have emerged in recent years, there is the need for studying email marketing from the perspective of the consumer. Since there are several conceptualizations of email marketing, this study adopts the definition where consumers' consent to receiving the emails is a must, in other words permission-based email marketing. In addition, the study examines the influence of permission-based email marketing on consumers' behaviors that go beyond purchases, namely the non-purchase behaviors. Thus, the purpose of this study is to gain a deeper understanding of how permission-based email marketing and relational factors influence consumers' non-purchase behaviors. Moreover, the study aims to answer to the following research question:

How does permission-based email marketing, aided by relational factors, influence consumers' non-purchase behaviors?

In order to answer the research question, a qualitative method was used, more specifically semi-structured interviews were conducted with young millennial consumers between the ages of 25 to 34. The results showed that different identified aspects of permission-based email marketing influence certain relational factors and ultimately the consumers' engagement. However, a key factor is the consumer's own perception regarding what the emails from clothing retailers should contain in order to be relevant. Whether the email's content is general or personalized, if the consumers perceive it as valuable and relevant, it will lead to increased customer satisfaction, perceived value, perceived brand competence, trust, commitment and loyalty. These relational factors can facilitate consumers' non-purchase behaviors such as opening, reading, clicking on links and spreading positive word-of-mouth. However, the results also indicate factors, which contribute to less and more negative non-purchase behaviors. If consumers do not perceive to have given permission for receiving emails from a clothing retailer, they will respond by unsubscribing. Moreover, if consumers perceive to be receiving an excessive amount of emails, or if they deem the content irrelevant, they are more likely to delete, unsubscribe and spread negative word-of-mouth. The study resulted in a conceptual model, which illustrates the factors of both permission-based email marketing and relational factors and their influence on consumers' non-purchase behaviors.

Keywords; Relationship Marketing, Online Relationship Marketing, Email Marketing, Permission-based Email Marketing, Personalized Email Marketing, Customer Engagement, Non-Purchase Behaviors

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1. Introduction

In the following first chapter of this thesis, we present the chosen topic in this study and introduce the reader to both the research problem as well as the theoretical background, from which the research gap subsequently is presented. In addition, the chapter includes the study's purpose and our research question.

1.1 Problem Background

Today, email is one of the commonly used digital communication tools, both in people's everyday professional and personal lives, as well as an interchange between brands, retailers and customers. Even though email has been an established form of communication for decades, in combination with a growing usage of other mobile messaging forms, there is yet a predicted rise in the number of email users worldwide according to recent statistics (Statista, 2022). Hence, while the use of multiple different digital marketing tools and forms of communication have expanded in the past years (Statista, 2020), email still stands its ground as important means for brands and retailers to reach and connect with customers. One of the reasons might be the possibility of reaching emails on-the-go, i.e., the possibility of reading them from a mobile device and not a desktop exclusively, which goes along with the increasingly busy consumer. The sheer number of emails sent and received daily is expected to increase from 306 billion in 2020 to 376 billion in 2025 (Statista, 2022), implying that the use of this form of communication is far from done. Additionally, email has from the last years developed from a tool of networking into a part of many brands' marketing channels and strategies and the entire email marketing market value is projected to increase from 7.5 billion in 2020 to 17.9 billion in 2027 (Statista, 2021).

The millennial generation is a critical group for companies to consider in relation to email marketing, because consumers of this age group are shopping most online, out of all generations (Statista, 2020). As email marketing is a digital marketing tool, it is important for companies to gain insights on how consumers, who shop online frequently, view it. Additionally, millennials are at the age where they begin to have an increasing purchasing power, as they get higher incomes. Thus, marketers as well as managers of retailers selling clothing brands should have an interest in seeing how they can capture the interest of consumers at this age using email marketing.

In a world where customer experience includes more and more impressions in terms of advertising, campaigns, banners and other marketing messages, a growing problem for brands is to stand out in the crowd and actually reach the customer (Hall, 2019; Marketing Week, 2022). Whilst the possibilities of reaching customers in different ways are increasing, with many brands implementing an omni-channel strategy using multiple platforms and ways of communicating, the question is about customers' limited attention and how to attain it (Marketing Week, 2022; Smallbizdaily, 2017). As more marketing options are emerging, the number of impressions a customer encounters daily also increases with this (Hall, 2019). Consequently, the individual consumer's attention span gets more saturated, and brands have to compete to get a part of it, often having to go

over and beyond to enhance the customer experience and perceived value with their services and products (Hall, 2019). In other words, understanding the customers' needs and building stronger, more long-term relationships with them in order to better grasp their attention (Hall, 2019). One of the many ways in attempting to do this is using email marketing.

According to recent statistics in North America email marketing is the second most preferred way of marketing among marketers in B2C today, shortly after blog posts/short articles (Statista, 2020). The two main objectives of email marketing is to increase sales and develop strong customer relationships (Hartemo, 2016; Zhang, 2017). Valuable and purposeful customer relationships, for both parties, is according to some marketers a way to reach through the noise of all competitors (MarketingWeek, 2022; Smallbizdaily, 2017.). Therefore, marketers need to understand how email marketing can facilitate establishing strong long-term customer relationships and stand out from the crowd of competitors. Subsequently, this implies that marketers, working with email marketing, should consider aspects from relationship marketing in an attempt to influence the engagement of the customer, in order to ultimately build stronger customer relationships.

1.2 Theoretical background and research gaps

Relationship Marketing

Relationship marketing emerged in the beginning of the 1980s in connection to a shift in business relationships, from transactional to more long-term (Gummesson, 2017). Due to the rapid growth of the subject, scholars have developed several different definitions of relationship marketing throughout the years. Relationship marketing was defined by Morgan and Hunt (1994, p. 34) as "all marketing activities directed toward establishing, developing, and maintaining successful relational exchanges". While Grönroos (1994. p.9) described it as an approach to meet mutual agreements through exchanges, by defining it as a way: "to establish, maintain, and enhance relationships with customers and other partners, at a profit, so that the objectives of the parties involved are met." Subsequently, this is the definition used in our thesis as we deem it to be equally relevant today.

The original marketing mix of relationship marketing consists of the 4Ps (price, promotion, place, product), however due to several paradigm shifts they were eventually concluded to be overly simplistic (Grönroos, 1994, p.7; Gummesson, 2017). Thus, an extension from transactional exchanges to more long-term customer relationships through value creation slowly evolved (Grönroos, 2004; Grönroos, 1994; Gummesson, 2017). Characterized by customer satisfaction and value creation, relationship marketing today has grown to a more interactive process than ever before (Gummesson, 2017; Grönroos, 2004). Kotler and Keller (2009, p. 164) define customer satisfaction as "a person's feelings of pleasure or disappointment that result from comparing a product's perceived performance (or outcome) to their expectations". However, it is argued that this can also include the entire value obtained, not only connected to the product qualities but also perceived service quality (Markeset and Kumar, 2003, p. 385). There is an emphasis on the interaction process of relationship marketing, for example, Grönroos (2004) states that the quality of the interaction is vital to improve the perceived value and the customer

satisfaction. The importance of a well-established interaction with the customer has contributed to a contemporary paradigm shift in relationship marketing, namely the emergence of the service-dominant logic (Vargo & Lusch, 2004). This development of relationship marketing started to emphasize the importance of value co-creation through an interaction where the customer is actively involved in creating value and if done successfully this will lead to higher customer satisfaction because of it (Vargo & Lusch, 2015). Even though the development of relationship marketing has paved the way towards more opportunities for companies to adopt effective strategies to build long-term, profitable and meaningful relationships with customers (Grönroos, 2004; Kumar et al., 2009), there are also some challenges. With high competitiveness on the market, companies cannot afford not providing expected value to their customers, since not delivering expected service quality can lead to brand mistrust and the customer ending the relationship with the company (Sajtos et al., 2010).

Within the relationship marketing literature there are many studies addressing specific relational factors and their influence on customers. For example, Ahmad and Akbar (2021) studied how the relational factors of: trust, commitment, competence and communication all influence the customer perception of the brand and ultimately the loyalty and purchase intention. Both trust and commitment are incorporated in Morgan and Hunt's (1994) study, where they emphasize the facilitating role trust has on customer commitment. Moreover, Grönroos (2004) points out the importance of communication in relationship marketing and its influence on improving customer satisfaction. Crosby et al., (1990) highlight the relational factor competence as fundamental when it comes to building customer trust and Xue et al., (2020) define brand competence as "consumers' considerations that a brand has the ability and skills to meet consumers' intentions, and it emphasizes on a brand's competitiveness, intelligence, and skills".

Through the continuous evolution of technological solutions companies nowadays have more channels to interact with the customers and can use digital tools to enhance customer relationships in online-settings (Steinhoff et al., 2018; Yadav & Pavlou, 2014). The transition to a more digital world did not only lead to the emergence of e-commerce, in other words more online purchases, but also to increased possibilities for companies to reach more customers and establish more communication with the purpose of building long-term customer relationships (Steinhoff et al., 2018). Due to the digitization companies have the capability to store big data on their customer, which implies more opportunities to learn more about the customer segment and their preferences, which ultimately can be used when providing more personalized communication (Rust & Huang, 2014). Even though this is important in order to be perceived as relevant for the consumer and when building a strong customer relationship, there are some consumers who have privacy concerns (Martin & Murphy, 2016). Some customers seek transparency and clear motives, which can cause them to not be willing to share personal information with the company (Awad & Krishnan, 2006).

Email Marketing

Email marketing research has grown over the past few years from an initial profit focus to the additional objective of building and maintaining customer relationships (Chang & Morimoto, 2011; Hartemo, 2016). Email is one of many online channels that can be used by companies to build and enhance their customer relationships (Boateng & Narteh, 2016). When email marketing is conducted to meet customers' expectations, preferences

and needs, it can achieve great success in terms of relationship building (Boateng & Narteh, 2016, p. 132). However, trust is vital for this to occur, and if the email does not fit the preferences of the customer, the commitment of the customer is at risk (Boateng & Narteh, 2016, p. 137). Moreover, due to the development of technology email marketing has gained better opportunities to track and deliver more adapted and personalized email content which meet the customers' preferences (Heimbach et al., 2015; Mahmoud et al., 2019). Additionally, multiple studies have shown that email marketing can be a cost-effective marketing tool, given that it is used in the right way depending on the context (Hartemo, 2016; Mahmoud et al., 2019; Wattal et al., 2012).

In the absence of a mutually agreed definition in literature, email marketing is distinct from email messages as well as direct postal mail and is rather a conceptualization of permission-based email marketing (Breuer et al., 2011; Morimoto & Chang, 2013). Breuer et al., (2011) define email marketing as communication with permission of the recipient, in contrast to postal mail which is defined by the intent of selling without collection permission of the customer beforehand. Furthermore, Moritomo & Chang (2011, p. 363) define email marketing as "the practice of sending email messages to receptive and expectant consumers". Lüders (2008, p. 684-685) suggest that email, as part of personal media used both privately and by companies, imply certain psychological barriers in customers. According to Bacile et al., (2014) many of these barriers can be reduced through permission, thus giving the customer a sense of control. Furthermore, Zhang et al., (2017) states that permission in email marketing has the potential to strengthen customer relationships. Brandal & Kent (2003) suggest distinguishing between basic and extended permission, where basic permission is agreeing to the emails while extended permission includes the customer sharing their personal preferences with the firm. The difference influences the likelihood of the customer engaging with the email (Brandal & Kent, 2003). Reimers et al., (2016) suggests that when offering no value to the customer, the difference between permission email marketing and "spam" starts to blur. Permission in email can in addition be beneficial for online retailers, such as clothing retailers. This is due to email driving traffic to the retail website and the opportunity to stand out in the mass advertising consumers face every day (Van Der Heijden, 2000).

Email content is a broad description of what information an email can potentially contain, for instance it can be advertising related to product displays, campaigns, links to the website and information about the company as well as advertising related to the target audience (Posadas et al., 2022; Sahni et al., 2016). Furthermore, email content can be more or less personalized to fit the customers' needs and preferences. Defined by Dijkstra (2008, p. 768), personalization is a mixture of information about a person in the content, it could be specific features such as name or a particular aspect that refers to the individual. Personalization is presented by several scholars as a way to strengthen customer relationships (Hartemo, 2016), however, depending on if it is transparent according to the customer (Aguirre et al., 2015). According to Tacikowski & Nowicka (2010) using the recipient's name in an email causes them to compulsorily divert their attention. Partially supported in a study by Sahni et al., (2018) that presented the use of the customer's name in an email leads to increased customer engagement. However, the negative aspects of personalized content are not to be overlooked as it risks leading to a perceived informal and as an invasion of privacy, due to email being a form of personal media (Bacile et al., 2014; Lüders, 2008; Sahni et al., 2018). Wattal et al., (2012) establishes that there is a twofold potential effect of using customization in an email, depending on the customers familiarity with the company and the general type of

personalization. One type is a product offer and the other type is a personalized greeting using personal information, the latter being less positively received (Wattal et al., 2012), supported by White et al., (2008) describing this phenomenon as ”personalization reactance” and largely dependent on the customers trust towards the company.

Customer Engagement

Customer engagement is the approach regarding consumer's participation and relation with a firm (Tonder & Petzer, 2017). Through substantial research customer engagement is established as an important and competitive way to build and maintain long lasting customer relationships (Brodie et al., 2013; Tonder & Petzer, 2017). As used within several fields of studies, such as political science, sociology and psychology among others, there are multiple definitions of customer engagement used today. There is further complexity as many academics propose separating customer engagement from involvement and participation that are claimed to be less complex and non-representative of co-creation (Brodie et al., 2011). According to Schau et al., (2009), engagement as a term is used more in research compared to the latter two, thus engagement can be assumed as a more relevant and extensive term.

Depending on which stakeholder, either employees, customers or an entire community, there are different forms of engagement (Brodie et al., 2011). Patterson et al., (2006) described customer engagement as the level of a customer’s physical, psychological and emotional engagement in their relationship with a company. While Mollen and Wilson (2010, p.12) reached the following definition: “the cognitive and affective commitment to an active relationship with the brand as personified by the website or other computer-mediated entities designed to communicate brand value”. The definition by Mollen and Wilson (2010) studied engagement in an online context. There is a current divide in schools of thought whether engagement is a psychological or behavioral state (Bowden, 2009; Van Doorn et al., 2010). The psychological aspects that are deemed to be part of customer engagement are; customer satisfaction, commitment and loyalty among others (Brodie et al., 2011; Bowden, 2009; Patterson et al., 2006; Vivek et al., 2012) Furthermore, there are two subdivisions in behavioral types, purchase or non-purchase behaviors, some scholars believe engagement to include both while others only believe it to include non-purchase behaviors (Maslowska et al., 2016, p. 470). This thesis is based on the notion that customer engagement includes both psychological and behavioral elements, thus following the definition by Hollebeek (2011, p. 790) who defines customer engagement as the ”level of an individual customer's motivational, brand-related and context-dependent state of mind characterized by specific levels of cognitive, emotional and behavioral activity in direct brand interactions".

Calder & Malthouse (2005) argues that both purchase and non-purchase behaviors are important. However non-purchase behaviors have more long-term advantages for customer relationships and loyalty (Lam, 2005; Parihar & Dawra, 2020, p. 900). Building on a similar notion, Van Doorn et al., (2010, p. 253) suggest that brands need to consider behavioral factors, in contrast to exclusively transactional behaviors to maintain strong customer relationships. Defined by Moliner-Tena et al., (2019, p.734), non-transactional behaviors are “behaviors that go beyond the transaction itself (referral behaviors, WOM behaviors, customer advocacy, loyalty, internet networks and co-creation)”, where WOM or word-of-mouth is communication between people (Buttle, 1998, p. 242-243). Customer advocacy is a mutually beneficial partnership between firm and customer,

which is defined as “a mutual dialogue and a partnership that assumes that if the company advocates for its customers, those customers will reciprocate with trust, purchases, and enduring loyalty.” (Urban, 2005, p.157). Loyalty is defined by Oliver (1999, p. 34) as: “a deeply held commitment to rebuy or repatronize a preferred product/service consistently in the future, thereby causing repetitive same-brand or same brand-set purchasing, *despite* situational influences and marketing efforts having the potential to cause switching behavior”. Internet networks are social entities and relationships online without physical contact and an idea of a person’s real world identity (Musial, 2013, p. 34-35). Co-creation is defined as: “consumers assume an active role and create value together with the firm through direct and indirect collaboration across one or more stages of production and consumption” (Ranjan, 2014, p. 291).

In the context of relationship marketing, engagement is a reaction to customer satisfaction, service value and trust, that collectively determine the customers affective commitment (Tonder & Petzer, 2017, p. 954-956). Customer satisfaction can be described as the customer's participation in positive interactions with a service provider (Tonder & Petzer, 2017, p. 951; Mackay et al., 2014, p. 320). Customer perceived value can be defined as the customers’ expectations in relation to product or service quality Tonder & Petzer, 2017; Sánchez-Fernández & Iniesta-Bonillo, 2007; Zeithalm, 1988). Characterized by Moorman et al., (1993, p. 82) trust is “a willingness to rely on an exchange partner in whom one has confidence” and it is crucial in maintaining customer relationships (Chen et al., 2016, p. 94; Morgan & Hunt, 1994, p. 24; Sekhon et al., 2014, p. 424). Customer commitment is being involved in specific behaviors with another person or company with whom there is a resistance to ever change the relationship (Shukla et al., 2016; Tonder & Petzer, 2017).

In connection to email marketing and according to a study by Sathya et al., (2017), the customer satisfaction affects the customers intention of an unsubscription to an email. Customer perceived value affects the likelihood of customer engagement with an email, financial benefits and personalization have influence on this (Yang et al., 2018). Trust influences how the customers respond to an email, through their beliefs of the provider's honesty and any privacy concerns (Cases et al., 2010). Customer commitment is favored through trust and making the email fun for the receiver, in turn impacting loyalty and customer relationships (Ranganathan et al., 2013). Consequently, all four relational factors are interrelated with email marketing and customer engagement.

The combination of email marketing, connected with relational factors and customer engagement, more specifically non-purchase behaviors, has in prior research, not been studied. Therefore, this study aims to make theoretical contributions by focusing on these topics. The growing objective of email marketing to use in order to build and maintain customer relationships (Chang & Morimoto, 2011; Hartemo, 2016). While Ahmad and Akbar (2021) found that certain relational factors influence customer loyalty, Tonder & Petzer (2017) established additional relational factors to have an impact on customer engagement. Many previous studies examine the effects of email marketing on customer engagement, often engagement in the form of purchases (Breuer et al., 2011; Hartemo, 2016; Kumar & Salo, 2016; Reimers et al., 2016; Sahni et al., 2016; Wattal et al., 2012; Zhang et al., 2017). However, our study only examines the influence of email marketing on the non-purchase behaviors of customer engagement.

1.3 Research Question

How does permission-based email marketing, aided by relational factors, influence consumers' non-purchase behaviors?

1.4 Purpose

The purpose of this study is to gain a deeper understanding of how permission-based email marketing and relational factors influence consumers' non-purchase behaviors. Furthermore, the study is conducted by using a qualitative method including semi-structured interviews to obtain insights on how consumers perceive and react to emails beyond the purpose of purchasing. The study is limited to the fashion retail industry and the consumers were asked a series of questions regarding their perception of emails from clothing retailers. The questions asked were mostly open ended, meaning the aim was to enable profound and thorough explanations from the interviewees. The aim is to ultimately expand the understanding of emails' influence of perceived benefits, disadvantages and how both consumers engage with emails as well as understanding why. The study aims to propose a conceptual model which explains how identified themes and factors interrelate and influence each other, more importantly, showing what aspects within permission-based email marketing and relational factors influence the consumers' non-purchase behavior. Theoretically, the aim of creating a conceptual model is to contribute to filling a research gap. However, practically the aspiration for the creation of a conceptual model is to provide an illustration of which aspects and factors within permission-based email marketing that marketers and managers ought to implement in their email marketing strategy to both increase customer engagement and build long-term customer relationships that go beyond pure transactions.

2. Scientific Method

In the following chapter we present the scientific method, where research philosophies and essential aspects such as literature search and pre-understandings are presented. The chapter starts with an introduction to why this research subject was chosen and is followed by the presentation of fundamental research philosophies, namely ontology and epistemology. Subsequently, the chosen approach of the research method and the research design are presented and discussed. Lastly, the description of the literature search process is presented as well as our pre-understandings of the research topic.

2.1 Choice of Subject

Being two marketing students, we share the same interest when it comes to how companies manage to establish long-term customer relationships in a highly competitive digital landscape. Nowadays companies have many online communication tools to utilize in their aim to build and maintain strong customer relationships, but this also implies more noise where customers are exposed to a large magnitude of impressions from companies trying to connect with them. This is an issue that has been addressed in our education, which we wanted to build on. Moreover, this motivated us to incorporate relationship marketing in some way, where we initially wanted to investigate how strong relationships facilitate more customer engagement. We realized that there have already been several prior studies within both research fields, which was why we decided to incorporate a marketing communication tool grounded in relationship marketing. We chose to incorporate email marketing. One of the reasons for choosing this communication tool is because of its evolution from being focused on generating profit to building long-term customer relationships (Chang & Morimoto, 2011; Hartemo, 2016). Moreover, because of this evolution, we were interested to see how email marketing can influence customer engagement that goes beyond transactions, namely non-purchase behaviors. There have been very few prior studies which qualitatively and holistically capture how consumers perceive email marketing's influence on their engagement beyond purchase intentions. Additionally, this is the reason why we finally concluded that we wanted to understand what aspects of email marketing combined with its relational factors could influence the consumers' perceptions and ultimately their non-purchase behaviors.

2.2 Ontology

Anyone engaged in research and the development of new knowledge in a specific field is driven by particular assumptions on how that knowledge ought to be developed (Saunders et al., 2016, p.124). These assumptions are a part of the research philosophy, which Saunders et al., (2016, p. 124) define as "a system of beliefs and assumptions about the development of knowledge". Philosophical considerations and assumptions in business research shape the way research is practically carried out and interpreted (Bell et al., 2019, p. 25). The research philosophy incorporates different dimensions of beliefs and assumptions, including ontology, epistemology and methodology (Bell et al., 2019, p. 25).

Ontology is a philosophy concerning the nature of our reality (Saunders et al., 2016, p. 127). In other words, ontology originated as a way of understanding reality and determining what is to be considered real and existing (Bell et al., 2019, p.26). The

ontological stance is shaping the way the research subject is being looked at and handled (Saunders et al., 2016, p. 127). Research with regards to ontology seeks to capture reality and consequently gain more and new insights which benefit the development of new valuable knowledge of reality (Bell et al., 2019, p. 26). The nature of reality can be viewed from two different positions, namely from objectivism or constructionism (Bell et al., 2019, p.26-27).

Objectivism as an ontological position is the idea of a reality which exists independently and without the influence of social actors (Bell et al., 2019, p.26). Moreover, objectivism implies that there is only one social reality which everyone experiences (Saunders et al., 2016, p.128). Similar to objectivism, the constructionism position can also explain the nature of reality but is however to be considered an alternative ontological position based on subjectivity and the interaction of social actors (Saunders et al., 2016, p.130; Bell et al., 2019, p.27). In contrast to objectivism, the constructionism emphasizes that reality is constructed through the interaction between social actors that to some extent mutually share a common ground of how the reality is being perceived or interpreted (Saunder et al., 2016, p.130). The reality is not to be considered "definitive" but is always evolving and constantly up for revision as assumptions and beliefs regarding the social reality of the world can shift (Bell et al., 2019, p.27).

In the context of this thesis our ontological position is constructionism, since we believe it is important and valuable to incorporate a broad set of perspectives, experiences and reflections regarding how social actors perceive their reality, while not be limited to objectivistic ideas of reality as being independent from the influence of social actors (Saunders et al., 2016, p.130). Additionally, deriving from our ontological stance our research question was developed and subsequently also our purpose. The main idea of this thesis is to seek a deeper understanding of how customers view and interpret permission-based email marketing from clothing retailers and its influence on their behaviors. The aim is to ultimately increase our insights of how influential these emails are in terms of their impact on customer engagement, more specifically on their non-purchase behaviors. In order to fulfill our purpose and accomplish an in-depth and rich data collection we had to embrace the social realities of all interviewees. In addition, by incorporating many perspectives and reflections we managed to expand the knowledge and find patterns where participants had both mutual beliefs and experiences as well as some unique insights from some participants. The ontological stance guided us regarding how to structure our research design and what to focus on.

2.3 Epistemology

The philosophy regarding epistemology deals with questions related to knowledge development and how to consider what acceptable new knowledge is or not (Bell et al., 2019, p.29; Saunders et al., 2016, p.127). The ontological position plays a vital role as a starting point since it dictates the following epistemological position of how knowledge, based on how reality is viewed, will be obtained (Bell et al., 2019, p.29). In epistemology there are two positions that determine how knowledge about reality is developed and these are positivism and interpretivism (Bell et al., 2019, p.30). If researchers were to embrace objectivism as an ontological position the knowledge can be obtained from for example observations or various measurements that captures the objective reality (Bell et al., 2019). Moreover, the epistemological position derived from objectivism is also known as positivism (Bell et al., 2019, p.30).

