Millennials and Brands

How do university aged millennials perceive and describe the role brands play in their everyday lives through social media?

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Abstract

Brands are defined as a construct in which the brand becomes an interface between the firm's activities and consumers' interpretations (de Chernatony & Dall'Olmo Riley, 2010). While millennials are sometimes viewed as active and engaged consumers who purposely seek out brands to connect, interact and in some cases collaborate with brands (Tanyel et al., 2013; Gurau, 2012; Moore, 2012; Lantos, 2014). Fournier and Avery's (2011) perspective suggests that, brands are in a way invading the social space of consumers, and that social media was created for people and not for brands. This study aims to find out the role brands play in the lives of university-aged millennials through social media.

The literature review discusses relevant literature, which partly helped guide the analysis of the thesis. A qualitative content analysis approach through a hybrid thematic analysis method was used to answer the research question.

The findings of the research suggest that brands play a role in the everyday lives of millennials through informing, inspiring, and connecting them with others. Through the use of brand marketing strategies such as relational and (virtual) experiential and in some cases collaborative marketing, brands are able to engage with their consumers and vice-versa. The findings adapt these strategies to social media elements and reveal which techniques work best or were more prevalent in the findings of the study. In general relational marketing strategies such as financial, social, and structural bonds were found to be a way to highly engage students. Experiential marketing strategies were also found as an important aspect especially when connected to inspiration and motivation as a role in the lives of students. In regards to consumers connecting with others through brands, co-creation of value for the brand can be formed through eWOM.

The implications towards theory and practice are discussed in detail.

Keywords: Millennials, Consumer engagement, Social media, Brand marketing strategies

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1. Introduction

It is nothing new that brands are involved in our everyday lives. Brands are everywhere and have become part of society in the sense that almost everything we do is somehow related to a brand. When using the term brands the first thought that comes to mind for many is an established and well known company which creates products, such as Coca Cola, Nike, or Apple. However there have been many different ways of defining brands by different scholars making this a rather broad and ambiguous term. Wood (2000) reviews and discusses the different ways in which brands have been defined. A brand can be defined either from the consumers' perspective and/or from the brand owner or company perspective. Additionally, brands can also be defined based their purpose, and in some cases brands are described by their characteristics (Wood, 2000).

On the one hand Bennett (1988, p.18) defines a brand in a rather company oriented manner stating that "a brand is a name, term, design, symbol, or any other feature that identifies one sellers good or service as distinct from those of other sellers." While on the other hand Ambler (1992, as cited in Wood, 2000, p.664) defines a brand through a consumer oriented approach as, " the promise of the bundles of attributes that someone buys and provide satisfaction…The attributes that make up a brand may be real or illusory, rational or emotional, tangible or invisible." Similarly Keller (1998 as cited in Kapferer, 2012, p.10) uses the consumer perspective and describes a brand as "a set of mental associations, held by the consumer, which add to the perceived value of a product or service. However, as Kapferer (2012) suggests, there are also emotional associations towards brands and this is a rather important aspect, which Keller (1998) did not touch upon. With the company perspective of a brand, the focus is on the brand purpose, which is differentiation, thus, what makes the brand different from its competitors. However, with the consumer-based definition the focus is on the consumer benefits, so what is the added value of the brand in the eyes of the consumer.

As Wood (2000), suggests, the term brand equity is commonly used by marketers to explain brand description or brand strength, which is sometimes referred to as consumer brand equity. In the case of this research, a more current yet broad definition of a brand and in particular the brand construct is used, which combines the notion that a brand is made up of the companies input and the consumers perspective. More specifically, as de Chernatony and Dall'Olmo Riley (2010, p.428) explain, "a brand exists mainly by virtue of a continuous process whereby the values and expectations imbued in the brand object (product or service) are set and enacted by the firm's staff [or the brand owner] and interpreted and redefined by

the consumers… through which the brand becomes the interface between the firm's activities and consumers' interpretations." The latter is the definition, which will be used to clarify what is meant by a brand in the following sections of this research.

One way in which brands have an effect on our lives is through the notion of constructing identity. More specifically, there has been a vast amount of research suggesting that brands contribute to the construction of a consumer's identity. According to Elliot and Wattanasuwan (1998) postmodern consumption is strongly determined by a consumer's search for self-identity. On the one hand, this means that consumers may choose a brand over another because they can see identity traits of themselves in the brand story, image and personality. While on the other hand, it means that a consumer's brand choice may influence the consumer's identity. So, when a consumer likes a particular brand, but does not see their current self-identity in the brand, the consumers perception of their self-identity can change based on the identity or image the consumer associates with the brand.

Ross (1971, p.38) refers to self-identity as self-concept, and argues that there is a difference between "actual self-concept", which refers to "the way a person actually sees himself to be, and "ideal self-concept", which is "the way a person would ideally like to be." In his study, it was found that consumers prefer brands that were similar to their own self-concept, and in particular, actual self-concept was more related to brand preference than ideal self-concept. This was a rather interesting finding, and it would be interesting to see whether this will come up in this research.

As Kirmani (2009, p.271) argues, "the interesting questions for consumer researchers are not about identity per se, but about the relationship between the self and consumption behaviour, particularly brand-related behaviour". This paper supports this line of thought, and instead of solely focusing on brands constructing self-identity, the focus is more on the relationships and experiences that consumers have with brands, which may or may not include the notion of identity.

This research focuses on the concept of millennials as a consumer segment, and in particular university aged millennials. Millennials are those born between 1980 and 2000, and are a diverse group of consumers, exhibiting unique media consumption behaviours and brand messaging needs (Geraci & Nagy, 2004; Smith, 2011; Gurau, 2012; Tanyel, Stuart, & Griffin, 2013; Williams, Crittenden, Keo, & McCarty, 2012). In an article by Jeff Fromm (2014), the author claims that this generation wants to be engaged and feel good about themselves. He further presents what intrigues millennials, such as millennials celebrate brand purpose, want a personal connection, embrace disruption, accept difference, and expect a dialogue.

With the rise of social media, companies are challenged in the ways they manage their brands. Considering the fact that millennials are seen to be technologically driven, and the fact that social media has empowered this group of consumers, there is a shift from the "firm to consumers as pivotal authors of brand stories in the branding process; a high level of interactivity manifested in social networks of consumers and brands; and a multitude of channels and brand stories that cannot be easily coordinated" (Gensler, Volckner, Thompkins, & Wiertz, 2013, p.253).

In today's digital world, and seeing as millennials have been described by their technology driven behaviours, it becomes almost a necessity to research brand marketing strategies not only in its traditional forms, but also in online environments, or more specifically social media. This led to researchers investigating how new media has changed the way consumers are perceived by marketers, and brand marketing strategies perceived by consumers. Well, much research has been done through the eyes of marketers and businesses about their (social media) marketing strategies' effect on consumers. However, research has been very limited on the perspectives of consumers, their opinions and experiences with brands and their digital marketing strategies. Quantitative research has been done about consumer's reactions to digital advertising strategies (Smith, 2011), but this does not go into depth regarding the consumers' opinions and experiences with brands. This paper aims to close this gap to some extent, by exploring the thoughts, perspectives and experiences of university-aged millennials with brands on social media.

There is a debate within academia regarding the roles of millennials as consumers. On the one hand, most scholars are enthusiastic about millennials, in the sense that they see millennials as active and engaged consumers who purposely seek out brands to connect, interact and in some cases collaborate with brands (Tanyel et al., 2013; Gurau, 2012; Moore, 2012; Lantos, 2014). This indicates that millennials accept and appreciate brands entering and participating in their social lives. On the other hand, some scholars who are more sceptical believe that millennials are difficult to reach and do not care or react to brand marketing strategies, leading to their lack of interest in engaging or interacting with a brand (Phillips, 2007; Greenberg, 2011).

Fournier and Avery's (2011) perspective although critical, is somewhat in the middle of the two conflicting perspectives. They see the potential of Web 2.0 in empowering consumers and helping brands create a relationship with consumers, yet they question their use of social media. In particular, they argue that brands are in a way invading the social space of consumers, and that social media was created for people and not for brands.

Supporting this view is Schultz and Peltier (2013), and they further explain that for future research, scholars should go beyond descriptive studies based on the use and usage, tools and techniques of (social media) marketing, and instead focus more on understanding if social media can be used to develop marketing strategies for consumer engagement. This research builds on this, as it seeks to find out if, how, and why millennials engage with brands on social media, and to see if the brand marketing strategies which are seen as generic among scholars and practitioners actually work the way they are meant to.

The research question is therefore: **How do university aged millennials perceive and describe the role brands play in their everyday lives through social media?** In order to realize or understand the role of brands it is important to know what brands are actually doing on social media and how these students or millennials are reacting and responding to these strategies. Based on this line of thought, two sub questions were formulated.

Sub question 1: How do students' experience with brands compare with literature on brand marketing strategies and consumer engagement?

Sub question 2: How do students react and respond to the approach that brands use on social media? These questions allow for the research to be more feasible as well as strengthen the interpretations of the findings.

In regards to the scientific relevance of this research, it attempts to fill in the gap in literature on consumer perspectives of online brand marketing strategies. It also contributes to literature on consumer engagement, as it will help clarify whether millennials are as engaged with brands as literature claims and how they view this engagement. Moreover, this research is socially significant as it can be useful for marketers to see how students feel about brands using social media, which aspects they find appealing, engaging and useful, and which aspects they find irrelevant or annoying. In this way, this research is able to make suggestions for new and improved social media strategies to be used by marketers as well as suggestions for future research regarding techniques for consumer engagement.

The following section of this paper is a critical review on existing literature, which discusses brands and millennials, consumer-brand engagement on social media, as well as brand marketing strategies for consumer engagement. More specifically, literature on the characteristics of the millennial consumer segment as well as their behaviours and attitudes towards brands is reviewed and elaborated on. Next, the concept of consumer brand engagement in relation to social media is discussed and explained thoroughly. With this understanding of consumer engagement, current literature on three key brand-marketing strategies, which serve as a conceptual framework for consumer engagement is reviewed, as

this will partially guide the analysing process. Chapter 3 of this thesis discusses the methods used to conduct the research. Through focus group interviews and qualitative content analysis of the transcripts I was able to gather and interpret data in order to present and discuss the findings of the research and thus answer the research questions. This is then followed by a final conclusion including a section, which presents the limitations of the research as well as implications for future research.

2. Literature Review

As previously mentioned, the term brands can be seen as rather ambiguous. This is why one generic definition was chosen as a way of clarifying what is meant by brands through out the paper. In light of this thesis, brands are described as a construct. More specifically, as de Chernatony and Dall'Olmo Riley (2010, p.428) explain, "a brand exists mainly by virtue of a continuous process whereby the values and expectations imbued in the brand object (product or service) are set and enacted by the firm's staff [or the brand owner] and interpreted and redefined by the consumers… through which the brand becomes the interface between the firm's activities and consumers' interpretations."

2.1 Millennials and Brands

In order to understand how consumers respond to brand marketing strategies such as those presented below (see Chapter 2.3), namely relational, experiential and collaborative marketing, it is important to recognise what the 'coming of age' generation, in particular the millennials are all about and why they are the chosen and a necessary unit of analysis. As previously mentioned the existing literature on millennials categorises this group as those born between 1980 and 2000 (Geraci & Nagy, 2004; Smith, 2011; Gurau, 2012; Tanyel et al., 2013; Williams et al., 2012; Moore, 2012). As discussed and recognised by a number of scholars, the millennials are a diverse group of consumers, exhibiting unique media consumption behaviours and brand messaging needs (Gurau, 2012; Geraci & Nagy, 2004; Tanyel et al., 2013). Although there are numerous ways of segmenting millennials, some researchers argue that this consumer group is best segmented in terms of their life-stage (Gurau, 2012; Tanyel et al., 2013). Of course, this is mostly dependent on the research goal. With this said, Gurau (2012) created three life-stages of millennials, namely, college students, young single professionals, and young married professionals. Since this research will focus on the use of new media and social media in particular, for participation, it is assumed that university aged students fit the profile better, especially as some researchers argue that this segment are 'true' digital natives (Williams et al., 2012). For this research conducted in 2015, the focus will be on university-aged millennials or as Gurau (2012) refers to as college students (born 1990-1997) ranging from the age 18 till the age of 25. It is important to note that when I refer to this segment of university aged millennials, I am referring to college students. However because college students can be of any age, I use university-aged millennials to reinforce that I am focusing on the traditional age range of university students thus between the age of 18 and 25.

In today's digital age, the millennials, also known as Generation Y, Digital Natives, and Net Generation, have matured in a time of (media) choice, optimism and empowerment, which has given them control of their media environment (Geraci & Nagy, 2004). This leads to the notion, that these consumers are therefore, more selective, and although optimistic, still critical and meticulous in their decision making process, due to the vast amount of information available to them. This market segment is often referred to as elusive, due to the perception that marketers are unable to reach and communicate with this audience efficiently (Geraci & Nagy, 2004; Smith, 2011; Gurau, 2012). This is largely due to the broadness and diversity of this consumer segment, seeing as not all millennials share the same characteristics and traits. The findings of this paper should therefore not be generalised to all millennials. Although one way of segmenting millennials is by their life stage or age range, which is the chosen method for this research, Barkley (2011) also identifies six distinct segments, which include all life stages of millennials. They are titled as hip-ennial, millennial mom, anti-millennial, gadget guru, clean and green millennial and old school millennial. There will be no deeper explanation of these segments since this study is focused on the life stage segmenting.

As mentioned above, not all millennials share the same characteristics. This idea of millennials being difficult to characterise is another reason why the life stages was chosen as a way to focus on one segment of millennials. In addition, it is important to note that within the life-stage segment of college students (Gurau, 2012), some people who fit this group may not adhere to the generic characteristic of millennials as technologically driven, or a true digital native and therefore when choosing participants for this research I focused on students who actively use social media. By narrowing down students with this characteristic, the focus was not on students alone but rather students as millennials.

There are two main conflicting perspectives regarding millennials' attitude and behaviour towards brands. On the one hand some researchers claim that millennials are generally not loyal to brands (Phillips, 2007; Greenberg, 2011), which could indicate that there is a lack of interaction and engagement between the consumer and the brand. Thus, in the case of this research I presume being loyal as a result of positive interactions with a brand. As cited in Guaru (2012), Caplan's (2005) results show that millennials care more about products, which match their personality and lifestyle rather than a specific brand. Similarly, in Phillips' (2007) study, it was found that millennials perceive themselves as rationally oriented consumers, and therefore consider price and product features as more important than brand names. In addition to these findings, Geraci and Nagy (2004) state that brand image only

becomes significant to millennials when functional features of the product or service are of high quality, which suggests that image and quality are interconnected. For this research, I plan to compare and contrast these characteristics of millennials with the characteristics I find through the discussions with students. By doing this, I will be able to realise how the selected students react and respond to brands on social media depending on their presumed needs and wants from brands, which helps in answering the second sub question.

