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Strengthening brand loyalty through email marketing

Raising children and a company in the Finnish baby food business

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ABSTRACT: What children eat and how to improve their nutritional health is a topic of growing interest. The diet of young children in Finland today is based largely on industrially produced baby food. Parents are exposed to a vast amount of nutritional information, advertising, retailers, brands and the range of products on the market. With all this information and options available, it is interesting to examine whether it is possible for them to become loyal to a specific baby food brand.

The purpose of this study is to examine brand loyalty in the context of a Finnish baby food company and how email marketing can be used in strengthening it. The first research objective is to propose a theoretical framework to connect brand loyalty and email marketing to deepen the understanding of the interaction between the two theoretical concepts. The second research objective is to examine the brand loyalty of the case company's customers towards the company and their attitudes towards the current implementation of email marketing. This objective is addressed by conducting the empirical part of the study, based on semi-structured interviews with nine customers of the case company. The third research objective is to provide actionable managerial implications for the studied case company on how email marketing can be used in strengthening brand loyalty. In the literature review of the study the main theoretical concepts, brand loyalty and email marketing, are defined and explored in depth. A research framework is proposed as an attempt to connect the elements relevant to this research. In the theoretical framework, relevant content is the concept that ultimately ties email marketing and brand loyalty together, suggesting how relevance must run through every aspect of email marketing to achieve the intended elements of brand loyalty.

When considering the case company's email marketing and the behaviour described by the respondents, there can be seen strong indications that email marketing contributes to behavioural brand loyalty. Most respondents reported having ordered products because of email marketing. When examining email marketing and attitudinal loyalty, the key finding focused on the relevance of marketing messages. Relevant email marketing content is associated with building trust and commitment, which can be further linked to brand loyalty. The most notable attributes indicating attitudinal loyalty were identified from the responses, e.g. the Finnishness of the case company and its mission to raise a healthy and planet-friendly generation. These attributes the loyal customers valued can guide the case company's communication, when aiming to gain new loyal customers. Email marketing has proven to be a cost-effective way for the case company to drive sales, announce new products, and ultimately support brand loyalty. Email marketing should therefore be seen as a way of strengthening and maintaining the relationship and loyalty between the brand and the consumer. Additionally, given the short duration of the customer relationship in the baby food industry, it would be worth considering how to convert individual buyers into loyal customers as early as possible.

KEYWORDS: brand loyalty, email marketing, baby food

VAASAN YLIOPISTO**Markkinoinnin ja viestinnän yksikkö**

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TIIVISTELMÄ: Lasten ravitsemus ja sen terveellisyyden edistäminen on yhä enenevässä määrin yleistyvä keskustelunaihe. Suomessa pikkulasten ruokavalio koostuu pitkälti teollisesti valmistetuista lastenruoista. Vanhemmat kohtaavat valtavan määrän ravitsemustietoa, mainontaa, jälleenmyyjiä, brändejä ja tuotteita. Tältä pohjalta on mielenkiintoista tutkia, voiko vanhemmasta tulla uskollinen jotain tiettyä lastenruokabrändiä kohtaan.

Tämän tutkimuksen tarkoitus on tutkia brändiuskollisuutta suomalaisen lastenruokayrityksen kontekstissa ja sitä, miten sähköpostimarkkinointia voidaan käyttää sen vahvistamiseen. Tutkimuksen ensimmäinen tavoite on luoda teoreettinen viitekehys brändiuskollisuuden ja sähköpostimarkkinoinnin yhdistämiseksi, jotta voidaan syventää ymmärrystä näiden kahden käsitteen välisestä vuorovaikutuksesta. Tutkimuksen toinen tavoite on tarkastella case-yrityksen asiakkaiden brändiuskollisuutta yritystä kohtaan ja heidän asenteitaan sähköpostimarkkinoinnin nykyistä toteutusta kohtaan. Tähän tavoitteeseen päästään toteuttamalla tutkimuksen empiirinen osuus, joka perustuu puolistrukturoituihin haastatteluihin, joihin osallistui yhdeksän case-yrityksen asiakasta. Tutkimuksen kolmas tavoite on tarjota yritykselle liikkeenjohdollisia kehitysehdotuksia siitä, miten sähköpostimarkkinointia voidaan hyödyntää brändiuskollisuuden vahvistamiseen. Tutkimuksen kirjallisuuskatsauksessa määritellään ja tarkastellaan perusteellisesti tutkimuksen teoreettisia pääkäsitteitä, brändiuskollisuutta ja sähköpostimarkkinointia. Teoreettinen viitekehys luodaan tämän tutkimuksen kannalta merkityksellisten tekijöiden korostamiseksi. Viitekehyksessä sähköpostimarkkinoinnin ja brändiuskollisuuden toisiinsa sitova tekijä on relevantti sisältö, jonka tulee kulkea kaikkien sähköpostimarkkinoinnin osa-alueiden läpi, jotta saavutetaan tavoitellut brändiuskollisuuden elementit.