According to Saunders et al., (2016, p. 135) “positivism relates to the philosophical stance of the natural scientist and entails working with an observable social reality to produce law-like generalisations”. In addition, positivism emphasizes that knowledge derives from phenomena that are posited or given (Al-Ababneh, 2020, p.79). Researchers engaged in a positivist approach to knowledge are conducting research containing hypotheses which will be empirically tested to either confirm or deny their validity (Saunders et al., 2016, p.137). Positivism is only concerned about research that can be statistically tested and is therefore more likely to exclude potential bias or human influencing the research findings (Saunders et al., 2016, p.138; Bell et al., 2019, p.30). In this particular epistemological stance, claims that reality and knowledge is not valid without scientific or empirical support (Turyahikayo, 2021, p.211) In contrast to the epistemological stance of positivism there is interpretivism, which was developed as an alternative epistemological position (Bell et al., 2019, p.31).

Saunders et al., (2016, p. 140) point out that interpretivism differs from positivism by the following definition:“interpretivism emphasizes that humans are different from physical phenomena because they create meanings". In other words, humans should be treated as a source of new insights and knowledge based on interpretations of one’s own reality (Saunders et al., 2016, p.140). Interpretivism is considered to be complex and can therefore, in contrast to positivism, not be limited to “law-like generalizations” when creating new knowledge (Al-Ababneh, 2020, p. 80). Interpretivism is derived from the ontological position constructionism and seeks to obtain profound understandings and interpretations with regards to the nature of subjective reality (Bell et al., 2019, p. 31; Saunders et al., 2016, p. 140). Furthermore, rather than generalizing empirical findings, interpretivism is emphasizing the importance of embracing the different interpretations and realities of a diverse group of people, which contributes to a richer understanding of a research object (Saunders et al., 2016, p.140). Gaining knowledge based on interpretivism can according to Bell et al., (2019 p.31) be accomplished through for example observations or interviewing people focusing on essential follow-up questions such as “how” and “why”. Furthermore, the aim is ultimately to elaborate the answers which enables a further in-depth understanding of which aspects shape the participants perceived reality (Bell et al., 2019, p.31).

In the context of this thesis our epistemology position is interpretivism, since we view knowledge development as a process characterized by the involvement of social actors and their experiences of reality. Consequently, the nature of our research question and purpose of the thesis are designed to facilitate a broad set of possible explanations, answers and reflections from consumers. We believe that our participants are crucial in the development of knowledge since they hold valuable experiences and reflections regarding our research topic (Saunders et al., 2016, p.140). The positivist approach to knowledge development does not incorporate the experiences of social actors, nor does it aim to deeply understand how and why humans or social actors behave the way they do (Bell et., 2019, p. 30-31). Hence, adopting the positivist position would not be able to provide answers and explanations with regards to the complexity of our research question. Through the interaction with our interviewees, personal experiences and reactions towards emails from clothing retailers were collected in our data, leading up to more valuable insights and knowledge of the phenomenon and its influence on the customer engagement.

2.4 Research Approach

Conducting research covers a variety of possible approaches depending on the magnitude of impact previous theories have on the research subject (Saunders et al., 2016, p.144). Three different approaches to be used in research are: deductive, inductive and abductive. With previous theories as a starting point, deductive approach to research aims at collecting data, generating hypotheses based on theories and subsequently testing them to either verify or reject their validity (Saunder et al., 2016, p.144). In addition, the deductive approach takes a broad set of general assumptions to consequently generalize the findings into specific populations or contexts (Ketokivi & Mantere, 2010, p.316; Saunders et al., 2016, p.144-145). In order to generalize accurately the sample size has to be chosen carefully and be sufficient (Saunders et al., 2016, p.146). Deduction is furthermore characterized by research in which seeks to find explanations regarding casual links and correlations between variables (Saunders et al., 2016, p.146). Previous research and theories work as a basis for the creation of a number of hypotheses that will be tested through a well-structured methodology and the use of quantitative data (Saunders et al., 2016, p.145-146).

In contrast to the deductive approach which focuses on investigating a bigger sample, the inductive approach is focused on a smaller sample to thoroughly seek deeper understandings of the participants' views, interpretations and perceptions on a particular research topic (Saunders et al., 2016, p. 147). Qualitative data is collected, through for example interviews, which allows for exploring potential themes and patterns of a research phenomenon (Saunders et al., 2016, p.147). The advantage of induction is that the researcher is not limited to a strict methodology as in deduction but is able to collect data leading to a more explanatory and nuanced findings to why or how a specific phenomenon is perceived or interpreted the way it is (Saunders et al., 2016, p.147). As a result, a new theory or conceptual framework will be established (Saunders et al., 2016, p.147).

Finally, there is the abduction approach, which incorporates both induction and deduction aspects by altering from both theory use and data collection (Saunders et al., 2016, p.148). Generalizations are derived from both the general and the specific and data is used to explain factors within conceptual frameworks and then investigate the validity of the findings (Saunders et al., 2016, p.148). The abduction is presented as "collecting data to explore a phenomenon, identify themes and explain patterns, to generate a new or modify an existing theory which you subsequently test through additional data collection" (Saunders et al., 2016, p. 145).

Rather than focusing on generalizing findings across a population as the deductive approach implies, we value the experiences and knowledge from a smaller sample to subsequently establish a deeper and more conceptual understanding of a phenomenon. Hence, in the context of this thesis the inductive approach is adopted and implemented. Our research question and purpose are aiming to seek profound understandings of a complex research phenomenon and why the participants perceive it the way they do, which Saunders et al., (2016, p. 145) mentioned as being fundamental in the inductive research approach. This choice of research approach also calls for a methodology which enables a data collection that provides a richness of interpretations, views and experiences that contributed to the creation of the conceptual framework. The conceptual framework allowed for a visual presentation and explanation of the complex research findings. If we

had adopted a deductive approach this creation of a new conceptual framework and theory would not have been feasible, since the goal with that approach is to test the validity of existing theories and models rather than the creation of new ones.

2.5 Research Design

Designing the research is about consistency and applying methodology and strategies in accordance to the research question (Saunders et al., 2016, p.163). Research design is defined as "the general plan of how you will go about answering your research question(s)" (Saunders et al., 2016, p.163). According to Bell et al., (2019, p.45), research design establishes a direction or guidelines for how and which research methodology ought to be implemented. More importantly, the choice of method required to be coherent with the research philosophy and strategies (Saunders et al., 2016, p.162). There are different methods one can apply when conducting research and collecting data, namely either qualitative, quantitative or a mixed-methods (Saunders et al., 2016, p. 164).

Quantitative methods, which is closely related with both positivism and the deductive approach, is characterized by investigating relationships or causal links between variables, creating hypotheses and generating statistical evidence of the findings (Saunders et al., 2016, p.166). Structured interviews, self-completion surveys and structured observations are examples of quantitative methods that can be used when collecting the quantitative data (Bell et al., 2019, p.166). These types of methods are advantageous in terms of establishing an unbiased data collection and facilitate replicable research (Bell et al., 2019, p.178). However, a clear drawback with these quantitative methods is the lack of consideration regarding the influence of peoples' social reality to certain research objects (Bell et al., 2019, p. 181). In other words, the particular methodology excludes the influence and interpretations of people, while statistically providing answers to reality more independently of other actors (Bell et al., 2019, p.181). In contrast, qualitative methods are providing knowledge based on subjective interpretations of peoples' realities and provide a more richness to the collection of data (Bell et al., 2019, p.356).

Qualitative research methods are primarily associated with constructionism, interpretivism and the inductive approach to research (Saunders et al., 2016, p.168). The aim is to collect data based on reflections, interactions and perceptions of individuals, resulting in the creation of a conceptual framework that explains patterns and themes of a specific phenomenon (Saunders et al., 2016, p.168). Data can be collected through for instance semi-structured interviews or observing people in certain contextual settings (Bell et al., 2019, p.357). Even though qualitative data collection methods entail an in-depth and detailed set of data, there are critiques supposing qualitative methods are way too subjective and difficult to generalize the findings (Bell et al., 2019, p.374). Additionally, a subjective research would also imply the risk of the research being difficult to replicate for other researchers (Bell et al., 2019, p.374).

Lastly, there is mixed-method research, which is defined as "the branch of multiple methods research that combines the use of quantitative and qualitative data collection techniques and analytical procedures" (Saunders et al., 2016, p.169). Incorporating both qualitative and quantitative methods could complement each other and consequently produce a richer set of data (Saunders et al., 2016, p. 171). However, there are challenges with the mixed-methods research in terms of inconsistent research philosophies stances

with regards to for example the research's ontology and epistemology stance (Bell et al., 2019).

Our choice of research method is a qualitative approach where we used semi-structured interviews, as it enabled us to gather the necessary data to subsequently answer our research question. This method provided richness in our data collection and ultimately an increased understanding of the research topic which is the purpose of our research. Although a quantitative method is beneficial in terms of its ability to generalize results across a population and find causal links between variables, it does not provide explicit answers to the questions of `how´ and `why´ in human behaviors and thoughts. Due to this, the quantitative method would not be able to provide sufficient depth in the data collection and ultimately not answer the research question. Altogether, our choices have laid out the foundation of our research design, which is characterized by consistency in terms of chosen philosophical assumptions and approaches. Finally, this qualitative research design has been guiding us throughout the whole research process and ultimately contributed to the creation of a conceptual model as well as answers to our research question.

2.6 Pre-understandings

Even though personal values and interests can positively influence the commitment regarding the choice of research topic and subsequently the whole research process, it is important to acknowledge how the preconceptions can possibly influence the research process in a less optimal way (Bell et al., 2019, p. 37). Preconceptions or pre-understandings are, according to many scholars, considerably important when developing new knowledge within a particular research field (Alvesson & Sandberg, 2022, p. 397). In addition, pre-understandings of a certain research topic will provide valuable insights and understandings of what has already been covered and where to find research gaps to base research questions on and to subsequently fill these with new knowledge (Alvesson & Sandberg, 2022, p. 402). According to Alvesson & Sandberg (2022, p. 402) pre-understandings work as both an "interpretation-enhancer and as a horizon-expander", meaning that prior knowledge provides a solid foundation for improved interpretation throughout the research process and a better understanding for how to expand the research field with new knowledge. Preconceptions are to a large extent inevitable in research, especially in qualitative research where the researcher is a necessary part of collecting the data through for example observation and interaction with participants, as well as interpreting the data (Alvesson & Sandberg, 2022, p. 407; Bell et al., 2019, p.37). Despite contributing to a better foundation and comprehensiveness of how to approach research (Alvesson & Sandberg, 2022, p.402), pre-understandings bring challenges with regards to potential biases, which need to be addressed and acknowledged (Bell et al., 2019, p.37).

Some of the potential risks with pre-understandings is that the researcher might seek patterns in which match the researchers' expectations or beliefs of what the result will show (Alvesson & Sandberg, 2022, p.406). Other potential biases that could occur based on preconception or personal values is the risk of developing sympathy for participants in a qualitative study, which can influence the way they are being interpreted (Bell et al., 2019, p.38). Alvesson and Sandberg (2022, p. 400) point out that the "pre-specific" element of pre-understandings entails the researcher's own personal experiences of a research phenomenon, which shapes the perception and thought process. Moreover, this could lead to biases such as creating preconceptions, drawing own expected conclusions

and being selective in how the research phenomenon is viewed (Alvesson & Sandberg, 2022, p. 400). To cope with all the pre-understandings and minimize the negative risks, they need to be addressed and questioned through a reflective approach where the researcher puts the preconceptions in relation to former theories and the collected data (Alvesson & Sandberg, 2022, p.406).

Being two marketing students with prior knowledge within our field of research, we knew that our pre-understandings were present. Theories with regards to relationship marketing and customer engagement have been addressed in our education during multiple occasions and in many courses. Hence, we have our own assumptions and beliefs of what we perceive to be important to include in our work and especially in our theoretical framework. However, in order to question our assumptions of important theories within relationship marketing and customer engagement, we reviewed a considerable amount of literature within both research fields which ultimately guided us towards scholarly accepted theories and concepts which we then applied. Even though our pre-understandings and interest for these areas of marketing helped us choose this research topic and subsequently our research question, we had to be aware of potential biases. Besides previous obtained knowledge and theories of relationship marketing and customer engagement, email marketing is something we both have our own personal experiences of. We both receive emails from online retailers selling clothing brands and have therefore a perception of how we view that particular area of marketing. In order to avoid potential bias, our aim was to spend a significant amount of time reviewing the literature in all of our marketing areas allowing for a broader set of knowledge, but more importantly to embrace a more critical mindset towards our preconceptions, which Alvesson and Sandberg (2022, p.406) highlight as being essential throughout the research process.

2.7 Literature Search and Source criticism

Exploring existing literature in the chosen research subject lays a crucial foundation for the continuation of establishing a research question and a purpose, which addresses a research gap (Bell et al., 2019, p. 91). During this initial stage of the research process the aim is to investigate relevant concepts and information within the field of research to subsequently gain a broad set of knowledge to build from (Bell et al., 2019, p. 91). During our initial literature review, in the areas of relationship marketing and customer engagement, we quickly realized that there is already great research coverage within these two research fields. Hence, we chose to incorporate email marketing and focus on non-purchase behaviors of customer engagement, since the combination of these marketing areas have not yet been explored. After coming to this realization, we expanded our literature search with multiple academic articles from both the Umeå university's library database of Academic articles and Google Scholar.

When searching for articles a broad set of keywords and synonyms were used in order to increase the chances of finding several relevant published articles. Some keywords we implemented were for instance: *relationship marketing, perceived value, customer engagement, email marketing, emails, relational mediators, relational factors, customer satisfaction, non-purchase behaviors, non-transactional behaviors*. Furthermore, when finding suitable research literature which had been cited frequently, we also found relevant articles referred to in the former ones. Moreover, when reviewing the literature, we used the original source as much as possible and subsequently complemented it with

more recent studies within the field to ensure that concepts and theories were still valid and up to date. This process was somewhat time consuming since we spent a significant amount of time analyzing them critically.

Developing a critical mindset when reviewing the literature is essential in order to subsequently develop the theoretical framework (Bell et al., 2019, p. 92). Moreover, this includes analyzing potential challenges, strengths and limitations as well as evaluating the credibility of the literature being reviewed (Bell et al., 2019, p. 92). When analyzing the literature, we collected a large amount of research supporting each other's findings, which strengthened the credibility of the theories and concepts created within the field of research. Apart from this, we also strived to use highly ranked academic journals, for example *Journal of Marketing* and *Journal of Marketing Research*, when gathering information to our theoretical framework. In order to find highly ranked journals, we used Scimago Journal & Country Rank's platform, where we filtered journals based on our research field marketing. Academic articles from highly ranked journals are peer reviewed, meaning they have undergone a process where an external editor reviews and scrutinizes the work in order for it to be accepted and published (Bell et al., 2019, p. 90). Our aim was to consider if the articles used were peer reviewed or not, and to do so we utilized the library's database which has a built-in peer reviewed indicator.

When reading existing literature, it is important to make sure to review the text actively and critically, Bell et al. (2019, p. 92) suggest following a process consisting of six steps to make sure this is done. The first step includes writing down notes and details of the material, in order to remember where to find what and the second step is to develop reading skills that are critical, to assess the credibility and objective of the literature (Bell et al., 2019, p. 92). The third and fourth step is to base and design your research question as well as findings and conclusion on the literature that has been reviewed, in order to find and fill an appropriate research gap (Bell et al., 2019, p. 92). The fifth step involves prioritizing and arguing why the literature used has been chosen, as mixing in too much literature can confuse the reader and weaken the arguments in the research (Bell et al., 2019, p. 92). Lastly, is to continuously evaluate and revise the data collection throughout the course of the work to make sure the literature that is used is the most relevant to the research topic (Bell et al., 2019, p.92). In the context of the thesis these six steps of critically reviewing the literature were implemented. Relevant and useful articles were written down in a separate document and were structured based on respective research areas, relationship marketing, email marketing and customer engagement. After collecting a broad set of articles, we then evaluated their credibility and prioritized them based on their journal's rankings, contribution within the research field and the number of citations. During this stage some articles were not chosen because of not being entirely relevant or credible to be used as a basis for our theoretical framework.

3. Theoretical Framework

In the following chapter we present the theoretical framework, where prior literatures within the chosen research fields are presented. During this chapter, theories and concepts within the research areas are defined and presented. Starting with the emerging and evolution of relationship marketing, email marketing and the development of permission-based email marketing. Additionally followed by explanations of the theories and concepts from the literature regarding customer engagement and non-purchase behavior. Finally, our conceptual framework is visualized and presents theoretical components that were considered essential in relation to the study's research question.

3.1 Relationship Marketing

3.1.1 Conceptualization of Relationship Marketing

Relationship marketing is a continuously evolving concept that has been the subject of research for decades (Payne & Frow, 2017). Moreover, according to Payne and Frow (2017) the concept of relationship marketing will only become more relevant in the upcoming years since the customer relationships will get more complex in the future. From a historical perspective, the concept of relationships in business can be traced to the time when trading between people started (Gummesson, 2017). Goods and services were exchanged in an interactive process which ultimately led up to a relationship being established (Gummesson, 2017). However, relationship marketing as a concept emerged in the beginning of the 1980s, when businesses transitioned from having short transactional relationships to more long-term relationships with business partners (Gummesson, 2017). The rapid development of the relationship marketing concept gave rise to the development of several different definitions. Morgan and Hunt (1994, p. 34) define relationship marketing as "all marketing activities directed toward establishing, developing, and maintaining successful relational exchanges". Building on that definition Grönroos (1994. p.9) defines relationship marketing as a way "to establish, maintain, and enhance relationships with customers and other partners, at a profit, so that the objectives of the parties involved are met." Here, the objective is to satisfy promises through interrelation (Grönroos, 1994. p.9). In this thesis Grönroos's (1994) definition is used when defining relationship marketing, since it is still relevant even though relationship marketing as a concept has undergone shifts in paradigm throughout the years.

The traditional marketing mix including the 4Ps (price, promotion, place, product) is considered the first paradigm among more paradigm shifts shaping the development of relationship marketing (Grönroos, 1994; Gummesson, 2017). According to Grönroos (1994, p. 7) the marketing mix as a paradigm turned out to be too simple and failed to integrate marketing as a process, but rather using it as separate activities such as pricing and product packaging. Consequently, this resulted in the development of the relationship marketing paradigm which extended, from purely focusing on the transactional relationship and marketing products, to focusing more on service marketing and establish long-term relationships with customers through establishing services that maximize the value creation (Grönroos, 2004, P. 99; Grönroos, 1994; Gummesson, 2017). Relationship marketing was characterized by a more interactive process with the aim of creating excellent value and customer satisfaction (Gummesson, 2017; Grönroos**,** 2004).

Customer satisfaction is defined by Kotler and Keller (2009, p.164) as: “a person’s feelings of pleasure or disappointment that result from comparing a product’s perceived performance (or outcome) to their expectations”. However, according to Markeset and Kumar (2003, p. 385) customer satisfaction is not exclusively linked to expectations of the product characteristics, it involves the total value received, including the perceived quality of the service process.

Moreover, Gröönros (2004) emphasizes that the interaction process is at the very core of relationship marketing. In addition, the quality of the interaction is crucial in order to enhance the customer’s perceived value and subsequently the firm’s competitiveness on the market (Gröönros, 2004; Parasuraman, 1997). According to a definition by Zeithaml (1988, p.14): “perceived value is the consumer's overall assessment of the utility of a product based on perceptions of what is received and what is given”. The conceptualization of perceived value has not however reached a consensus among scholars, and some even criticize Zeithaml’s definition as being oversimplified, focusing only on the transactional perspective with regards to `benefits´ and `sacrifice´ (Sánchez-Fernández & Iniesta-Bonillo, 2007; Boksberger & Melsen, 2011). On the other hand, Parasuraman and Grewal (2000, p.169) embrace a more holistic approach to perceived value by incorporating different dimensions in their definition: “perceived value is a dynamic construct in that the relative emphasis on each component may change over time”. The identified value components in the prior research regarding perceived value are: the acquisition value, transaction value, in-use value and redemption value (Grewal et al., 1998; Woodruff 1997). The acquisition value is explained as the value a consumer perceives of getting a product or service which has more benefits in comparison to monetary costs (Parasuraman & Grewal, 2000, p. 169). Transactional value is emphasizing the importance of getting a pleasing deal when purchasing a product or service and in-use value is the perceived usefulness of a product or service (Parasuraman & Grewal, 2000, p.169). Lastly there is the redemption value component which highlights the benefits attached to a product or service’s end of the utility cycle (Parasuraman & Grewal, 2000, p.169). All of these value components are essential when determining the customer’s overall perceived value of the product or service (Parasuraman & Grewal, 2000).

In the last decade there has been an additional paradigm shift in relationship marketing, namely the emergence of the service-dominant logic (Vargo & Lusch, 2004; Vargo & Lusch, 2015; Gummesson, 2017). Vargo and Lusch (2015, p. 5) emphasize the importance of conceptualizing and holistically examining what generates value, not only to customers but to different stakeholders and how to establish a successful collaborative value co-creation with them. To sum up, in the development of relationship marketing the emphasis has shifted towards two essential foundations, namely customer satisfaction and value co-creation (Grönroos, 2004; Vargo & Lusch, 2015). In the interactive process, which the customer plays an important role in, the most important goal for the company is to generate value together with the customer (Vargo & Lusch, 2015). In addition, this would, if done successfully, result in great customer satisfaction and essential competitive advantages (Grönroos, 1996; Kumar et al., 2009).

Although the relationship marketing paradigm has been groundbreaking and created enormous possibilities and opportunities for companies to expand their businesses, there are also some strategic challenges that need to be addressed**.** Relationship marketing as an interactive and value generating process has allowed companies to build profitable,

meaningful and strong relationships with their customers (Grönroos, 2004; Kumar et al., 2009). Moreover, as a result of the digitalisation companies have an increased ability to collect significant amounts of data on their customer segments, which creates a foundation for being even more competitive on the market (Kumar et al., 2009). Effective relationship marketing strategies can contribute to higher customer satisfaction, higher retention rate, better acquisition of new customers, more value creation and ultimately a higher profitability (Kumar et al., 2009). There are some evident advantages with integrating relationship marketing as a natural part of any business, however there are challenges regarding which relationship marketing strategies that are the most effective and how they impact the development of the customer's relationship with the company (Zhang et al., 2016). Ineffective strategies or failures in terms of not providing expected service quality can lead to mistrust, a damaged company image and ultimately damage the customer relationship (Sajtos et al., 2010).

3.1.2 Relational Factors

According to a recent study by Ahmad and Akbar (2021) four relational factors in relationship marketing, namely; trust, commitment, competence and communication all contributed to enhancing the customer's brand attachment and subsequently also the customer loyalty and purchase intentions (Ahmad and Akbar, 2021). As a result from their findings, Ahmad and Akbar (2021) proposed a conceptual model linking the four dimensions in relationship marketing and their influence on customer's brand attachment and ultimately the effect on loyalty and purchase intentions. Oliver (1999, p. 34) defined loyalty as "a deeply held commitment to rebuy or repatronize a preferred product/service consistently in the future, thereby causing repetitive same-brand or same brand-set purchasing, *despite* situational influences and marketing efforts having the potential to cause switching behavior."

In a study by Palmatier et al (2006) their findings showed that communication and competence were the two most influential factors on establishing strong relationships with customers. Grönroos (2004) emphasizes that communication is a key process in relationship marketing and points out the importance of a communication strategy characterized by unified messages. Moreover, integrated marketing communication (IMC) is used as a tool to support different elements of the relationship with regards to establishing, maintaining and improving the customer relationship (Grönroos, 2004). Apart from establishing a value generating communication strategy, it is essential to realize the impact competence has on how customers perceive the quality of the relationship (Palmatier et al., 2006). According to Crosby et al., (1990) the expertise or competence of the company's representative plays an important role in generating trust and customer satisfaction, which are two important components when establishing a long-term customer relationship. Furthermore, competencies and experiences allow for a better understanding for solving the customer's demands and will consequently facilitate customers' value-creating process and enhance the customer's perceived meaningfulness of the relationship (Crosby et al., 1990; Palmatier et al., 2006). Competence in relation to the customer's brand perception (brand competence) is defined by Xue et al (2020, p. 2) as: "consumers' considerations that a brand has the ability and skills to meet consumers' intentions, and it emphasizes on a brand's competitiveness, intelligence, and skills". Additionally, in digital marketing campaigns, brand competence has a significant importance when establishing credibility among customers (Makrides et al., 2020, p. 15).

Building on the two aforementioned relational factors of relationship marketing, being communication and competence, complementary essential relational factors within the relationship marketing literature are trust and commitment. Morgan and Hunt's (1994) Commitment - trust theory points out that both factors are required in order to establish a successful customer relationship. Firstly, according to Morgan and Hunt (1994) trust plays a pivotal role when engaging in a customer relationship since it creates a sense of reliability and trustworthiness. Morgan and Hunt (1994, p. 23) define trust as "when one party has confidence in an exchange partner's reliability and integrity". According to a study by Garcia de Leaniz et al (2015) corporate social responsibility (CSR) sparks customer trust along with both customer commitment and identification which subsequently all have a positive impact on customer loyalty towards the company/brand. Moreover, trust has a significant influence on relationship commitment, since trustworthy relationships are being perceived as more meaningful and valuable to maintain (Morgan and Hunt, 1994, p.23). Relationship commitment is defined by Morgan and Hunt (1994, p.23) as: "an exchange partner believes that an ongoing relationship with another is so important as to warrant maximum efforts at maintaining it; that is, the committed party believes the relationship is worth working on to ensure that it endures indefinitely". In addition, trust and commitment in combination with each other facilitate cooperation and thereby also strengthen the relationship as a whole (Morgan and Hunt, 1994, p. 25). All four aforementioned relational factors; communication, competence, trust and commitment play a vital role in the context of relationship marketing and the area of email marketing, which is the focus of this thesis. In addition, the Ahmad and Akbar's (2021) conceptual model was used as an inspiration when developing our own conceptual framework (See Figure 1) including relational factors within relationship marketing.