The second perspective on the other hand, suggests that millennials are committed to brands that express social and community values, in alignment with the consumer's identity profile (Edelman/ StrategyOne, 2010; Smith, 2011; Lantos, 2014). In a study conducted by Edelman/ StrategyOne (2010) it was found that millennials acquire a powerful sense of brand awareness and loyalty, which they usually share and disseminate within their personal (online) social network. While Smith (2011, p.492) suggests that developing a brand community is a successful method to engage, and that "millennials respond to personalised [brand] messages", which could lead to brand loyalty. This leads to the common agreement within literature that the adoption of new media (or social media) by millennials and consequently brands, empowers these consumers in gaining control of which brands they want to connect with and encourages them to be proactive in interacting, participating, and co-creating with brands they love (Geraci & Nagy, 2004; Smith, 2011; Lantos, 2014). This indicates that students react and respond positively to brands they choose to connect with by actively engaging with these brands. Furthermore, considering the notion that brands play a role in constructing a consumer's identity (Ross, 1971; Elliot & Wattanasuwan, 1998; Newholm & Hopkinson, 2009; Kirmani, 2009) it is fair to assume that millennials love brands that they can relate to, in the sense that the brand image and personality reflects the consumer's identity. This can either be the consumer's personal identity, which Swaminathan, Page, and Gurhan-Canli (2007) refer to as self-concept connection or group identity sometimes referred to as social identity, such as the brand country-of-origin connection or brand communities. These arguments or perspectives of scholars will be evaluated during focus group interviews in order to see if the respondents agree that brands participate in their lives through building a community, which they can relate to.

However, not all millennials voluntarily participate or co-create. Therefore it is suggested by literature that these consumers need some type of recognition or rewarding system in order to maintain their participation (Aggarwal, 2004; Lantos, 2014). Building on the notion of consumer empowerment, it is argued that the total control and freedom, which consumers have today can also lead to negative outcomes for businesses, in the sense that

social media can be used to express negative word of mouth (NWOM) about a brand (Smith, 2011; Van Noort & Willemsen, 2012). Seeing as this content can easily be shared with a mass audience, unhappy customers who are considered influential within their social network can jeopardise and even damage a brands reputation. This aspect of the literature suggests that in answering the second sub question, participants in my study may react or respond negatively to the social media use by brands.

For this study, both perspectives will be taken into account, however, I assume that the second perspective will be more prevalent, since it aims to discover the responses and reactions of consumers to (digital) marketing strategies aiming at creating consumer engagement, and a long-term relationship with consumers.

2.2 Consumer (brand) Engagement and social media

For brands to be involved in and participate in the lives of consumers is to say that the brand is engaging with the consumer and vice versa. Consumer brand engagement has become a popular concept within academia and practitioners, but what does it really mean? What are the different levels of engagement, and how are brands trying to engage with their customers?

Hollebeek (2011, p.565) defines customer brand engagement as "the level of a customer's cognitive, emotional and behavioural investment in specific brand interactions." In addition to this, Mollen and Wilson (2010, p.923) discuss 'brand engagement' in online settings, and characterise consumer engagement as "the cognitive and affective commitment to an active relationship with the brand as personified" by online platforms envisioned to communicate brand value. Both definitions suggest that engagement goes beyond simple involvement due to the interactive relationship-building factor of engagement. This led to Brodie Illic, Juric, and Hollebeek's (2011), definition of consumer engagement in a virtual brand community such as a brand's Facebook page, as involving explicit interactive practices between members of the community (consumers) and the brand. They found that positively engaged consumers led to higher levels of consumer loyalty, satisfaction, empowerment, connection, emotional bonding, trust and commitment. This may imply that millennials respond positively to brands' use of social media. Using these terms and in relation to the second sub question, this study aims to reveal the reactions and responses of millennials to brand's social media approach.

The rapid growth of social media usage by consumers, and in particular millennials has challenged traditional marketing strategies, which has led to many businesses feeling

pressured to participate on social media seeing as this is where their targeted customers are prevalent. Studies show that with the Internet, social networking sites and interactive technologies, millennials are enabled and inspired to be more active in the formation and development of brands (Sawhney, Verona, & Prandelli, 2005; Smith, 2011). Through Electronic Word Of Mouth [eWOM] (positive or negative), it is argued that this generation wants to contribute and be involved in all aspects of a brand (Van Noort &Willemsen, 2011; Chu & Kim, 2011). This is why it is important for marketers to adjust their social media strategies in order to positively engage these vocal consumers (Gensler et al, 2013). Based on this perspective, it is assumed that students will be enthusiastic during the group discussions on brands, and possibly show high levels of engagement with brands through the use of eWOM, which means that they may respond positively (or negatively) to brands' use of social media by being active consumers.

Fournier and Avery (2011) on the other hand think critically about this general agreement in literature that brands using social media will positively engage consumers. They argue that when brands started entering social media, their efforts were ignored, rejected, and exploited. More specifically, companies or brands that joined social networking sites, such as Facebook, in the hopes of developing relationships with consumers, noticed that instead of gaining a positive relationship, consumers saw this 'invasion' in their private space as an opportunity to look for price deals and as a place for complaints (Fournier & Avery, 2011). This line of thought is found in a study conducted by IBM Institute of Business Value, who found that consumers following brands on social media do this not to build a relationship and engage with the brand but instead to gain tangible value (Baird & Parasnis, 2011). For example, some companies use extrinsic benefits such as discounts, loyalty points, or raffles as a way to engage consumers in their social network and to create positive behaviours such as Positive Word Of Mouth (PWOM) and feedback about the brand (Wirtz et al., 2013). It will be interesting to find out whether students think this way about brands on social media or if they actually care about building a relationship with the brand. In this manner, I will be comparing my results from student's opinions and stories with the perspectives and expectations of the aforementioned literature.

The notion of social Customer Relationship Management (CRM), or as some refer to as webcare has become popular among scholars and practitioners. Social CRM is defined as a business strategy based on engaging consumers via social media in order to build trust and brand loyalty (Greenberg, 2010; Woodcock, Green, & Starkey, 2011). This strategy is most efficient when consumers use social media platforms as a means for complaints and Negative

Word Of Mouth (NWOM). Van Noort and Willemsen (2011) differentiate between proactive and reactive webcare, characterising the proactive approach as when brands unnecessarily respond to NWOM, and the reactive approach as when a brand only responds to NWOM when pushed to do so by consumers. Overall, the authors see consumer complaints as a way of engaging with a brand, and therefore suggest that webcare positively influences consumers' perceptions of a brand. This approach which brands use on social media for consumer engagement and satisfaction will be discussed and evaluated by students in order to compare the positive expectations of researchers with the actual opinions and experiences of the students' interaction with a brand.

It is however, important to note that users of social media are not necessarily customers of a brand, and therefore when consumers voluntarily choose to associate themselves with a brand by 'liking' the brand on Facebook or by 'following' the brand on Twitter, they form a type of online community (Ang, 2010). The process of actively seeking a brand can be seen as a first stage of building a connection and engaging with a brand. Ang (2010) describes four major pillars in community (or customer) relationship management, including, connectivity, conversations, content creation, and collaboration. These pillars help in understanding the different levels of consumer engagement, in the sense that once a community is formed around a brand, the amount of participation and engagement is increased. For this study, these pillars will be used as way to identify the responses of students towards brand's social media strategy for consumer engagement, which helps in answering the second sub question.

Furthermore, as Wirtz et al. (2013) suggests, consumer's engagement with a brand can range from extremely low to extremely high. Therefore it would be interesting to find out what levels of engagement millennials have with brands, in order to see if brands are successfully participating in these consumers' lives.

2.3 Three key marketing strategies for consumer engagement

There are three main marketing strategies, which lead to or result in the development of consumer engagement. Cova and Cova (2012) identify three key marketing approaches, which influence a consumer's relationship, engagement and experience with a brand, namely, relationship marketing, experiential marketing and collaborative marketing. All these strategies are to be reflected on and evaluated with participants of this research. These strategies will help guide the research and in particular the analysis process for answering the

two sub-questions, which in turn will aid in analyzing the data for the main research question. More specifically, in the case of the main research question, these strategies will be used as a reference if these topics come up during the focus groups.

Through focus group interviews it is the assumption that these marketing strategies could be brought up and discussed by the respondents without realising they are referring to a specific strategy. Indeed, the questions asked during the interview are somewhat based on the idea behind these concepts, but this will be further discussed in the operationalization of the data collection method in Chapter 3. With this said, these branding strategies will be used for a comparison between academic literature and actual experiences and relationship stories of students. When referring to the shift in marketing approaches, I will assume the present strategies (relationship, experiential and collaborative) with a focus on but not limited to the use of new media, to adhere to the consumer segment of university aged millennials. This line of thought is supported by the existing literature, which have classified these millennials as a tech savvy, relationship oriented, interaction driven, and experience seeking group of consumers (Geraci & Nagy, 2004; Smith, 2011; Tanyel et al., 2013; Gurau, 2012; Moore, 2012; Lantos, 2014).

2.3.1 Relational Marketing

The relationship marketing approach uses financial, social, and structural bonds, which are together categorised as relational bonds, in order to reduce the chances of customers ending a relationship with a brand (Berry, 1995; Seiders, Voss, Grewal, & Godfrey, 2005; Chen & Chiu 2009). In his work, Berry (1995) characterizes financial bonds through short term buying motivations such as the use of discounts. Social and structural bonds can be related to the use of new media, since social bonds are created by providing personalized services and structural bonds by focusing on services that add value and increases customers' efficiency (Berry, 1995; Huang et al., 2014). These relationship-marketing approaches will be of use to this study, as I consider this as an important way in which brands participate in the lives of millennials. Results collected from my research will allow for me to identify certain marketing initiatives, which may be named or discussed by the participants.

Developing relational bonds with consumers has been extensively proven to increase trust, satisfaction, commitment and brand loyalty (Aggarwal, 2004; Huang et al., 2014; Chen & Chiu, 2009). In a recent study done by Huang et al. (2014), it was found that financial bonds had little to no effect on brand relationship quality and customer loyalty, while social

and structural bonds were found to be significant in creating a sense of community, and therefore increasing the relationship quality and level of loyalty. With regards to customer satisfaction, which is also important in the sense that it can lead to having a positive relationship with a brand. Chen and Chiu (2009) found that financial bond is more effective for short-term customer satisfaction, while structural bond is more effective for long-term customer satisfaction. For this research, I will use these three categories of relational bonds as a reference to guide me through the interpretation stage during data analysis, by comparing this literature to the answers given by students.

Considering the assumptions in academia that millennials are a multimedia, multitasking, inconsistent and unpredictable group of consumers, it becomes difficult for consumer behaviour researchers to characterise their behaviour for a longer period of time (Cova & Cova, 2012; Moore, 2012; Tanyel et al., 2013). This is why companies found it important to join the social media world, as this way they are able to track their consumers, react and respond at a faster pace, and through this, maintain a continuous and in some cases, strong relationship with their consumers (Moore, 2012; William et al., 2012). For this reason, I characterise social media as an important platform in which millennials use to interact and build relationships with brands. So in other words, it is assumed that students are aware that brands use social media as a channel for participating in lives of students.

For a clearer understanding on the motivations behind a consumers love or willingness to interact and create a relationship with a brand, I use Fournier's (1998, p.363) brand relationship quality construct, which include, "affective and socioemotive attachments (love/passion and self-connection), behavioural ties (interdependence and commitment), and supportive cognitive beliefs (intimacy and brand partner quality)." In other words, these six aspects are seen as reasons for a consumer to want a relationship with a brand and results in creating strong brand relationships. This construct will be used as a reference when analysing the relationships university-aged millennials have with brands online, seeing as this is a more effective and efficient way of consumer brand interaction (Kietzmann, Hermkens & McCarthy, 2011).

2.3.2 Experiential Marketing

The shift from traditional marketing to experiential marketing has led to the common belief that consumers can have a relationship with a brand, before and beyond purchasing decision.

Schmitt (1999) differentiates between traditional and experiential marketing by identifying the four different characteristics of the two marketing strategies. For this research, two specific characteristics from both perspectives are identified, as these two are most relevant in regards to the consumer perspective.

While traditional marketing is characterised by a substantial focus on product/ service functional features and benefits, which is based on performance characteristics. Experiential marketing focuses on the customer experience, which offers sensory, emotional, cognitive, behavioural and relational values that substitute functional values (Schmitt, 1999). It is argued however, that with experiential marketing, the functional features are also recognised as significant values since this is perceived as a given in the minds of consumers (Cova & Cova, 2012). Similarly in Moosylvania's (2015) study, it was found that high quality products matter most to millennials. When referring to the marketers' perception of the consumer, traditional marketing practices view customers as rational decision makers, while in addition to this perception, experiential marketers view customers as both emotionally and rationally driven (Schmitt, 1999). This is in line with Pine and Gilmore's (1998) claim, which states that 'new consumers' or in the case of this paper, millennials, favour being engaged in consumption experiences instead of simply purchasing products/services. Millennials are all about the experiencing of a brand, therefore brands attempt to participate in their lives through creating an experience for them. This logic will be evaluated and compared between results of the research and literature on the case.

Looking at the notion of experiential marketing from a virtual and online perspective, a number of scholars advocate that the advent of web 2.0 and its interactive features, allows for online experiential marketing to create an enhanced (electronic) environmental experience, which engages customers and stimulates an emotional response through visual and audio cues (Lou, Chen, Ching, & Liu, 2011; Schmitt & Zarantonello, 2013). This suggests that brands use new media to create an experience for students, in order to participate in their lives.

In order to manage experience, Schmitt (1999) created five strategic experiential modules, in which he suggests marketers to handle as integrated experiences. Similarly, but through a digital and online perspective, Luo et al. (2011) formulated five elements in virtual experiential marketing (VEM). Both studies recognised the importance of creating sensory experiences (*sense*) as one of their five elements. On a more traditional level, Schmitt (1999) refers to all five human senses, in particular, sight, sound, touch, taste and smell, while on a more contemporary note, Lou et al. (2011) focuses on the senses we experience in a

computerised, online setting, which are sight and sound (e.g. images, videos, colours, animations, text, etc). Schmitt (1999) further suggests the importance of creating affective experiences (*feel*), which he describes as a consumer's personal feelings and emotions towards a brand. Correspondingly, Lou et al. (2011) advocate the importance of an online interaction between the brand and the consumer, which also leads to arousing emotions and feelings toward the brand.

Moreover, establishing creative cognitive problem-solving experiences (*think*), physical experiences, behaviours and lifestyles (*act*), as well as social identity experiences that result from a brand relating to a particular group or culture (*relate*), are all vital components of experiential marketing (Schmitt, 1999). By implementing important lessons from conventional experiential marketing, Lou et al. (2011) argues that experiencing pleasure through online means, can lead to positive attitudes and behaviour towards a brand. Moreover, experiencing flow is described as when consumers are drawn into an online platform's navigation and activities, which is facilitated by interactivity, and leads to an exploratory behaviour. Lastly, building an online community relationship with consumers helps in creating a sense of trust and belonging with a brand, which in turn can enhance the experience with the brand (Lou et al., 2011).

These modules are important for this study, as they will assist me in identifying when students are describing experiential marketing as a strategy, which works or doesn't work with them. They may bring this up without being explicit, as they may not know that this is what the brand is trying to do.