Kun tutkitaan case-yrityksen sähköpostimarkkinointia ja vastaajien kuvaamaa käyttäytymistä, havaitaan selkeitä viitteitä siitä, että sähköpostimarkkinoinnin voi nähdä edistävän käyttäytymiseen perustuvaa brändiuskollisuutta. Useimmat vastaajat kertoivat tilanneensa yrityksen tuotteita sähköpostimarkkinoinnin ansiosta. Sähköpostimarkkinointia ja asenteellista brändiuskollisuutta tutkiessa tärkein havainto koski relevantteja markkinointiviestejä. Relevantti sähköpostimarkkinoinnin sisältö liittyy luottamuksen ja sitoutumisen rakentamiseen, mikä voi edelleen johtaa brändiuskollisuuden vahvistamiseen. Vastauksista tunnistettiin merkittävimmät asenteelliseen uskollisuuteen viittaavat ominaisuudet, kuten case-yrityksen suomalaisuus ja sen missio kasvattaa tervettä ja planeettaystävällistä sukupolvea. Nämä uskollisten asiakkaiden arvostamat ominaisuudet voivat jatkossa ohjata case-yrityksen viestintää, kun halutaan tavoitella uusia uskollisia asiakkaita. Sähköpostimarkkinointi on osoittautunut case-yritykselle kustannustehokkaaksi tavaksi lisätä myyntiä, kertoa uutuuksista sekä tukea brändiuskollisuutta. Sähköpostimarkkinointi tulisikin nähdä keinona vahvistaa ja ylläpitää brändin ja kuluttajan välistä suhdetta ja uskollisuutta. Kun huomioidaan lisäksi asiakassuhteen lyhyt kesto lastenruoka-alalla, on syytä pohtia, miten asiakkaat voidaan muuttaa uskollisiksi mahdollisimman varhaisessa vaiheessa.

AVAINSANAT: brändiuskollisuus, sähköpostimarkkinointi, lastenruoka

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1 Introduction

What children eat and how to improve their nutritional health is a topic of growing interest in both public and political discourse (Best, 2017). It is widely recognised that eating habits developed in childhood influence dietary health later in life (e.g. Baldassarre et al., 2016; Best, 2017; Birch & Doub, 2014; Skinner et al., 2002), making it critical to work towards improving what children eat (Best, 2017). Hence, one of the concerns of new parents is how to provide their babies with balanced and nutritious foods (Thompson & Glaser, 2001). During this early period, parents are responsible for the decisions on feeding practices, such as what, how and when to feed their children (Birch & Doub, 2014). This is not a simple task: parents are exposed to a vast amount of nutritional information, advertising, retailers, brands and the range of products available (Dawson, 2013; Mesch et al., 2014, as cited in Román & Sánchez-Siles, 2018). With all this information and options available, is it possible for them to become loyal to a specific baby food brand?

The diet of young children in Finland today is based to a fairly large extent on industrially produced baby food – a share that is significantly higher compared to that in many other countries (Jansik et al., 2024; Kilpimäki, 2008). The leading players in the baby food market in Finland are the big brands of Nestlé, Hero, Danone and HiPP (GlobalData, 2023), challenged by start-ups, such as Green Planet Astronauts and Muru Baby (Pro Luomu ry, 2023). In such highly competitive conditions, being able to create brand loyalty is invaluable; it is considered one of the key approaches to achieving competitive advantage (Gommans et al., 2001). Loyalty is positively connected to the financial performance of a company (Morgan & Rego, 2009), especially in market conditions of intense competition (Homburg et al., 2009). The increased competition within certain industries has emphasised the role of loyalty even further (Khan, 2014). The significance of it is considered so important that Khamitov et al. (2019) name loyalty as one of the key concepts in marketing research and practice.