3.2 Online Relationship Marketing

3.2.1 Conceptualization of Online Relationship Marketing

Similar to the traditional concept of relationship marketing, online relationship marketing is built on the foundation of mutual relational exchange and value creation between company and customer (Steinhoff et al., 2018). However, differences in terms of settings can be pointed out when comparing traditional relationship marketing approaches with online relationship marketing. The former, relationship marketing, can traditionally be associated with offline settings where the relational interactions were established human-to-human with for example face-to-face interaction (Steinhoff et al., 2018). In contrast, online relationship marketing establishes relational exchanges in online-settings where customers interact with technologies rather than directly with humans (Steinhoff et al., 2018; Yadav & Pavlou, 2014). Online relationships as a concept is defined by Steinhoff et al (2018, p. 370) "as relational exchanges mediated by Internet technology that occur in a human-to-technology environment", which is a definition that is used in this thesis.

Online relationship marketing emerged in the late 1980s as the internet started to become commercialized to the public (Thaichon et al., 2019). In addition, this created a domino-effect where companies had to communicate additionally and provide more information to the customers beyond product qualities in order to fulfill new psychological needs that had arisen (Thaichon et al., 2019). As customers could approach information which they had not previously had access to, both regarding online trading companies as well as

competitors, firm's had to increase their communication to continuously update the consumer on their prices, product qualities and benefits in order to manage the customers and market shares (Thaichon et al., 2019). The competitive landscape became more noticeable, where companies expanded their marketing channels with online channels, which ultimately sparked the development of e-commerce, in other words online purchases (Steinhoff et al., 2018). Not only did the adding of an online channel increase sales via more convenient purchase experiences, for example not having to travel to a physical brick-and-mortar store, it also allowed companies to establish more communication and building relationship with their customers by providing easy accessible and eye catching information or content (Steinhoff et al., 2018).

Throughout the evolution of technological advances, online relationship marketing has become more interactive, where channels such as emails, social media and other internet-based platforms have enabled a bidirectional communication between customers and companies (Steinhoff et al., 2018). Due to the impact of social media and other interactive platforms, content is not only created from the company but also from the user or the customer and value generation is characterized as a co-creative process, which enables strong long-term customer relationships (Vargo and Lusch, 2015; Steinhoff et al., 2018; Thaichon et al., 2019; McColl-Kennedy et al., 2019). Moreover, the online community and bidirectional communication makes it easier for companies to obtain valuable insights from customers' feedback, which can be used as a basis for further innovation and optimizing the company's service and product offerings (Steinhoff et al., 2018).

Even though the evolution of online relationship marketing has enhanced the way companies interact with their customers, optimizing the value co-creation and learning more about their customers through bidirectional communication, companies face some challenges as well (Steinhoff et al., 2018). Additionally, the evolution in technology and digitization have for example contributed to a challenge with regards to how to manage the big data collection and the personalized content in the online communication channels (Martin et al., 2017; Steinhoff et al., 2018).

3.2.2 Big Data & Personalization

Through an advancement in IT systems and digitization, companies have the capability to store a large amount of big data on their customers, which enhances the opportunity for more personalized communication and offerings (Rust & Huang, 2014). Big data can be fined as: "the extent to which vast information, often about individual consumers, is captured and used by various organizations to better understand and predict behavior" (Martin & Murphy, 2016, p. 136; Tirunillai & Tellis, 2014). The development of the digital marketing environment has shifted the focus towards establishing customer centered and relationship building with the mediating role of technology and online channels (Rust & Huang, 2014). In the context of online relationship marketing, the broad variety of online communication channels and IT tools have enabled companies to expand their capabilities to understand, track, store and analyze their customer segment's behavior and preferences via for example analyzing patterns with regards to customers purchasing data (Rust & Huang, 2014; Martin et al., 2017). The use of email communication, mobile apps, social media, cookies on websites and GPS information are merely a few examples of how companies track and learn more about their customers' needs and wants (Rust & Huang, 2014). Moreover, big data provides valuable insights guiding managers within companies to implement personalized marketing activities to

strengthen, maintain and enable profitable customer relationships through increased personalized communication and optimize the product/service offerings (Rust & Huang, 2014). High quality of service and products is essential to ultimately establish high customer satisfaction (Tirunillai & Tellis, 2014).

Even though there are many benefits to be drawn from increased personalization from storing big data, companies also face palpable challenges with regards to personalization's impact on privacy concerns (Rust & Huang, 2014; Martin & Murphy, 2016). Building relationships with customers requires expanding the knowledge and understanding of the customer's needs to be able to offer relevant and personalized offerings and communication, but there is a clear "trade-off" regarding the degree of personalizing the communication and offerings in relation to potential upcoming privacy concerns (Martin & Murphy, 2016; White et al., 2008). According to a study by Awad & Krishnan (2006) customers who seek more information transparency are less prone to want more personalized offerings from companies, since they are more restrained with the personal information they provide the company with. In addition, Awad and Krishnan (2006) emphasize that companies need to communicate the benefits and value personalized communication services would bring to the customer, in order to mitigate the negative perception with collecting and storing the customer's information. However, the data collection encompasses perceptions of vulnerability and lack of control, which can cause customers to have negative feelings, spread negative referrals and ultimately end the relationship with the company to form a new one with a competitor instead (Martin & Murphy, 2016; Martin et al., 2017). The trade-off between being too personalized or not is present when it comes to email marketing (White et al., 2008). According to White et al (2008) being too personalized in emails directed towards customers might lead to a backlash and result in negative perceptions of the company.

3.3 Email Marketing

3.3.1 Conceptualization of Email Marketing

Email marketing is a form of marketing communication which has been widely investigated across various research streams in marketing (Hartemo, 2016). From a relationship marketing perspective, email marketing can be positioned within the subject of online relationship marketing as a communication tool. The purpose of online relationship marketing is in conclusion to establish and maintain mutually favorable long-term relationships with customers (Steinhoff et al., 2018). In addition, there are various online channels and applications that are used to accomplish this relationship building, emails being one of them (Boateng & Narteh, 2016). According to Shapiro et al., (2008) advantages using email is to develop understanding and communicate expectations to the customer, meaning it can be used to fulfill four out of five stages in the developing buyer-seller relationships process; exploration, expansion, commitment and dissolution (Dwyer et al., 1987; Shapiro et al., 2008). As indicated by prior research, email marketing can be beneficial in improving the relationship between a company and its customers when used regularly and designed to fit the customers' personal preferences, behaviors and needs (Boateng & Narteh, 2016, p. 132). However, in case of failing to fit the customers preferences, firms risk losing the customers commitment (Boateng & Narteh, 2016, p. 137). Furthermore, due to scammers and hackers using email as a way to steal personal

data of customers, it is vital for companies to win the customers trust in order to succeed with their email strategies (Boateng & Narteh, 2016, p. 137).

Email marketing is relatively researched in terms of its effects and efficiency, it has existed and been used by companies since the rise of the internet in the 1980s (Chang & Morimoto, 2011, p. 360). However initially with a more sales-oriented objective compared to how it is used today (Chang & Morimoto, 2011). When companies started using emails as a way of communication it was a cost-effective and easy way of reaching the customer compared to the previous postal mailing (Jackson & DeCormier, 1999). This often caused the format to be considered as ”spam” due to the large quantities consumers received (Chang & Morimoto, 2011; Hartemo, 2016; Jackson & DeCormier, 1999). Of course, unsolicited emails or spam are still a common occurrence (Moritomo, Chang, 2013), but email marketing has over the past years shifted from a more profit-generating purpose to the additional intention of customer relationship building, engagement and long-term loyalty, also partly due to customers' increasing knowledge and influence (Hartemo, 2016; Zhang et al., 2017). Because of this additional purpose a number of new strategies have emerged, studying long-term effects (Breuer et al., 2011), permission-based versus unsolicited email marketing (Zhang et al., 2017; Morimoto & Chang, 2013), the customers response to monthly amount of emails and the degree personalization of the content and potentially negative and positive effects (Zhang et al., 2017; Sahni et al., 2018; Wattal et al., 2012).

Consequently, email marketing has grown to be a prominent communication tool of relationship marketing, especially with new technology and data-tracking that makes further optimization and personalization possible, as well as customer interactions more clearly and accessible (Heimbach et al., 2015; Mahmoud et al., 2019). Additionally, prior research demonstrates the value of using an effective email strategy and using adapted and contextual methods can yield great results in both customer relationship-building and generating profits (Boateng & Narteh, 2016; Shapiro et al., 2008). The difference of customer purchase intentions or purchase phase will mean a difference in how an email is perceived and what behavior it triggers (Zhang et al., 2017). Depending on which purchase phase the customer is in, optimal email marketing refers to the strategy built on permission-based email marketing and takes it one step further by including the impact of the number of emails on a monthly basis that affects how customers perceive the retailer sending the emails (Zhang et al., 2017). The strategy implies that the higher the probability of purchase the lower the amount of emails is optimal and vice versa, however in average the amount is seven emails per month (Zhang et al., 2017).

3.3.2 Permission-based Email Marketing

Email marketing lacks an agreed-upon and distinct definition in literature and is rather a definition of permission-marketing and a distinction from email messages and postal direct mail (Breuer et al., 2011; Morimoto & Chang, 2013). According to Breuer et al., (2011) and building upon earlier definitions by Moritomo & Chang (2003), email marketing is defined as communication with the recipients permission and is distinguished from email messages and postal direct mail, which is defined as unsolicited massages or ”spam” the intent of selling a service or a product without obtaining the customers permission before sending. Moritomo & Chang (2011, p. 363) define email marketing as ”the practice of sending email messages to receptive and expectant consumers”. Lüders (2008, p. 684-685) defines email marketing as a part of modern

communication and personal media: ”Emails are used not only as a private means of communication, but also sent as newsletters from institutions and corporations in a mass communication way”. Suggesting that having the same media forms for both personal and mass communication changes the dynamic as traditionally they served different functions, interpersonal communication in contrast to societal communication (Lüders, 2008). Personal media, as the name implies, is more personal to the customer and therefore there are certain psychological barriers that companies need to overcome in order to use the communication channel effectively (Bacile et al., 2014; Lüders, 2008). A number of these barriers can be reduced by giving the customer a sense of control by allowing them to themselves choose the communication they want to receive, in other words; permission-based email marketing (Bacile et al., 2014). Furthermore, permission-based email marketing has the aim to create more long-term customer relationships instead of persuading the customers to make a one-time purchase (Zhang et al., 2017). Additionally, permission-based email marketing can be beneficial with e-commerce and for online retailers, such as clothing retailers. This is partly due to the potential advantage in standing out on the current market that is full of advertising impressions and secondly as it is possible to generate website traffic through direct access to the retail website in emails (Van Der Heijden, 2000). In addition, this is based on the assumption that recipients are more likely to read an email when they have agreed to receive it (Kent and Brandal, 2003). This thesis aims at gaining a deeper understanding of permission-based email marketing specifically.

A study by Brandal & Kent (2003) suggested distinguishing between basic and extended permission, as they found the level of permission given by the consumer to correlate with how likely they are to engage with the email. The basic permission in this study was characterized by people agreeing to receiving emails, while the extended permission is when people in addition to this agreed on providing personal preferences and interest (Brandal & Kent, 2003, p. 4). Reimers et al. (2016) presented in their study on permission in email marketing that an email which disregards the recipient's personal needs, in other words adds no benefits or value to a person, can also be defined as “spam”. When the email does not contain any information that is wanted by the recipient, the differentiation between permission-based email marketing and “spam” starts to blur (Reimers, 2016, p. 14). This thesis takes the extent of permission into consideration when conducting the study based on these studies, it can influence how the recipients react to an email.

3.3.3 Personalization in Emails

The degree of personalization can have a great impact on the recipient's reaction to email marketing. Prior to defining personalization, a clarification of what we mean by email characteristics and email content in this thesis, needs to be done. Email characteristics can include offers, discounts, subject line and the volume of communication among others, in which all can have varying results on customer responses (Kumar, 2021). Furthermore, email content can be advertising related to product displays, campaigns, links to the website and information about the company as well as advertising related to the target audience (Posadas et al., 2022; Sahni et al., 2016). Promotional advertising and discounts can be used by online retailers to potentially increase purchase incentives (Grewal et al.,1998), emails offering one possible way to convey the message to customers. Pietz et al., (2017) describe email content as information about various deals and offers, while Kumar & Jaro (2016) include campaigns and visual layout and design as vital parts of email content. According to a study by Strähle & Köksal (2015), content such as

information about transparency and sustainability work can be used to establish a strong and credible brand image and is commonly used by fashion companies. We believe that this is something that can be incorporated by clothing retailers in email marketing. Which is why transparency and sustainability are two components that could be included as email content. Influencer marketing has through the past years grown to be a prominent marketing tool, it has the potential for brands to gain trust and loyalty by the influencers' followers (Posadas et al., 2022, p. 125). It is common that retailers selling clothing brands have collaborations or campaigns with influencers (SanMiguel et al., 2018) hence, making it a possible part of email content as well. According to Bleier & Eisenbeiss (2015) a way to make content personalized is to base advertisement on the customers previous online shopping behavior, called retargeting. Other scholars claim that content and information simply made to fit the preferences of the customer is personalization (Hartemo, 2016; Sahni et al., 2016). Thus, the email content mentioned in this paragraph has the ability to be personalized to different degrees.

Personalization in this context needs to be defined as a starting point to begin to understand it. Dijkstra (2008, p. 768) defines personalization as a mixture of information about a person in the content, it could be specific features such as name or a particular aspect that refers to the individual. In a study by Sahni et al., (2018) the implication was that using the recipient's name in the email's subject line will increase the probability of customer engagement and purchase, indirectly having an effect on sales. There is extensive previous research showing that in settings with an considerable amount of distractions and a lot of elements to keep track on, individuals have the tendency to compulsory divert their attention to their name when visible (Tacikowski & Nowicka, 2010), caused by the general self-recognition that people are automatically drawn to (Reed, 2004; Wolford & Morrison, 1980). Generally, the purpose of customizing email marketing to match the identity of the individual consumer can from a psychological perspective implicate benefits in situations that bring a lot of information for the person to take in and process (Reed, 2004; Wolford & Morrison, 1980).

The process of making emails personalized has in the past few years become more straightforward and accessible to a greater extent with the help of so-called marketing automation and data storage (Heimbach et al., 2015). Marketing automation can be used to modify content, offers and layout to fit a person's expectations, it is commonly used in both CRM and email marketing (Heimbach et al., 2015, p. 130-131). Hartemo (2016) presents personalization in email as a way to strengthen the relationship between customer and brand by making the content relevant to their needs and preferences. A study by Aguirre et al., (2015) implicated that a firm that secretly collects and later uses that data about customers will negatively affect its customers' click-through intentions, while firms that are transparent will result in the opposite. Click-through intentions is a customer's tendency to click on an link and results in the overall click-through rate, which in the context of email marketing can be defined as "a ratio of the number of customers who click the link within an email to the total number of emails sent" (Mackintosh et al., 2017, p. 34). Thus, email personalization made with the use of marketing automation and data collection can be beneficial to a firm or retailer, as long as it is overt, meaning it is apparent in the eye of the consumer (Aguirre et al., 2015). Additionally, a study by Kumar & Salo (2016) revealed that the placement of a link in an email has an effect on the recipient's reaction and overall click-through rate. Links that are placed in the top and left region of an email have a higher click-through rate than the links placed in the bottom and right region (Kumar & Salo, 2016, p. 10), meaning that even factors that risk being

considered as insignificant, have an impact on how the consumer reacts to an email (Kumar & Salo, 2016).

Yet there is a need for caution, as email is a form of personal media and therefore risks facing psychological resistance, subsequently being perceived as informal, intrusive and an invasion of privacy by the customer (Bacile et al., 2014; Lüders, 2008; Sahni et al., 2018). Additionally, since the rise of different personal media applications, there is also a risk of an overwhelming amount of message and information volume for the consumer (Bacile et al., 2014). A study by Wattal et al., (2012) concluded that the effects of using the recipient's name or other overall customization in an email can be twofold depending on the context and content of the email. In the case of individual emails there is a difference depending on the information presented in the email, where customers react positively to a personalized product-offer while responding negatively to the use of direct personal information such as a customized greeting (Wattal et al., 2012). However, this effect is in turn dependent on the customers familiarity with the company (Wattal et al., 2012). As customers' purchase intentions rely largely on trust, too much personalization in communications with the customer risks them questioning the company's motives behind it, as well as the use of the information (Wattal et al., 2012). Especially due to emails leading to a rise of identity theft and other scams in recent years (Wattal et al., 2012, p. 681). This is further supported by Chellappa & Sin (2005) that presented potential customers' resistance in using personalized services in the occurrence of privacy concerns. A study by White et al., (2008) further signified this issue describing it as ”personalization reactance” when a customer has a negative reaction and resistance to receiving email they perceive as too personal by a brand with whom they are not familiar with and where the personalization is not justified by the consumer (White et al., 2008).

Additionally, there is a difference in consumers actively visiting a company's website and being ”pulled” in by the content compared to receiving an email that ”pushes” the message, as personalization in the former context is shown to positively affect consumer purchase intentions while the latter can vary in outcome (Wattal et al., 2012, p. 682). Thus, it is important to note that the paradox in the perceived advantages and disadvantages with the level of email personalization is dependent on context, transparency and how the customer's relationship is with the company, as this influences perception, brand-trust and in turn customer brand engagement (Aguirre et al., 2015; Sahni et al., 2018; Wattal et al., 2012).

3.4 Customer Engagement

3.4.1 Conceptualization of Customer Engagement

Customer engagement is the concept capturing a consumer's participation and connection with a company (Tonder & Petzer, 2017). Marketing scholars have through substantial research concluded the importance and competitive advantages of customer engagement, both in terms of long-lasting customer relationships and increased profits (Brodie et al., 2013; Tonder & Petzer, 2017). There is however an existing division in the school of thought in the contribution and effect of customer engagement, one side believes customer relationship loyalty and value is a consequence of customer engagement, another side considers customer engagement to be an effect of the established factors (Tonder & Petzer, 2017). Several academic fields of studies, sociology, psychology and

political science among others, use the concept of engagement and there are still multiple descriptions that are used today (Brodie et al., 2011). Additionally, there is further complexity to the matter as scholars have tried to separate the concept of engagement from the concepts of participation and involvement, which according to many practitioners fail to account for the complexity and co-creation that is involved in the process of engagement and extends beyond the former two (Brodie et al., 2011). In a study by Schau et al., (2009) the term engagement is used more frequently among marketing scholars when examining how to increase value creation, compared to the concepts of participation and involvement. Meaning that the concept of engagement can be deemed a more relevant term in prior research as it goes beyond the other two in terms of interaction, in contrast to participation and involvement that can be seen as more traditional and less extensive (Brodie et al., 2011).

It is also important to distinguish the different forms of engagement as depending on which stakeholder one examines whether these are employees, customers or a more general audience such as the engagement of an entire community or society (Brodie et al., 2011). The definitions of customer engagement in different dimensions are many, the first was established in 2006 by Patterson et al., (2006) who describes it as the level of a customer's physical, intellectual and emotional engagement to a company. This definition also suggests that customer engagement consists of the components of absorption, dedication, vigor and interaction that collectively make up the concept, the latter two express the behavioral properties of engagement (Patterson et al., 2006). Mollen and Wilson (2010, p.12) studied engagement in an online context from the perspective of the practitioner and reached the following definition: "the cognitive and affective commitment to an active relationship with the brand as personified by the website or other computer-mediated entities designed to communicate brand value". This research by Mollen & Wilson (2010) attempts at bridging the academic world with the reality of the practitioner and therefore serves an important purpose in aiding the brand in improving the customer experience by using engagement as an intermediate factor.

In the marketing literature there is currently a separation in theories regarding engagement. One group of scholars view engagement as a psychological state, while others believe it to be solely behavioral (Bowden, 2009; Van Doorn et al., 2010). The definitions of engagement emerge from the field of psychology and are based on a person's individual experiences, therefore it is difficult to measure engagement without accounting for the experiences leading to the person's reaction (Malthouse & Calder, 2011, p. 277). As engagement is dependent on the individual psychological state, attitude and satisfaction are factors closely related to it (Malthouse & Calder, 2011, p. 277). However, they are not necessarily context-specific but are interactive and can affect the overall experience for the individual (Malthouse & Calder, 2011, p. 277).

There are two subdivisions in types of behaviors when conceptualizing engagement, purchase and non-purchase behaviors, while some scholars argue that engagement includes both types of behaviors, others believe it inhibits the non-purchase behaviors exclusively (Maslowska et al., 2016, p. 470). While acknowledging that the psychological aspects of customer engagement are essential, as it can present itself as customer satisfaction, commitment and loyalty and more (Brodie et al., 2011; Bowden, 2009; Patterson et al., 2006; Vivek et al., 2012). This thesis is based on the premise that customer engagement consists of both psychological and behavioral aspects. Additionally, Parihar & Dawra (2020, p. 901) argues that customer engagement begins at

a psychological state and manifests itself as different types of behaviors, while customer commitment stays on a psychological or attitudinal level. Hollebeek (2011, p. 790) defines customer brand engagement as the ”level of an individual customer's motivational, brand-related and context-dependent state of mind characterized by specific levels of cognitive, emotional and behavioral activity in direct brand interactions". This is the definition of customer engagement that is used in this thesis. Van Doorns et al., (2010) defines customer engagement in a similar way but emphasizes a focus on the behaviors apart from transactions, namely the non-purchase behaviors.

3.4.2 Non-purchase Behaviors

While both purchase and non-purchase behaviors are according to Calder & Malthouse (2005) important and will over time contribute to increasing engagement through aggregated experiences, the non-purchase behaviors have higher probability of having more long-term benefits on customer relationships and loyalty (Lam, 2005; Parihar & Dawra, 2020, p. 900). Continuing, Van Doorn et al., (2010, p. 253) contested that in order to maintain strong customer relationships in the long run, brands need to consider other behavioral factors than purchase behaviors solely. Verhoef et al., (2010) suggest that because modern technology has led customers to more easily communicate with brands and voice their opinions, non-purchase behaviors have become more important for brands to consider.

Non-purchase behaviors were divided into four general dimensions by Kumar et al., (2010), customer lifetime value, customer influence value, customer referral value and customer knowledge value. Customer lifetime value is according to Kumar et al., (2010, p. 299-300) the purchase behavior of the customer, while customer influence value refers to a customer's influence and encouragement on another customer. As well as the convincing and converting of new potential customers, it is commonly intrinsically motivated (Kumar, 2010, p. 300). This is in contrast to customer referral value that is extrinsically motivated and begins with the firm attracting the customer, often to join a brands or retailers customer-club, so called referral programs to later recruit new customers themselves (Kumar, 2010, p. 299). The customer knowledge value is the process of a customer sharing their knowledge, suggestions or experiences to help the firm improve its services or products (Kumar, 2010, p. 301). Consequently, Kumar et al., (2010) argues that in order to succeed with a marketing strategy, companies need to consider all four dimensions and how to use them to their advantage, ultimately leading to stronger customer relationships. Van Doorn et al., (2010) gave the examples of word-of-mouth, blogging and participation in brand communities as examples of non-purchase behaviors, in addition the authors emphasizes that these behaviors can be both positive and negative. Brands however, have the ability to influence the direction of the behavior by creating incentives such as loyalty programs for customers to engage with the brand in a positive manner (Bijmolt et al., 2017). Based on these findings and in the context of email marketing, some behavioral aspects that are non-transactional are influencing others to subscribe, purchase, sign up to the brands membership, all in all recommend the brand, answer a survey, leave a review of the brand and browse the website after clicking on a mail i.e click-through rate.

Non-purchase behaviors or non-transactional behaviors is defined by Moliner-Tena et al., (2019, p.734) as: “behaviors that go beyond the transaction itself (referral behaviors, WOM behaviors, customer advocacy, loyalty, internet networks and co-creation)”. This

is the definition of non-purchase behaviors that is used in this thesis. WOM behavior refers to the concept of word-of-mouth and can be defined as communication between people, either face-to-face, oral, direct or ephemeral while product, brand, service or organization focused (Buttle, 1998, p. 242-243). Customer advocacy is a partnership with mutual benefits to both firm and customer; "it is a mutual dialogue and a partnership that assumes that if the company advocates for its customers, those customers will reciprocate with trust, purchases, and enduring loyalty." (Urban, 2005, p.157). This also indirectly entails that if the customer experiences a loss in benefits, it can lead to an end to the partnership. In this case, either an unsubscription or an end to their engagement, hence, ignoring or not opening the emails. Loyalty can be defined as "a deeply held commitment to rebuy or repatronize a preferred product/service consistently in the future, thereby causing repetitive same-brand or same brand-set purchasing, *despite* situational influences and marketing efforts having the potential to cause switching behavior." (Oliver, 1999, p. 34). Internet networks can be defined as a social network with social entities connected by social relationships on the internet with lack of physical in person contact, the ability of multimodal communication and an ambiguous correlation between people's identity in the real world versus online (Musial, 2013, p. 34-35). Lastly, co-creation is defined by Ranjan (2014, p. 291) as when "consumers assume an active role and create value together with the firm through direct and indirect collaboration across one or more stages of production and consumption". In the context of email marketing different types of non-purchase behaviors could potentially be opening, reopening and click-through which is collaboration made from the customer. While deleting, marking an email as spam and unsubscribing to an email can be described as customer engagement as well, although of a more negative character.