Table 1. Traditional vs. Virtual Experiential Marketing

Traditional - Schmitt (1999)	Virtual - Lou et al. (2011)
SENSE	SENSE
FEEL	INTERACTION

THINK	PLEASURE
ACT	FLOW
RELATE	COMMUNITY
	REALATIONSHIP

2.3.3 Collaborative Marketing

With the common belief of millennials being an active consumer group (Bruns, 2008; Van Noort & Willemsen, 2012), it is fair to assume that the collaborative marketing approach is an effective way of engaging and interacting with these consumers. According to Cova and Cova (2012) the focal point in collaborative marketing is that consumers are viewed as potential collaborators, in the sense that the goal has shifted from marketing to consumers to marketing with consumers. This means that there is a blurred line between consumers and producers, and thus, creating value for a brand, becomes a collaborative process (Prahalad & Ramaswamy, 2004; Gensler et al., 2013).

Examples of this co-creation of value are portrayed in Alvin Toffler's (1980) concept of prosumers (producing consumers) and the advent of eWOM, but more recently the use of social media and online reviews. Due to the fast paced, real time, and interactive two way communication that web 2.0 has created, consumers are now able to easily access information and publicly discuss opinions about brands (O'Reilly, 2005; Duan, Gu, & Whinston, 2008). While some scholars see the positive aspects of eWOM for consumer empowerment and engagement, others are critical and sceptical about eWOM being beneficial for brands. Studies have shown that online reviews affect the attitudes and in some cases, consequently the behaviours of consumers towards a brand (Hu, Liu & Zhang, 2008; Duan et al., 2008; Doh and Hwang, 2009). It will be interesting to see how students react and possibly respond to brand's attempts of including the students in the branding process. Millennials, according to literature, are willing to participate with brands. However, the reality may prove to be different.

Seeing as consumer generated online review platforms are not created by the brand itself, it becomes challenging for companies to control the negative evaluations, and opinions about their brand. This is why it is important for companies to be on social media and in particular social networking sites, so they can listen and respond to what consumers online have to say about their brand. In fact, Van Noort & Willemsen (2011) discuss the notion of

Negative word of mouth (NWOM), and found that consumers value a brand more positively when the brand responds to a complaint rather than when they are silent. This suggests that consumers expect and want to interact and engage with brands on social media. Whether through a complaint, an inquiry, or simply to let the brand know they love it. This aspect will be discussed during the interviews with students and the results will be compared to the literature.

Moreover, Fournier and Avery (2011) suggest that branding has become an open source activity in the sense that their value is co-created since anyone can have a say regarding issues of the brand. While brands struggle to influence consumers' perspectives on social media, consumers learned how to use and leverage brands for their own purposes. This can lead to the creation of alter brands, which can be linked to the sharing economy, in the sense that "alter brands exist mainly to serve the common collective goals of community members, [therefore] the community creates value by generating its own concepts, services, relationships, etc. without interaction with the company" (Cova & Cova, 2012, p.162). Although when consumers are not happy with a brand, it can lead to the creation of counter brands, which "exist mainly as a reaction from members of the brand community that are frustrated with the company's behaviour" (Cova & Cova, 2012, p.162). It would be valuable for my research, to see whether brands on social media participate more in the lives of students through collaborative marketing, experiential or relational, depending on which strategies students appreciate and find engaging. Also, to see whether students are interested in collaborating or advocating for/against a brand, and to what extent they will go in expressing these feelings.

With the use of literature on how brands want to participate and build a relationship with consumers, this study will compare the best practices of the aforementioned (online) marketing strategies (relational, experiential, and collaborative) with the actuality and reality of how millennials evaluate these strategies. Considering the notion of the uninvited brand (Fournier & Avery, 2011), and the notion of sCRM or webcare, it is interesting to find out whether millennials appreciate and participate in marketing efforts for consumer engagement.

This research aims to discover how university aged millennials understand the role of brands in their everyday lives. In particular, the goal is to investigate and understand the perspectives and experiences of university-aged millennials with brands on social media. This led to the research question: **How do university-aged millennials perceive and describe the role brands play in their everyday lives through social media?** More specifically, this research aims to answer this question by understanding the perspectives and opinions of

students' relationships and experiences with brands, as well as their attitudes and behaviours towards social media strategies used by brands. Therefore, the two sub questions below will help make the research question more feasible.

Sub question 1: *How do students' experience with brands compare with literature on brand marketing strategies and consumer engagement?*

Sub question 2: *How do students react and respond to the approach that brands use on social media?*

3. Methodology

This section of the paper presents the methods and approach taken to answer the research question and sub-questions. In the research design an explanation of the reasons why a qualitative approach is best fit for this research is given. This is then followed by an in depth discussion on the data collection method of focus group interviews, including the sampling method used, and its benefits in strengthening the outcome of the research. Before presenting the approach taken for the qualitative content analysis of the data, the process in gathering

data through group interviews is operationalized, including the different concepts it touches on.

3.1 Research Design

For this research a qualitative approach was taken in order to find out how university aged millennials perceive and describe the role that brands play in their everyday lives through social media. In qualitative research the goal is usually to provide an in-depth and interpreted understanding of the social world (Ritchie & Lewis, 2013). More specifically, the researcher studies people's social and material situations, including their experiences, and perspectives. As this research is focused on the perceptions and experiences of university-aged millennials in regards to brand marketing strategies, it is necessary for a qualitative research method to be used. In addition, qualitative methods aim to discover, describe and interpret human behaviour (Lindlof & Taylor, 2011), and in the case of this research, the behaviours and attitudes of university students towards brands was examined and evaluated. In order to answer the research question "**how do university aged millennials perceive and describe the role brands play in their everyday lives through social media**" two sub questions were formulated as this allows for a better understanding of the research goal.

Sub question 1: *How do students' experience with brands compare with literature on (online) brand marketing strategies and consumer engagement?*

Sub question 2: *How do students react and respond to the approach that brands use on social media?*

3.2 Data collection method

The chosen qualitative method to collect data was in the form of focus group interviews. According to Babbie (2011) focus group interviews is commonly used by market researchers in order to explore consumers' perceptions of a product or a type of commodity. Ironically, this research will use focus groups to ask 'consumers' to evaluate and discuss brands and their marketing strategies for consumer engagement. Calder (1977) describes focus groups based on the type of knowledge they produce. Knowledge is categorised into everyday knowledge and scientific knowledge, where everyday knowledge is recognised from the terms and

language people use to make meaning of their everyday world, and scientific knowledge refers to the use of numerical measurement to test constructs and hypotheses (Calder, 1977). In the case of this research the knowledge produced through the focus groups can be seen as everyday knowledge. This is partly because the participants of the group discussions are a not necessarily experts in the field of marketing and therefore their terminology and language use in making sense of their thoughts and opinions, responses and reactions to brand marketing strategies are not often based on scientific measurements. In addition, focus groups can be conducted in different approaches and because this research was exploratory in its approach, it further explains why everyday knowledge was the outcome rather than scientific knowledge. According to Calder (1977), the knowledge generated by exploratory focus groups is everyday knowledge, which he describes as prescientific, in order to differentiate the everyday knowledge generated in a phenomenological approach. More specifically, "the rationale of exploratory focus groups is that considering a problem in terms of everyday explanation will somehow facilitate a subsequent scientific approach" (Calder, 1977, p. 356). This means that with the findings of this research, there is a possibility of a follow up or extended research that could take a quantitative and thus scientific approach.

Contrary to the phenomenological approach where the rationale is simply to understand the everyday experience of the consumer, the exploratory approach aims to generate scientific constructs and to validate them against the consumer's everyday experience. In addition, the exploratory approach can be adopted in order to compare scientific with everyday explanations. This research follows this line of thought, as in order to answer the sub questions it uses data collected from the focus groups to compare with existing literature and concepts on brand marketing strategies and consumer engagement. This is done by using predefined codes based on the relevant concepts presented in chapter 2. Calder (1977) calls this comparison relationship as cross-validating scientific explanations against everyday ones, and argues that if these are not coherent then a choice must be made and in many cases the consumer's explanation is chosen rather than the theoretical hypotheses.

Seeing as the research question investigates the personal opinions and experiences of university students, it is logical to assume that having interviews will lead to the best results. According to Lindlof and Taylor (2011), interviews are conducted in order to understand experiences and perspectives of participants, to gather information about the unobservable as well as verifying information obtained elsewhere. In the case of this research, the aim is not just to explore the experiences and opinions but also to accept or challenge the existing literature on brand marketing strategies and consumer engagement.

So far the reasons presented for using focus groups are similar to reasons for using individual interviews. However, it is important to further distinguish why focus groups are more effective for this study instead of individual interviews. Ritchie and Lewis (2013, p.37), suggest that since group discussions allow members to hear from others, it provides "an opportunity for reflection and refinement, which can deepen respondents' insights into their own circumstances, attitudes or behaviour." This perspective on focus groups is further supported by Frey and Fontana (1991), who argue that focus groups can stimulate recall and opinion elaboration. This aspect of focus group interviews will be useful and valuable for my research project. In addition, Babbie (2011) claims that with focus groups, the group dynamics often bring out aspects of the discussed topic, which wouldn't have been expected by the researcher, nor would it have arose from individual interviews. This is another reason why focus groups prove to be much more beneficial for this study. Moreover, when having interviews or rather discussions in a group setting, participants are able to gain feedback on their views and respond to differing views (Frey & Fontana, 1991). Being a university aged millennial myself, as the researcher, I am be able to experience their stories in the same way as the participants through interaction, which helped increase my chances of further understanding the underlying meanings in their responses. Similarly, as Lederman (1990) argues, data generated in focus groups are usually richer and deeper than data collected in one on one interviews. This is partially because focus groups allow the researcher to observe groups in interaction with one another, therefore creating interactive data, which cannot be gathered in individual interviews.

3.2.1 Sampling Method

The focus group method involves the use of in-depth, group interviews through which participants are selected purposefully, even though they are not essentially representative of a specific population (Lederman, 1990). As previously mentioned, the focus of this research is not to generalise the findings to all university aged millennials, due to the distinct and diverse nature of this consumer segment. A certain level of homogeneity in focus group participants is important because people who share similarities are assumed to give strength to one another's individual perspective (Lederman, 1990). Additionally, it is argued that group members will be able share more honestly with others they perceive to be like themselves rather than those they think will not understand them (Lederman, 1990). In the case of this

research, what the participants have in common is their education level (university or HBO – university of applied sciences), age range (18-25), and active use of social media. Moreover when recruiting the participants I made sure that each participant were friends or in acquaintance with at least one or more of the other participants. This way I would avoid the risk of participants feeling uncomfortable in expressing their views with people they do not know. Still, it is important to note that the latter may lead to some limitations, as there may not be enough variety in the data if many of the participants in one group are close friends.

I was able to conduct 6 focus groups with 5-8 participants per group, depending on the amount of respondents that agreed to participate. The focus groups took place between March and May. Although the initial plan was to spend one month on the interviews, it was difficult to plan the group interviews because not every participant could be present on the specific day and time in the same location. So in order to have this happen, the planning was constantly changing until everyone could agree on a specific day, time and location. Table 2 presents an overview of the participants and their study background. It was important to clarify what each participant is studying because it gave me a sense of his or her preconceived knowledge on certain discussions. For instance, students who were studying in the field of communication and media, marketing or business were more aware of certain marketing strategies on social media, and therefore could easily understand terms such as connection, interaction or having a relationship with a brand. Whereas students studying in other fields needed to be probed to understand the scope of the question as well as answer the questions as it was intended.

Table 2: Overview of focus group participants and their study background

Focus Groups	Participants/ gender			Study background
1	Jackson	(m)	-	Communication and Media
	Ashley	(f)	-	Communication and Media
	Annabelle	(f)	-	Marketing Management
	Anton	(f)	-	General Management
	Chuck	(m)	-	Business and Economics
	Dolores	(f)	-	Communication and Media
2	Louise	(f)	-	English Language and Literature

	Phillip	(m) -	Communication and Media
	Frank	(m) -	Business and Economics
	Lauren	(f) -	Communication and Media
	Amanda	(f) -	Communication and Media
3	Cheryl	(f) -	Nano-biology
	Sander	(m) -	Financial Investment
	Andrew	(m) -	Financial Investment
	Olivier	(m) -	Business and Economics
	Angelo	(m) -	Business and Economics
4	Dee	(f) -	Innovation Management
	Marnell	(f) -	Communication and Media
	Jason	(m) -	Communication and Media
	Nora	(f) -	Communication and Media
	Michel	(m) -	Media and Entertainment
	Selma	(f) -	General Management
5	Isabelle	(f) -	Communication and Media
	Phil	(m) -	Information Technology
	Ayanna	(f) -	Psychology
	Bruna	(f) -	Fine Arts
	Rachel	(f) -	Law
	Connor	(m) -	Business Management
6	Tessel	(f) -	Cultural Anthropology
	Chioma	(f) -	Psycho-biology
	Gillian	(f) -	Commercial Economics
	Omer	(m) -	Business Administration
	Natalie	(f) -	Communication and Media

The unit of analysis was university aged millennials, which in the case of this research refers to university students between the ages of 18 and 25. The reason for focusing on this group is because as previously discussed, while some scholars view this market segment as elusive, disloyal and unengaged, others see them as rather engaged and enthusiastic about connecting and collaborating with a brand. Additionally, as it is generally agreed by scholars

that this market segment are technologically driven, it only seems fair to focus on them especially when it comes to the use of new media in brand marketing strategies. Researching this group of consumers will allow for a better understanding on the motives, attitudes and behaviours of these consumers regarding their relationships and experiences with brands.

With focus groups, the respondents are selected based on their relevance to the topic, which is being studied (Lederman, 1990; Babbie, 2011). Most of the participants were recruited through Facebook, as this reassured me that they are active on social media, and therefore justifies their relevance to the study. As with most qualitative studies the sample does not need to be statistically representative, and therefore non-probability sampling methods were preferred. For this study, seeing as the criteria for choosing participants is not extensive, a purposive sampling method as well as snowball sampling method was chosen.

Snowball sampling was used when it became difficult to find more participants for a group. When this was the case, I asked people from each focus group to spread the word, so to ask their friends if they would be willing to participate, in order for me to get more respondents. Purposive sampling is when the units which are to be examined are chosen based on the researchers judgment about which ones will be the most useful or representative (Babbie, 2011). So in this case, students between 18 and 25 years old, who (actively) follow or like a brand on social media (ex: Facebook, Twitter, Instagram) are the most representative based on literature.

It is important to note that I do not intend to solely focus on the three social media platforms listed above, but put these down as examples because of their popularity. With this said, I presume students to be active on these social media platforms; however, I did not dismiss participants if they follow a brand on a different social media platform. This is because I assume that the decision to follow a brand on any social media platform is related to how often the student uses that social media. Perhaps there might be some differences in the motives of following a brand on different social media, which may be interesting to discover.

3.2.3 Procedure

The group interviews took place in an informal setting of a home. Focus group 1, 2, and 5 were held in the household of one or more (some participants lived together) of the participants. While Focus group 3, 4, and 6 were held in my household. Making the decision to conduct the interviews in a home was based on a couple of reasons. First on a practical note it was easier for the participants to meet at a location convenient for all of them. So for

example with focus group 2, I had to go Utrecht since all the participants lived in the same student house in Utrecht. Second, I felt that having the interviews at someone's house would avoid noise interference while recording the interviews. If the interviews were done in a café for example there is always the possibility that the recorder would catch up on other sounds or conversations happening in the café. Lastly, having an informal setting in someone's house allowed for the participants to feel more relaxed during the interviews and therefore speak more freely and openly on their experiences.