Brand loyalty may be achieved in a variety of ways (See e.g. Knox, 1996), however, the present study only examines one of them. In their article, Merisavo and Raulas (2004) found that email marketing had a beneficial effect on brand loyalty and therefore suggest its use to businesses. Email marketing has long been a leading driver on consumer purchases (Hartemo, 2023; Marketing Charts, 2024). As cited in a Marketing Charts (2024) article, according to a recent Marigold (2024) report, more customers worldwide have bought through email than through all of the other marketing channels examined. The use of email marketing is widespread across sectors, as is the recognition of its profitability as a marketing tool (Bonfrer & Drèze, 2009; Hartemo, 2016, 2022; Mahmoud et al., 2019; Pop & Carmen, 2010; Shankar et al., 2022; Zhang et al., 2017). It is a cost-effective marketing channel (Jeshurun, 2018; Tran & Strutton, 2020; Yasmin et al., 2015; Zhang et al., 2017), allowing inexpensive contact with customers. This cost-effectiveness can be seen to increase the return on investment, ROI (Rosário, 2021). Rosário (2021) links this to the increase in interaction with consumers and the possibility of responding faster.

Simply put, email marketing is a way for businesses to provide information about the company and its services (Rosário, 2021). The way Hudák et al. (2017) describe the role of email marketing is multi-faceted: email marketing is both a brand building and relationship building tool as well as a channel for sales promotion and customer acquisition. In addition to these opportunities, Yasmin et al. (2015) mention the possibility of building brand awareness, customer loyalty and trust. Tran and Strutton (2020) also recognise the potential of emails both in attracting new customers and in informing existing customers about current or renewed offers. They encourage including emails as part of a company's direct marketing toolkit. They also highlight the strengths of email marketing in terms of personalising messages, targeting the desired audience and tracking results relatively easily. By announcing various content, promotions, discounts and upcoming events, companies aim to drive people to their websites (Paulo et al., 2022). The many benefits of email marketing are also recognised by consumers. Jeshurun (2018) highlights the timeliness, rich and appealing information and

advertising as elements that users value in email. In light of the advantages of both email marketing and brand loyalty, it is therefore beneficial to explore how email marketing can be used to strengthen brand loyalty in this highly competitive industry.

1.1 Research problem and objectives

Previous research shows that email marketing has had a positive effect on customers' brand loyalty (Merisavo and Raulas, 2004). The purpose of this study is *to examine brand loyalty in the context of a Finnish baby food company and how email marketing can be used in strengthening it*. Although previous research has shown a positive relationship between email marketing and brand loyalty in the context of a multinational brand, a gap exists in terms of how these concepts apply to a niche market. The studied Finnish baby food company is a startup, which typically aspires to apply cost-effective marketing methods in an innovative way (Rus et al., 2018). Email marketing, on one hand, has been identified as a cost-effective marketing channel (See e.g. Jeshurun, 2018). On the other hand, one of the primary goals of a startup is to attract new customers while retaining existing ones to allow growth and competitive advantage in the market, hence it is recommended for startup managers to prioritise loyalty (Ansari & Riasi, 2016). Based on the findings of the study, the aim is to provide managerial implications on how to most effectively use email marketing as a tool to strengthen brand loyalty. Three research objectives have been derived from the purpose of the study:

The first research objective is *to propose a theoretical framework to connect brand loyalty and email marketing*. This is achieved by first defining the concept of brand loyalty and examining its different dimensions: behavioural and attitudinal loyalty. This is followed by a comprehensive overview of what email marketing is today. The aim of the framework connecting brand loyalty and email marketing is to deepen the understanding of the interaction between the two theoretical concepts.