3.4.3 Relationship Marketing and Customer Engagement

In the context of relationship marketing, engagement can be defined as a result of the combining factors; interaction, attention, absorption, identification and enthusiasm, as explained in a theoretical framework by Tonder & Petzer, (2017, p. 954). These factors are a reaction to the customer satisfaction, service value and trust, that collectively determine the customers affective commitment in which in turn is strongly correlated with customer engagement (Tonder & Petzer, 2017, p. 954-956). Customer satisfaction can be described as the customer's experiences of positive interactions with a service provider and it has been shown to positively correlate with both strong customer relationships and increased customer engagement (Tonder & Petzer, 2017, p. 951; Mackay et al., 2014, p. 320). Customer perceived service value have many definitions and can generally be described as the concept of the paid price for a product or a service in relation to its quality and the customers' expectations of it (Tonder & Petzer, 2017; Sánchez-Fernández & Iniesta-Bonillo, 2007; Zeithalm, 1988). Trust is characterized as "a willingness to rely on an exchange partner in whom one has confidence" (Moorman et al., 1993, p. 82). It is vital in the building and development of customer relationships, as well as in encouraging customer engagement, according to both Tonder & Petzer (2017) and Nolan et al. (2007). A notion that is supported by several academic studies and scholars (Chen et al., 2016, p. 94; Morgan & Hunt, 1994, p. 24; Sekhon et al., 2014, p. 424). Continuing, Nolan et al., (2007) proposes that an individual is only willing to engage with an online community if they perceive the accompanying benefits and value to exceed the risks, implying the vital part that trust has in the online businesses as well. Customer commitment is the concept of an individual part-taking in certain behaviors and having a specific relationship with

another person or company, with an unwillingness to exchange this relationship to another (Shukla et al., 2016; Tonder & Petzer, 2017).

In the context of email marketing, the degree to which a customer is satisfied with a service affects the customers' intentions of unsubscribing to an email list and continuing to use the service, according to a study by Sathya et al., (2017). Thus, higher customer satisfaction is positively correlated in succeeding with email marketing and is affected by factors such as the amount of information the email contains, how it can simplify the shopping process and if it can save the customer time (Sathya et al., 2017). Customer perceived value has been reported to increase a customer's probability to open and engage with an email, variables such as financial incentives and personalization both have an impact on this perceived value, exhibited in a study by Yang et al., (2018). Subsequently, in a study by Cases et al., (2010) trust is shown to influence the customers response to email marketing, trust is in turn dependent on the customers perceived level of privacy and if they believe that the email provider is honest. Lastly, Ranganathan et al., (2013) presented research to implicate that customer commitment increases when email marketers invest in cognitive and emotional factors such as trust-building and making the email service fun for the receiver. Additionally, customer commitment will consequenlty affect the customer loyalty and therefore strengthen the long-term customer relationships and effects of the email marketing (Ranganathan et al., 2013). Hence, there are multiple studies to show that positive customer satisfaction, perceived value, trust and commitment influences the effects and outcomes of email marketing positively, while also going the other way around. In other words, the four mentioned variables above are all correlated and interdependent with email marketing and customer engagement (Cases et al., 2010; Sathya et al., 2017; Ranganathan et al., 2013; Yang et al., 2018).

3.5 Conceptual Model

Based on the findings of previous studies, there is an evident link between relationship marketing and email marketing, customer engagement (Boateng & Narteh, 2016; Tonder & Petzer, 2017). Our conceptual model was designed with the intention of illustrating how the areas are connected more specifically, using particular parts of email marketing and customer engagement, namely permission-based email marketing and non-purchase behaviors within the field of customer engagement. Our conceptual model is partly based on a model by Ahmad and Akbar (2021) that presents how four relational factors, trust, commitment, competence and communication, influence the customers relationship with a brand and ultimately loyalty and purchase intentions. As well as a conceptual model by Tonder & Petzer (2017) that describes how relationship marketing is connected to customer engagement using the factors of customer satisfaction, trust, commitment and perceived value. Considering that these factors are also closely related to the outcome of email marketing (Cases et al., 2010; Sathya et al., 2017; Ranganathan et al., 2013; Yang et al., 2018), we incorporated them in our conceptual model as well (see Figure 1).

The reason for only applying permission-based email marketing in this model, is because we believe permission is a basic precondition when using email marketing to build stronger customer relationships. As we have studied email marketing's second objective of improving customer relationships, we were not interested to study if so-called "spam" has any influence on customer engagement. The same reasoning is applied when looking to attain understanding of personalization in email marketing and not the number of monthly emails related to the customers purchase mode. Personalized content in contrast

to general content, is shown in several studies to have the potential to greatly impact the customer's relationship with a company (Hartemo, 2016; Sahni et al., 2016; Wattal et al., 2012). Since the aim of our thesis is to gain insights on how consumers perceive and react to email marketing from retailers selling clothing brands, we conducted a qualitative study in which questions about number of emails and customers purchase phases could have been too abstract and difficult for a customer to answer themselves in an interview. A quantitative study looking at data would be more beneficial to see the exact number of emails sent out and recognize any patterns or phases in the customers' purchases, if this had been the objective of our thesis. Being that the outcome of personalization in an email can be twofold depending on the customer's relationship with the brand or retailer, we do not exclude the possibility that the effect that personalization in email marketing has on customer engagement can be both positive and negative.

The argument for only observing the email marketing's relation to non-purchase behaviors, and not completed purchases as well, is firstly because the non-purchase behaviors have potentially bigger impact on the long-term customer relationship building than pure transactions between buyer and seller (Lam, 2005; Parihar & Dawra, 2020; Van Doorn et al., 2010; Verhoef et al., 2010). Secondly, while purchases can be easier to measure in a study and is in a sense a type of customer engagement, a number of studies of email marketing fail to consider exploring the other types of customer engagements beyond transactions, more specifically the non-purchase behaviors of customer engagement. The different types of non-purchase behaviors can be open, reopen and click-through as part of the co-creation where customers directly or indirectly engage with a company in any way (Moliner-Tena et al., 2019, p.734). Some other more extensive non-purchase behaviors also exist, such as influencing others by word-of-mouth, joining a customer club or sharing knowledge with a company through feedback and surveys (Kumar et al., 2010; Moliner-Tena et al., 2019). While at the same time, a consumer deleting, marking an email as spam, unsubscribing and spreading negative word of mouth from the emails can be seen as negative non-purchase behaviors.

To conclude, our conceptual model displays how the factors of customer satisfaction, trust, commitment and perceived value in relationship marketing can potentially affect the outcome of email marketing, whilst also email marketing affects the outcome of relationship marketing. Thus, they are closely interrelated and the effect goes both ways. Subsequently, the level of individualization of the email, together with the influence of the relationship marketing factors, can potentially affect how likely it is for the customer to engage with the email and potentially the brand. It is important to note that this engagement can be both positive and negative. In turn, we believe that depending on how the customer has engaged with the brand or retailer this will result in how strong the customer relationship is, which is the goal of relationship marketing. *Figure 1: Conceptual model*

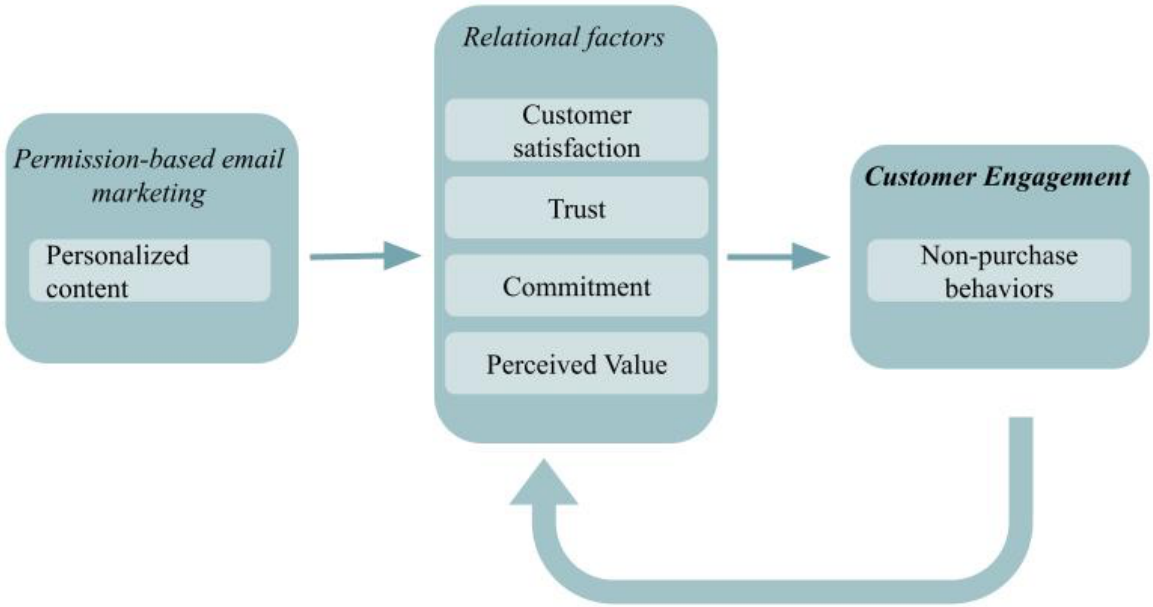

Figure 1: Conceptual model

4. Practical Method

In the following chapter we present the practical method of how we planned and conducted the research. It incorporates how and why we chose the specific data collection method, our sampling technique and how we both planned as well as conducting the interviews. Furthermore, we also present the transcription process, how we thematically analyzed the data and finally how we addressed the ethical considerations in our research.

4.1 Data Characteristics

There are two distinct types of data in research, primary data and secondary data (Saunders et al., 2016). The primary data is intended for a specific study or subject (Saunders et al., 2016). This data type is collected by observing, systematically documenting, analyzing, measuring and attempting to understand people's behaviors of a research phenomenon (Hox & Boeije, 2004). Primary data add to existing general knowledge that can be reused by other researchers, which is then called secondary data (Hox & Boeije, 2004). Secondary data can be interpreted in a different way from its original intent and therefore provide new knowledge and outcomes in new contexts (Saunders et al., 2016). When studying current statistics and historical events, secondary data is more appropriate (Bell et al., 2019, p. 297-300).

The advantages of primary data includes an addition of new information, however this also signifies the work required to produce it (Hox & Boeije, 2004). In addition, this data can be collected in a way to be adapted to be coherent, to fit the research question and thus fulfill the purpose of the study (Hox & Boeije, 2004). The disadvantages of primary data is that it requires time and potentially money, as it is collected for specific research and studies, often through experiments or interviews (Hox & Boeije, 2004). The advantages of secondary data is in some ways the opposite, it is easier to collect and requires less time and money as it is usually stored in data archives or on databases (Hox & Boeije, 2004). However, as it is not collected specifically for a study it is not adapted to fit the research problem in the same way as primary data (Hox & Boeije, 2004). Depending on where the data is stored, it can be difficult to access, however this issue has been reduced since the emergence of the internet (Hox & Boeije, 2004).

While both data types offer different advantages and disadvantages, mentioned before, this thesis uses the primary data as its main source. As our study seeks to gain deeper understanding regarding how customers perceive and react to email marketing use by retailers selling clothing brands, observations are necessary. There is no database that has this type of information collected and while some forms of engagement in this context can be tracked, such as click-through-rate, it would require us to have access to data from different sources and even then, it might not be feasible to gather all the information needed for this study. This is one of the difficulties of using secondary data, it can be complex to get access to it (Bell et al., 2019, p. 301-302). Additionally, attempting to fully understand the reasoning behind many customers' behaviors purely based on statistics and without interviewing them directly can be challenging, if not, impossible. Thus, this thesis collected the data using interviews with consumers that receive emails from retailers selling clothing brands.

4.2 Data Collection

4.2.1 Planning the Interviews & Designing the Interview Guide

Interviews can be structured to different degrees, either highly structured and formal with completely standardized questions in a controlled practice, or informal without any predetermined questions and structure (Bell et al., 2019, p. 437). Between the two are semi-structured interviews, where the questions may vary in the interviews but there is still a structure and some overall themes presence (Bell et al., 2019, p. 436). We conducted semi-structured interviews to explore some predetermined topics and themes while still being able to make changes depending on the answers and overall flow of the conversation. Using a semi-structure enabled us to put emphasis on certain parts depending on the interviewees' replies and reactions, while disregarding the questions that showed to be irrelevant given the individual's responses. The reason for this is that the topic and objective of our thesis requires a form of study that is adaptable in order to understand the interviewees' perceptions and reasoning. By carrying out semi-structured interviews we leave space for adjustment of questions depending on each individual response and increases the possibility that we will succeed in achieving in-depth understanding of the consumers involved in our study

The purpose with an interview guide is to present a framework of the themes of the study (Bell et al., 2019, 439). In a semi-structured interview it is particularly important to construct an interview guide in order to highlight themes that are intended to answer the study's most vital areas based on the research question (Bell et al., 2019, p. 440). The themes can be based on selected theories and literature that captures the research topic, without a clear target with the themes, the interview will lack a direction (Saunders et al., 2016, p. 402). Furthermore, the themes should be grouped in a logical order that complement each other (Saunders et al., 2016, p. 402).

The interview guide in our thesis (see Appendix 1 & 2) starts with opening questions regarding participants' general email habits, the email service provider they use and how frequently they receive emails from retailers selling clothing brands. The point of this is to set the focus for the interview and build trust with the respondent, something that is important according to Bell et al., (2019, p. 439), and for us to gain some insights in their email habits. Following this are questions regarding the participants' perception of and reaction to these emails and what they think of them. Additionally, we ask if they actively subscribed to the emails to examine the level of permission, as it may affect their attitude towards receiving these emails. In the next section of the interview guide we ask about personalized content and examine the interviewees' views on it. It starts with more open and general questions and transitions to questions regarding more specific types of personalized content and levels of personalization. The relational factors in our conceptual model are integrated in the questions in this section of the guide. Throughout the interview guide there are questions linked to customer engagement, the reason for this is that depending on the question the reaction can be potentially different as people react differently to varied content and levels of personalization. Towards the end of the guide, questions about the three dimensions of non-transactional behaviors in customer engagement, influence, knowledge and referral are included. Lastly, it ends with a closing question that has the purpose of tying up any loose ends and catching any potential aspects that we have failed to think about. The same logic follows through the entire guide, we

start with more open questions and then narrow down to more ask about specific content and possible reactions.

To pre-test our interview guide we had a first draft evaluated by fellow students in connection with a seminar. The second draft that we designed after feedback and reevaluation of the first one, we revised further according to ongoing communication with our supervisor through emails and occasional meetings. We then conducted two test interviews with the third draft before we started with the interviews themselves, partly to verify that the questions could be understood by consumers who were not familiar with our work, and had limited knowledge, but still had experience, of email marketing. This assessment was done with the aim of presenting a final version of our interview guide that would be effective and most importantly, understandable to the participants as well as appropriately designed to answer our research question.

4.2.2 Sampling Technique

When choosing a suitable sampling technique for a study, there are certain factors that need to be taken into account, such as the research type, the research question, purpose and approach in the study (Saunders et al., 2016). This thesis is part of business research and there are two sampling techniques best fitted in this case, probability and non-probability sampling (Creswell, 2007). Probability sampling is most commonly used in quantitative studies where statistical generalizations are made (Creswell, 2007). The purpose of the probability sampling approach is that each person from a population is equally likely to be selected (Saunders et al., 2016). Non-probability sampling is useful when it is necessary that the participants are appropriate to answer the research question and meet the study's objective, therefore it is most suitable that they get selected by the researcher (Saunders et al., 2016, p. 295-297).

The actual sample size of a study is dependent on the nature of the research. According to Saunders et al., (2016, p. 297) when the aim of the research is to gain extensive understanding and insights, the actual data collection and analysis is more valuable and critical than the sample size. In other words, the emphasis is on quality and not quantity. However, a general principle is to continue to sample until no new insights, themes or information is discovered (Saunders et al., 2016, p. 297). Continuing, when using in-depth interviews the sample size is suggested to be between 5-25 participants, depending further on the characteristics of the group (Saunders et al., 2016, p. 297).

The objective of our research was to gather knowledge and understanding about consumers' perceptions and reactions to email marketing from retailers selling clothing brands. To achieve this a non-probability sampling method with a heterogeneous group was used in order to capture diverse themes among the participants' responses. We selected specific criteria we deemed necessary for our participants, such as the requirement of prior experience of email marketing, meaning that they had received or were currently receiving emails from retailers selling clothing brands. We conducted a selection process with similar requirements and asked potential participants in the selected population, which was millennials, then made our sample. The reason for basing our sample from the population of millennials was partly due to the increasing purchase power of the age group and secondly as young consumers in general are noted to be early adopters and trendsetters for further segments to follow (Kotler et al., 2017, p. 33). Specifically, we focused our study on young millennials aged between 25-34, this group

in particular is shown to be the age group that shop the most online in general, but more importantly the age group that order the most clothes using e-commerce in Sweden (SCB, 2021, p. 9; Statista, 2020). Because our study focuses on email marketing used by clothing retailers and among Swedish consumers, we deemed this age group to be most relevant to use as our sample.

The selection started from our own network of contacts, where we reached out to potential participants using the business online platform LinkedIn. We asked questions regarding their age, as we have studied a specific age group, and if they had previously, or currently were receiving emails from retailers selling clothing brands. This to make sure everyone had some experience of email marketing, however we also wanted to find participants with different levels of experience in relation to email marketing. The participants that did not reach the requirements of previous experience were sorted out. Our final sample size consisted of a total of ten interviews. Based on the response from the potential participants we made through subjective judgment and a comparison of answers we were able to divide the experience of interviewees into three levels; basic, considerable and extensive. With basic experience we acknowledge the interviewee to previously and currently have received a relatively limited amount of emails, therefore they might not have excessive experience of emails but enough to share their own perceptions of it. Considerable experience implies a medium amount of emails, both past and present, thus the participant might have more insights to share as they receive emails more often. The reason for choosing to include participants with different levels of experience was to make our study more nuanced and create a greater probability of reaching data saturation. Mainly by avoiding any bias that may arise by only including individuals with a lot of experience in email and, therefore, perhaps a preference for that form of marketing. Furthermore, with the hope of gaining more insights and a deeper understanding of consumers' different reasoning and reactions, which are undeniably influenced by their own experience.

4.2.3 Conducting the Interviews

When conducting an interview, it is important for the interviewer to remain as objective as possible, this is in order not to influence or direct their answers, the material that is collected through the interviews and ultimately also the final results of the entire study (Saunders et al., 2016, p. 394). It is therefore essential that aspects such as how prepared the participant is, how the questions are asked and how trustworthy and professional the interviewers appear, are well-planned before beginning to conduct the actual interviews (Saunders et al., 2016, p. 397).

When we began to carry out our sampling and before we decided who would participate in the study, we asked potential participants a few general questions regarding their email habits and experiences of it. This indirectly prepared the participants regarding the overall subject of our research and later the interviews. As further preparation a consent form was sent out prior to the interviews, where a short description of the purpose of our thesis was included, as well as information regarding the handling of their personal data after conducting the interview. The objective of sending out the consent form was to reassure the participants about our, and our study's credibility. When the interview itself started, we went through the purpose of the study once again, to make sure they understood the intention of the interview. We also informed the interviewees about the ethical aspects

such as anonymity, the treatment of their personal data and their right to end the interview whenever and without giving any reason. Although this information was included in the consent document sent out and signed before, we wanted to make sure they were well aware of this. Partially, in order to instill confidence and trust in the participant, but mainly because we believe ethics is one of the most important aspects in research overall.

According to Bell et al., (2019, p. 440) factors such as the place of or the environment where the interview is being held, can affect the overall impression and thus, answers from the person being interviewed. A quiet place, without unnecessary distractions is beneficial, preferably an environment where the respondent is comfortable and the risk of being overheard or disturbed is minimal (Bell et al., 2019, p.440). Therefore, we carried out all interviews in rooms and buildings where we would not be disturbed, mostly in reserved study rooms at Umeå University. Interviews can be conducted either face-to-face, over telephone or by other digital means (Bell et al., 2019, p. 450). The majority of our interviews were carried out face-to-face, with the exception of three interviewees who could not meet in person. However, these were instead conducted over the platform Microsoft Teams, where we had access to cameras and thus could see and speak to the interviewee similarly to meeting them in person. The appearance of the interviewer is also important as it shows the level of professionalism and credibility (Saunders et al., 2016, p. 405). Therefore, it was important that we presented ourselves in a neat way to give a serious impression and inspire confidence in our participants. When asking the questions, it is important to do so without influencing the participant in any direction or showing any bias towards a specific answer (Saunders et al., 2016, p. 399). This can be avoided by formulating the questions in a way that leaves it open to a degree of free interpretation or by keeping as neutral a body language as possible (Saunders et al., 2016, p. 408-409). Throughout all interviews, we tried to keep a professional image both in terms of appearance and way of responding to their answers. With the intention of not influencing the participants in any direction and thus the results of our study. Word choices, encouragement in the form of nods or smiles can potentially affect the answers (Saunders et al., 2016, p. 410). We have therefore tried to avoid talking or behaving in a way that risked influencing the participants during the interviews, by asking more open questions as well as using neutral words and body language.

Apart from three interviews that we had over the digital platform Microsoft Teams, due to the participants not being able to meet in person, the other eight interviews were conducted face-to-face. Although internet-mediated interviews have many benefits in terms of resources and access, when meeting in person is not possible (Bell et al., 2019, p. 451), it can risk affecting the quality of the interview with technical and sound issues. However, this was something we generally managed to avoid. The duration of each interview varied between approximately 30-55 minutes.

Table 1: Interviewee & interview information

	Participants	Age	Setting	Date	Duration of the interview
1	Consumer A	25	Face-to-face in Umeå	2022-04-01	37.21 minutes
2	Consumer B	26	Face-to-face in Umeå	2022-04-04	40.59 minutes
3	Consumer C	25	Face-to-face in Umeå	2022-04-04	39.32 minutes
4	Consumer D	26	Face-to-face in Umeå	2022-04-05	55.39 minutes
5	Consumer E	25	Face-to-face in Umeå	2022-04-05	29.26 minutes
6	Consumer F	28	Face-to-face in Umeå	2022-04-07	34.42 minutes
7	Consumer G	27	Internet mediated (Teams)	2022-04-07	35.11 minutes
8	Consumer H	28	Internet mediated (Teams)	2022-04-11	44.01 minutes
9	Consumer I	25	Face-to-face in Umeå	2022-04-11	29.52 minutes
10	Consumer J	26	Internet mediated (Teams)	2022-04-12	29.56 minutes

4.2.4 Transcription

When conducting qualitative interviews, it is common that audio-recording devices are used in order to both completely capture what and how the participant expresses his/her words, which subsequently enable a favorable transcription process (Saunders et al., 2016, p. 572). This audio-recording is essential in order to mitigate the risk of not incorporating everything that has been said, which would make the transcription inaccurate or incomplete (Saunders et al., 2016, p. 572). However, it is important to realize that audio-recording an interview could potentially have a negative impact on the interviewees' responses to the questions being asked, since they, according to Bell et al., (2019, p. 445), might become "self-conscious" about how to approach the audio-recorded questions which could imply limitations in their answers. With regards to qualitative interviews including open-ended questions, the transcription is noticeably a time-consuming process, where one hour of interview could potentially take several hours to transcribe (Saunder et al., 2016, p.572). Hence, there are state-of-the-art automatic voice-recognition softwares that dictates the audio files and ultimately transcribes the interview itself in a more time-efficient manner (Saunders et al., 2016, p. 573). Even though there are some benefits using voice-recognition and automatic transcription softwares in terms

of time-efficiency, there are also some palpable risks to be aware of (Saunder et al., 2016, p. 573; Moore, 2015).

Even though advances of automatic speech recognition softwares have been made, there are still technological problems in terms of for example word errors, noise sensitivity and problems related to different accents that could have a negative impact on the accuracy of the transcription (Moore, 2015, p.255; Picheny et al., 2011, p.2). Additionally, this would imply that there is still a need for researchers or conversation analysts to carefully review the transcription manually and make corrections whenever the software does not capture the right words (Moore, 2015). Hence, according to Moore (2015) transcribing interviews is a time-consuming process despite the use of automatic transcription tools. When conducting a qualitative study it is crucial that the data is captured fully and accurately, which is why corrections of errors are pivotal in order to establish "clean data" (Saunders et al., 2016, p. 572). When conducting the interview in another language while using an automatic transcription software there is also a need for an accurate translation process in the following step (Saunders et al., 2016, p. 416). This translation is crucial, since the meanings and words used in the original language should be captured and equivalently presented in the translated transcripted version (Saunders et al., 2016, p. 416).

In the context of this thesis an automatic speech recognition and transcribing software were used. During all of the interviews, face-to-face as well as digital interviews, we used Microsoft Teams. This platform, primarily used for meetings and presentations online, has the capability to record audio and at the same time transcribe in real-time using a built-in AI speech recognition function (Microsoft Teams, 2022). Even though this software reduced some of the labor or time of transcribing the data, there were several word errors, problems related to recognizing different accents and other mistakes being made. Hence, we had to spend some time reviewing the recorded material and make corrections as well as add some additional non-verbal contributions, for instance whenever there were pauses or hesitations in the interviewees' answers. Moreover, since we chose to conduct the interview in Swedish, while writing the thesis in English, we knew the importance of a well implemented translation of selected quotes from the transcription. We focused on finding equivalent words and wordings in order to truly capture what was said during the interviews.