Before each interview, still in the recruiting process, I sent a short description on what the discussion would be about and the aim of my thesis, so that the participants could be aware of what they would be discussing and if they were eligible to do so. At the start of the interview I asked if everyone was ok with being recorded as well as whether they would like to have pseudonyms or were fine with me using their first names. Most participants agreed with these terms, very few wanted pseudonyms, not for privacy reasons but simply because they thought it would be fun. Regardless, I needed to respect their wishes and therefore used these pseudonyms when reporting the results. All group discussions were between 30 to 60 minutes. Since the 2nd and 3rd focus groups were between 30-40 minutes, I decided to do 6 interviews instead of 5, just to be sure that I would have enough data.

3.2.4 Operationalization

In order to understand the role which brands play in the everyday lives of university aged millennials through social media, it is important to understand how brands participate or connect with these consumers on social media. This is why the two sub-questions referring to (online) brand marketing strategies and its effects on consumer engagement are needed. It is difficult to make claims about brands playing certain roles in our lives without understanding and investigating their efforts and approaches to creating consumer engagement. If the consumers are not interacted with or engaged in any way then claiming that the brands play a role in their lives would be unjustifiable and an unreliable argument.

Using literature on brand marketing strategies and consumer engagement, this study partially took on a comparative approach, in the sense that data collected from the participants was compared to literature on the given concepts, relational, experiential and collaborative marketing for consumer engagement. In this way, the research results will either support or challenge expectations of marketers and academics, making it socially, professionally, and academically significant.

The group discussions

The interview questions were organized in a way to be able to directly and clearly answer the sub-questions and consequently answer the main research question. The questions were created using some concepts discussed in the literature review as guidelines. However, as I did not want to limit the discussion to only the perceptions of consumers on (social media) marketing strategies of brands, I made sure to make the questions more broad and feasible for the participants to answer. Also, as I wanted to avoid using specific terms, which exposed the marketing strategy, I tried to make the questions as open as possible. A preliminary focus group was conducted in order to test how receptive people were to the questions. As I found that the participants were very receptive I also used the data from this group in my analysis. The first part of the interview was structured as an introduction to the topic of brands on social media. I started off with the simple question of what brands they followed on social media and why? When I noticed that some participants were struggling in remembering the brands they follow or like on social media, I asked what they considered to be brands? This allowed for more input and a discussion between the participants on whether they agreed on each other's perceptions on what brands are or not. It also helped participants who were convinced they did not follow any brands, realize that brands could be more than just a product based company. The participants could therefore feed off of each other's ideas and responses, which as previously mentioned is a positive outcome with focus group interviews.

After the participants were able to mention a few brands they followed, I asked what about that brand makes them interesting to follow? With this question what I tried to get out of the participants is basically what the brand does on their social media that the participant likes. In this way I ask a rather open question, with an underlying and preconceived expectation that they will touch on concepts such as (virtual) experiential marketing with regards to audio visual cues leading to the experience of pleasure (Lou et al., 2011), as well as relational marketing in regards to financial bonds as a way to connect with the consumer (Huang et al., 2014; Chen & Chiu, 2009). In an attempt to push more in the direction of my research goal, and to further dive into the concept of experiential marketing as well as collaborative marketing such as co-creation of brand value, I also asked more specific questions such as, "have you ever participated in online (or offline) activities produced by brands?" and if so tell me more about this. In most cases this discussion led to the notion of

interaction and with this I could extract information on relational marketing and relational bonds such as structural and social bonds (Huang et al., 2014; Chen & Chiu, 2009).

To find out more on the opinions of the participants there were a couple of follow up questions asking how their experience or interaction with the brand shaped their perception of the brand. The notion of social customer relationship management or webcare (Greenberg, 2010; Woodcock, Green, & Starkey, 2011; Van Noort & Willemsen, 2011) was another focus of the interview questions in which I asked the participants whether they have used social media for customer service reasons and how this experience affected their relationship with the brand. The interview ended with a broad question asking what brands they would recommend or not recommend to others based on the experiences they've had with the brand online (on social media) or offline. With this they were given the freedom to discuss what they like or don't like about certain brands.

It is important to note that I am aware that since millennials value the opinions of their peers, there may be a chance of not having diverse results, due to one or two participants dominating the discussion. During the focus group interviews I found that this was the case in some groups, however, I was able to avoid or rather reduce this risk by making sure I gave each participant an equal chance of initiating his or her experiences and opinions.

As this is a qualitative research there are some questions raised about the reliability and validity of the research. In regards to the reliability of the focus group interviews, Silverman (2011) suggests that these can be seen as reliable when the questions are clearly understood by each participant in the same way, and that the answers can be coded without the possibility of uncertainty. These notions can be achieved in a number of means, such as "thorough pre-testing of interview schedules, thorough training of interviewers, as much use as possible of fixed-choice answers, and inter-rater reliability checks on the coding of answers to open ended questions" (Silverman, 2011, p.365). As previously noted, a preliminary group interview was held in order to check how receptive people were to the questions. In addition, although all questions were open ended, a few of them had fixed choice answers in the sense that although the answers may be different, they all had a similar focus. For example, the opening question of what brands the participants followed led to different answers of the brands and why they follow them but in principle all participants named a brand and a reason for following that brand. Moreover, I used reliability checks on the coding of the answers by asking another student who shared the same supervisor as me to check the interpretations of my data into codes, in order to reduce the level of bias and subjectivity in my interpretations.

Silverman (2011, p.365) also suggests that interviews should also satisfy the criterion of low inference descriptor and this can be done by "tape recording the interviews, carefully transcribing these recordings on your own, and presenting long extracts of data in the research report." All these factors were acted on for this research. As previously mentioned, a recording was made for each group interview, and these were carefully and manually transcribed by me. As seen in the results section, long extracts of the data from the interviews were placed as quotes, which further strengthens the reliability and consequently the validity of the findings.

Furthermore, Moisander and Valtonen (2006) as cited in Silverman (2011), suggest two ways to satisfy the reliability criteria in qualitative research. They argue that "by making the research process transparent through describing the research strategy and data analysis methods in a sufficiently detailed manner", is one way in which the research can be seen as reliable (Moisander & Valtonen, 2006 as cited in Silverman, 2011, p.360). They also suggest that focusing on theoretical transparency by being explicit on the theoretical stance of the research and its relation to the interpretations also helps satisfy the reliability criteria. These suggestions of reliability in qualitative research were adopted for this research, and are briefly discussed in the next section of data analysis method.

The problem with validity in qualitative research is that the aim is not to generalise the findings to the whole population and therefore it becomes difficult to claim validity since if the research is done again, the results may not be similar. In the case of this research, considering that millennials are seen as a diverse group of consumers, it would be risky to claim that if this research was done again with different participants within the group of university aged millennials, the findings would be the same. This is why I stress through the paper that the findings are not to be generalised and why the issue of validity is tackled reliability criteria such as transparency and rigor in the method of analysis and reporting.

3.3 Data analysis method

After the actual interviews have taken place, the recorded data was transcribed manually on a computer and then analysed through a qualitative content analysis. The type of content analysis used for this research was in the form of a thematic analysis. Hsieh and Shannon (2005) suggest that there are three different approaches to qualitative content analysis:

conventional, directed, and summative content analysis. This study takes on the conventional as well as the directed approach to analyse the transcribed data. According to Hsieh and Shannon (2005), conventional analysis is commonly used when the aim of the study is to describe a phenomenon, and this style of content analysis is typically used when existing theory or literature on a phenomenon is limited. Therefore in this manner the coding categories originate directly from the transcribed data, making it an inductive approach to thematic content analysis (Elo & Kyngäs, 2008). For this study, considering the literature gap in consumer perspectives on the role brands play in their everyday lives through social media, using the conventional or inductive approach to data analysis prove to be the appropriate method. As for the directed approach, this is usually used when existing theory or prior research about a phenomenon is available but would benefit from further description (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005). In this manner the analysis would take a deductive approach by using findings or concepts from previous research as guidance for initial codes, and so in this sense, the analysis is operationalized on the basis of prior knowledge (Elo & Kyngäs, 2008). This approach is used for answering the sub-questions of this study since the aim is to compare and contrast the effects of brand marketing strategies and approaches on social media found in existing literature to the actual findings of the research. More specifically, in this case, the effects refer to the second sub question as it demonstrates the reactions and responses of the participants, while the comparison of the marketing strategies refer to the first sub question and therefore in this way both questions are interconnected.

Thus, in order to answer the research question I used a hybrid process of deductive and inductive thematic analysis (Fereday & Muir-Cochrane, 2006). In particular, for the sub-questions the codes were mainly concept driven and therefore predetermined, while the main research question would be answered through data driven codes and categories. Using this hybrid process is argued to improve the validity and reliability of the research as it contributes to the rigor of the research. For both methods of analysis, prior to the initial coding stage I read and re-read through the transcripts in order to familiarize myself with the data (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

3.3.1 Deductive thematic analysis

As previously mentioned a deductive thematic analysis was used in order to answer the sub-questions of this study. The process of analysis and category/theme application is more structured than with inductive analysis, in the sense that I already had predefined codes in

mind before the initial coding stage of analysis (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005). Using the brand marketing strategies of relational, experiential and collaborative for consumer engagement, I started the coding process by reading and highlighting texts, which on first impression seems to represent or indicate the categories within the strategies, such as the three relational bonds, financial, social, and structural (Huang et al., 2014). Because this research aims to identify the strategy use on social media, for experiential marketing the focus was more on the virtual aspect. Using the literature as a guide for coding, the open codes generated from the data were grouped in two categories, namely, visual and audio cues, and interaction.

With collaborative marketing although using the same coding process, the initial 3 categories of eWOM, online reviews, and marketing with consumers which were formulated through axial coding were very similar to each other, and therefore the decision was made to combine them as one main category named co-creation of value, placing the 3 initial categories as subcategories (Elo & Kyngäs, 2008).

It is important to note that during the coding process any text that could not be categorised in relation to the predetermined coding scheme was given a new code (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005). Below Fig. 1, 2 and 3 presents a visualization of the systematic steps taken in the analysis process, which helps the rigor and therefore reliability and validity of the research findings.

Fig. 1 Thematic overview: Relational Marketing for consumer engagement on social media

Fig. 2 Thematic Overview: Experiential Marketing for consumer engagement on social media
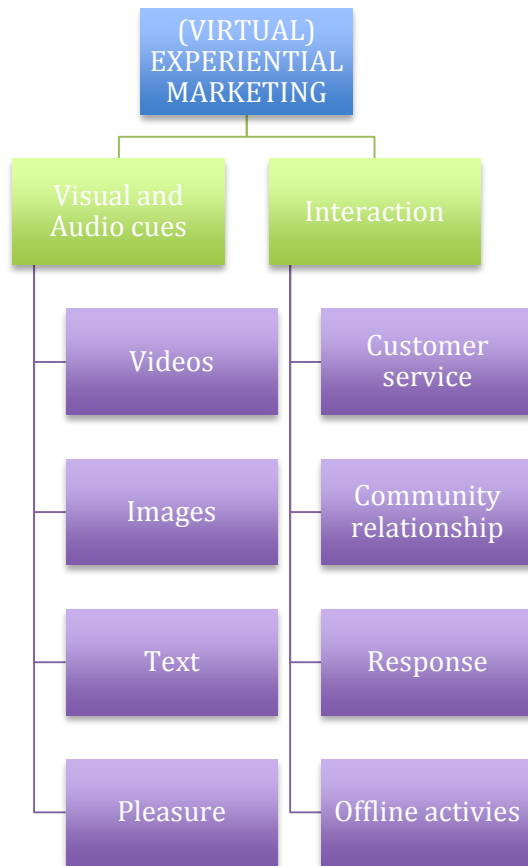
```
                    ┌─────────────────┐
                    │   (VIRTUAL)     │
                    │  EXPERIENTIAL   │
                    │   MARKETING     │
                    └─────────────────┘
                  ┌───────────┴───────────┐
          ┌───────────────┐       ┌───────────────┐
          │  Visual and   │       │  Interaction  │
          │  Audio cues   │       │               │
          └───────────────┘       └───────────────┘
                  │                       │
          ┌───────────────┐       ┌───────────────┐
          │    Videos     │       │   Customer    │
          │               │       │    service    │
          └───────────────┘       └───────────────┘

          ┌───────────────┐       ┌───────────────┐
          │    Images     │       │   Community   │
          │               │       │ relationship  │
          └───────────────┘       └───────────────┘

          ┌───────────────┐       ┌───────────────┐
          │     Text      │       │   Response    │
          │               │       │               │
          └───────────────┘       └───────────────┘

          ┌───────────────┐       ┌───────────────┐
          │   Pleasure    │       │Offline activies│
          │               │       │               │
          └───────────────┘       └───────────────┘
```

Fig. 3 Thematic Overview: Collaborative Marketing for consumer engagement on social media


3.3.2 Inductive thematic analysis

An inductive approach as previously explained, was used to analyse the main research question. This method was best fit and beneficial for this part of the research because it acquired direct information from the participants without imposing preconceived or predetermined categories (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005). The first step taken during the analysis process was open coding. In doing this, I coded fragments or responses from the transcribed interviews which I found relevant to the research goal by breaking up the text and seeing each fragment as one piece of data (Boeije, 2010). I coded these fragments mostly in a descriptive manner, in the sense that the codes created were based specifically on what the participant answered in the context of the question asked. After the initial coding stage, I listed all the generated codes in what Boeije (2010) refers to as a coding scheme, and organized them hierarchically in terms of their relations to each other. I looked through the codes and edited

them in an interpretive manner. So by interpreting the codes in the context of the research question I was able to group the codes into clusters of their meanings.

Through the grouping of the codes or as Lindloff and Taylor (2011) refer to as axial coding, I could then start coming up with category names based on the similarities of the grouped data. I ended up with 8 categories, which were, keeping up to date, awareness, knowledge, creativity, self-expression, motivation, community, and self-brand identification, with many of them still being able to be linked with each other. Through selective coding and connecting these categories together I was able to create an overarching theme for categories that were similar (Lindloff & Taylor, 2011). These themes were, inform, inspire and connect.

Fig. 4 shows a brief indication of how I created my categories based on the codes I generated, and through this how I got my three main themes, which I use in answering the main research question. These were not all the codes found but were the most relevant in the sense that they help give a clear and comprehensive overview of the connection to the categories formed and eventually themes.