The second research objective is *to examine the brand loyalty of the case company's customers towards the company and their attitudes towards the current implementation of email marketing*. This objective is addressed by conducting the empirical part of the study, based on semi-structured interviews with a sample of the case company's customers.

The third research objective is *to provide actionable managerial implications for the studied case company on how email marketing can be used in strengthening brand loyalty*. This objective is achieved by reflecting the findings of the empirical part on the theoretical framework of the present study and drawing conclusions on this basis.

1.2 Research approach

This study was conducted through a qualitative research approach. The approach was chosen since, according to Hirsjärvi et al. (1997), the aim is to describe real life phenomena as profoundly as possible. More specifically, within the field of qualitative research, the approach chosen for the present study is a case study. In a business context, case studies can be used to illustrate even the highly complex and multifaceted topics in a more structured format (Eriksson & Kovalainen, 2008). These choices were made based on the purpose of the study, since according to Hirsjärvi et al. (1997), the research problem and approach are closely linked. The research method chosen for this study is conducting semi-structured personal interviews. An in-depth discussion on the methodological choices is provided in chapter 3.

1.3 Research structure

This study is structured in five separate chapters. First, the topic and context of the study are presented in the introduction. This is followed by identification of the research problem, objectives and approach. The second chapter of the study provides a literature

review. In this chapter, the main theoretical concepts of the study, namely brand loyalty and email marketing, are defined and explored in depth. The chapter concludes with a proposal for a theoretical framework to combine the two concepts for the purposes of this study.

The third chapter covers the methodological choices made in the present study. This section explains in more detail the chosen research approach and method, an introduction of the studied case company, the data collection and analysis methods, as well as the trustworthiness, ethical considerations and use of artificial intelligence in the study. In the fourth chapter, the findings of the study are presented. The final chapter of this study contains the discussion. The chapter reviews the objectives of the study, offers managerial implications, and presents limitations of the present study as well as suggestions for future research.

2 Literature review

This theoretical chapter covers the concepts of brand loyalty and email marketing. First, the concepts are defined, followed by a review of the components of both individual concepts. At the end of the chapter, a research framework is proposed as an attempt to connect the elements of brand loyalty and email marketing relevant to this research.

2.1 Brand loyalty

According to Gounaris and Stathakopoulos (2004), there is no unique definition of brand loyalty within marketing research. Kabiraj and Shanmugan (2011) underline that brand loyalty is a multidimensional and highly complex concept. Under this conceptual framework, researchers typically focus on certain aspects of loyalty, such as attitude, purchasing behaviour, or its multifaceted nature alone (Watson et al., 2015). However, only examining a single aspect of brand loyalty, such as repurchase, might offer an incomplete picture of the whole (e.g. Vera & Trujillo, 2017).

Proposals for a definition of brand loyalty have been suggested over the decades (e.g. Kha, 2008; Knox & Walker, 2001; Odin et al., 2001), one of the most cited being Oliver's (1999) loyalty definition. Oliver (1999) defines loyalty as:

a deeply held commitment to rebuy or repatronize a preferred product/service consistently in the future, thereby causing repetitive same-brand or same brand-set purchasing, despite situational influences and marketing efforts having the potential to cause switching behavior. (p. 34)

As the Oliver (1999) definition indicates, the concept of brand loyalty requires a repeat purchase pattern and a favourable attitude to the brand (Dick & Basu, 1994; Merisavo & Raulas, 2004). Brand loyalty can therefore be conceptualised as the relationship between attitudinal and behavioural elements (e.g. Dick & Basu, 1994; Odin et al., 2001; Szczepańska & Gawron, 2011). Two distinct lines of research define the literature on the

concept of loyalty – the stochastic (behavioural) and the deterministic (attitudinal) approach (Odin et al., 2001). The two approaches are discussed in detail further in this literature review.