4.3 Data Analysis

Following the data collection the next step is to analyze and structure the findings. When conducting qualitative research, it is often done through a thematic analysis (Bell et al., 2019, p.519). Thematic analysis is defined as "a method for identifying, analyzing, and interpreting patterns of meaning ('themes') within qualitative data" (Clarke & Braun, 2017, p. 297). Themes within the data are highlighting essential and salient aspects with regards to the research question and are often visible through patterns in the participants' answers (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 82). However, since qualitative research often entails a large and complex set of data, the researcher is highly involved in choosing and judging which themes are present and if these are relevant to incorporate in the analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 82). Therefore, thematic analysis is contributing to an open approach regarding choice and strategy which does not limit how the researcher conducts the analytical process (Nowell et al., 2017, p.2). However, this openness could also potentially lead to a lack of clarity on how to establish an accurate and effective thematic

analysis (Nowell et al., 2017, p.2). If this analytical process is to be effective and result in useful findings one must adopt a methodological and systematic approach when processing and presenting how the data was analyzed (Attride-Stirling, 2001, 386). Moreover, in order to achieve a trustworthy and systematic thematic analysis, one can adopt a step-by-step approach where all of the six phases are aiming for creating a transparent and credible analytical process (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p.87; Nowell et al., 2017, p. 4). In our thematic analysis the six phases of a step-by-step approach were used as a guiding tool throughout the analytical process.

The first phase of this step-by-step approach is to get familiar with the data by examining overall findings and spend time reading through the data several times (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 87). During this phase it is important that the data collected through interviews have been transcribed, in order to enable the following phase of coding the data (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 87-88). After revising our transcriptions, the data was reviewed and examined to get an initial comprehension of recurring patterns, which we later coded in the next phase of our thematic analysis. This second phase of generating codes is about highlighting and segmenting important and meaningful aspects and reflections found in the data (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 88). During this phase we underlined and highlighted sections and sentences in our transcribed data in different colors in order to both categorize similarities as well as make them become more salient and easier to work with in the upcoming phases.

In the third phase of this thematic analytical process, themes were identified (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p.89). These themes capture a broader aspect found in the data and the list of codes found in the second phase are distributed to the most suitable and relevant theme (Braun et al., 2006, p.89; Nowell et al., 2017, p. 8). In this phase we accumulated the identified codes based on the similarity of their characteristics and used different tables to list them accordingly. When completing the grouping of codes, they started to form different overall themes. Subsequently, phase four is emphasizing the need to critically assess the themes' relevancy and if some should be rejected or alternatively be merged if they turn out being too similar (Braun et al., 2006, p.91). Consequently, the following phase five is about defining the important characteristics of every theme coherently and distinctively (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p.92). During both phase four and five, our focus was to identify whether the themes were differentiated in their characteristics and specific codes they correspond to. Moreover, during these phases we excluded some themes that were lacking a significant amount of data to back them up, which is also something Braun and Clarke (2006, p. 91) highlight as being a reason for rejecting them as useful themes.

After identifying all the relevant themes for this thesis we structured them via an illustrative tool, which Attride-Stirling (2001, p.387) define as a thematic network analysis. According to Attride-Stirling (2001, 389) the thematic network is not to be considered an analysis, but should rather be viewed as a visual tool providing the researcher with an overview of all the identified themes and how they relate to each other. When using thematic network analysis the identified themes are structured into different levels of themes, namely basic-, organizing- and global theme(s) (Attride-Stirling, 2001, p.388-389). Basic themes are described as segments found in the transcribed and coded material that when compiled together form a broader representative theme, the organizing themes (Attride-Stirling, 2001, p.389). The organizing themes provide an understanding on which main areas of themes that are included in the analysis and are ultimately answering to the global theme (Attride-Stirling, 2001, p.389). Moreover, the global theme

encompasses all identified themes in relation to the research topic and is to be considered the core theme of the whole research (Attride-Stirling, 2001, p.389). Using this thematic network analysis in this thesis did not only guide the arrangement of identified themes in a more structured way, it also contributed to a visual and holistic presentation which benefited our interpretation and analysis of the different themes and their relation to each other (see Figure 2).

After conducting the thematic network, we subsequently proceeded to phase six in the thematic analysis. This final phase is about the production of the thesis final analysis that incorporates a convincing presentation of findings, patterns and themes that can be used as a basis to subsequently answer the research question (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 93). During the final phase we aimed at highlighting the most important aspects of our data, which facilitate rigourness and comprehensiveness.

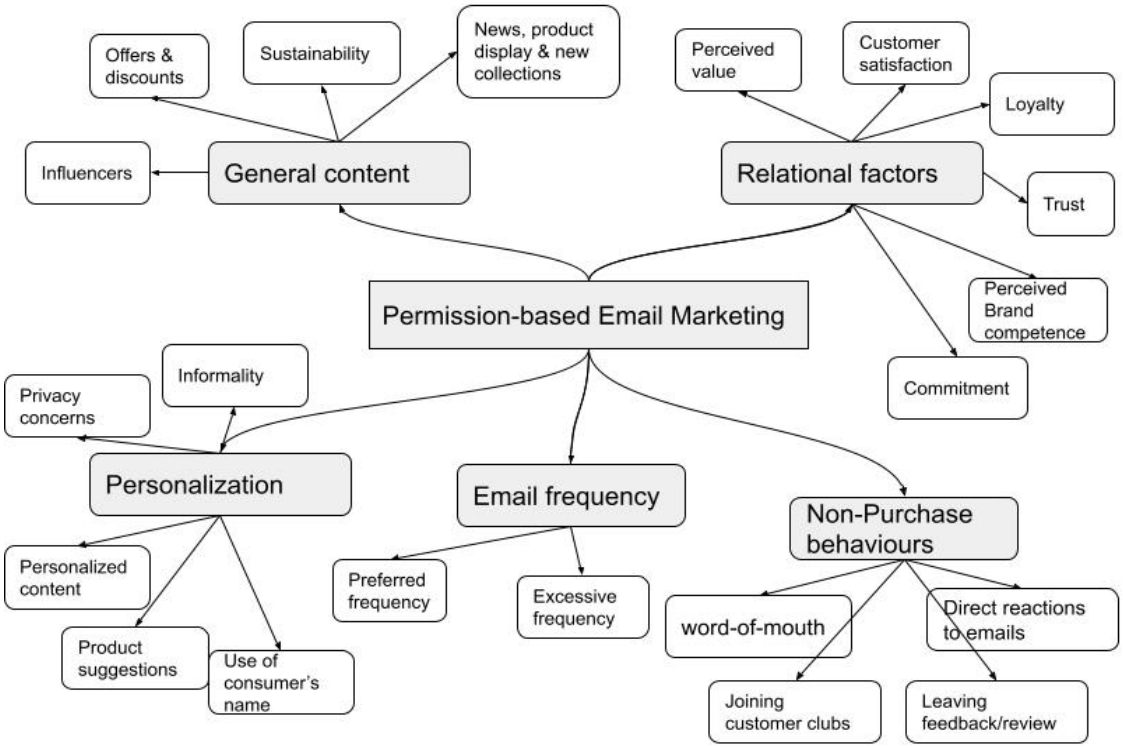

Figure 2: Thematic Network Analysis

4.4 Ethical Considerations

When conducting a qualitative study, for example semi-structured interviews, the aim is to establish an interaction between the interviewer and the interviewee which facilitates trust and truthful and authentic answers to the questions asked (Qu & Domay, 2011, p.252). In order to achieve this there are ethical considerations that need to be taken into account during the research process (Qu & Domay, 2011, p. 252). Firstly, when conducting the interviews, the researcher should avoid any potential risk of imposing harm to the interviewee (DiCicco-Bloom & Crabtree, 2006, p.319; Qu & Dumay, 2011, p.252). Moreover, this implies the need for transparency regarding the interview process, what the information will be used for and to some extent the purpose of the study. In addition, this would entail the need for the participants to give their full consent to the interview and furthermore also be informed of their rights during and after the interview is conducted (Qu & Dumay, 2011, p.253). The consent encompasses everything from the way the interview is to be recorded to more basic rights for example the interviewees' right to withdraw their participation at any time or their right to not answer specific questions (Bell et al., 2019, p.119; Qu & Dumay, 2011, p. 253). Potential risks of participating in the interview should be presented since the interviewer is responsible for not causing any harm with regards to for instance stress or damaging the interviewee's self-esteem (DiCicco-Bloom & Crabtree, 2006, p. 319; Qu & Dumay, 2011, p.253).

Although disclosure of the purpose of the study before the interview might contribute to increased trust and clarification of key themes, it could also negatively impact and alter the participants' way of answering the questions and influence their own perceptions concerning the research topic (Qu & Dumay, 2011, p. 253). Additionally, according to Qu & Dumay (2011, p.253) the interviewer should preferably debrief the whole research purpose to the interviewee when the interview is completed. They mean that this is in line with an ethical way of providing closure to the interviewees' participation in the study and consequently leading to more transparency. Presenting the purpose beforehand and then providing a more explicit explanation afterwards are also in line with the prevention of deception. Preventing deception is about being authentic and presenting the research purpose without deceiving the participants in any way, which can be done through honest communication and transparency (Bell et al., 2019, p. 123). Finally, there are the privacy and confidentiality considerations to research. The participants have the right to be anonymous since the answers he or she provides could be sensitive if for example an employer or manager can track the answers to a specific individual (Qu & Dumay, 2011, p. 254). Right to privacy is related to the interviewees' consent, since it is an essential condition to why a participant feels comfortable enough to sign the consent form (Bell et al., 2019, p. 123). The collection of data and information from the interviews is to be stored and maintained in a confidential way, meaning that it is protected and non-accessible for any external actors (DiCicco-Bloom & Crabtree, 2006, p. 319).

In the thesis these ethical considerations were taken into account when conducting our research. Initially, we sent out a consent form including a general presentation of the research purpose as well as providing information regarding the interview procedure, participants' rights to anonymity and for how long the data from the interview will be stored after completing the interview. After receiving the signed consent form we planned a date for when to conduct the interview. We booked group rooms in order to ensure a quiet and calm setting, where the interviewee feels safe enough to express their answers as well as a place where the audio recording can pick up the speech recognition. The

procedure and the condition regarding rights and consent was repeated during the occasion of the interview, mostly to mitigate risk of causing misunderstandings and causing potential harm. Furthermore, this was followed by briefly repeating the study's purpose and solving potential uncertainties or questions the interviewee had. After completing the interview, we thoroughly explained, in more detail, about the research topic and the reason for choosing the themes in the interview. This provided the final closure of the interview leading to more comprehension of the questions' characteristics and particular order. All the data were stored exclusively in Microsoft Teams with the aim of protecting and securing full confidentiality of the data collected from our participants.

5. Empirical Findings

In the following chapter the profiles of the interviewees will be introduced, followed by the presentation of our findings based on the data collected from our semi-structured interviews. The data presented is structured based on main themes that were identified from our thematic analysis. Every theme has been given a subchapter which includes quotes from the interviewees.

5.1 Presentation of the Interviewees

Consumer A is a 25 year old full-time student and has basic previous experience in email marketing from retailers selling clothing brands. This consumer stated in connection to the sampling selection that they receive less emails today than a few years ago.

Consumer B is a 26 year old part-time worker that has extensive experience in email marketing from retailers selling clothing brands. This participant indicated that they receive a high frequency of these types of emails and from many different retailers.

Consumer C is a 25 year old full-time student that has basic previous experience in email marketing from retailers selling clothing brands. This consumer established that they are relatively new to receiving these types of emails.

Consumer D is a 26 year old full-time worker with considerable experience of emails from retailers selling clothing brands. This consumer stated in connection to the sampling selection that they receive emails from a number of retailers.

Consumer E is a 25 year old full-time worker with a basic experience of email marketing from retailers selling clothing brands. This person declared that although they receive these types of emails, it is currently a more restricted amount.

Consumer F is a 28 year old part-time worker that has considerable experience in email marketing from retailers selling clothing brands. This participant suggested that they receive a medium frequency of these types of emails and from a number of different retailers.

Consumer G is a 27 year old full-time student with extensive experience of emails from retailers selling clothing brands. This consumer stated in connection to the sampling selection that they receive emails from a number of retailers.

Consumer H is a 28 year old full-time worker that has extensive experience in email marketing from retailers selling clothing brands. This participant indicated that they receive a medium frequency of these types of emails and from a number of different retailers.

Consumer I is a 25 year old full-time student that has basic previous experience in email marketing from retailers selling clothing brands. This consumer established that they are currently receiving these emails from a restricted number of retailers.

Consumer J is a 26 year old full-time student and has considerable previous experience in email marketing from retailers selling clothing brands. This consumer stated in connection to the sampling selection that they receive less emails today than a few years ago.

5.2 Presentation of Empirical Data

5.2.1 Perceived Permission

This thesis aimed at only studying permission-based email marketing and therefore we did not ask explicit questions to the participants about receiving emails they had not agreed upon receiving, in other words ”spam”. However, we were interested in gaining insights if the level of perceived permission potentially changed how they viewed the emails, if they had actively subscribed to them or if they were automatically subscribed to them in connection with a purchase. The results implied that although automatically subscribed in connection to a purchase, many of the participants seemed to be sufficiently aware that they felt like they had actively subscribed. Consumer C said the following regarding if they had actively subscribed to these emails:*”Yes, or it is more like, it was at the first time of ordering that you click on receiving newsletters for offers or such, so yes I believe I did.” - Consumer C*

Similar statements were made from other participants as well. Therefore we did not gain any insight that the level of permission made any difference. However, the act of giving permission to receiving emails, whether this permission was more or less active, seemed to matter more. Some of the participants mentioned the word ”spam” in a negative meaning, indicating ”spam” is generally seen as annoying and unwelcomed by them. Consumer E, in regards to giving permission to the emails, stated that: “*Yes, well I know that I have received them a few times when I don’t remember to have ever signed up to them. And even if I might have done that, I unsubscribe from them either way” - Consumer E*

Pointing to that even if permission was in fact given to receive these emails, if the participant didn't remember this happening i.e not remembering to give the permission, they would unsubscribe. Thus, permission matters, however the level of it, seems to make less of a difference among many of the consumers in this study.

5.2.2 Email Frequency

All of the consumers in this study stated that the frequency of, or the amount of emails received have a great impact in their perception and reaction to the emails. Most participants expressed that a higher frequency was annoying and eventually a cause for deleting the emails, moving them to the junk folder or unsubscribing from them. Additionally, a few indicated that when they received a lot of emails from the same retailer it felt like spam.

Such as Consumer A: *“I have unsubscribed from many, or not many but some because it got too much. Because it is so much all the time, you get everyday from several brands, it eventually becomes too much.”* Following with the same sentiment was Consumer E

when asked what their expectations of the emails are: "*that they don't send out emails too often. If they send them too often I will unsubscribe." - Consumer E*

However, while a high frequency of emails was generally perceived as annoying, some consumers stated that this was avoided when retailers send them emails more seldom contributing to a perceived exclusivity and curiosity.

5.2.3 General Email Content

Offers & Discount

Throughout all interviews we found that one of the most important reasons for wanting to receive email marketing was to get access to offers and discounts. It was anticipated to be a favorable factor of email marketing, and seemed to generally be valuable among the consumers. On the question concerning what content they were most interested in receiving an email Consumer C indicated that offers and discounts are the main reasons for wanting these emails: "*Offers. In short, really just offers. If they have a special offer for seasons, or preferably reduced prices and such, but really offers. I do not look so much at everything else". - Consumer C*

It was also expressed that the offer or discount needs to be at a certain level or percentage in order to be of interest, otherwise it can be seen as a sales attempt without enough incentive to act on. When asked what would increase the chances of them engaging with something included in an email from these retailers Consumer E stated: *"Maybe if there is a really good discount, I won't do anything small like 10%. More like if it is a really good discount or similar."* Following up on that question was what they viewed as a "good discount" they responded: *"I don't know, but maybe 50%. Something of that sort" - Consumer E*

Other consumers mentioned percentages in-between 20-40% as a sufficient discount to peak their interest enough to in any way act on it. Thus, some consumers seem to have a pre-decided idea of what would be required from a discount or an offer for them to be interested. Although generally appreciated, offers and discounts were not liked by every participant, a few stated that it does not really matter if an email contains offers or discounts, they can still get annoyed by receiving them or not want to interact with them. It can happen if the offer or discount is in regard to products that are of no interest to the consumer, for instance when it is on items that the consumer perceives as too old or out of season. Hence, the products offered at a reduced price need to be relevant to the consumer for them to want to engage with the email and the retailer.

Two consumers indicated that they viewed offers and discounts as the retailers attempt at selling more, often coming across as "too pushy" and aggressive in their sales tactic. Ultimately, giving the opposite effect and driving the consumer away and less likely to interact with the email or even the retailer altogether. When asked about what content they are most interested in an email, Consumer A said:*"Even though it is clear that it is a sale and everything like that, it is not something I'm noticing directly. It doesn't really give me anything."* Indicating that offers or discounts of different sorts really interested them enough to want to engage with an email. Overall, it appears that offers and discounts have a significant impact on many of the consumers in this study, but not all and it is dependent on the value or percentage of the discount.

News, Product Displays and New Collections

Many of the consumers expressed that access to news, product displays and new collections is one of the reasons for them wanting to receive emails from these retailers. One consumer expressed it as an opportunity to get the word off new collections and items before everyone else. Some suggested that receiving these emails is a way of keeping track of new seasonal items and trends, whilst also giving them tips for future purchases. When answering what kind of content they are interested in Consumer D stated: *"Well I guess it is when it is either an offer or news of some kind. That's what makes you click on it, if you have some sort of discount to use somewhere." - Consumer D*

While many appreciated the emails as a notification for new styles and items, some found them unnecessary. These consumers established that the reason was that they themselves kept track of the trends and seasonal items via social media and the retailers websites. Consumer G stated that: *"Let's say it is an email containing "inspiration for spring" I would never look at it. Because I can find that on Instagram or other social media, so yeah that's not of any interest to me."* Meaning that they would rather look for themselves than get an email about news and new collections via other platforms and means. However, Consumer G also stated that they can sometimes be interested in receiving emails about news when they come from brands that they are more interested in, such as more high-end and expensive brands. Hence, while most emails containing this type of content are of no interest to this consumer, it is very brand-dependent and shows more loyalty towards certain brands.

Influencers

Some of the consumers mentioned that collaborations with influencers are one often reasons they want to receive emails from these retailers. To be able to get a potential preview of the collaboration as well as tips and the chance to purchase something before it sells out. Additionally, it was also stated as one of the things that would make them want to engage with an email and click on any of its content.

When asked what would increase their likelihood of clicking on an email or something in it, Consumer F stated that: *"If they have some sort of collaboration with an influencer that you actually know of, then you might open the email and check it out." - Consumer F*

Following up on this was Consumer D when asked what type of content in an email they are interested in: *"If it is like new collections for spring news, that's a lot of that, or influencer marketing maybe, that's something I want to look at. I would say that maybe it is something that makes you click on it." - Consumer D*

However, there was also an indication that this incentive to look at and potentially engage with an email containing a collaboration with an influencer is stronger when the consumer has a personal liking and interest in that particular influencer. Meaning that the influencer itself should be relevant to the consumer receiving the email, in order for them to engage with it.

Transparency & Sustainability

A transparent production line was something frequently expressed as beneficial and an incentive to engage with an email by the consumers in this study. This for instance included knowing the country of production, a production that the retailer would display openly to its customers as well as fair working agreements to all the employees. This was particularly expressed when asked what in an email would make them trust a retailer more.

As an example, when answering this question Consumer I responded: *"A transparent production line, so you can see every step of their production and what everything has cost. Such as when they show that it is not made in China but instead in Europe, that of course can make me perceive them as better. So their sustainability works in general." - Consumer I*

Indicating that this consumer also values a more sustainable production as well as a transparent one. More consumers in our study expressed similar sentiments, that they can stand behind the retailers that they feel like they align with their values. Sustainability work being one of the vital factors that impact this. When asked what type of content they are most interested in seeing in an email, Consumer H said: *"Their production line and to see information about the company, if they are transparent. Sometimes retailers send out emails such as "we have changed our products and it looks like this, because of this reason.. etc". Things like that." - Consumer H*

Subsequently, when asked what in an email would make them talk about a retailer to someone they know, Consumer H stated:*"that is if the retailer has a really good brand image, if they are sustainable and I feel like I can stand behind them with a good conscience." - Consumer H*

5.2.4 Personalization

Personalized Content

Generally speaking, most consumers in this study indicated a positive opinion to receiving emails with more personalized content. Content mainly in the form of offers, product suggestions and campaigns or news with items they are interested in. Many stated that if an email is customized to fit their preference they perceive it as more relevant and useful to them. When asked what would make them engage with something in an email Customer F said: "*Yes, when it is not too mainstream, if it feels a bit more personal. That it feels like they are meant for me, then I wouldn't just delete all the emails. So I would say, if they really customize the emails to what they think I would like and want." - Consumer F*

Consumer D also emphasized a similar opinion in favor of personalized content: "*I think it is good. I know that they can see what I have ordered before so if they can offer me similar things for a good price, I will accept it positively."* With Consumer F agreeing with a similar opinion, when responding to thoughts about personalized content: *"I don't*

mind it at all. If I have clicked on something and they can customize the content to my preferences it is not something I mind." - Consumer F

Although offers and discounts in general are regarded as valuable by many of the consumers in this study, there is a clear distinction between personal and non-personal offers. Personalized offers seem to be held to a higher value compared to the non-personal ones. When asked if the emails meet their expectations Consumer D responded: *"I often find them interesting and fun to get news and offers that are more personalized, which I often think they are." - Consumer D*

Additionally, receiving an birthday-email with a personal discount code or offer was something brought up by some consumers as very positive. In connection with being asked if they ever experience emails as being too personal, Consumer F stated that: *"No I wouldn't say so. Because the most personal thing is my birthday and I only thought it was good to receive emails about that."* Consumer J stated: *"This was something you didn't bring up, but birthday emails, on one's birthday, that can be personal and appreciated, such as receiving a 10% discount on your day". - Consumer J*

Product Suggestions

Most consumers suggested that they dislike receiving emails with products they've viewed on the retailers website, functioning as a reminder to the customer. This of course, with some exceptions of consumers seeing it as something valuable. When asked about how they perceive receiving emails containing product suggestions of products they have viewed on the website Consumer B responded:*"I would say that if it is a product I have looked at their website, then I don't need information about "this is something you have viewed" because I feel like if I have seen it on the website I have already made the decision to either purchase it or not. Then I don't need to be reminded about it. I probably don't need the reminder, either it wasn't that important or I would have remembered it myself."* A similar statement was made by Consumer E when asked the same question: *"Often a bit annoying, because I already know the item exists. It is not like I think "oh look, this was something new that I want to look at". There is a reason that I have not ordered it already so I think receiving an email with that item won't make any difference for me, it is mostly just annoying." - Consumer E*

However, there were a few exceptions as a few consumers distinguished that this type of email benefits them in the sense that they welcome the reminder and might be more likely to look at the product again. When answering what their thoughts were about receiving these types of emails Consumer C stated: *"It depends, it can be beneficial when I feel like I get a reminder. If I have looked at it once, I might be tempted to buy it although the timing was not right. So, if it get an email with the same product I viewed earlier it can be an incentive, maybe I will have more money or the timing is better." - Consumer C*

Additionally, some consumers stated that they liked receiving emails with products they had viewed earlier when they have knowingly provided their email to receive a reminder when the product is back in stock or available in their size again. Stated by Consumer A: *"Sometimes emails can be useful to keep track of when something is back in stock or in my size, then I read them."- Consumer A*

Overall, more consumers liked emails containing suggestions of products similar to products they've viewed on the retailers website. It was generally more positively received as a styling tip or for when they themselves had not been able to find exactly what they were looking for. When asked what they thought about receiving emails with product suggestions Consumer F stated that:*"I was looking for a leather jacket at Zalando but I couldn't find any that was exactly like I wanted. Later I got an email with suggestions on similar styles of leather jackets, and as none of the ones I had previously looked at felt completely right I thought it was perfect to get similar suggestions. It was like I needed the email as a guide to find the perfect one." - Consumer F*

Many of the other consumers seemed to have the same type of reasoning. However, it was clear that the product suggestions have to be very similar to what the customer has previously looked at, for example if the customer has viewed jeans, they don't want to get an email with suggestions of shoes. Explained by Consumer C when responding to the same question: *"That's a bit more difficult, I think it can feel a bit excessive or like they only want to sell you more things. It depends on how similar the products are, if it is the same product but with a different color then it is fine. But let's say I was shopping for a frying pan and then I only got suggestions of kitchen knives, it is not the same thing even though both are kitchen cookware."* A similar thought was expressed by Consumer J, who points out that the suggestions have to be relevant: *"I would say that it depends, if I'm genuinely interested in the things I have looked at or if it is something I'm not interested in, then I don't care." - Consumer J*

The use of Consumers' Names

The use of names in either the subject line or in the email content had a mixed reception amongst the consumers in this study. While some thought it was good as it peaked their interest in what the email entained, others found it annoying. Most participants however stated that they were neutral to seeing their name in association with the email or that it was something they had not previously noted or reflected upon.