Fig. 4 Thematic overview: The role of brands
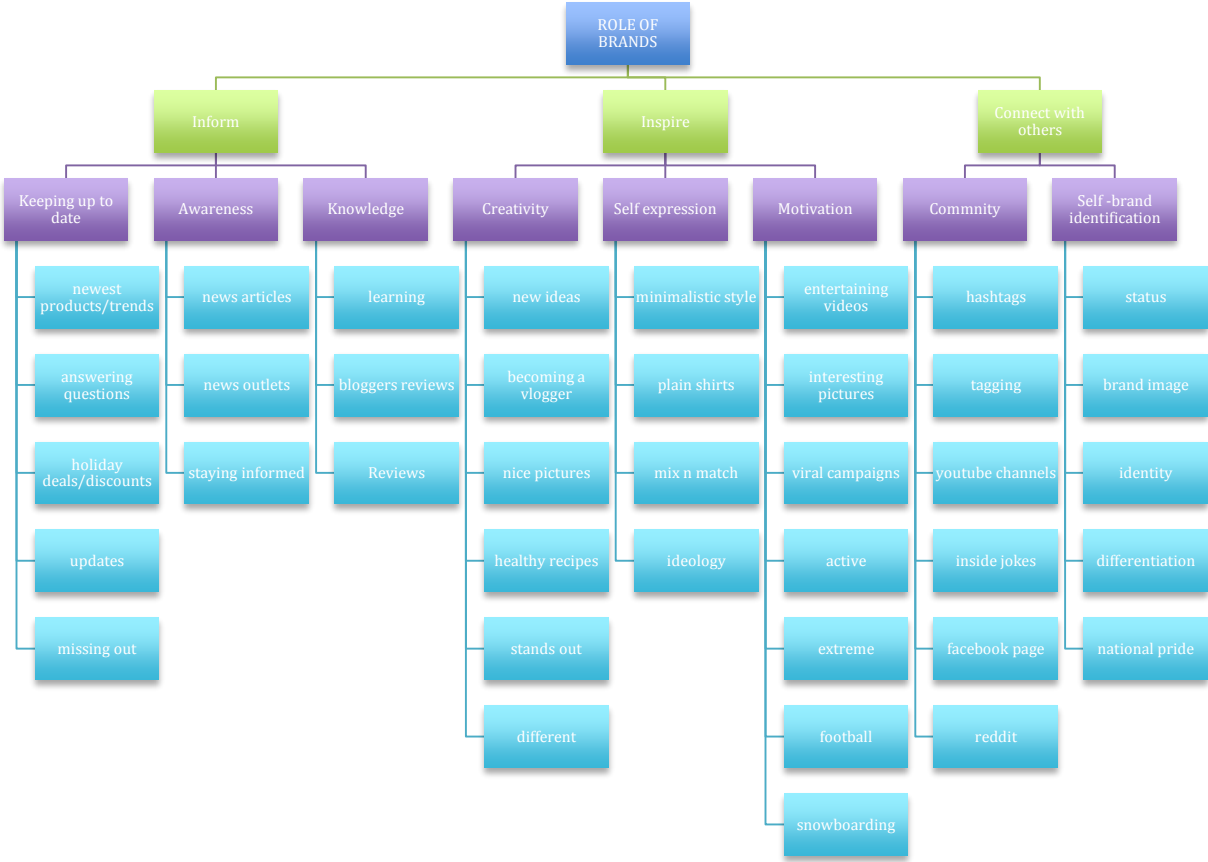
In order to further make meaning of the findings, a large part of the analysis was based on my interpretations. Kvale (1996, as cited in Ritchie & Lewis, 2013) identifies three different ways of interpretations in qualitative analysis. First, self-understanding is when the researcher attempts to understand what the participants themselves mean, so creating meaning based on the assumed meaning of the respondent. The second method referred to as critical common sense understanding, and this is when the researcher creates meaning through the use of common knowledge on the context of statements. Lastly, interpretations can be made through theoretical understanding, which refers to when the interpretation is placed in a broader theoretical perspective. This research used a combination of all three manners of interpretation. The self-understanding and critical common sense understanding interpretation method was used in analysing the main research question, while the theoretical understanding method was used for the analysing and answering the sub-questions.

As previously mentioned, in terms of the reliability and validity of my interpretations, through peer debriefing with a classmate who also shared the same supervisor as me I was able to have a second opinion on the interpretations of my codes, which helped me in making the final decisions on the categories and eventual themes.

4. Results

In this section of the paper, the findings from the analysis of the focus group interviews are presented. As previously mentioned, in order to fully understand and clearly answer all research questions, two different approaches of thematic analysis were used. In order to answer the sub-questions a deductive thematic analysis was conducted in which concepts found in existing literature were seen as predefined themes. These predefined themes are all based on their effects on consumer engagement on social media and they are as follows: relational marketing, experiential marketing, and collaborative marketing. The effects on consumer engagement are described as the reactions and responses of the students to the brand marketing strategies, which shows the interconnectivity of the first and second sub question.

A comparison will be made based on the existing literature on brand marketing strategies and its effects on consumer behaviour and engagement with the actual findings of the focus group interviews. In this manner, the first sub question, "*how do students' experience with brands compare with literature on brand marketing strategies and consumer engagement?*" is answered. In addition, the reactions and responses of the participants regarding brands' use of social media will be presented, in order to answer the second sub question, "*how do students react and respond to the approach that brands use on social media?*" For the main research question, **"how do university aged millennials perceive and describe the role brands play in their everyday lives through social media?"** an inductive thematic analysis approach was taken and through this three themes which were not predetermined were formulated, namely, inform, inspire and connect with others.

Before these findings are reported, a short discussion on the participants' perspectives of what brands are is presented below. It is important to explain this because during the group interviews it was noticed that while some participants had a very narrow and basic view on the term brands, others had a broader perspective. Depending on the their opinions on what they considered brands to be, some participants had more to say about their interactions and experiences with these brands than others.

4.1 Diversity of brand understanding

As presented in Chapter 2, brands are described as a construct in which the brand is made up of the company or brand owner's input and the consumer's perspective or interpretations (de Chernatony & Dall'Olmo Riley, 2010). Instead of presenting the respondents with this definition of brands, I allowed them to decide for themselves what they would consider as

brands. In general, when I asked the participants on what brands they liked or followed on social media, most of them were clear on what they perceived to be brands. The generic perceptions of brands between the focus groups were strongly based on a company that produce and sell a product and in many cases a service. In focus group 2 Amanda's response to what brands she follows on social media suggests that her perception on the definition of brands is rather narrow.

> Amanda: "Yeah for me I don't know... I don't really like follow brands.."
>
> Me: "Ok so what do you consider as brands? Maybe that's a better start."
>
> Amanda: "I feel like a brand is something physical like Red bull or Coca-Cola or H&M, and I don't really follow anything like that."
>
> Me: "So you think brands are mainly product based?"
>
> Amanda: "Well no but when you ask me what brands do I follow then that's the first thing that I think of."

Whereas she first was sure she doesn't follow any brands in regards to her definition of brands, after some probing, she realised that there may be more to what serves as a brand. Through a discussion with the rest of the participants, she later on came to the conclusion that brands are broader than her initial thought and even initiated the idea that celebrities could also be seen as brands.

In focus group 6 Omer gives a rather technical and corporate based definition of brands, where he touches on differentiation through a unique product or service, as a key aspect of a brand.

> Omer: "I think a brand is a name, a company that produces some kind of valuable good or service to a consumer, so a product or service that is supposedly unique and distinguished."

This probably is linked with his educational background in Business Administration. His definition although not always explained this professionally was a common perception of what brands are according to the majority of the participants. Chuck for example adds on to the discussion in focus group 1 that he also considered party or event organisations to be brands.

> Chuck: "... Even like party organisations"

While with some participants, their definition of brands were more rigid and needed a little convincing through discussion in the groups in order for them to open up to the idea that brands can be more than just a typical commodity, other participants were more open to this idea from the get go. Gillian explains her definition of a brand and adds to this the notion of bloggers as personal brands.

> *Gillian: "Well in my opinion a brand is a set of perceptions/images that represents a person, company, product, service etc.. So it could totally also be a person. So like with personal branding I would think of artists, bloggers, public figures and stuff."*

This idea of bloggers as a brand was found in almost all group discussions. However unlike with Gillian, this notion mostly came up through extensive discussion on definition of brands on social media. In focus group 4 Dee also referred to bloggers and vloggers as brands but first asking if my definition included this type of brand. I did not want my perceptions to interfere with the data so I allowed her to explain her opinion.

> *Dee: " I have a question. Do you consider bloggers and vloggers to be a personal brand?"*
>
> *Me: "Uhm its something I've wondered myself. I mean do you?"*
>
> *Dee: "Some of them yes. I mean some of them are very big and I do consider them to be a personal brand, like as a brand themselves…."*

As Dee mentions, some of the bloggers/vloggers are big which suggests that the size of fan base or followers indicates whether a personal brand can be seen as legitimate or not. In another focus group, Chioma touches on this aspect as well, in which she suggests that anything with a substantial following on social media can be considered as a brand.

> *Chioma: "… I think anything that has a substantial following can be considered a brand…"*

So here again, the large amount of followers is used to explain the brands legitimacy.

Having an overview on the different perspectives of brand understanding is important for this research because it contributes to the findings of the main research question, regarding the role brands play in the everyday lives of consumers through social media. In particular, through these different considerations of brands, it was found that brands are categorised in three aspects, product based brands, service based brands, and personal brands. This distinction came in handy later on during the analysis and reporting of the results for the main research question.

4.2 Brand marketing strategies for consumer engagement

As previously discussed, there are three core brand-marketing strategies for consumer engagement. However, to what extent are these strategies still valid in engaging consumers? In particular, when related to new media or more specifically social media, how effective are these strategies in engaging university aged millennials. It is important to know what strategies brands are actually using on social media, and since this is based on the information given by the actual consumer segment of university aged millennials, measuring the real effects on consumer engagement becomes more reliable. There is therefore a shift from mere assumptions to interpretations of true experiences. The level and type of engagement in this sense, relates to the reactions and responses of the participants. Thus, a high level of engagement could be the result of positive or even negative reactions and responses to the brand's approach on social media

4.2.1 Relational Marketing

As previously discussed in the literature review, with relational marketing, brands try to create relational bonds with consumers as a way to maintain the consumers relationship with the brand (Berry, 1995; Chen & Chiu, 2009). These relational bonds include financial bonds which are characterised through short term buying motivations, social bonds referring to personalised services, and structural bonds in which services of the brand adds value and increases the customers' efficiency (Berry 1995; Huang et al., 2014). The results suggest that brands use financial bonds such as discounts and special offers, as a way to connect and consequentially maintain a relationship with the respondents on social media. However, although these financial bonds were used as a means to reach the participants, in a couple of cases the participants felt annoyed when this was the only way in which brands communicated with them. As Annabelle explains below, she and others find it annoying when brands constantly post the same things especially when it's only based on discounts.

> *Annabelle: "But also the issue with liking some brands is that you get spammed with so much information that is useless like 30% off this and like buy this and that. That's why some people l know including myself, like even if they like something [on Facebook], after a few weeks they unlike it because they are just bored and annoyed of seeing all the notifications."*

The fact that she unlikes the brand on Facebook, shows her negative reaction and response to the approach used by the brand. By unliking the brand on Facebook, this suggests that the consumer is ending the relationship with the brand on social media. In this sense, the results implies that the participants find it interesting to follow brands on social media when they would also post other relevant content rather than just promotions and discounts. In the example below Selma talks about a lingerie brand she follows on Instagram, which also posts other interesting pictures unrelated to their actual products.

> *Selma: "Well for instance on Instagram.. there's one brand I'm following.. something with lemons by... I forgot the name but they have really nice lingerie and like shorts and shirts too but they also post like pictures of the office and the workers and it makes the brand seem more nice and like...."*
>
> *Marnell: "Like a person?"*
>
> *Selma: "Yeah"*

In this fragment, Selma referring to the brand as a person, indicates that posting more personal photos such as the workers behind the brand allows the consumer to connect even further with the brand in a more personal level. This notion of viewing the brand as a person was linked to the category of social bonds. In my interpretation this implies a personalised service (Berry, 1995; Huang et al., 2014) in the sense that the brand becomes personalised by the consumer. Having diverse posts on Instagram rather than just direct advertising of their products could suggest that the brand is not directly advertising to Selma, but rather genuinely trying to connect with her by showing the more human side of the brand. The people behind the actual brand. In this way I argue that this could lead to the consumer feeling a closer and more personal connection with the brand. This finding is in line with literature, which found that social bonds can increase the relationship quality of the consumer and the brand (Huang et al., 2014).

In regards to relational bonds as a strategy for interaction and ultimately engagement with a brand, the results suggest that with financial bonds respondents showed a low level of engagement with the brand, whereas with social and structural bonds, the respondents showed a higher level of engagement with the brand. In the example below, Cheryl explains how she follows brands on social media (Instagram in particular) for updates on clothes or special offers, and how this shapes her interaction with the brand. In her view, the interaction she has with the brand is liking the post and being influenced to purchase the product.

> *Cheryl: "Well with me its more that because I follow them [brands] for updates on clothing and stuff because I just like their brand, if I just see something nice on their*

page or some nice offer, I think like ok I want to buy something. So that's more the interaction I get..."

Me: "Do you ever comment on the posts?"

Cheryl: "Well I usually just like their pictures often.. but its more that they really influence me to actually buy something.. and if I comment its usually just to tag my friends like if I think they would be interested in the product."

Cheryl's response to her interaction with the brand was one, which was prevalent within most of the group discussions. So in this case most respondents went as far as to like a post of a brand they follow, and very few including Cheryl will comment by tagging a friend. Using the four major pillars of community (or customer) relationship management, namely connectivity, conversation, content creation, and collaboration (Ang, 2010), liking a post was depicted as the connectivity and thus first stage to consumer engagement. This low level of engagement with product related brands such as clothing brands could imply that the students felt that with brands solely focused on financial bonds, there was no need to connect or interact further than by liking or following the brands page. This finding is in line with literature, which found that financial bonds only led to short-term customer satisfaction (Chen & Chiu, 2009). However it is important to note that by tagging a friend, Cheryl is further engaging with the brand in the sense that they are including others from their social circle in their branded space as a way of eWOM. This notion of eWOM was depicted as an unintentional collaboration with the brand (Ang, 2010). Cheryl is therefore unintentionally collaborating with the brand as she is in a way promoting the product of the brand to a friend. Still, it is important to consider the possibility that this engagement had less to do with the financial bonds and more to do with the fact that there was a new collection.

Despite the fact that in most cases financial bonds did not lead to an improved brand relationship quality or customer loyalty as literature has found (Huang et al., 2014), there were a few cases in which the respondents did engage on a higher level with brands. One of these cases was in relation to the approach of brands using extrinsic benefits such as promotions and online contests as a way to positively engage their consumers (Wirtz et al., 2013). A few of the respondents admitted to participating in an online contest or activity to win a product by a brand. While the majority of these respondents did not end up winning, one did win and as a result it extended his loyalty towards and perception of the brand. In the example below Phil explains an experience he had with Sony in which he participated in an online contest created by the brand. The winner of the contest would win the newest Sony phone.

Phil: "Like I did something similar [participated in an online contest] 4 years ago with Sony on Facebook and they were like post a picture of Queens day and the best picture would win the newest phone, and I posted a picture and I won. The winner was chosen by which photo had the most comments and likes (...) yeah it was pretty awesome."

Me: "Sick! So is this why you're sort of more loyal to Sony, because as you mentioned earlier you own a lot of Sony products?"