Brand loyalty can be viewed as a critical performance factor in modern business practices since, as Reichheld et al. (2000) state, there is an apparent linkage between loyalty and company profits. Alrubaiee and Al-Nazer (2010) claim that it is frequently argued that in the long term, one of the primary factors influencing an organisation's financial performance is improved customer loyalty. Brand loyalty has been found to impact a company's financial performance in terms of sales (Watson et al., 2015), profitability (Hayes, 2008), price leadership, market share (Chaudhuri & Holbrook, 2001), and competitive advantage (Dick & Basu, 1994; Gounaris & Stathakopoulos, 2004; Kabiraj & Shanmugan, 2011) as well as marketing cost reduction (Rundle-Thiele & Bennett, 2001). Hayes (2008) states that the financial growth of a business depends on the business not losing existing customers faster than it attracts new ones. Leveraging brand loyalty further requires an understanding of the two different approaches, namely behavioural and attitudinal, and how to combine the two.

2.1.1 Behavioural loyalty

According to Nam et al. (2011), the behavioural perspective of brand loyalty is demonstrated by how frequently repeat purchases occur. In this context, a person is considered loyal to a brand if they consistently purchase from it (Odin et al., 2001). Paavola (2006) explains that this approach excludes the mental processes of buying and rather emphasises the outcome of the process, namely the repeat purchase pattern. Paavola goes on to illustrate that, from this simplified behavioural perspective, a loyal customer could be someone who always buys the same brand, always goes to the same grocery store or always eats at the same restaurant.

From a behavioural perspective, the concept of brand loyalty involves several dimensions of customer behaviour (Paavola, 2006). The author identifies two such dimensions: *length of relationship* and *level of purchase concentration*. Length of relationship refers to the time the consumer has been a customer of the business (Paavola, 2006). Level of purchase concentration refers to how much of a customer's purchases are concentrated on a particular brand or bought from a particular store, chain or group of stores (Paavola, 2006). Back and Parks (2003) mention the following measures for identifying repeat purchase patterns: *the frequency of purchases, the ratio of purchases of a specific brand relative to the other brands purchased, and/or the actual amount of purchases*. Paavola (2006) explains that, from a scientific point of view, the more loyal a customer is, the greater the proportion of their purchases that they allocate to the object of their loyalty.

The behavioural approach has been seen as somewhat controversial (e.g. Odin et al., 2001; Temessek & Touzani, 2009). Although the behavioural approach is a relatively objective way of measuring customer loyalty, a weakness of the approach is that it does not offer a valid explanation for the loyalty (Kha, 2008). As the attitudinal component of loyalty is not considered, misinterpretations of loyalty may follow (Back & Parks, 2003; Ebrahim, 2020; Paavola, 2006). For instance, routine consumption may be misclassified as loyalty, whereas occasional impulse purchases, variety seeking or supply shortages may distort the loyalty profile of a truly loyal customer (Dick & Basu, 1994; Paavola, 2006). In this context, situational drivers of purchase or more complex psychological motives are not considered (Odin et al., 2001) and thus why and how brand loyalty develops is not examined (Dick & Basu, 1994). Behavioural loyalty research focuses, essentially, on the past, which is another subject of criticism (Paavola, 2006). Paavola explains that the historical perspective and the measurement of purchases already realised do not provide a direct indication of the consumer's future choices. When the reasons for repeat purchases are not identified, the consumer's future choices cannot be predicted either (Paavola, 2006).

2.1.2 Attitudinal loyalty

Temessek and Touzani (2009) define the attitudinal approach as having a strong positive attitude towards a brand in comparison to competitor brands. Contrary to behavioural loyalty, attitudinal loyalty focuses not only on transactional, but also on attitudinal elements such as psychological commitment (Odin et al., 2001), trust (Back & Parks, 2003) and strong psychological attachment (Park & Kim, 2000). In their article, Grisaffe and Nguyen (2011) discuss the connection between emotional attachment and loyalty. When repurchases are emotionally bonded, a company's revenue streams can be considered less sensitive to disruption. Grisaffe and Nguyen (2011) go on to state that it is essential for companies to enable customers to create a strong emotional bond with the brand to drive loyal, profitable customer repurchases. Loyal consumers may perceive a brand as superior to its competitors, for instance in terms of reliability or a more positive experience (Chaudhuri & Holbrook, 2001).