Such as Consumer E when responding to the question of what they thought about having their name included in the subject line, heading or the text of an email: *"It is not something special. It doesn't get me to react in any way."* As well as Consumer F : *"I guess I think it is good, but I know that it is very easy for them so I don't really pay any attention to it." - Consumer F*

To the question if they react in any way when seeing their name in an email , Consumer C gave the following answer: *"Yes I think so. I think that when you see your name you become curious about what it says"*. Following up with a similar notion was Consumer J: *"I like it, I think it is good. It feels like an extra attempt. That they have made more of an effort than to write "best customer" or something alike. It doesn't necessarily increase my incentive to buy something, but it is nice to see my name and it can make you happier."* Thus, both consumers found that having their name included in an email was more of a positive experience, although due to different reasons.

Consumer H stated, when asked their opinion on seeing their name in connection to an email, that: *"Best case scenario is that I don't care, worst case I get provoked. Like, if it is a very auto-generated email and they use my name in it, that I registered or they took via my credit card when I bought something. It feels very algorithm manipulated and*

almost fake.". With Consumer A expressing a similar opinion when asked the same question: *"I don't like it. It feels very sales-focused and almost a bit unprofessional in a way."* Establishing that the use of their name in an email is received negatively by both. Altogether, using the recipient's name in connection to an email seemed to have a mixed response. While both positive and negative responses were observed, most claimed that this was something that left them unaffected and indifferent. Thus, not reacting in any particular way to the email.

Privacy Concerns

While many of the consumers in this study declared that they like receiving more personalized content in emails from retailers selling clothing brands, some stated privacy concerns. Regarding both their personal info included visible in an email, but also how the company is handling their personal data, for example how much information they collect about them and what they do with it. When responding to what they think about personalized content in emails, Consumer A gave the following answer: *"I'm also a little skeptical, because I wonder how they got hold of this information and know exactly like if I look at jackets, I only get emails about jacket offerings and that makes me a little skeptical" - Consumer A.*

Following up with a similar statement by Consumer H when asking the same question: *"If it is very general info, like where I live and such, then it is okay. But if they use my name or my birth year and such it feels a bit unnecessary to me. I would say that I'm neutral or a bit more negative to them using my personal data in an email". - Consumer H*

Additionally, responding to that question also, Consumer D indicated that it depends on which brand and if there is a prior relationship with the brand: *Yes or I would say that if it is a company that you purchase from once and don't really feel like you have a relationship with yet, then I might get a bit surprised if they send an email with my name in the greeting, it is like "okay?". Maybe you react a bit to it and it feels a bit weird, you kind of wonder where that came from all of a sudden". - Consumer D*

While some consumers expressed a negative view on personalized content, others established that they felt that content often did not feel personal enough. These consumers claimed that a lot of the emails aren't personally adapted to their preferences, some even stating that they feel like none of the emails are. When asked what they think about personalized content, Consumer G stated: *"I wouldn't really say that I've felt it to be that personal, and even if I have I know it is because of algorithms that create the content. So no it doesn't really feel personal when you know that there isn't an employee that has written a personalized email to every subscriber."- Consumer G*

When asked about what they think about receiving emails from retailers selling clothing brands Consumer B responded: "My *first thought is that it is annoying (receiving emails) because it is so mainstream. I don't feel like they actually know what I'm interested in."* Similar to this statement, when asked what they think about personalized content in emails, Consumer I said: *"I wouldn't say that I've noticed them being individually costumed to me, given that there's a lot of it that's irrelevant".* Hence, some participants experience that not enough emails are personalized among the ones they receive.

A part of personalized content is informality which many consumers mentioned as something they have reacted to. Both the language and the layout of an email was indicated to contribute to the opinion that an email was perceived as too personal and therefore informal and unprofessional. Consumer A expressed a perceived informality in connection to the layout: *"Yes I do. Definitely when they use a lot of colors and big headlines like I said before, then it feels very informal and not serious. I don't know if I trust those emails either." - Consumer A*

While Consumer F expressed a similar impression: *"If it looks bad or something then I wouldn't click on it. I would get a rather poor perception of them. I think it should be a bit of colors, pictures and the font should be nice. That kind of thing is important and it is something I notice. It should be a red tread with their website, so it is connected and adds to their image or brand."* Consumer B gave the layout as an example to what they view as important in email: *"It shouldn't be a lot of text, more simple pictures. It should be quick to read it through, it catches my attention more when it is not too much".* Many consumers in this study indicated that the layout of an email does matter and will dictate whether the email as a whole will be perceived as serious or too informal.

5.2.5 Relational Factors

Perceived Value

When asked about what type of content our consumers in the study are the most interested in and in what way they create value for them as customers we focused the attention on the relational factor perceived value. Overall, the responses to these two questions revealed palpable similarities of factors that are perceived as valuable among all our interviewed consumers. In particular, the most recurring answers emphasized the personalized benefits of a subscription to the clothing retailers' email newsletter. These benefits were primarily the reception of (personal) discount codes. However, for the discount codes to be perceived as valuable many of the participants' highlight the fact that they need to be complemented with alluring clothing offerings. In addition, failing to communicate the combined value proposition of discounts and apparel, these emails are, according to the consumers, going to disappear in the midst of other similar emails in their inbox. When asked about what will increase the probability of clicking on a link in an email or interacting with it, Consumer I claimed: *"The more it is on sale, the greater the probability, but otherwise sometimes it can be if it is news as well". - Consumer I*

Based on many of the interviewees' answers, the monetary aspect of getting offers at a lower price, either by communicating current sales or discount codes via emails is important. The consumers express that pleasant deals and generous discounts are important factors when attracting the their attention and getting them to open the emails, which both signal perceived value from these emails. However, for some of the interviewed consumers, it is important that they specifically are looking for something special for the discount to be effective. One consumer emphasizes the importance of timing, and that if he/she is currently looking for pants, the retailers should incorporate personalized emails containing pleasant deals on pants in order to be attractive and relevant. Furthermore, on the question how the interviewees perceive personalized

content in emails the answers were divided. While some claimed that emails from these retailers often fail to deliver personalized content and offerings, others highlighted the importance of personalization in order to stay relevant and add value to them as customers. One of the consumers in this study mentioned personalized emails as being thoughtful as they are shaped to maximize the value creation of the customer by offering clothes that is adapted to the customer's preferences: *"I feel chosen but then it feels like that they are not forcing stuff on you to buy, but rather that they actually care, like when it was my birthday and I received 25 precent off on H&M's assortment" – Consumer F*

Some consumers in this study expressed the feeling of thoughtfulness and companies not forcing them to engage in transactional behaviors when providing more personalized offers. The perception of these consumers is that retailers which provide inspirational and personalized content managed to shift the focus to what the customer would need for maximizing their perceived value, rather than how to maximize sales and company profit.

Customer Satisfaction

When asking the interviewees about their expectations on emails from retailers of clothing brands and if these expectations are met the answers were divided. The overall expectations on these emails are that they should contain pleasant discounts preferably 20% and over, personalized offers, information about current sales and updates on upcoming news regarding fashion trends. Moreover, some interviewed consumers even mentioned what they expect emails from clothing retailers should avoid, namely being too eager to sell their products, containing no relevant personalized information or emailing them (customers) too often. The expectancy of how emails should be constructed for customers to be satisfied is expressed as follows from Consumer I: *"I want it to give me something, either knowledge of something new, or yes then sale. I do not just want them to send something just because I would remember their names. I find that quite annoying"-Consumer I*

Generally speaking, the interviewed consumers emphasized the need of getting some value in return for sharing information and subscribing to email lists or newsletters. What is seen as valuable emails differed among the participants, however information regarding upcoming sales and discount codes were frequently mentioned as important factors. Not able to provide valuable communication in emails will according to the interviewees, including Consumer I, lead to feelings of annoyance. *"Yes, but I expect, partly, that they will not come too often, because then it can be a little annoying but rather that they come at regular intervals. Then also that it is like containing something that is valuable to me"-Consumer D*

Followed by the question about the expectations with regards to emails, the interviewees were asked to explain whether these expectations are met based on the emails they receive. For the most part the expectations are being met. The emails received do for the most part contain discounts, information on current sales and inspiration of upcoming collections. However, some participants are indifferent concerning email expectations from these retailers and if they are met. Moreover, some claim that emails received do not in fact live up to expectations since they most of the time choose to delete them and others emphasize that meeting expectations does not mean that it is worth opening them.*"For the most part, yes I think so. Often it is like campaigns or new collections*

which one should become aware of, but just because I expect it from them does not mean I want to open them".- Consumer G

This quote from consumer G indicates the email expectations in relation to the probability of engaging with that email. For the most part, these responses were common based on the experiences and reflections of the participants. They expected email containing certain components which are perceived as value creating although it is not apparent that met expectations are enough to actively open and interact with received emails.

Brand Competence

The brand perception and layout of the clothing retailer's email were aspects which we did not address in the conceptual framework nor in our interview guide. However, due to the choice of conducting semi-structured interviews these topics were initiated based on some of the interviewee's answers. Subsequently, the question regarding how the email's layout influences the perception of the clothing retailer's brand was incorporated in the following interviews. According to all our participants the layout of the email is essential for the sake of creating credibility, seriousness and interaction. According to one interviewee the layout of the email is effective whenever it is coherent with the brand image or positioning:*"If it is visually pleasing and appealing, and that is of course subjective, but if it is in line with the brand, then I think it is positive"- Consumer G*

Building on the importance of establishing a layout which suits the retailer's brand image, many of the participants emphasized specific retailer brands which continuously capture their attention whenever they see emails from them in the inbox. What these brands all have in common is the perception of capability, offering great quality and communicating their value proposition in an email layout which facilitates engagement and the willingness to interact with them. These brands are, according to the interviewees, perceived to send emails to customers less frequently compared to more fast-fashion brands and the layout is done well and truly. As an example, one participant points out a brand which the person perceive is more influential compared to other brands with regards to its email layout: *"The only brand I can think of to take a closer look at is like when MQ sends something and I cannot really say why, it is more that it does not feel like this `fast-fashion´ brand or something like that and it feels a little more serious."- Consumer A*

This quote shows the consumer's perceived brand awareness when viewing the email inbox. The preferred brand is being compared to other brands that are perceived to be fast-fashion brands that are recognized as less serious in the eyes of that specific customer. Similar thoughts regarding fast-fashion brands were shared among other participants who indicated that it requires more effort for these brands to capture their attention with respect to their content, layout and how they portray themselves.

Loyalty

While many appreciated the emails as a notification for new styles and items, some found them unnecessary. These consumers established that the reason was that they themselves kept track of the trends and seasonal items via social media and the retailers' websites. Consumer G stated that they can sometimes be interested in receiving emails about news

when they come from brands that they are more interested in, Consumer G: *"I receive emails from Ganni and those type of brands that are more expensive for me I value some brands more because I can identify with their image."* The consumer mentions more high-end and expensive brands as an example. Hence, while most emails containing this type of content are of no interest to this consumer, it is very brand-dependent and shows more loyalty towards certain brands.

Trust

When asked about what makes our interviewees more likely to trust clothing retailers based on their email communication, many of them referred to the email's layout and design, as well as their content and transparency with respect to payment policies and consumer rights. Others emphasized the need for relevant, personalized and credible offerings in order to trust the email from the specific retailer. While a few of the consumers that participated in the study were unsure and had not really reflected on what makes them trust emails and brands, others singled out specific brands working with sustainability and transparency as being more trustworthy and that they convey a more serious impression compared to other brands.

Consumer F said: *"it is probably that it (emails) becomes personalized, or that they give suggestions and stuff like that which I found relevant, but also that it is a nice layout so it still feels serious".* Similar to this statement regarding trust factors in emails, Consumer I emphasized: "*that they do not do what would make me trust less on them, but they must show that the offers are credible as well".*

According to these two consumers, clothing retailers have to communicate personalized, relevant and credible offerings in order to generate trust. The content in emails must in other words be perceived as valuable and adapted to the preferences of the specific consumer as well as being realistic and create a sense of trustworthiness with regards to what they are offering for them to ultimately interact with the received emails (open, click on links, etc…). In terms of the content in emails, some consumers in the study highlighted the need for the clothing retailer to include contact information as well as different payment solutions and consumer rights for them to trust the retailer. Consumer B claims: *"On the one hand, perhaps because their contact information is always included, but so at the bottom it is easy to find if you want to contact them. Maybe also like what payment solutions they have, because I think that if you see that someone has Klarna then I think "okay they are a reliable and a good company". I get the impression that they are more serious and reliable.""*

Based on the reflections of the study's participants, there are perceived factors that increase the feeling of mistrust. Poor design of the email's layout, too high email frequency and offers that fail to capture the consumers' preferences are causing most of the consumers in this study to question the credibility of the clothing retailer and consequently reacting for instance by discarding the emails. Consumer F states: *"It could be that they kind of send out too many emails, that it is too frivolous or too general, not related to me and if they are bad-looking emails, like that they only did that for a short amount of time or that they just sent plain text with a link, then I think it is spam or some type of virus".*

Commitment

When consumers in this study responded to the question regarding what makes them want to subscribe to clothing retailers' email lists or newsletters, the general viewpoints incorporated the reception of different personalized offers and benefits. Some of the mentioned benefits among the participants were discounts and the opportunity to get access to new collections before other customers. In other words, the interviewed consumers emphasize that clothing retailers need to continuously and frequently send emails which will maximize their perceived value and satisfaction. However, most of the participants highlight the perceived annoyance of receiving these emails too often, which ultimately causes them to think it is a behavior which can easily be associated with spam and therefore unsubscribing from them. The following quote from Consumer E captures what most of the study's participants thought was essential for them to remain as a subscriber by stating: *"If they don't send out emails too often, if they send out frequently then I will unsubscribe. But if they send them like once a week or such and if I find the content interesting sometimes, like a good discount or some nice items, then I think it can be fun to receive them".*

5.2.6 Non-purchase Behaviors

During the interviews with the participants questions on how they react to different aspects of emails were asked frequently in order to understand their behaviors in relation to the emails they recieve. The responses to these questions were varied with different reactions and approaches to emails from clothing retailers. However, generally speaking, most of the interviewees emphasized the fact that they receive an extensive amount of emails every week from different clothing retailers, which ultimately causes many to ignore or delete most of them without opening them. High email frequency is, by some consumers in this study, one of the main reasons for unsubscribing from the newsletters or email lists. However, some interviewed consumers emphasize that some clothing retailer brands manage to stand out in their email inbox, mainly because of them liking a certain brand which increases the probability of them opening, re-opening and clicking on links within these emails. Consumer H claims that: *"If it is from brands that I like I open them otherwise I mostly ignore them. Sometimes I open an email and read it, then I go back the next day and open it again, it is not often but I do that with some specific emails. If they release a new collection and you need to sign up to get early access, then I can go back and activate it."*

Many of the consumers in this study expressed previous experiences of unsubscribing to emails from clothing retailers. In connection to this, they expressed the importance of the unsubscription process being easy. Both in terms of finding the unsubscription option in the email as well as the number of steps. As described by Consumer B: *""I think it should be very easy to click on unsubscription from emails because I can get annoyed when I need to clear out and not have things that come to my email inbox, that is why I like companies that have the option "If you no longer want to receive newsletters from us, unsubscribe here", compared to companies where you have to search or go to their website to find it.""*

When asked about whether our participants had ever influenced or spread the information regarding the emails they receive from clothing retailers to someone they know the responses varied. While some claim that it depends on the specific brand or if the email contains great deals which would benefit and match a friend's preferences. However, generally speaking, most of the interviewed consumers stated that they rarely spread information and speak about the clothing retailer to someone they know, reasons being for example that they think others get similar emails, the offers or deals are not attractive enough or they do not open the emails in the first place. The following quote is more Consumer D, who expresses that great deals which benefit a friend is a leading factor when spreading the information to others: "*Yes, if you get an email that there is a sale it can easily happen then you say, "go in and check there, they have a good sale". If it is something you think someone else would benefit from or if I have received an offer that I think my friend would also like."*

Although some expressed their willingness to spread the word about the retailer brand and their emails, other consumers in this study claimed that high email frequency in combination with contents that are too focused on generating quick transactions. This is further expressed by Consumer H in the following way: *"If they have this aggressive marketing, then I can talk about it negatively. That this is kind of annoying, that I can mention it as "this is a very annoying company" when getting emails from them."*

Most of the interviewees in this study explained that they were members in customer clubs of the clothing retailers they receive emails from and that this membership was initiated through a purchase or at the promise of receiving 10 percent discount on their first purchase. In addition, many of the interviewees also emphasized that discounts were the number one factor of them joining customer clubs. When asked about the possibility of becoming a member via emails from clothing retailers the consumers in the study had various responses. Some pointed out that they were not likely to join via emails, but rather in a physical store or via the retailer's own website. Others claimed that they could join via email if they were already familiar with the company and its offerings: "*it depends on what you get from it maybe, then you get a good discount on it or something then I could be willing to sign up. But then it is kind of like when you sign up with the email on their website to become a member of the customer club then it feels like you get the emails afterwards".- Consumer F*

On the questions regarding whether the participants in this study had ever responded to emails asking for their feedback or leave a review on garments they previously purchased, the overall response was that these emails are ignored due to either perceived laziness, not gaining something in return or being too time-consuming to follow through answering them. For example, Consumer I claims that these emails do not provide any value personally and is annoying: *I think it becomes quite irrelevant to me. I only see it as spam really.*

As a follow-up question the interviewees were asked to answer what would be required for them to actually answer these emails from clothing retailers by either giving feedback or leaving a review. Generally speaking, the answers among the participants emphasized the need for getting something in return which would incentivize them to ultimately respond to these emails, for instance receiving a discount code on the next purchase. However, some consumers in this study also highlighted the need for obtaining information about the purpose of collecting their feedback/review to evaluate if their

personal feedback would benefit the company and contribute to the retailer's overall development. Consumer D claims: "*if it is that I notice that my feedback would kind of do something, that it makes a difference in some good way, if you notice that it has a bigger purpose".* By the same sentiment, Consumer B emphasize the willingness to contribute with feedback and reviews, however only if it is a smaller company asking for it: "*So I would probably say that I'm probably more open to doing it when there are smaller companies, but like all these Nelly, Bubbleroom and Zalando, they are so big and then it is like "well what does it matter if I write something ", while for smaller companies I feel " but oh my god then I can help them "".*

5.2.7 Non-purchase Behaviors' Influence on Relational Factors

We found that emails have different outcomes on the relational factors, depending on what type of non-purchase behaviors they were doing. The consumers who stated that they frequently engaged with and liked receiving the emails they were currently subscribed to claimed that it had positively influenced their relationship to the retailer and brands. Consumer D expressed how receiving emails consequently has influenced their shopping habits and ultimately the relationship with the retailer: *"Yes generally I would say that it has made me shop more. Because otherwise I'm not frequently on retailers' websites so when I get these emails that they are releasing a new collection, have new items or sales I would say that I visit the websites more often. And then when I shop more I start to like the brand more, so generally I like the retailer more because of it."* The same sentiment was expressed by Consumer E: *"When I stay as a subscriber I would say that it strengthens the relationship because those are the first websites I visit when I'm looking to buy something."*

Some consumers established that their relationship with the retailer and brands were kept indifferent or unaffected by receiving emails, meaning that emails won't change their opinions about a retailer. Instead, the service or products were more important. Additionally, a few consumers stated that their relationship with the retailer had been somewhat negatively affected by them unsubscribing to the emails after getting annoyed by them, such as Consumer J:

"I definitely think that emails have an effect. I can have a good perception of a company beforehand and then I see what kind of email strategy they have, with offers and such every week and I think they get annoyed and I don't like the company anymore." - Consumer J

6. Analysis and Discussion

In the following chapter the empirical findings will be analyzed and discussed based on the main themes related to permission-based email marketing that were identified. Starting with the consumers' perceived permission and subsequently followed by the general email content, email personalization and lastly the email frequency. The results indicate the influence of the email factors together with the relational aspects on non-purchase behaviors that were discovered in the interviewees' responses.

6.1 Perceived Permission

From our findings it was evident that permission in email marketing matters and impacts how the consumers perceive and react to receiving emails from retailers selling clothing brands. This is further supported by Bacile et al., (2014) that suggests that permission-based email marketing overcomes certain barriers otherwise present in receiving emails. These barriers can occur due to emails being both a personal communication channel as well as used by companies (Bacile et al., 2014). The consumers in this study indicated that whether they consider that they have given their permission to receive these emails can determine whether they react positively or negatively to them, thus, positively or negatively enforcing some of the relational factors, such as customer satisfaction, perceived value and commitment. Customer satisfaction in the context of email marketing is described by Sathya et al., (2017) as a predictor to whether or not a consumer will unsubscribe from an email list, depending on if the benefits of the email are in accordance with the consumer. In connection to permission, many participants indicated that if they have forgotten or in other ways are unaware of subscribing to the emails, the potential benefits of the email have less impact. However, when permission is knowingly given in any way the opposite occurs. Many consumers indicated that if they receive an email they don't think they have subscribed to they are less likely to react to it in a positive way, whereas many would not engage with it beyond the scope of deleting it.

Furthermore, Yang et al., (2018) reports that perceived value will increase the probability of a customer engaging with an email, which coincides with some of the answers given by the consumers in this study. If the consumer is unaware of having given permission the perceived value of the email can be lessened, while actively given permission can increase the perceived value of an email. Although not remembering given permission, some consumers expressed that they might stay subscribed to the email if the perceived value is high enough. Additionally, permission could potentially influence the consumers commitment and ultimately loyalty to the email or even the retailer. If it is lacking, the commitment will most likely be reduced and the other way around. This result is supported by Ranganathan et al., (2013) demonstrating that customer commitment in email marketing will affect the relationship with the retailer and the loyalty of the customer. Many consumers in this study indicated that they were already members of some of the clothing retailers' customer clubs before receiving emails from them. Therefore, they already had a level of perceived permission to the emails and ultimately a sense of commitment towards the retailer.

The reactions to an email with given permission, interrelated with the mentioned relational factors, was described by some of the participants as opening the email, reading

the content and sometimes clicking on a link or picture in an email. Described by Moliner-Tena et al., (2019) as examples of non-purchase behaviors, specifically customer advocacy and co-creation. Customer advocacy is a mutual partnership between customer and firm, displayed through dialogue and resulting in trust, purchases and loyalty (Urban, 2005, p.157). While co-creation is according to Ranjan (2014, p. 291) direct and indirect collaboration between customer and firm. Based on our empirical findings, co-creation could potentially present itself as; opening, reopening, reading, clicking on and in other ways positively engaging with an email. Furthermore, a negative reaction can potentially be irritation, which in turn led to ignoring the emails, deleting them, moving them to the junk folder or unsubscribing from the emails from a retailer altogether, meaning an end to the customer advocacy and co-creation.

We found no indication among our participants that the level of permission made much of a difference. As suggested by Brandal and Kent (2003) there is basic and extended permission. The basic permission is the consumer agreeing to receiving the emails while the extended permission is consumers also sharing their personal preferences with the firm (Brandal & Kent, 2003). However, the study by Brandal and Kent (2003) was conducted in the early 2000s and the technology was for that reason different from today where most customers indirectly agree to their personal info and preferences being collected through data collection and accepting cookies (Rust & Huang, 2014). Therefore, we can assume that most consumers have unknowingly given a more extended permission to most retailers they receive emails from, where they may also have visited their websites, social media or other platforms. The conclusions about the perceived permission from our study is that it greatly influences the consumers relationship with a retailer through their email marketing. This result is supported by Zhang et al., (2017) that presents permission-based email marketing as a potential approach to create more long-term customer relationships. In our study we can see an indication that permission in email marketing is interrelated with several of the relational factors and ultimately influences the consumers reaction and engagement with emails.

6.2 Email Frequency

The first theme that emerged in our analysis was email frequency. It was evident from our interviews that the number of received emails have a great influence on how consumers perceive and react to the emails. A higher number of emails were, by many, considered annoying, seemingly non-dependent on the content of the email, indicating that the high frequency of emails risks potentially overrunning the potential customer satisfaction and perceived value with the content of the email. In addition, meaning that although the emails could potentially yield benefits for the consumer, the benefits of each email appear to be perceived as less valuable when the number of emails increases a week. A few consumers expressed that even though the emails contain sales, offers and discounts which may otherwise be of value to a customer, if they receive too many emails, there is a risk that they only find the emails annoying eventually, despite the content of the email. This result is supported in a study by Reimers et al., (2016) that showed emails that add no benefits or value according to the customer could be perceived by them as spam. A few consumers did in fact indicate that a higher number of emails could sometimes feel like spam, even though they had given permission to receive emails from the retailer. Additionally, Bacile et al., (2014) establishes the risk of overwhelming the modern-day consumer with the number of messages and information, as personal media applications have increased, email being only one of many. Thus, both previous research

as well as our study implied that if the consumer feels like they receive too many emails from a retailer, the emails can lose their value and even though they might bring benefits with them, they can be perceived as annoying or be perceived as spam.

As suggested by some participants, their loyalty or relationship to a retailer or brand will impact how they view receiving emails from them, as well as influence the outcome of receiving the emails. Many participants stated that the stronger the relationship was the more positive their reaction was to the emails, meaning that they liked getting emails from some retailers more than others when they felt they could relate more to that brand's image and had a stronger loyalty towards them. According to Oliver (1999, p. 34) loyalty can be described as deeply held commitment, despite marketing efforts and situational influences, indicating that if a customer is loyal to a retailer they have higher tolerance to their emails, everything from the frequency to the content as it is part of the marketing efforts. This is in line with the participants' answers and the findings in our study, a stronger relationship with a retailer or brand results in a more positive and accepting attitude towards their email in general.