Phil: "I already kind of was [loyal] but yeah it could be"

Me: "But then how did this experience influence your perception of Sony as a brand?"

Phil: "Well I already had a Sony phone and then I signed up for that and I got the newer one again so it was a good experience… I guess it kind of did contribute to my positive view on Sony."

In this case, Phil already had some type of relationship with Sony before the experience. Although he is unsure whether the good experience he had with the brand increased his loyalty, his response to the experience depicts a high level and long term customer satisfaction. This challenges previous literature which claims that financial bonds do not lead to long term customer satisfaction (Chen & Chui, 2009), as well as literature which argues that an increase in brand relationship quality or customer loyalty cannot be a result of financial bonds (Huang et al., 2014). With this said, the positive outcome of this experience in which Sony used a type of financial bond, could indicate the growth of an even stronger relationship with the brand, which could have led to having an emotional bond as well as a long-term commitment to the brand (Brodie et al., 2011). As till this day Phil still stays true to the Sony brand, the latter assumption is reinforced. The results therefore suggest that although generic financial bonds like discounts and special offers do not lead to a high level of engagement, improved brand quality relationship or customer loyalty, when there is an extrinsic benefit involved, thus that the consumer gets something in return, the level of engagement from the consumer increases even if its only in short term. What stays long-term however is the emotional bond and commitment to the brand.

The categories of social and structural bonds were mainly found through the interactions the participants had with brands. The findings suggest that through webcare, which Van Noort and Willemsen (2011) describe as customer relationship management on social media, a high level of engagement and interaction is formed between the consumer and the brand. It was interesting to see that the respondents were most active in conversing with

brands, thus taking a step further in engaging (Ang, 2010), when it came to customer service reasons. Just as Fournier and Avery (2011) suggested, it was found that the respondents saw brands being on social media as an opportunity to complain, as they used the platforms, Facebook and Twitter as a means for customer service. An example of this is can be seen in the experiences which one of the respondents had with KLM.

> Louise: "... with KLM was the same thing with the whole New York situation [flight to NY got cancelled due to snow blizzard]. We got in contact with KLM... we actually called them on the phone and we didn't get much response but when we contacted them through Twitter and Facebook they actually immediately solved our problem and refunded out ticket."

> Louise: "This definitely gave me a positive image of the brand because they try to solve the problem.. they might not have the right answer but when I see a company try and just help individuals it's really nice to see.. I actually looked at KLM's Facebook page whilst in the process of getting our problem solved and I saw how they were answering other people and so you know, its not their problem that the blizzard happened, but the fact that they actually try to solve problems gave me a good impression of the company."

The example given above implies that through the personalised service that KLM gave to Louise, and the fact that their use of social media is strongly based on helping and informing their customers, which therefore increases customer efficiency (a key aspect of structural bonds), the relationship quality she has with the brand increases (Huang et al., 2014). Social bonds were formed through the reactive webcare approach used by KLM, which Van Noort and Willemsen (2011) describe as when a brand only responds because the consumer, usually due to NWOM, forces them to. Additionally, KLM helping individuals and trying to solve a problem, which was in a way out of their control, implies a genuine and authentic approach to customer service, which furthermore increases the social bonds formed by the brand with Louise. This strategy of brands seeking interaction on social media, in this case through webcare, is also related to virtual experiential marketing as a strategy for consumer engagement and as a result arouses emotions and feelings towards a brand, which consequentially enhances the consumers experience with the brand (Lou et al., 2011). As Louise mentions, KLM's efforts gave her a good impression of the brand, which could indicate that their efforts to interact with her and others led to a positive reaction as it brought up positive emotions and feelings towards the brand. During the group discussion, Louise

further stressed on how she feels that good customer service is the most important aspect for her when it comes to her loyalty towards a brand. Her opinion on this matter was highly agreed upon within and between the different focus groups. This is in line with research, which claims that social and structural bonds could lead to the growth of relationship quality and level of loyalty (Huang et al., 2014).

On a different note, Connors experience with Vodafone shows how sometimes although brands try to use social and structural bonds to positively engage with consumers, this engagement could take on a negative turn.

Connor: "I did the same thing [complain] with Vodafone, cause I had like the worst experience ever with Vodafone, and I wrote on their wall on Facebook. Like a really long post saying like how horrible it was and then they fixed everything for me within like that hour. It was messed up because I had contacted them before through email and even went to their store, but they didn't do shit. Then just because I posted it on their wall, they solved the problem immediately…

Connor: "Even though they responded to me, they did it not because they sincerely felt bad for my bad experience but because it was public and they don't want that negative reputation on Facebook… like I still have them as a provider but I'm refusing to pay my bills, I haven't paid it in 4 months…and I totally lost all respect for them as a company."

This was a very interesting situation, as Connor reached out to Vodafone for help in many different ways. However as he was only responded to when he made his problem public on their Facebook wall, his image of the brand was jeopardized. In this case Vodafone used the approach of what Van Noort and Willemsen (2011) refer to as reactive webcare, in which they only respond to NWOM when forced to do so by consumers. The authors argue that because a consumer's complaint is a manner of engagement, this will lead to customer satisfaction and a positive perception of a brand (Van Noort & Willemsen, 2011). Surprisingly this was not the case with Connor's experience. Instead of reacting positively to the fact that Vodafone eventually responded and fixed the problem, Connor's negative reaction and response by not paying his bills in 4 months, and loosing respect for the company, suggests that Vodafone's discrepancy, inconsistency, and prior unavailability in their customer care approach was enough for him to distrust the brand. This could imply that Vodafone lacked the use of strong structural and social bonds, as they were unable to be

authentic, consistent, and available leading to low customer efficiency. This could also suggest the notion that authenticity and consistency also plays a huge role in the minds of millennials when it comes to their relations with brands.

Despite the latter, other respondents did have a positive perception of a brand when they responded to their complaints on social media. Nonetheless, these respondents also recognised and emphasised on the fact that brands respond on social media because they feel pressured and want to avoid a negative reputation, considering the open and transparent nature of social media.

4.2.2 (Virtual) Experiential Marketing

As previously mentioned the notion of interaction is a key aspect to virtual experiential marketing and Lou et al. (2011) stresses on the importance of online interaction between the brand and the consumer. The findings presented above in relation to customer service through social media thoroughly discuss this concept of interaction as a way to build a relationship with a brand, whether positive or negative. Therefore this aspect to virtual experiential marketing needs no further explanation at this stage.

An interesting finding related to virtual experiential marketing suggests that millennials value the experience of a brand more than the actual product or service. Basically all brands, which the respondents liked or followed on social media made use of virtual experiential marketing strategies related to sense and pleasure through audio and visual cues such as videos and images. According to Lou et al. (2011) virtual experiential marketing is characterised by the senses we experience in an online setting which are sight and sound, and experiencing pleasure through online means, which they found can lead to positive attitudes and behaviour towards a brand. A brand which came up often in relation to this strategy was Red Bull, in which a couple of respondents discussed how they were highly entertained and felt pleasure by the videos posted by Red Bull on social media. The example below shows how sometimes the experience of a brand is more important than the actual product.

Phillip: "I follow Red Bull on Facebook… because they have a lot of fun and entertaining stuff to watch… they have this Red Bull TV thing and they post trailers and teasers of these kind of things when they have a new series or when they do a live thing about snowboarding or something like that, then they post that and you can watch it on Red Bull TV. Or just like fun videos of people with a BMX riding down

ridiculous courses… and like the air racing thing as well. It's just insane to see that people actually do these things. I love watching these videos… I just find it really exciting and entertaining."

Phillip: "On social media then yeah I think so [feel a connection to the brand] but like I'm not buying the product. Like when there's a cheaper version, which there always is of energy drinks, I mean I don't need Red Bull, I can buy other energy drinks that's cheaper and tastes fine too. But I only have a relationship on social media with them."

As shown above, for Phillip the positive experience and connection he has with Red Bull on social media does not influence his purchasing behaviour. This was an interesting and surprising finding, because as Lou et al. (2011) claims, experiencing pleasure through online means can lead to positive attitudes and behaviours towards a brand. However in this case, Phillip's behaviour, in particular his purchasing behaviour did not change. Nonetheless, his response to the pleasure he feels from watching the exciting and entertaining videos posted by Red bull, suggests that his attitude and perception of the brand was positively enhanced.

4.2.3 Collaborative Marketing

In the case of collaborative marketing the findings suggest that students engage with brands on social media through extrinsic benefits such as co-promotion (Wirtz et al., 2013). This can be done through an online promotional contest formed in a lottery or win by chance method, where brands ask consumers to share and like their page, which in turn would help promote their brand. A handful of participants admitted to have taken part in such contests in order to win a free product. The findings suggest that a key tactic in encouraging co-promotion of a brand is through rewarding the consumer. An example of this is presented below.

Lauren: "I do promote for festivals, because you can go for free and yeah you only have to post something on Facebook like sharing and liking the page or something, so I'm like it's 50 euros you get for free so yeah why not? But I also feel like I kind of spam everyone with it but at the same time I don't really care, even though I do find it quite annoying when I see it from someone else. So it's kind of hypocritical, but yeah I still do it myself."

As Lauren suggests, her motivation behind promoting for festivals is based on the reward she receives from the brand, in her case free entry to the festival. The small effort of

liking and sharing a page is a strong enough initiative for her to co-promote despite her clear awareness of possibly spamming her friend's page. This finding portrays the power of rewards in facilitating collaboration in consumer engagement. Supporting this finding is Barkley (2011) in which their study found that millennials seek value and rewards. I argue that although this strategy can be seen as collaborative marketing, it can also be depicted as a type of financial bond since the consumer is looking to gain something tangible from the brand rather to than build a relationship or connection with the brand (Baird & Parasnis, 2011).

Another aspect of collaborative marketing, which came up during the group interviews was the notion of online reviews and its importance in the making of purchasing decisions. The findings indicate that online reviews are highly valued by the students. In every group there was a general consensus towards the idea that before buying a product, especially an expensive one, making use of online reviews was depicted as a norm and must. Additionally, the findings emphasised on the idea that reviews on branded pages such as a brands Facebook page, were less trustworthy than reviews from consumer based platforms such as Reddit. In the example below, Dolores suggests that she values the complaints written by consumers on branded Facebook pages. However, as she states 'when you go to the reviews [section]…' suggests that she when she talks about complaints she is referring to those found on the wall posts or comment section of the Facebook page. She further implies that on the actual review section of the brands Facebook page she is sceptical on whether those reviews are written by real people or people hired by the company, which was interpreted as her lack of trust on reviews from brand controlled pages.

> *Dolores: "Like for me personally. When I go on a Facebook page and I see complaints, I actually want to read those complaints because they are actually like made by someone, cause like when you go to the reviews and they're some bad reviews, it could be that like the company hired them or made their employees write a bad review so that they could create a balance "*

> *Jackson: "Yeah exactly. I find like other sites for reviews way more credible and valuable than Facebook. Like review wise I wouldn't choose Facebook for confirmation. Reddit for example is already like another social media (platform) which I find way better when it comes to reviews."*

Jackson agrees with Dolores. Their view on this matter is one, which was generally agreed upon within and between the focus groups. As Jackson suggests, he values other review sites

way more than reviews on Facebook, as he is unconvinced of the credibility on Facebook reviews. He would rather make use of other consumer generated social media for online reviews such as Reddit. The findings therefore imply that students value the opinions of others on brands, suggesting a co-creation of value.

Furthermore it was interesting to see that many of the respondents viewed (famous) bloggers and vloggers as brands, and here I refer to them as personal brands. This further proves the importance of outsider opinions and reviews, which backs up the claim that branding has become an open source activity through the co-creation of its value (Fournier & Avery, 2011). Thus, creating value for a brand has become a collaborative process (Prahalad & Ramaswamy, 2004; Gensler et al., 2013), and in the case of these bloggers and vloggers, the line is blurred between them as consumers of the products they discuss and review, and producers on content that is viewed by and influences many others.

Although not a common occurrence or trend between the focus groups, one participant did actively partake in co-creating value for a brand. In particular this was depicted through positive WOM and voluntary co-promotion for the brand. The example below shows how Dee positively and enthusiastically interacted and engaged with a brand, which as a result enhanced her positive perception of the brand. T-Mobile decided to give its customers an extra giga-byte of Internet data for free and this made Dee very happy that she decided to let the world know.

> Dee: "I went to their twitter page and posted like thank you guys so much and that I'm really happy with it because I really needed it, and they reacted back and were like well enjoy it, we're glad that you like it and stuff... I felt really cool that they replied back to me."

As Dee took the step in writing on the brands page to thank them, this was interpreted as a high level of engagement as she went on to seek interaction with the brand and succeeded by conversing with the brand (Ang, 2010). Not only did she let the world know by posting it on T-Mobiles twitter page, she also extended her love for the brand by advocating the brand to customers of the brands' competitors.

> Dee: "...there was this guy who was on a Dutch TV show where they're naked and stuff [Adam & Eve] .. but yeah I saw on the best of social media website cause I follow that too, that he posted to KPN about how he was way over his internet data. So then I wrote him a message saying like hey T-Mobile is giving free GB's so you should go to T-Mobile instead of KPN, and then T-Mobile also reacted on that as well but KPN

said nothing. So that was kind of weird.. I was like well that sucks you could've defended your brand but whatever."

As shown above Dee took the interaction to the next level as she also advocated for the brand by recommending the brand to a public figure on Twitter. There are two important aspects to this action. First as she posts her recommendation or rather promotion of the brand on a Dutch reality TV character's page she is marketing with the brand since I assume the reality TV star to have many followers. In this sense she is promoting for the brand by creating promotional content on a page where she can reach a large group of people. Second, as she states that T-Mobile reacted to her post on the reality TV star's page, this suggests that she tagged the brand as well as the competitors' brand, KPN on the post. I argue that she is connecting brands together and in this sense seeking interaction with both brands. This finding depicts a high level of consumer engagement as she participates in content creation as well as voluntary collaboration with the brand (Ang, 2010).

The fact that KPN did not react to her post but T-Mobile did could be the result of an increased connection and relation with T-Mobile, and an increased negative perception of KPN as a brand. This therefore suggests that Dee was positively engaged by T-Mobile which therefore could lead to a higher level of connection, satisfaction, loyalty, empowerment, emotional bonding trust, and commitment with the brand (Brodie et al., 2011). Dee stating that it was 'weird' and 'sucked' that KPN did not respond to the conversation suggests a negative reaction to their social media use. This finding supports Van Noort and Willemsen's (2011) conclusions that consumers favour and value a brand more positively when the brand responds rather than when the brand stays silent. Most participants between and within the focus groups were aligned with this perspective.

4.3 The role of brands

Through an inductive thematic analysis, three main themes were formulated in regards to the role brands play in the everyday lives of university-aged millennials. These were, to *inform, inspire,* and to *connect with others*. As previously discussed in the Chapter 4.1, the participants' understanding of brands led to the categorisation of 3 types of brands: product based brands, service based brands, and personal brands. In this section of the results, we can see how these brand aspects are related to the themes. Table 3 shows an overview of the themes and categories found during the analysis. By using examples from the data for each

category, it demonstrates rigor in the analysis process, showing how I interpreted the data to get to the categories and themes formulated.