Other examples of psychological predispositions connected to attitudinal loyalty include attitudes and preferences towards the brand (Ebrahim, 2020), motivation, and involvement (Back & Parks, 2003). According to Paavola (2006), loyalty can be seen as a latent attitudinal state that can generate repeat purchase behaviour, increased purchase volumes or referrals. The primary contribution of the attitudinal approach is a deeper comprehension of the consumer-brand relationship and the drivers behind brand loyalty (Temessek & Touzani, 2009). As Mascarenhas et al. (2006) explain, attitudinal loyalty often manifests as an ongoing relationship with a brand. In addition, in their article, Hur et al. (2011) examine the link between brand loyalty and brand communities. They argue that brand communities enable customers to be involved and interact with each other, thus reinforcing brand loyalty. According to Kha (2008), ways to measure attitudinal loyalty is by purchase intention, preference, willingness to recommend and supplier prioritisation.

The attitudinal approach can also be viewed through a critical lens. Firstly, a latent positive attitude does not always translate into a purchase intention or translate into repeat purchases or referrals (Paavola, 2006). Paavola goes on to state that there may be barriers to purchase, such as the consumer's financial situation, or the poor availability of the preferred brand. The author questions whether a positive attitude alone is sufficient to express loyalty. According to Back and Parks (2003), brand loyalty cannot be examined solely by behavioural or attitudinal metrics. They highlight the need, expressed in previous research, to integrate these approaches into one construct.

2.1.3 Connecting behavioural and attitudinal loyalty

In their article Baldinger and Rubinson (1996) present a model for the simultaneous measurement of behaviour and attitudes to assess loyalty. The model originated from the viewpoint that researchers treated behavioural and attitudinal data as separate, without considering the connection between the two. The model's basic assumption is that behaviourally loyal customers are predicted to assess the brand they are loyal to significantly more favourably than brands they never or seldom buy (Baldinger & Rubinson, 1996). Such customers have been labelled "real loyals".

In contrast, loyal customers who are not loyal in attitude are identified as "vulnerable" in the Baldinger and Rubinson (1996) model. Then again, a "vulnerable" customer who also shows a positive attitude towards a competitor brand is called "prime prospect" for that competitor brand in the model. Real loyals are thought to remain loyal for a longer period of time than vulnerables. Additionally, prime prospects are believed to convert at greater rates and eventually develop high brand loyalty, possibly to a competitor brand. According to the Baldinger and Rubinson (1996) model, the "real loyals" are customers who exhibit both behavioural and attitudinal high levels of loyalty, creating the brand's core of loyal customers.

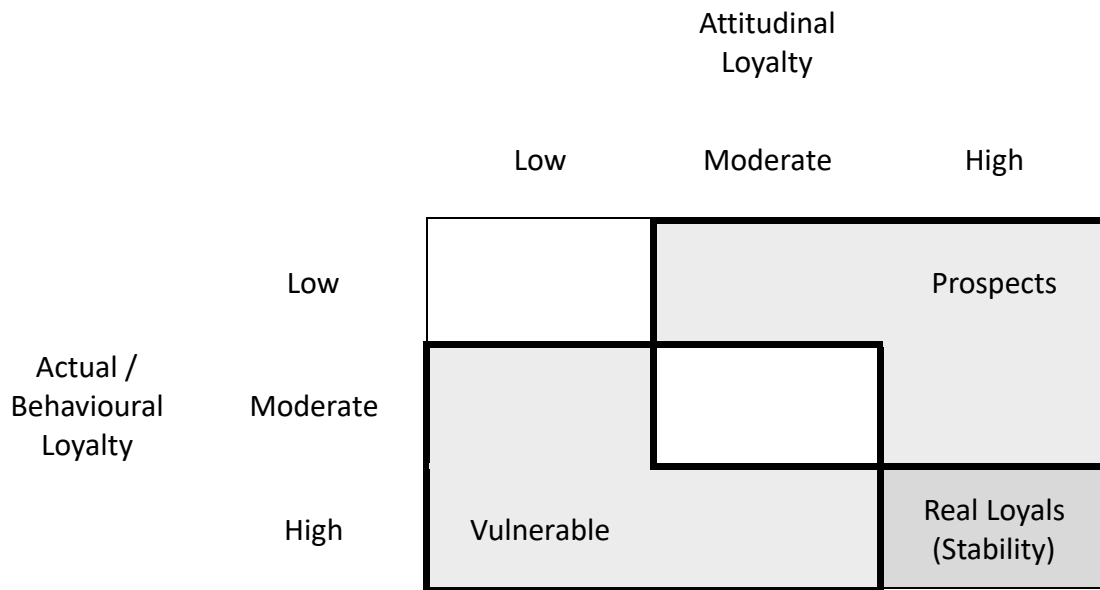


Figure 1. Behaviour / Attitude Matrix (Adapted from Baldinger and Rubinson (1996)).