Some consumers established that the amount of emails must not be too much, as a basic condition for them to want to continue to be subscribers. Many interviewees indicated that they rather receive a lower amount of emails as that makes them more curious towards the information in the email, it was perceived as more special and exclusive, which means that they are more likely to engage positively with the email. While this was the case for most participants, some also stated that although they themselves found a higher number of emails more annoying, they understood why it may occur. Many of the participants explained it as a way for the retailer to sell more as well as keep relevant and stay in the mind of the consumer. A study by Zhang et al., (2017) showed that the amount of emails on a monthly basis sent to a consumer should be dependent on what purchase phase they are in, referred to as optimal email marketing. The higher probability of a purchase the lower the amount of emails should be sent to that consumer (Zhang et al., 2017). We only interviewed consumers, we cannot know if any of the retailers they receive emails from use this strategy. We can either assume that the retailers that some consumer stated that they feel like they get too many emails from either use this type of strategy and try to encourage the consumer to purchase more, or they do not use this strategy and are unaware of the potential connection between the purchase phase and how many emails are optimal, implicated in the study by Zhang et al., (2017). In any case, if a customer feels that they are receiving too many emails from a retailer, we can see that it risks leading to irritation, even though it may be part of their email strategy. In addition, this could lead to more negative reactions, either ignoring the email or engaging with it in a negative way such as unsubscribing. In some cases, this perception of an excessive amount of emails could even lead to negative influence or word-of-mouth from the consumer.

6.3 General Email Content

Offers & Discounts

From the empirical findings it is noticeable that the consumers in this study prefer emails containing pleasant deals and discounts from clothing retailers. In other words, they favor deals where they get the feeling of “saving” money, meaning they do not have to spend

that much money for the wanted garment. The desire to obtain discounts from clothing retailers can be seen as more general email content, meaning these emails do not have to adapt or be personalized to meet specific customer needs. Whenever emails are characterized with more general discounts, they can be used on a broad set of garments which allows the customer to truly take advantage and choose which clothes to use those discounts for. These factors were present in the interviewees' answers, where they emphasized that by signaling a pleasant discount it will immediately attract attention and be perceived as valuable. Our findings with regards to the participants' perceived value of receiving discounts and pleasant deals are coherent with Parasuraman & Grewal's (2000, p.169) perceived value components; acquisition value and transactional value. The feeling of getting quality clothes for less monetary costs, as well as getting a pleasant deal both create a feeling of great acquisition value and transactional value among interviewed consumers (Parasuraman & Grewal, 2000). Many of the interviewed consumers in this study claimed that discount codes in emails contribute to an increased probability of engaging with them by opening, reading, clicking on links as well as answering emails where the clothing retailers ask for their feedback or to leave a review of a previous purchase. Even though all consumers in this study expressed that emails asking for their feedback or leaving a review were annoying and seen as too time-consuming, causing them to mostly ignore them, some consumers claimed that when receiving a pleasant discount as an incentive they were more likely to engage with these emails and share their opinions.

Evidently, some of the consumers in this study valued more general content that benefited their opportunity to complete purchases at a reduced price, rather than receiving information regarding upcoming collections or news. In order to achieve high customer satisfaction for these consumers, clothing retailers have to frequently provide discounts in their emails, since this is based on our findings one major reason why these consumers are committed to staying as a subscriber. Coherent with Morgan & Murphy's (1994) commitment-trust theory, some of the interviewed consumers trust in some clothing retailers more than others, which enhance their commitment of maintaining the relationship with them. In addition, the consumers seem to trust brands that can meet their expectations of receiving discounts and therefore they are still committed and are not likely to be unsubscribing. Moreover, some consumers in this study claimed to spread positive word of mouth or in other words positively influence someone they know whenever they recieve pleasant deals or discounts from a clothing retailer. However, some of the consumers in this study perceived discount emails as being too sales focused and an aggressive marketing strategy, aiming for purely quick transactions.

Based on our findings, these consumers were more likely to demand more from the clothing retailers' emails, for instance them being more personalized to adapt to their needs. This is consistent with the previous study of Rimers et al., (2016) that emphasizes that emails that disregard customers' needs will be seen as spam. In addition, although the emails might contain pleasant discount codes, some of the consumers in this study emphasize that they are not satisfied unless the emails are adapted to meet their personal needs and wants in terms of for instance offering more personalized garments. Being too sales focused and failing to stay relevant due to offering general product suggestions and not personalized garments, all cause some of the consumers in this study to engage in non-purchase behaviors such as deleting and unsubscribing from the clothing retailers' emails. Mistrust in the retailers' capability of providing personalized offers is also a factor explaining why some consumers in this study ignore or delete emails, because they view

them as spam or insignificant. Some consumers even claimed to spread negative word of mouth or influence of these clothing retailers to someone they know because of perceived aggressive and annoying transactional focused marketing strategies.

Transparency & Sustainability

From the empirical findings it became evident that a clothing retailer's transparency and sustainability in their email communication are essential when building trust among the consumers in this study. Some consumers emphasized that clothing retailers that communicate a transparent production line, working conditions and sustainable values are more trustworthy. This increased trust contributed to the willingness to support them by increasing their customer engagement. Besides trusting brands that are more transparent and sustainable, some consumers claimed that they can align their personal values to these clothing retailers which contributed to increased commitment and loyalty. These findings are in line with the study of García de leaniz et al., (2015) that shows the importance of corporate social responsibility in building trust, commitment and identification with the brand to ultimately establish customer loyalty. Our findings show that consumers in this study favor some brands over others where they can associate or identify themselves more to their brand image on the basis of the perception of clothing retailers emails. Furthermore, in terms of non-purchase behaviors this influenced the participants in this study to engage more to the emails from these retailers by opening, re-opening them or clicking on links. Moreover, some consumers even mentioned that a clothing retailer's sustainability initiative communicated in emails contributed to them influencing someone they know by spreading positive word of mouth about this specific retailer.

Influencers

Some consumers in this study stated that incorporating influencer collaboration in clothing retailers' email marketing contributes to increased curiosity. Especially if this influencer is someone the consumer finds interesting and recognizes. Based on our findings, some participants claimed that including influencers in the emails they receive from clothing retailers increase their probability of opening the email, reading its content and clicking on links guiding them to the retailer's webpage. This can be explained by the relational factor of trust. The feeling of trust towards the influencer could explain the liking of the influencer and what that person is advertising in terms of clothes, which is consistent with Posadas et al's (2022) claims regarding the influencer marketing's contributions to increased consumer trust towards the brand which the influencer collaborates with. Moreover, some consumers in this study also highlighted the fact that influencers often inspire them with for example different season-based collections. This demand for inspiration was also something some participants expected from the emails they received and when clothing retailers had inspiring influencer collaborations in their email marketing it contributed to high customer satisfaction. However, the interviewees emphasize that the influencer had to be relevant and inspiring for them to engage with the emails. This further explains why failing to find the right influencer collaboration will not lead to consumers wanting to open the emails, but rather ignore them or even delete them.

News, Product Displays and New Collections

In terms of general content, many of the participants in this study expressed that receiving information of new collections, news and general product display made them interested to engage with the emails. Some consumers in the study even claimed that they expect emails to provide them with fashion updates and that it is perceived as valuable and makes them satisfied. When receiving news regarding upcoming fashion trends and new collections, some consumers in this study stated that this contributes to an increased likelihood of engaging with the emails. In other words, they feel curious and want to open the emails to view the content in the hopes of getting inspired.

Although some interviewees expressed their desire to get inspirational emails containing news, upcoming collections and general product displays, others found them insignificant. The explanation of this was for example that emails as a communication channel was not as favorable for the use of inspiring content compared to social media platforms in the eyes of these consumers. Based on this, emails containing news and upcoming collections were being ignored by many of the interviewed consumers who valued other contents including for example discounts and sales. However, some consumers expressed that some brands are of interest when they communicate news and collections via emails. This can be explained by some consumers' loyalty and brand perception, which both influence the engagement towards received emails. Some interviewed consumers explain that some brands always catch their attention and that they are invested in the relationship and therefore also in the clothing retailers general news and information in their emails. This contributes to these consumers being more willing to open, read and interact with the emails more frequently compared to other brands.

6.4 Personalization

Personalized content

As our findings showed in this study, personalized content in an email is generally more well received then general content. Our findings are coherent with several previous studies on personalized content in email marketing. Boateng & Narteh (2016) claim that email marketing has the potential to strengthen the relationship between customer and company when it is designed to fit the needs and preferences of the customer. Furthermore, Hartemo (2016) presents personalization in email as a way to enhance the relationship between customer and brand. Additionally, prior research acknowledges if the email is not relevant to the consumer, they can just as well find the information themselves or get it from somewhere else, meaning that relevance is very important in personalization (Hartemo, 2016). According to Aguirre et al., (2015) personalization in emails is beneficial as long as it is clear to the consumer that the information about them and their online behaviors is tracked. The responses to personalization among the participants in our study concurred with the conclusions of these studies, as well as aligned with the relational factors of customer satisfaction, perceived value, brand competence and loyalty. Most consumers in our study indicated that an email needs to be relevant to their personal needs and preferences in order for them to react to it and engage with it positively. While some emails only containing general content can be well-

received by some consumers, the reason for this is that the content still is in some way relevant to them, personalized or not. Either by showing new items or including an offer of some sort that can be useful to them. However, personalized content has a much higher likelihood of being relevant to the consumer as it is customized to fit their needs and preferences based on previous online behaviors, known as retargeting (Bleier & Eisenbeiss, 2015). Many consumers claimed that they do expect emails from clothing retailers to be personalized to meet their expectations and if they fail to do so the probability of deleting, ignoring and unsubscribing from them were more likely to happen compared to emails that do the opposite. This is fundamentally linked to the consumers' mistrust in the clothing retailer's capability or ability to provide the right and relevant content via emails to meet their expectations. Furthermore, this is also coherent with the study by Sajtos et al., (2010) that emphasizes the failure of providing expected service as a factor both causing distrust with the consumer as well as lowering their customer satisfaction, which risks damaging the customer relationship.

According to Reed (2004) and from a psychological perspective, people are generally drawn to marketing that in some way is relatable to their own personal identity. Further signified by Wolford & Morrison (1980) that states one of the reasons for consumers experiencing self-recognized marketing appealing is that it stands out, when there is a lot of information to process. Our findings are consistent with both studies, since many of the interviewed consumers in this study explained that certain clothing retailers manage to stand out in the midst of all the other emails in their inbox. One reason for this is the feeling of associating themselves with the retailers' brand, values and their assortment. While some consumers explain the importance of a clothing retailer's sustainability values because they share those values, others emphasize the assortment of clothes that match the consumer's preferences and personal identity. In this some brands seem to be perceived as more competent in providing this personalization of product offerings compared to others. In addition, the finding about perceived brand credibility in our findings is comparable with the study by Makrides et al., (2020) which shows that brand competence influences consumers' perceived credibility towards the brand. Moreover, a clothing retailer's ability to provide more personalized content is also shown to enhance trust and commitment among consumers in this study, which also is in line with Morgan and Murphy's' (1994) Commitment-trust theory. Some consumers indicate that these brands that successfully offer more personalized content in combination with being perceived as a credible and competent brand are seen as more valuable to commit to and maintain the relationship with. This further explains the reason behind why consumers are more engaged towards these clothing retailers' emails, where consumers in this study explain that they open, read and click on links within these emails more frequently compared to other brands.

Product suggestions

The type of personalized content that seemingly is received most positively is product suggestions that are similar to products the consumer has previously viewed on the retailer's website. The reason for this could potentially be that the consumers experienced this as more valuable to them in contrast to emails with products they had viewed on the website. With the exception of products they had viewed and had an interest in knowing when it was back in stock or their size. Hartemo (2016) establishes personalization in emails as a way to improve the relationship between customer and company as long as it is relevant to the customer. The importance of relevance to a customer is additionally

supported by Reimers et al., (2016) that claims emails that add no value to the customer can be seen as spam, indicating that emails with product suggestions similar to their items they have viewed can be assumed to be more relevant to the consumers in our study and therefore more beneficial. The same reasoning goes for emails containing items that the consumer wants to receive a reminder of when it is back in stock or their size. Hence, there is a potential difference in customer satisfaction and perceived value and product suggestions with similar products seemed to lead to higher customer satisfaction and perceived value among our participants in general. The reactions to these types of emails varied, if they were perceived as useful common behaviors were described as opening the email, reading the content and sometimes clicking on it. If the reaction was more negative the engagement could be deleting, moving them to junk mail or unsubscribing. Some consumers stated that in order for the emails with the product suggestions to be useful to them, they need to be relevant. Once again and in accordance with Hartemo (2016), relevance is very important in succeeding with personalization in emails. If the consumer received emails with suggestions of products they had no interest in or not similar enough to what they had viewed, these emails become pointless, leading to more negative types of reactions such as deleting, moving the email to the junk mail or unsubscribing to the emails.

The use of consumer's name

The use of participants' names in an email resulted in various reactions and subsequent engagement. Some participants found it positive while others negative, the majority stated that they had no particular reaction to it. A study by Sahni et al., (2018) presented that using a customer's name in the email's subject line or in the email content increases the chances of customer engagement as well as purchase. While some of the consumers in our study gave answers that coincided with the indication of the study by Sahni et al., (2018), claiming that they react positively to seeing their own name in an email, many consumers established that they reacted indifferent or negative towards it, meaning that our findings neither oppose or support prior research. Furthermore, there is research supporting that individuals compulsorily redirect their attention to their own name in settings with a lot of distraction (Tacikowski & Nowicka, 2010). Although most consumers stated no reaction to seeing their own name in an email, we cannot exclude the possibility that this is something that occurs subconsciously and therefore something the individual is not aware of. As it is a psychologically subconscious reaction that the individual does not actively think about or perhaps notices, they might not consciously think that their name has any impact. But we cannot draw the conclusion that it does not, even if the consumer claims to react indifferently.

In a study by Wattal et al., (2012) it was found that customers react more positively to product offers in contrast to use of their personal information in an email, such as name. Additionally, using the recipient's name in an email can have a mixed effect depending on the familiarity with the company, indicating that trust and loyalty play a part in how the consumer might react (Wattal et al., 2012). Trust is demonstrated to influence how customers react to email marketing, in a study by Cases et al., (2010). Loyalty is indirectly shown to influence the customers response to email marketing through a higher tolerance to marketing efforts in general (Oliver, 1999). Consequently, using the name in an email has various influences on the consumer depending on their trust and loyalty towards the retailer, something we found to be consistent with the findings of our study, further supported by White et al., (2008) that describes how customers can be more skeptical to

receive more personal content from a brand if they do not have a close relationship with them.

Privacy concerns

In our study, we found a few instances where privacy concerns were existent among the consumers, such as when the familiarity with the brand is lower and the email yet contains more personalized content, consistent with the study by White et al., (2008) that the customers relationship with a company influences how they react to more personal emails. Many consumers stated that in cases when they have little relationship with a brand they react more negatively to them including personalized content in an email, wondering how they got ahold of the information. According to Aguirre et al., (2015) this can happen when a customer is unaware that the information about them is being collected, which in this case could happen if the consumer, in their own experience, has had little or a few interactions with the retailer. This finding is further supported in a study by Awad & Krishnan (2006) that establishes a requirement for companies to convey the possible benefits that personalized communication can contribute to, in order to justify the necessary data that needs to be collected about the customer. Hence, in cases where the consumer perceives an email as too personal, a weak previous relationship with the retailer that results in a lack of justification in the use of the customer's data may explain this perception, also described by Martin & Murphy (2016) as the customer having a negative perception of a company due to a lack of control caused by their data collection, ultimately leading the customer to end the relationship with the company. We can also reverse this reasoning to make the assumption that the consumers who stated that they had not experienced emails that they perceived as too personal, probably had a relationship with the retailers or were aware that data and information about them was being collected.

A few consumers indicated that they had experienced informality through either language, an attempt from the retailer being personal and most commonly; layout, causing an impression in the consumer regarding lack of professionalism and seriosity. This can be connected with brand competence, described as the consumers idea of a brands ability and skills to meet consumer expectations (Xue et al., 2020). If the emails are perceived as informal by the consumer, it can be a potential sign of a failure in brand competence and their skills. Informality is also closely related to trust which influences how the customer reacts to email marketing (Cases et al., 2010), meaning that if the consumer regards an email as informal in any way it may affect their trust towards it and in turn their reaction to the email. Examples of non-purchase behaviors stated in connection to perceiving an email as either too personal or informal was entirely negative, leading to reactions such as deleting, marking the email as spam or placing it in the junk mail as well as unsubscription. Additionally, many consumers mentioned that the process of unsubscribing should be easy as it otherwise risks influencing their perception of the retailer negatively.

Non-purchase behaviors influence on relational factors

As exhibited in our empirical data, we found that the consumers' non-purchase behaviors in turn can influence the relational factors. This was something we assumed in our initial conceptual model displayed by the arrow between the two boxes (see Figure 1). Consumers who stated that they have a more positive perception of the emails and hence

engage with them frequently, also indicate that this in turn impacted their impression of the retailers positively. While those who claimed the opposite, stated that it meant a more negative view of the retailer. Based on our findings we see indications that a customer's engagement can influence their impression of a retailer and overall relationship with them due to the involvement of relational factors. Hence, the consumers' engagement with emails, can be an indication of their perception of the clothing retailer. Which is consistent with Tonder and Petzer's (2017) description of customer engagement, as the concept of understanding how the engagement of the customer affects their perception and connection with a company.

6.5 Revised conceptual model

The analysis of our empirical data has resulted in revision of our primary conceptual model that illustrates how permission-based email marketing and relational factors influence consumers' non-purchase behaviors. In our initial conceptual model we only included personalized content as part of permission-based email marketing as we assumed, supported by previous studies that it had a more positive influence on the relationship between customer and company in contrast to general content. However, our findings revealed that general content can have influence on non-purchase behaviors and therefore also the relationship between consumer and retailer, depending on if the content is perceived as relevant to the consumer. We found among our participants that offers, discounts, news, transparency and sustainability have a positive impact on the non-purchase behaviors, such as opening, reading, reopening, click-through and word-of-mouth. We also saw that other components in general content also can influence depending on how relevant it is for the consumer, the components being product displays, new collections and collaborations with influencers. As the potential impact of general content among the consumers in our study was greater than previous assumptions, it is included in our revised conceptual model. Personalized content remains in the revised conceptual model as the assumptions supported by previous research were present in our participants' statements. We can see that personalized content influences how consumers perceive and ultimatley react to emails.

Additionally, we found that frequency has a major impact on consumers' perception of emails, a higher number of emails resulted in irritation among a clear majority of the participants in our study. Frequency had a major impact on the response to the email, regardless of the email content and potential value to the consumer. Thus, a higher email frequency seemingly made the content of each email less relevant to the consumers as the annoyance caused by it succeeded the potential benefits. However, we did not intend to study the number of emails sent out in relation to the customers purchase phase known as optimal email strategy. Therefore, our findings do not indicate if this is something used by the retailers that the consumer in our study receives emails from and if it has any impact on their reaction to the emails. Despite this and implied by the answers given by the consumers in our study, frequency is important in email marketing and influences the consumers perception and reaction to the emails, for that reason it is included in our revised conceptual model.

Among the relational factors all remained from the initial conceptual model, with the addition of two more components; loyalty and perceived brand competence. We found that loyalty had positive influence among the participants' tolerance to the email frequency and perceived value of the overall content, as well as the non-purchase

behaviors. Many consumers mentioned that they distinct some emails from others depending on which retailer it is from, due to their loyalty to the brand. Perceived brand competence was identified in the consumers' answers about their opinions of informality, in particular the layouts of an email and the importance of the layout being professional and coherent with the retailer's overall brand image. As well as in relation to how well a retailer manages to personalize an email to fit each customer's preferences. Thus, perceived brand competence was shown in this study to influence how the consumer perceives an email and their non-purchase behaviors. The other relational factors; customer satisfaction, trust, commitment and perceived value were found important in all of the themes related to permission based email marketing in our study. In our study, there is clear indication that emails interrelated with the relational factors have an impact on consumers' non-purchase behaviors. Moreover, comparable with our original conceptual model with regards to the non-purchase behaviors' influence on the relational factors, the revised conceptual model incorporates the same arrow going from "non-purchase behaviors" to "relational factors". In addition, this is due to the fact that our participants' responses revealed changes in the relational factors based on the way they engaged or reacted to the emails from the clothing retailers.

Similar to the assumptions in our primary conceptual model, we found in this study that non-purchase behaviors are influenced by email marketing and the relational factors. This influence could be established in all the themes of permission-based email marketing and to be dependent on the relational factors, such as the consumer's perception of the email and the retailer impacts their behaviors. The positive non-purchase behaviors we identified were open, re-open, read, click-through, word-of-mouth and feedback, while deleting, marking as spam, moving to junk mail and unsubscribing can be interpreted as of more negative character.

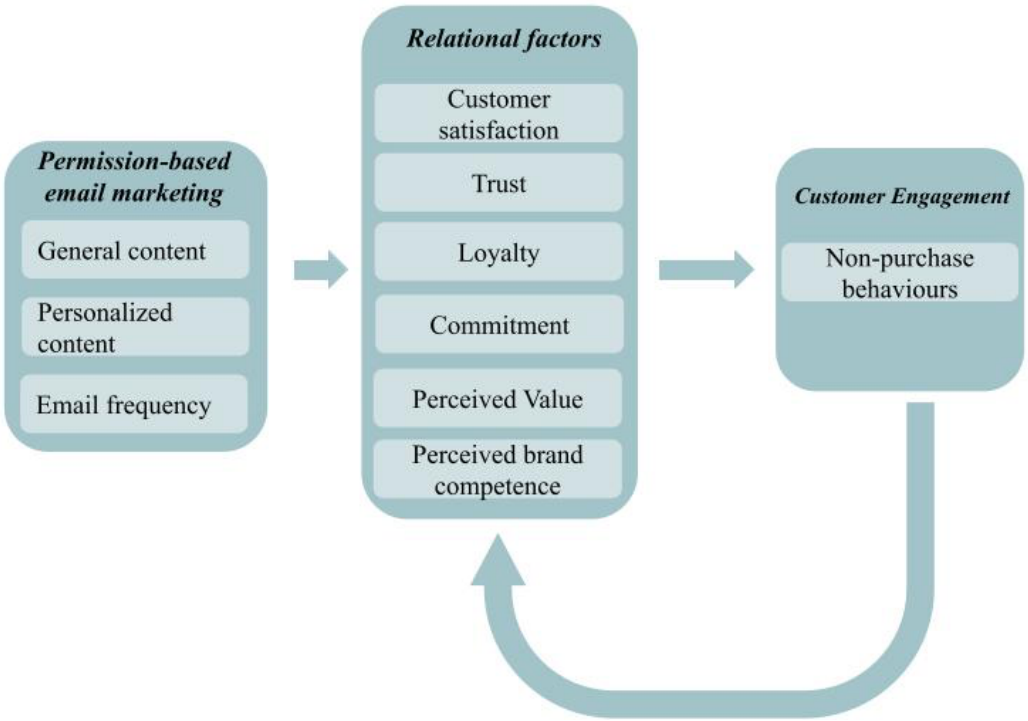

Figure 3: Revised conceptual model

7. Conclusions

In the final chapter we will present the conclusions of our findings and answer our research question. Moreover, both the theoretical contribution and practical relevancy of the study will be presented, followed by limitations and suggestions for future research. Lastly, the truth criteria and quality of the conducted research will be addressed.

7.1 General Conclusions

The purpose of this study is to gain a deeper understanding of how permission-based email marketing and relational factors influence consumers' non-purchase behaviors. By conducting a qualitative study we were able to obtain knowledge and profound understanding of how young Swedish millennial consumers perceive emails from retailers selling clothing brands, as well as understand the 'why' behind their perceptions and reactions. This allowed us to accomplish the purpose of our study and to answer the research question:

How does permission-based email marketing, aided by relational factors, influence consumers' non-purchase behaviors?

The analysis has functioned as the basis to several insights and conclusions related to email marketing. One implication found was on the topic of permission in email, where we established that permission is crucial among the consumers. However, the level of permission showed no indication of having any influence. However, we acknowledge that the initial description of extended permission, that includes the customers sharing their personal preferences with the firm, has today become the standard due to data tracking and cookies accepted by customers when visiting a website. Thus, it can be argued that customers today in many cases have given extended permission on this basis. Altogether, without permission the participants indicated that the email is of no interest to them, regardless of its potential benefits. Furthermore, permission interrelates with the relational factors of customer satisfaction, perceived value and commitment. The more positive non-purchase behaviors connected to permission-based emails in our study were opening, reading, click-through, while the more negative reactions were deleting, moving to the junk mail and unsubscribing. Continuing, our study established that email frequency is crucial, and too many emails according to the consumers is a cause of irritation that risks overshadowing the potential benefits of the email. Further stated by our participants, their previous relationship with the retailer greatly influences their tolerance to the number of emails and other general marketing efforts. Thus, loyalty is connected to frequency and was shown to have a big impact on the consumers perception and reaction to the emails. Some participants indicated that a reasonable amount of emails was a basic precondition for them to want to keep receiving the emails, while too many emails could lead to the non-purchase behaviors of deleting, moving to junk mail and unsubscribing.