Table 3: Role of brands

Theme	Subtheme (category)	Example from data
INFORM	Keeping up to date	Tessel: "… I follow H&M, the Juice Brothers, Brandy & Melville, Bakers and Roasters, Asos and ZARA. I guess mostly because I want to stay updated on their newest products, discounts and stuff but like also for events,…"
INFORM	Awareness	Isabelle: "…and buzzfeed and stuff like news outlets cause I like seeing like new videos and information about the world and topics I'm interested in."
	Knowledge	Dee: "I follow them [bloggers/vloggers] because I want to learn things about make up and fashion and stuff… And they also then introduce new brands to me and that is another reason why I follow them because then I can see what other new brands are out and if they're good and stuff because they do reviews as well.
INSPIRE	Creativity	Gillian: "… actually I'm going to start a YouTube channel of my own. Sort of a vlog where I show make up and fashion tips and like evaluate the

		products of brands and stuff.. I plan to have different brands on my channel and my goal is to generate enough followers so the brands will approach me themselves eventually."
	Self expression	Tessel: "… I can definitely identify with ZARA as a brand especially with the minimalistic style in a way.. cause like I don't wear a lot of jewellery and like it has to be like either eye shadow or lipstick so not both at the same time ..and I buy lots of plain shirts like not a lot of fuss you know."
INSPIRE	Motivation	Omer: "… they [Nike] post many different types of videos and pictures which I find interesting and entertaining and stuff like that. Like sometimes when I watch their videos and I'm just chilling, I feel like I need to go play football or something, or like do something active."
CONNECT WITH OTHERS	Community	Marnell: "Yeah [I do hashtag brands my instagram posts] … but not so much for the brand to interact with that or respond but more to I guess just get it into that hashtag so if people search it they will see it.. so I guess that has for me personally less to do with actually interacting with the brand or expecting anything from the brand and more to do with just broadcasting whatever I'm posting."

	Self-brand Identification	Michel: "… well for instance like Ziggo sponsors Ajax now, so a lot of people from Feijenoord quit their contract with Ziggo just because they brand themselves with Ajax and they don't want to be associated with that."

4.3.1 Inform

The results suggest that one important role which brands play in the everyday lives of students is to inform. The findings of the group discussions indicated that students valued and accepted brands on social media when they would inform them on different entities. The initial codes for this theme were descriptive in the sense that I based it on the actual response of the participants. So I used key words from fragments, which seemed relevant to the study, and in some cases created key words based on my interpretation of the fragment (see Fig. 4).

When referring to product-based brands, the open coding indicates that students perceive the role of brands on social media as an opportunity to be informed on the newest products, trends, updates, discounts, holiday deals, and in general want to be kept up to date. An example of this can be seen below where Tessel explains why she follows H&M and other brands on social media.

> Tessel: "Well for me I follow quite a lot of brands, I mean I follow H&M, SLA (restaurant), the juice brothers (a smoothie bar), Brandy&melville, Bakers and Roasters, Asos and ZARA… I guess mostly because I want to stay updated on their newest products, discounts and stuff but like also for events…"

Her explanation suggests that she expects brands to be on social media to keep her informed on the newest products and discounts, but also on upcoming events. As Tessel states that she 'mostly' follows brands for these reasons, this could imply that she finds this an important aspect of brands being on social media, and therefore an important role of brands play in her life through social media.

When it came to service-based brands, such as airlines, news outlets, and events (party organisations or festivals), the findings suggest that students follow these types of brands on

social media in order to be aware of their surroundings by being up to date on the latest news, informed about delays, and staying up to date on the latest parties or festival.

Isabelle: "Yeah that too [Vice], and Buzz feed and stuff like news outlets cause I like seeing like new videos and information about the world and topics I'm interested in."

As Isabelle suggests, she follows news outlets in order to stay informed about the world and topics she is interested in. This again suggests the importance of brands helping students be aware of their surroundings and their interests.

With personal or people based brands such as celebrities or famous bloggers and vloggers, the findings suggest that the role of these types of brands to inform were based on the consumer gaining knowledge about product or service brands, but also about certain lifestyle topics such as fashion and beauty tips, nutrition, and fitness. The findings also suggest that students are highly influenced by opinions of bloggers about other brands. The example below explains what value Dee gets from following bloggers on social media. In her experience, the role of bloggers is to inform her on what the new trends or products are, how they work, and if they are of high quality.

Dee: "I follow them [bloggers/vloggers] because I want to learn things about make up and fashion and stuff.. I follow them really religiously like every week [on YouTube]. And they also then introduce new brands to me and that is another reason why I follow them because then I can see what other new brands are out and if they're good and stuff because they do reviews as well. So for me that's important because before I go spend 50 dollars on lipstick I want to know if it's good."

As Dee mentions, she follows bloggers in order to learn and therefore gain knowledge on make up and fashion. I coded this as beauty and fashion tips. In addition, as Dee states, she follows these bloggers and vloggers 'religiously' every week on social media. The extended amount of time she spends on the bloggers page could result in Dee having a closer relationship with the brand. In general the findings support this claim, and suggests that students feel a closer tie and engage more with personal brands like bloggers rather than product based brands. Moreover, as Dee suggests, the bloggers she follows also introduce her to other new brands, and as they review and evaluate these brands, Dee is either encouraged to buy the brands product to test it out herself or discouraged if the evaluation on the brand is negative. When bloggers came up in discussion within focus groups, the participants who were active followers also mentioned that the importance of blogger reviews. This finding suggests that the opinions of bloggers are highly valued by students. This trust and dependence on an outsider's opinion strongly implies that millennials highly value the

opinions of others more than that of the actual brand. It also implies that bloggers are seen as experts in the topic or branded area.

4.3.2 Inspire

The findings suggest that brands also play a role as a source of inspiration for many of the participants in the group discussions. This was most prevalent with product-based brands and personal brands, but never came up with service based brands. In the case of product based brands the findings suggest that university-aged millennials express their identity through the relationships they form with brands. In the example below, Tessel discusses how her connection to ZARA has shaped her identity, as she is able to express herself through clothing and her outer appearance, by referring to a minimalistic style, which she expresses through limited amount of jewellery, simple makeup, and plain shirts.

> *Tessel: ... each brand has a type of "look" which makes it popular. For example ZARA is quite minimalistic and that's what its brand name stands for.*

> *Tessel: "Well I would say that I can definitely identify with ZARA as a brand especially with the minimalistic style in a way, cause like I don't wear a lot of jewellery and like it has to be like either eye shadow or lipstick so not both at the same time.. and I buy lots of plain shirts like not a lot of fuss you know.... I really do like ZARA in that sense and that's why I follow them. I like seeing what they have new and like the mix and match but simple style."*

In this case, because she first describes the image she perceives ZARA to be (minimalistic), before comparing herself to ZARA, it implies that due to her preconceived perception of the brand image and personality, she is able to mould and create her ideal self-concept. The ideal self-concept is used instead of actual self-concept because the inspiration she gets from the content that ZARA in combination with other brands she follows, posts on social media, challenges her to re-discover herself and the way in which she wants to portray and express her identity. This could imply that her choice of brand influences her perception of her self-identity (Elliot and Wattanasuwan, 1998; Ross, 1971).

Creativity was another aspect or category found in which brands inspire university-aged millennials. More specifically, the findings suggest that brands inspire students to be more creative through inspiring them with new ideas, healthy recipes, or even to create their own

content and become a personal brand. The example below shows how Gillian was inspired by brands that she decided to start her own vlog and become a personal brand herself, through which she could have an even deeper connection with brands that she liked.

> *Gillian: "I follow mostly luxury brands like Chanel, Cartier, Louis Vuitton, but also like lifestyle and travel brands."*

> *Gillian: ".... I don't feel like I actually interact with the brands.. but more like I stalk their pages haha… but actually I'm going to start a YouTube channel of my own sort of a vlog where I show make up and fashion tips and like evaluate the products of brands and stuff.. I plan to have different brands on my channel and my goal is to generate enough followers so the brands will approach me themselves eventually."*

Although Gillian does not feel like she interacts with brands she actively follows on social media, it is fair to presume that she has an attachment to these brands as she states that she 'stalks' their pages, which could indicate that she is regularly on their social media page. This frequent visit to the brands page could imply a high level of interest and commitment to the brand. Through this commitment I argue that she is gradually connecting with the brand and becoming inspired to voice her knowledge and opinions on the brand. By creating her own vlog where she can discuss about the brands she loves and new brands she is evaluating, as well as give fashion and beauty tips to her followers, she is expressing her creativity and identity through her connection with the brands. As her aim is to become an expert in the field of bloggers and be seen as influential among her followers, she hopes to be noticed by the big brands she loves and in this sense create a relationship with them through collaboration.

The analysis of the group discussions also revealed that brands inspire the participants through motivation. In particular, the findings suggest that when the participants would look at videos or images brands posts which were related to their interests and lifestyle, they would feel motivated to for instance work out or eat clean if it's a fitness blog they follow or in the case of the example below be active and live a more fulfilling lifestyle. As Omer explains, when he watches the videos Nike posts on social media perhaps related to his interest in sports, he feels the need to be more active.

> *Omer: "… they [Nike] post many different types of videos and pictures which I find interesting and entertaining and stuff like that. Like sometimes when I watch their*

videos and I'm just chilling, I feel like I need to go play football or something, or like do something active."

This feeling of motivation through entertaining and captivating audio and visual cues suggests that brands can help students accomplish more in their lives. By inspiring Omer to get off the computer or off his phone for some time and be active by playing football, a sport he is very much interested in, Nike is connecting with Omer and engaging him outside the walls of social media.

In the case of service related brands the inspiration factor was less prominent, and I argue that this is because one cannot express their identity or learn about their identity through these types of brands, and the main idea behind being inspired is based on an experience or an ideology which the consumer creates themselves through the brand rather than one which is created by the brand itself.

4.3.3 Connect with others

With the use of social media, students are able to connect with others who share the same interests, beliefs and values through brands. This millennial consumer segment and more specifically those in the coming of age life stage, in this case 18-25 years old, are commonly in a search for their identity and place in society (Barkley, 2011). This therefore suggests that students interviewed used social media as a means in finding their identity. In particular, when brands have a page on social media, all customers who follow the brands page are connected by their relation to the brand, creating a type of community. Due to this connection with others, their identities are further confirmed. The example below depicts how Marnell feels she connects with others on Instagram through hashtags of brands.

> *Marnell: ".... I do hashtag brands my instagram posts ... but not so much for the brand to interact with that or respond but more to I guess just get it into that hashtag so if people search it they will see it.. so I guess that has for me personally less to do with actually interacting with the brand or expecting anything from the brand and more to do with just broadcasting whatever I'm posting."*

Interestingly, she emphasises on the point that her use of hashtags are less to be noticed by the brand or to connect with the brand and more to be noticed by others who use the same hashtags and in a way be part of that hashtag community.

Nora: "I think often when you hashtag a brand in a post, you usually click the hashtag yourself to see what other people have been posting on that same brand, and I think that's always nice to see what other people are doing with a similar situation."

Nora supports Marnell's point and adds that she is also more interested in what others post when using the same hashtag. In this way she is connecting with others by comparing her posts with theirs and therefore seeing how they express themselves differently through these brands.

Connecting with others through brands does not always relate to positive associations of the brand. In some cases students connect with others through brands in a negative way. In the example below, Bruna discusses how her negative experience with Air France led to her connecting with others who also share this view.

Bruna: "I had an issue with Air France… I just basically had a terrible flight, I got food poisoning, and on the way to Brazil with the same airline, I got an ulcer in my eye… so I kind of blamed Air France… but I mean it was terrible a lot of other things went wrong too, like my luggage got lost, they brought it to me like the day after or something. I don't know like all these different things went wrong, and it was the first time I flew Air France instead of KLM, and I'm never going to do it again. I posted a status on my Facebook and I like tagged their name on it, and so many people liked my status and like posted their own stories under the comments section... like horror stories from Air France haha, but surprisingly they never reacted or did anything."

As Bruna posted her about her negative experience with Air France on her own social media rather than on the wall of the company, it could suggest that she was looking more to interact with others in her social space rather than with the brand. However, as she did tag the brand on the post, this indicates that to some extent she did want to be heard by the brand and as she was surprised that they never reacted, suggests that she had expected a response from Air France. So with the combination of the connection she had with others through which they share similar stories and experiences, and the poor webcare of Air France, it could imply that Bruna's negative opinion on the brand was reconfirmed. This finding furthermore suggests that when students connect with others about a brand, it could lead to negative outcomes for the brand, and this is why it is important for brands to listen on social media (Van Noort & Willemsen, 2011).

Another interesting finding, which shows that connecting with other does not always refer to a positive association with the brand, is related to the category of self-brand identification. The findings suggest that through self-brand identification, which I refer to as

the consumer identifying with the brand, the consumers can connect with others who identify with the same brand. In many cases this can lead to rivalries between groups who support competing brands. The formation of communities associated with one brand can also lead to negative perceptions of other brands. The example below demonstrates a situation in which a fan base or community boycotts a brand because the brand associated itself with the communities rivalry brand. In particular, the rivalry between two football club communities, Feijenoord and Ajax led to Ziggo loosing some customers. As Michel explains, Ziggo, a Dutch media and communications service provider, recently started sponsoring Ajax and this led many Feijenoord fans to quitting their contracts with Ziggo as they did not want to be associated with Ajax.

> *Michel: "....well for instance like Ziggo sponsors Ajax now.. so a lot of people from Feijenoord quit their contract with Ziggo just because they brand themselves with Ajax and they don't want to be associated with that."*

This was found rather interesting as it shows how people connecting with others through self-brand identification and forming a community can lead to them taking action against a brand that they do not agree with or want to associate themselves with. As Cova and Cova (2012) suggests, this type of reaction can lead to the creation of counter brands. However in this case it is not clear on whether this happened or not, instead what is clear is the notion that brands are stronger when they have a community of supporters.

5. Discussion

This part of the paper focuses on connecting the findings of the two sub-questions together with the findings of the main research question. In doing this, the overall results of the research questions will be linked and compared with previous literature as discussed in Chapter 2. This discussion of the results presented above will put the research into the context of marketing theories as well as social media marketing in practice. In other words, the following section of this paper will present how the findings contribute to literature on marketing theories as well as the implications towards social media marketing practice.

5.1 Inform

The findings suggest that through relational marketing strategies, brands play a role in the everyday lives of student by informing them on different entities. As the results indicate, through relational marketing techniques such as financial bonds (Berry, 1995; Huang et al., 2014) brands are connecting with this consumer segment as they are informing university aged millennials on new products, trends, discounts, and special offers. In addition, with social and structural bonds techniques primarily related to webcare (Van Noort & Willemsen, 2011) brands are able to effectively engage with students. In many cases when brands were proactive and responsive on social media, so for example airlines informing the participants on delays, or T-Mobile reacting to Dee's post when she advocated for the brand on a public figures page, students were generally pleased and positively engaged with the brand. Similarly when brands used a reactive webcare approach, which Van Noort and Willemsen (2011) refer to as when a brand responds to NWOM only when forced to do so by the consumer, the findings suggest that students generally appreciated the efforts of the brand, and this led to positive perceptions of the brand. This is in line with Van Noort and Willemsen's (2011) study, which found that webcare positively influences consumers' perceptions of a brand.