General content was found to influence the consumers' perception and reaction to email marketing. Offers and discounts in particular had a more positive influence on the non-purchase behaviors among the participants in our study, closely connected to the relational factors of customer satisfaction, perceived value and trust. Moreover, it is

shown to lead to the non-purchase behaviors of opening, reopening, reading and click-through, as well as leaving feedback or word-of-mouth when the offer or discount is perceived as valuable enough. However, when the general content is of no relevance to the consumer it risks being perceived as an annoyance and reason to spread negative word-of-mouth, apart from possibly first deleting it, moving it to junk mail or unsubscribing. Transparency and sustainability in emails was expressed as a source of trust towards the retailer and exclusively leading to positive non-purchase behaviors. Collaborations with influencers in email marketing was established to be something interesting to some consumers, however only if the influencer themselves is interesting to the consumer otherwise it had no particular impact. Lastly, many participants indicated that news, product displays and new collections in emails hold certain significance, when perceived as relevant to the consumer. If relevant, it was expressed to lead to more positive non-purchase behaviors, while no relevance led to a more negative reaction and even annoyance. Consistent, with almost all mentioned types of general content, perceived relevance is key in order to positively influence the consumers perceptions and reactions.

The consumers in our study indicated that personalization in email is generally more well-received in contrast to general content, confirming existing studies (Hartemo, 2016; Sahni et al., 2016). This may be partly due to its relevance to the consumer. As stated before, relevance is essential, regardless of the content of the email, if the email is perceived as relevant to the consumer it will lead to a more positive reaction. Product suggestions with products similar to previously viewed items were indicated to be more positively received rather than product suggestions of the exact product the consumer has seen. Consistent with the relational factors of customer satisfaction and perceived value of the email, thus how beneficial the customer perceives the email. The use of a consumer's name in an email had a mixed reception among our participants with the most consumers stating that they reacted indifferently. In general, personalized content is connected to the relational factors of perceived brand competence, commitment and trust as consumers have confidence in the retailer's ability to match the content to their preferences. In case of failure, it risks leading to a miscalculation of consumer needs and preferences, or on the other hand; content that is perceived as too personal and therefore informal or a privacy concern. It was established by a few consumers in our study that had experienced privacy concerns and informality through email marketing, both interconnected with the relational factors of loyalty, trust and brand competence and if occurring, leading entirely to negative reactions.

In conclusion, our study found that the themes of perceived permission, general content, personalized content and email frequency, all within the scope of email marketing and aided by certain relational factors, influence several non-purchase behaviors among the consumers. Intuitive and indicated in our study, the aspects of e-mail that are positively related to the relational factors, thus affecting all relational factors favorably, also lead to a positive reaction from the consumer. Some of the most important key words established in our study are permission, frequency, loyalty and relevancy. The results of our study yield valuable theoretical contribution and knowledge for managers and marketers within clothing retail, especially as one of the few studies within the subject of email marketing which is conducted from a consumer perspective.

7.2 Theoretical Contributions

Previous research on email marketing has had a focus on how to use it in order to increase sales, using purchases as a measurement to clearly indicate the efficiency of an email campaign (Chang & Morimoto, 2011). Therefore, many existent studies on email marketing are related to customer purchases (Chang & Morimoto, 2011; Hartemo, 2016; Jackson & DeCormier, 1999). It is only in the past few years that the added objective to strengthen the relationship between customer and company using email marketing has emerged (Hartemo, 2016; Zhang et al., 2017). Many scholars claim that in order for companies to strengthen the relationship with their customers, more types of customer engagement apart from purchases needs to be considered (Brodie et al., 2013; Tonder & Petzer, 2017). Although studies on email marketing's effects on customer engagement do exist, it is to a more limited extent. The studies often focus on a few selected components of email marketing in relation to a few selected components of customer engagement (Breuer et al., 2011; Hartemo, 2016; Kumar & Salo, 2016; Reimers et al., 2016; Sahni et al., 2016; Wattal et al., 2012; Zhang et al., 2017).

For instance, Breuer et al., (2011) examines the long term effects of email marketing, as a type of advertising, on sales. Hartemo (2016) studied how email marketing can be used in order to empower the customers, while Kumar and Salo (2016) researched the effect of link placement on click-through rate in emails. Reimers et al., (2016) researched how permission email marketing influences perceived ease of use, usefulness, enjoyment and risks. Sahni et al., (2016) researched the effects of using the recipients' names, as a form of personalization in emails, on email opening, increased sales and decreased number of unsubscriptions. Continuing, Wattal et al., (2012) researched the effects on customers responses of personalization in email, these responses were open, unsubscribe, no action, click-through and purchase. Zhang et al., (2017) studied the effect of the number of emails on retailers' long-term profitability. Although these are only a few of the studies regarding email marketing, they indicate a pattern shared by a lot of the research within the area, with few exceptions, the majority examines the effects of email marketing.

According to Kumar et al., (2010) many studies that examine customer engagement disregard other types of engagement apart from purchases, meaning the non-purchase behaviors. This is also seen in the studies presented in this chapter, purchases, open rate and click-through rate are often used as common indicators of customer engagement in research regarding email marketing. Although both purchase and non-purchase behaviors are important to increase engagement, non-purchase behaviors can amount to stronger customer relationships and loyalty over time (Calder & Malthouse, 2005; Lam, 2005; Parihar & Dawra, 2020, p. 900). Furthermore, Van Doorm et al., (2010) disputed that brands need to consider behavioral aspects apart from purchase in order to maintain strong customer relationships. Verhoef et al., (2010) states that non-purchase behavior is crucial as a consequence of evolving technology that has facilitated customers to voice their opinions to brands more easily. While open rate and click-through rate are types of non-purchase behaviors, there are many more that also can be considered. Thus, as email marketing today has the objective to strengthen the relationships between customer and company, we believe that studies connecting email marketing and non-purchase behaviors are needed. Specifically, studies from the perspective of the consumer, in order to gain understanding and insights in their perceptions and reactions to email marketing.

To explain this influence further we have included several relational factors in our conceptual model. The relational factors were selected based on research indicating that they can aid in enhancing customers brand loyalty (Ahmad & Akbar, 2021), influence customer engagement (Tonder & Petzer, 2017) as well as connect to email marketing (Cases et al., 2010; Sathya et al., 2017; Ranganathan et al., 2013; Yang et al., 2018). Furthermore, our study focuses on email marketing among retailers selling clothing brands and Swedish consumers. We believe that our study has contributed to understanding about how the customers' non-purchase behaviors can be influenced through email marketing and aided by relational factors. Our conceptual model illustrates how email marketing, integrated with the relational factors, impacts consumers' non-purchase behaviors, and additionally, how the non-purchase behaviors in turn can influence the relational factors, depending on what type of behaviors the consumer has displayed.

7.3 Practical Implications

The practical implications of this study are aimed at providing a foundation for marketers and managers at clothing retail companies to optimize their email marketing strategies and enhance their customer relationships. The study's findings provide an increased understanding of how consumers perceive and engage with different aspects within identified areas of permission-based email marketing. These insights are contributing to broader knowledge with regards to permission-based email marketing and its impact on consumers' non-purchase behavior which is beneficial and can be advantageous for marketers and managers to utilize. The result of the study can be used as a basis for developing clothing retailers' email marketing strategies to maintain and strengthen the customer relationships, as well as implementing strategies for mitigating the risk of damaging the consumers' perceived brand image and relationship with the retailer. The revised conceptual model is proposed to visualize how permission-based email marketing interconnected with relational factors influence the consumer's non-purchase behaviors.

Based on the findings, in general many consumers sometimes expressed a feeling of indifference to emails coming from clothing retailers. One major reason for this was the blatant perception of an excessive amount of emails coming to their inbox every week. This high email frequency is therefore to be considered a potential pitfall for every clothing retailer that wants to reach out to their customers. The result from our study showed a palpable annoyance and irritation among interviewed consumers with regards to high email frequency. All consumers expressed that their reactions to this are mostly characterized by ignoring and disregarding them, but often also deleting and unsubscribing from these emails. Moreover, spreading negative word of mouth of clothing retailers that are sending emails way too frequently is also occurring based on our participants' responses. Furthermore, this is ultimately something marketers and managers must take into consideration, since perceived excessive email frequency can yield negative influences on customers' non-purchase behavior and relationship with the retailer. Sending emails more seldom can, based on the consumers' responses in this study, lead to more curiosity contributing to them wanting to engage with the emails by opening them and reading the content. However, if retailers have a low email frequency level in their mailing then consequently they could face the risk of not maintaining the perceived relevancy and top-of-mind with the customers. Sending emails more seldom is favored among interviewed consumers, however marketers and managers need to find the

right balance which is preferred among their customer segments in order to both maintain and enhance their customer relationships.

Another component to permission-based email marketing is the content. The keyword in terms of content is relevancy, in other words the consumer should perceive the content as valuable and interesting in order to consequently engage with the emails. Even though most of the consumers in this study claimed that they expect personalized content in emails from clothing retailers for them to be satisfied and perceive them as valuable, others emphasized that general content including discounts and general offers could be equally relevant. Managers and marketers ought to adapt their email marketing content to the preferences and expectations the specific customer or target segment has. Our study shows that if the consumer finds the content in emails from clothing retailers as relevant they are more likely to be committed to staying as a subscriber and opening, reading and clicking links more often compared to the opposite. Lack of relevant content can cause these consumers to mistrust the retailer or the brand's ability to provide value in their email marketing, which consequently can lead to less commitment and behaviors that indicate signs of a damaged relationship. Both positive and negative non-purchase behaviors in relation to email marketing can be used as a basis for developing new strategies for clothing retailers. While marketers can track consumers' interaction with the email, for example clicking on links, as an indication of engagement, lower levels of CTR can be signaling factors showing the lack of customer engagement. By addressing what works and what does not in terms of creating more customer engagement that goes beyond transactions, marketers can develop tactics and ways to facilitate more relational factors and ultimately establish higher levels of engagement.

Lastly, the aspect of perceived level of permission is shown to have an influence on the consumers' willingness to commit to a clothing retailers email subscription. In this study, consumers expressed that clothing retailers with whom they cannot recall having given their permission to receive emails from unsubscription were the most common response. This would imply that managers and marketers ought to be transparent when asking for the customers' permission to receive emails from them for permission-based email marketing to be effective. Building on this, if the consumer wants to unsubscribe from these emails the process should be easily done via a salient unsubscription option integrated in the emails. Some consumers in this study expressed that sometimes this unsubscription process is too complicated which causes irritation and annoyance, leading to a spillover on their perception of the retailer as a whole. Managers and marketers can mitigate this negative spillover effect by designing a salient unsubscription option in their emails, allowing unsatisfied customers to end the subscription in a way that does not lead to further irritation.

7.4 Societal & Ethical Implications

The digitalization as a societal trend has opened up new possibilities for companies to maximize the value co-creation, build long-term customer relationships and as a result also gain essential competitive advantages (Vargo & Lusch, 2004; Kumar et al., 2009). Companies are capable of storing big data on their customer segments, which entails increased opportunities to learn more about their wants and needs and how to conduct marketing communication which meet their expectations (Rust & Huang, 2014; Martin & Murphy, 2016). The findings of this study show that value is perceived when the individual consumer gains something in exchange for staying committed to a relationship

with a clothing retailer. While many interviewees emphasize personalized offers in emails as their main reason for staying as a subscriber, since it is perceived as generating more relevancy, others perceive general discounts as the most important factor for them being subscribers to emails. However, in a world where consumers frequently are exposed to impressions, the ones that are perceived as relevant in relation to the individual's preferences are most likely to add value. The clothing retailers that manage to attract and maintain customers via effective email marketing are also the ones that can be profitable in the long run. This also implies positive societal implications with regards to the overall economy and maximizing the perceived value on an individual level. However, there is a negative aspect with regards to companies' aim to provide more relevant and personalized email content and that is privacy concerns among consumers. The practices of companies storing big data on consumers in order to provide more attractive and personalized communication might backfire and consequently lead to more customer skepticism (Martin & Murphy, 2016; White et al., 2008). The ongoing evolution of technology and the development of new strategies to attract and communicate with consumers need to be handled and restricted both legally and ethically. Through the ongoing evolution, society needs to adapt and continuously update laws preventing harming consumers' integrity and privacy. Our study provides relevant societal implications by exploring these critical issues from a customer perspective.

7.5 Limitations & Future Research

We acknowledge that this study has several limitations which future research can address. One such limitation is the sample of our study, because there is a difference between how individuals of different ages or generations respond to email. For example, growing up under different socio-economic conditions and with access and exposure to different levels of technology, can affect how people perceive and react to email marketing. Young millennials are the generation that currently shops the most online and therefore an appropriate group to base a sample on in the context of email marketing. However, we recognize that we do not know how millennials perceive and react to email marketing compared to other generations. In addition, whether email is the marketing tool that is more or less optimal to reach our chosen age group contrary to other types of marketing. Future research on the subject may therefore consider studying a wider selection over more ages and generations and explore if any differences between age groups can be detected.

A similar reasoning can be made regarding the geographic limitations with our study. We have studied Swedish consumers exclusively and therefore do not know if different cultures cause any difference in how individuals respond to email marketing. For instance, there could be varied reactions from people from different countries and cultures which we have not studied. Additionally, to examine how it might affect if the retailer sending the emails operates in different countries where consumers might react differently to the same email, due to cultural distinctions. For example, if a retailer uses a similar email strategy irrespective of the nationality of the customer to whom it is sent, it can lead to different reactions depending on cultural differences. Furthermore, we acknowledge that our study does not include a gender perspective and comparisons if there are any potential gender differences, something that could be of interest to future studies within the subject.

Further suggestions and opportunities for future studies building on our research could consequently include a generational, cultural and gender perspective. Additionally, a bigger sample could be considered in order to attain an even greater understanding of the population in order to capture potential additional insights. Although our sample consisted of ten interviews that has given us an in-depth understanding of consumers perception of email marketing, more interviews could be carried through to potentially include more perspectives and gain equal knowledge of each perspective. Lastly, future studies could examine whether a consumer's previous experiences of online shopping have any influence on their perception of email marketing. Both in order to see if it affects how they interact with emails, and if it potentially differs from how people with less experience of online shopping interact with them.

7.6 Truth Criteria

According to Bell et al., (2019, p.362) research quality criteria of validity and reliability are two common criteria used when evaluating the quality of research. While some scholars claim that the definitions of validity and reliability can be adapted to suit qualitative research, others emphasize that the two criterias are purely linked to quantitative research (Bell et al., 2019, p. 362). In addition, these scholars highlight qualitative rigor as an equivalent criterion for validity and reliability when it comes to qualitative research (Thomas & Magilvy, 2011, p. 151). Rigor is a way to generate trustworthiness throughout the whole presentation of the research and is characterized by thorough, transparent and detailed explanations and reasonings (Thomas & Magilvy, 2011, p. 151). In the context of this thesis the rigor has been adopted as quality criterion, since it encompasses critical aspects with regards to qualitative research, for example by addressing the study's rigorousness and appropriateness with regards to for example; the presentation of the purpose, use of theories and how the analysis is conducted and presented (Tracy, 2010, p.841).

In order to establish rigor and trustworthiness in qualitative research Lincoln and Guba's (1985) model can be implemented (Thomas & Magilvy, 2011, p.152; Krefting, 1991, p.217). This model contains four factors of enhancing trustworthiness, namely, credibility, transferability, dependability and confirmability (Thomas & Magilvy, 2011, p.152). Credibility in qualitative research is the researcher's ability to interpret the participants' shared experiences regarding the research phenomenon in an accurate way (Thomas & Magilvy, 2011, p. 152). To ensure high credibility in our study the focus was to interpret the transcripted data in a precise way supported by identified recurring patterns in the participants' answers. In addition, the empirical findings chapter is supported by several quotes which consequently are used as a basis when presenting our analysis and interpretations in a more transparent way.

The second component in Lincoln and Guba's (1985) model is transferability, which addresses whether the research findings can be generalized to a broader population (Krefting, 1991, p. 220). However, the nature of qualitative studies is not aiming for generalizing to a population but rather focusing on a smaller sample including a representativeness of the participants involved in the study (Krefting, 1991, p.220). In the context of our study the aim was not to generalize the findings to a population, but rather generate deeper understandings and insights of how consumers in our sample perceive and act upon emails they receive from clothing retailers and why they react in a particular way. Hence, in order to establish transferability to a study characterized by a unique

selected sample in Sweden, the focus was to describe and present every consumer's background and prior experience of receiving emails from clothing retailers in as clear a manner as possible, but more importantly is in line with the participants' conditions of consent and the GDPR.

Moreover, dependability in qualitative research is the third component of Lincoln and Guba's model (1985) and it encompassed the researchers transparent reasoning and argumentations why certain choices were made, for instance the sample selection, how data was collected and how interpretations from the analysis were made (Thomas & Magilvy, 2011, p. 153). Based on this factor of dependability the aim was to generate a sense of reliability by authentically describe every choice we made throughout the research process and furthermore also provide arguments to why these choices are most in line with the nature of the research's characteristics and design, but also to the study's purpose and research question. Lastly, the fourth factor on how to enhance trustworthiness and the quality of qualitative research is confirmability (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Confirmability can be established when the three aforementioned factors are fulfilled and aim to provide an overall critical mindset throughout the research process (Thomas & Magilvy, 2011, p. 154). Moreover, this entails both to openly present alternative choices that could have been made in the research and addressing certain limitations present in the study, but also to critically question the researcher's own preconceptions toward the research phenomenon to ultimately mitigate the risk of them having a negative influence of the interpretations of the findings (Thomas & Magilvy, 2011, p. 154; Krefting, 1991, p. 221). Being two marketing students with prior knowledge regarding relationship marketing and theories about customer engagement we had to address and question our preconceptions throughout the research process. In addition, we both have experiences regarding receiving emails from clothing retailers, which is something that we acknowledged could influence the way data is being interpreted. However, the aim throughout this thesis was to stay as authentic and transparent as possible by presenting argumentation of every decision taken and supporting them by addressing advantages and disadvantages.

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Appendix

Appendix 1: Interview guide

Opening questions:	**Link to themes**
How often do you check your email inbox a week?	
Which email service provider do you use? Does it filter your private emails from commercial or campaign emails?	
How often do you receive emails from retailers selling clothing brands? Which retailers? Are you a member of one of the retailers' customer clubs?	
Permission-based email marketing	
General:	
What do you think about emails from these retailers? Why?	
How do you react when you receive these emails, what do you do? Why?	**Customer engagement**
What would increase the chances of you clicking on a link in an email?	**Customer engagement & commitment**
Did you subscribe knowingly to an email list of some of these retailers selling clothing brands? Why?	**Level of permission**
Were you signed up to some of them by the seller or in another way when you purchased something from the retailer?	**Level of permission**
What type of content in an email are you most interested in? Why?	**Perceived value & customer satisfaction**
Personalization in email marketing:	
How do you perceive personalized content in emails from retailers selling clothing brands?	**Personalization**
Do these emails have value for you as a customer? Why? How?	**Perceived value**
What are your expectations regarding these emails? why? Examples? Do the emails you receive meet your expectations? How?	**Customer satisfaction**
What makes you want to stay subscribed to an email list from a retailer? Why?	**Commitment**

How do you perceive emails containing products you have previously looked at on the retailer's website/app? Why? How do you react to these emails? Why?	**Personalization & customer engagement**
How do you perceive emails containing product suggestions that are similar to the products you've looked at? Why?	**Personalization**
How do you perceive emails with your name included in the heading or in the email content? Why? Does it make you react in any way? How? Why?	**Personalization & customer engagement**
How have these emails changed your relationship to the retailers and their brands? Why?	**Personalization & Relational factors**
Do you perceive any emails as too informal? In what way? Could you give an example?	**Personalization**
Do you perceive any emails as too personal? How? Could you give an example? From which retailers? How have these emails changed your relationship to the retailers and their brands? Why?	**Privacy concern & trust/mistrust**
How do the retailers' use of your personal information in emails influence your perception of them? Why? Do you have any mistrust or concerns? Why?	**Privacy concern & trust**
What in these emails would make you trust the retailer more or less?	**Privacy concern & trust**
Have you ever unsubscribed from emails from a retailer selling clothing brands? What made you do this? How did this affect your perception of this brand?	**Customer engagement & perceived value**
Non-purchase behaviors:	
How do you react to emails asking for your feedback or suggestions via surveys from these retailers? Why?	**Knowledge sharing**
What in an email from these retailers would make you answer a survey? Why?	**Knowledge sharing**
How do you react to emails asking for your feedback by leaving a review? Why?	**Knowledge sharing**
What in an email from these retailers would make you want to leave a review? Why?	**Knowledge sharing**
Do you ever talk about any of the retailers you receive emails from to someone you know? Why?	**Word-of-mouth**
What would be required in emails from these retailers to encourage you to tell someone you know about the retailer or	**Word-of-mouth**

clothing brand? Why?	
Are you a member of one of the retailers' customer clubs? Would you become a member of these retailers' customer club via email? Why?	**Customer club/membership**
What in the email would make you want to become a member of the retailers' customer club? Why?	**Customer club/membership**
Additional comments:	
Do you have any additional comments or thoughts that you would like to share with us?	

Appendix 2: Interview guide (Swedish version)

Inledande frågor:	**Teman**
Hur ofta kollar du din E-post per vecka?	
Vilken e-posttjänst använder du? Filtrerar den dina privata mejl från kommersiella/kampanjer?	
Hur ofta får du mejl från återförsäljare av klädmärken? Vilka återförsäljare?	
Permission-based email marketing	
Allmänt:	
Vad tycker du om mejl från dessa återförsäljare? Varför?	
Hur brukar du reagera när du får dessa mejl? Vad gör du? Varför?	**Customer engagement**
Vad skulle öka sannolikheten att du klickar på en länk i ett mejl? varför?	**Customer engagement & commitment**
Prenumererade du medvetet på dessa återförsäljares nyhetsbrev? Varför?	**Level of permission**
Blev du registrerad på nyhetsbrevet via en säljare eller indirekt när du köpte något från återförsäljaren?	**Level of permission**
Vilket typ av innehåll i ett mejl från en återförsäljare är du mest intresserad av? Varför?	**Perceived value & customer satisfaction**
Personligt anpassad e-postmarknadsföring	
Hur upplever du personligt anpassat innehåll i e-post från	**Personalization**

dessa återförsäljare? Varför?	
Har dessa mejl något värde för dig som kund? På vilket sätt?	**Perceived value**
Vad har du för förväntningar på dessa mejl? Varför? Kan du ge något exempel? Motsvarar mejlen du får dina förväntningar? Hur?	**Customer satisfaction**
Vad får dig att vilja fortsätta att prenumerera på ett nyhetsbrev från en återförsäljare? Varför?	**Commitment**
Hur upplever du mejlen som innehåller produktförslag som de produkter du har tidigare tittat på hos återförsäljarens hemsida/app? Varför? Hur reagerar du på dessa typer av mejl? varför?	**Personalization & customer engagement**
Hur uppfattar du mejl som innehåller produktförslag som liknar de produkter du har tittat på? Varför?	**Personalization**
Vad tycker du om när återförsäljare använder ditt namn inkluderat i rubriken eller i själva mejlet? Varför? Får det dig att reagera på något sätt? Hur? Varför?	**Personalization & customer engagement**
Hur har dessa mejl förändrat din relation till återförsäljarna och deras varumärken generellt? Varför?	**Personalization & Relational factors**
Upplever du några mejl som för informella? På vilket sätt? Kan du ge ett exempel?	**Personalization**
Upplever du vissa mejl som för personliga? Hur? Kan du ge ett exempel? Från vilka återförsäljare? Hur har dessa mejl förändrat ditt förhållande till återförsäljarna och deras varumärken generellt? Varför?	**Privacy concern & trust/mistrust**
Hur påverkar användning av dina personuppgifter i ett mejl din uppfattning om återförsäljaren? Varför? Har du någon misstro eller oro? Varför?	**Privacy concern & trust**
Vad i dessa mejl skulle få dig att lita mer på återförsäljaren? vad i ett mejl skulle få dig att lita mindre på återförsäljaren? varför?	**Privacy concern & trust**
Har du någonsin avslutat prenumerationen på mejlen från en återförsäljare som säljer klädmärken? Vad fick dig att göra det? Hur påverkar detta din uppfattning om varumärket?	**Customer engagement & perceived value**
Non-purchase behaviors:	
Hur reagerar du på mejl som ber om din feedback eller förslag via undersökningar från dessa återförsäljare? Varför?	**Knowledge sharing**
Vad i ett mejl från dessa återförsäljare skulle få dig att svara	**Knowledge sharing**

på en kundundersökning? Varför?	
Hur reagerar du på mejl som ber dig lämna en recension? Varför?	**Knowledge sharing**
Vad i ett mejl från dessa återförsäljare skulle få dig att vilja lämna en recension? Varför?	**Knowledge sharing**
Pratar du någonsin om någon av återförsäljarna du får mejl från till någon du känner? Varför?	**Word-of-mouth**
Vad i ett mejl skulle få dig att berätta för någon du känner om återförsäljaren eller klädmärkena? Varför?	**Word-of-mouth**
Är du kund-medlem hos någon av de återförsäljare du får mejl från? Skulle du bli medlem i dessa återförsäljares kundklubb via e-post? Varför?	**Customer club/membership**
Vad i ett mejl skulle få dig att vilja bli medlem i återförsäljarnas kundklubb? Varför?	**Customer club/membership**
Övriga kommentarer:	
Har du några ytterligare kommentarer eller tankar som du vill dela med oss?	

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