However, an unexpected finding in Connors experience, indicated that reactive webcare can also lead to negative perceptions of a brand when the brand lacks in the appropriate use of structural bonds such as availability, consistency and convenience, which are mean to increase customer efficiency (Chen & Chui, 2011; Huang et al., 2014). More specifically because Connor had tried to reach out to Vodafone many times through different customer service platforms such as phone, email, as well as in the physical store but wasn't helped until he publicised his issue on their Facebook wall, he lost respect for the brand. The lack of consistency in their customer service as well as the inconvenience they caused him by

being unable to assist him with his problem prior to his post on their wall led Connor to believe that their webcare was inauthentic. Challenging Van Noort and Willemsen's (2011) conclusions, Connors experience led to his negative relationship and perception of the brand, despite the fact that the brand did end up responding and solving the problem. This therefore suggests that brands can create positive relationships with consumers through webcare, only if the brand is consistent in the authenticity of all their customer service platforms.

5.2 Inspire

The results found that through the use of virtual experiential marketing strategies, brands on social media play a role in the lives of students by inspiring them in expressing their identity, extending their creativity, and through motivation to do better. With the advent of web 2.0 and its interactive features, virtual experiential marketing can create an enhanced online experience, which engages consumers and stimulates an emotional response through visual and audio cues (Lou et al., 2011; Schmitt & Zarantonello, 2013). In their study Lou et al. (2011) identified 5 elements in virtual experiential marketing, namely, sense, interaction, pleasure, flow, and community relationship. The results of this study found sense, and pleasure to be the most prevalent element when it came to inspiring students. The findings suggest that sensory experiences such as videos, images and text (Lou et al., 2011) allowed students to experience pleasure through online means. Just as Lou et al. (2011) argues, the findings indicate that this feeling of pleasure led to positive attitudes towards the brand.

Students valued the sensory experiences of videos and images posted on a brands social media page. They found it entertaining and interesting to watch, and this feeling of pleasure led to the creation of their relationship with the brand. Videos and images displaying content related to the interest of the student, for example, fashion, snowboarding or football had a large impact in the students online experience with the brand, as it led to them being inspired by the brand.

Contrary to the study done by Moosylvania (2015), which found that high quality products matter most to millennials, the findings of this research suggests that students are emotionally and rationally driven (Schmitt, 1999). In particular the results show that students valued the online experience they had with brands through visual and audio cues, however this positive relationship with the brand did not affect their purchasing behaviour towards the brand. In other words, just because they felt connected to the brand online did not necessarily

mean that they would buy the product. Based on the findings, I argue that considering Schmitt's (1999) view on millennials being both emotionally and rationally driven, it would be fair to assume that the reason the online experience and relationship (emotional drive) does not affect purchasing behaviour is related to the rational aspect. Thus, if there is a cheaper brand with almost the same quality it would be the rational decision to buy the cheaper brand, especially as a student with less income. This finding contradicts claims of Lou et al. (2011), which states that experiencing pleasure through online means can lead to positive behaviours towards the brand. This therefore suggests that brand names only matter to millennials when the product or service is of high quality and unique to similar commodities.

5.3 Connect with others

The findings of this research suggest that through virtual experiential marketing strategies such as building community relationship, brands play a role of connecting students to others. The community relationship element of virtual experiential marketing suggests that building an online community relationship with consumers helps in creating a sense of trust and belonging with a brand, which in turn can enhance the experience with the brand (Lou et al., 2011). First of all, the fact that the students liked or followed a brand on social media, already indicates the first step of connectivity with community relationship management (Ang, 2010). The findings suggest that students could connect with others through brands by using certain social media elements such as tagging a friend on a brands post or hashtagging a brand on their personal posts. Also, through self-brand identification students could feel like they're part of a community and connect with others who share the same lifestyle and way of thinking.

The use of social media elements by students such as tagging people and hashtags was related to collaborative marketing concepts such as eWOM and the co-creation of value (Prahalad & Ramaswamy, 2004; Gensler et al., 2013). As Cova and Cova (2012) argue, with collaborative marketing consumers are viewed as potential collaborators, in the sense that the goal has shifted from marketing to consumers to marketing with consumers. An interesting and surprising finding however indicates that in many cases when students hashtag brands on social media, they do not do this to be noticed by the brand but rather to be noticed by others and be in that hashtag group or community so to speak. By hashtagging a brand on their post they are able to also see what other people posted using the same hashtag, so again in this way they are connecting to others. Similarly when students would tag a friend on a brands post,

they did not intend to interact with the brand but rather to connect with a friend. However I argue that this form on eWOM can be seen as co-creation of value for a brand as the students are in a way promoting the brand by tagging their friends on the brands post or hashtagging the brand on their personal posts. A general perspective in literature on eWOM suggests that, through eWOM, millennials want to contribute and be involved in all aspects of a brand (Chu & Kim, 2011; Van Noort & Willemsen, 2011; Smith, 2011). The findings only partly support this perspective because although the intentions behind the student's collaboration with the brand was to connect with others, they still unintentionally somehow helped in creating value for the brand.

5.4 Contributions to marketing literature

As previously discussed, there is gap in literature on consumer perspectives of social media brand marketing strategies, and the findings of this study contributes to this topic. More importantly this study revealed the role of brands on social media in the lives of students, which has not been studied before. In addition, although there has been research done on digital marketing strategies in general, there is limited research done on social media marketing strategies in specific. By using literature on (online) brand marketing strategies in general and evaluating these in terms of their presence and use on social media, this research attempts in identifying social media marketing strategies.

Moreover, as part of the goal of this research was to compare existing literature on brand marketing strategies for consumer engagement, with the actual findings, the study accepts or challenges these assumptions and reveals which strategies actually work and which don't. For example, the study found that extrinsic benefits such as promotions or online contests only engages the consumer on a short term basis and also leads to customer satisfaction, However extrinsic benefits has little to no effect on improving the relationship between the brand and the consumer with the exception of when the customer is already loyal to the brand, then it extends their loyalty.

Also the findings of the effects of webcare contributes to marketing literature, as it challenges and adds on to current literature on the effects of webcare. The findings suggest that when a company decides to use social media for customer service, they must maintain their authenticity and be consistent within all their customer service platforms, and not just focus on social media because of its open and transparent nature. Millennials are aware that brands are vulnerable and lack control on social media, and therefore when pressured or

attacked publicly on social media they expect a response. It is therefore better to make the process as convenient as possible for the consumer.

5.5 Implications towards practice

The findings of this study have a few implications towards practice. First of all the results suggest that brands need to be more creative in the in their methods of engaging the consumer, for example by not only posting discounts or promotions of the products. Although students like to be informed on these aspects, when a brand solely focuses on this students get bored and annoyed with the brands and this can lead to them ending their online relationship with the brand. Social media marketers can use this research to learn about what consumers value, what they like about brands on social media and what they find annoying or unnecessary.

As the results suggest that extrinsic benefits such as online contests or promotions does not lead to long term engagement or relationship with the brand, marketers can learn from this and they are advised to make these competitions more challenging and interesting rather than just asking the consumers to share and like the page. I suggest that one way, in which brands can possibly ensure more engagement and longer-term relationship with the consumer through online competitions, is by encouraging consumers to show their talents and allow them to express their identity and connect this identity with the brands identity. This way the consumer will understand the brand more and the brand can show the consumer that they value the consumers input and that they are not just focus on their brand to be promoted.

5.6 Limitations and future research

Although the methods used for this research was useful and successful in answering the research questions, every research has its limitations. In this section the limitations of this research are presented and through identifying this, suggestions for future research can be explained.

The main limitation of this study was based on the sample. First, although I tried to have a diverse range in the educational background of the participants, I found that more than half of the total amount of participants in the focus groups were studying in similar fields such as Business, Marketing, or Communication. This is seen as a limitation because these students

are quite familiar with the topic of branding and marketing strategies and therefore they would tend to answer questions in the interview from a company perspective rather than a consumer perspective. In this sense this could lead to some bias in the results as they could have been answering some questions in the way they believe I want to hear it. For future research I would suggest using a more diverse range of educational backgrounds in order to possibly reduce some bias from the results.

The second limitation related to the sample refers to the use of the consumer segment, millennials. As previously mentioned, this group is seen as elusive and quite diverse as the generic characteristics of the group do not necessarily apply to all members of the group. It is therefore difficult to make final assumptions of conclusions of the millennial group as a whole. Although I attempted to segment this group through life stages, there was no significant difference between the life stages apart from the notion that college students or university aged millennials were true digital natives and therefore technologically driven. For future research, I would suggest focusing on Barkley's (2011) six different segments, which include all life stages of millennials, namely, hip-ennial, millennial mom, anti-millennial, gadget guru, clean and green millennial and old school millennial. Perhaps these segments would be more relevant in the sense that their characteristics are possibly more distinct from each other than that of life stages.

The third limitation related to the sample refers to the diversity of gender. There were 13 males out of the 33 participants of the focus groups. This is not an equal distribution and could have a possible impact on the outcomes of the study. For future research it would be advised to have a more balanced amount of males and females, or maybe even focus on each gender separately and then compare them to see if there is any difference.

Lastly, although I did use the method of peer reviewing with one other student and partly a deductive approach for my codes and categories, my interpretations were still essentially subjective. For future research in order for the interpretations to be a little less biased, and thus an enhanced reliability and validity of the research findings, member checks should be done.

6. Conclusion

Brands are powerful in the sense that they have become part of society and therefore are involved in our everyday lives. By being on social media they have found a way to further meddle their way into our lives, as this provides them with a means to participate in our daily online activities. Considering the fact that university aged millennials are always online and on social media (Barkley, 2011), brands are able to increase their influence in their lives by making use of these platforms. This study aimed to find out the role of brands on social media in the everyday lives of university-aged millennials and how (social media) brand-marketing strategies contribute to consumer engagement.

Contrary to Fournier and Avery's (2011) perspective, which shows that brands are in a way invading our social space by being on social media and more specifically social networking sites, the findings of this research suggest that for university aged millennials this has become a norm and therefore they do not see this as an invasion of their social space. In fact, they expect brands to be on social media as they now play an important role in their everyday lives. When brands enter the social space of consumers they are expected to communicate and connect with them just as people do with other people on social media. This humanizes the brand for the consumer as it is no longer a one-way communication where only the brand speaks to the consumer, but instead it has multiple dimensions, in which the consumer can communicate with the brand, the brand with the consumer, the brand with other brands, as well as consumers with other consumers. When brands are active on social media and respond to consumers, a closer tie and connection is formed.

The findings of this research indicate that brands play a role in the lives of university-aged millennials through informing, inspiring and connecting them with others. Students expect brands to be on social media as a way to keep them updated as this is an information rich consumer group (Barkley, 2011), and with the use of relational marketing techniques such as financial, social and structural bonds, on social media, brands are able to create a connection and relationship with university-aged millennials. This relationship helps guide and encourage the consumer in creating an identity for themselves. It also helps connect them with others who share the same relations with the brand.

Moreover, the findings suggest that students value the experience with certain brands more than the actual product. Through this experience and image a brand transcends, the consumer creates an identity based on their ideal self-concept, which the brand portrays. The consumer is therefore inspired to explore their different sides, and in some cases even inspired to co-create value for a brand.

The outcome of this research is academically relevant as it contributes to literature on social media marketing strategies and its effects. Its exploratory approach also allows for the conclusions to be tested scientifically through a quantitative approach (Calder, 1997). This research is also professionally relevant as the findings explain which social media marketing strategies actually work for consumer engagement and which are less effective. Marketing professionals can use the findings and adapt it to their company strategy.

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Appendices: Interview protocol

1. Introduction to the focus groups

As you all know you are invited to participate in this research about brands and millennials. As you probably remember from the consent form I sent you guys through Facebook, the purpose of the study is to understand the role brands play in your everyday lives through social media. The questions of this focus group will be related to your perspectives and experiences with brands on social media. If you don't mind, I will be using a voice recorder during the discussions to help with my field notes and help me remember better what each of you had to say today for later on when I transcribe. The recordings will be used only for the purpose of this research, and will be deleted after transcribed. If you would like to keep your identity hidden for any reasons please let me know and you may choose a pseudonym. The discussion will take between 30 and 60 minutes.

2. Participants educational background

Focus Groups	Participants/ gender		Study background
1	Jackson	(m)	- Communication and Media
	Ashley	(f)	- Communication and Media
	Annabelle	(f)	- Marketing Management
	Anton	(f)	- General Management
	Chuck	(m)	- Business and Economics
	Dolores	(f)	- Communication and Media
2	Louise	(f)	- English Language and Literature
	Phillip	(m)	- Communication and Media
	Frank	(m)	- Business and Economics
	Lauren	(f)	- Communication and Media
	Amanda	(f)	- Communication and Media
3	Cheryl	(f)	- Nano-biology
	Sander	(m)	- Financial Investment
	Andrew	(m)	- Financial Investment

	Olivier	(m) -	Business and Economics
	Angelo	(m) -	Business and Economics
4	Dee	(f) -	Innovation Management
	Marnell	(f) -	Communication and Media
	Jason	(m) -	Communication and Media
	Nora	(f) -	Communication and Media
	Michel	(m) -	Media and Entertainment
	Selma	(f) -	General Management
5	Isabelle	(f) -	Communication and Media
	Phil	(m) -	Information Technology
	Ayanna	(f) -	Psychology
	Bruna	(f) -	Fine Arts
	Rachel	(f) -	Law
	Connor	(m) -	Business Management
6	Tessel	(f) -	Cultural Anthropology
	Chioma	(f) -	Psycho-biology
	Gillian	(f) -	Commercial Economics
	Omer	(m) -	Business Administration
	Natalie	(f) -	Communication and Media

3. Interview questions

1. What brands (or company) do you follow on social media? → Anyone else following this brand?

   * If unsure of what brands they follow then ask: what do you guys consider as brands?

   - What about (this brand) makes them interesting to follow?
   - What are the reasons for following these types of brands?

2. What do you think about brands being on social media?

- Can you tell me about any interesting experiences you've had with brands on social media?
- Have you ever participated in online (or offline) activities produced by a brand? **Such as games, competitions (lays), festivals (Heineken, desperados), incentives (to get a special offer), Online contest, etc. . Tell me about this
- How do you feel about the brand since you had that experience (before and after)?
- Do you think social media enhanced your experience?

3. What do you consider as interaction with a brand?
   - Have you had any interactions with brands? → Can you tell me more about this?
   - How does this interaction shape your perception of the brand?

4. Do you know of brands which use social media for customer service or customer relationship management?
   - Have you ever used social media for customer service reasons?
   - Did they respond? → How did that make you feel?
   - What if they didn't respond? → How would that make you feel?
   - How does this affect your relationship with the brand?

5. Do you feel like you have a type of a connection (or relationship) with the brand (because they are on social media)?
   - How does this (relationship) affect your perception of the brand?

6. Which brands would you most likely recommend to others?
   - Why these brands? What do they do on social media?
   - Which brands would you not recommend to others and why?