When considering ways to strengthen brand loyalty, a company can consider its own target groups and customers through this model. According to Baldinger and Rubinson (1996), this implies that there must be more prospects than there are vulnerables. The measures to achieve this, according to them, vary enormously from company to company; it could be building real loyalty, or it could be driving trial and conversion. Different types of customer segments can be approached through different marketing channels, and the following chapters discuss an example of this, email marketing.

2.2 Email marketing

Not only are emails used for private correspondence, but they are also sent out in large volumes as newsletters by organisations and businesses (Lüders, 2008). Hudák et al. (2017) define email marketing as “a targeted sending of commercial and non-commercial messages to a detailed list of receivers respectively e-mail addresses” (p. 342). In Yasmin et al. (2015) email marketing definition it is added that the message can be sent to either “existing or potential consumer”. In other words, email marketing is a

marketing tool and channel for informing potential customers about the services and products available or to generate additional sales from existing customers (Komulainen, 2023).

According to Jeshurun (2018), marketing emails may vary in format, content and frequency, hence email can be seen as a truly versatile medium. The content of marketing emails involves a number of factors (Hartemo, 2023) that marketers have an interest in optimising and tailoring (Hanna et al., 2015). Hartemo (2023; see also Hartemo et al., 2016) goes on to state that these include the subject line and textual content of the email, which typically change between emails, as well as the sender, format and layout, which are often more fixed. In addition to these, Hanna et al. (2015) mention the sending time of the email, the body of the email, a call to action, such as a “click here to buy”, and the footer, which often contains the so-called fine print, such as information on the company and the option to unsubscribe from the newsletter.

According to a Spilker-Attig and Brettel (2010) article, email marketing has features of both push and pull marketing. The difference between these outbound and inbound marketing aspects, according to them, is whether the customer has subscribed to the company’s newsletter. This phenomenon can also be referred to as permission-based email marketing (e.g. Martin et al., 2003). The authors go on to state that “permission-based emails are powerful because by signing up to an email list, the consumer is requesting the information from the advertiser rather than simply being exposed to it” (p. 294). Hsin Chang et al. (2013) discuss in their article the differences between permission-based and so-called “spam” emails. Spam is also known as unsolicited email marketing (Martin et al., 2003). Whereas spam creates interruptions and to some extent negative associations, permission-based marketing is perceived as a permitted and acceptable influencer on the reader’s attitudes (Hsin Chang et al., 2013).

Type	One-time campaigns	Automated sequences	Newsletters
Form	Push emails	Marketing funnel	Regular, informational
Audience	Mass distribution	In response to an event or action	Newsletter subscribers
Content examples	Discounts, offers, product launches	Abandoned cart funnel, welcome funnel	Entertainment, interaction, information

Figure 2. Three primary types of email marketing messages (Adapted from Gunelius (2018); Hanna et al. (2015); Kumar (2021)).

Marketers' approaches to sending marketing emails can be roughly divided into three: "one-time campaigns, automated sequences, or newsletters" (Gunelius, 2018, p. 164). One-time campaigns, or push emails, are sent directly to customers in a more mass distribution manner (Hanna et al., 2015). The authors go on to state that common uses for emails in this category include discounts and offers, new product launches, product updates and awareness building. According to Gunelius (2018), a one-time campaign can also be informational instead of a promotional one, in which case the email would contain valuable and relevant content in order to build a connection with receivers, leading to brand trust, purchasing, and eventually brand loyalty. Hanna et al. (2015) state that the content of the emails varies depending on whether the aim is to convert new customers or retain existing ones.

Through another approach, automated sequences, messages are sent automatically in response to an event or action (Hanna et al., 2015). The automated sequences approach is also known as the email marketing funnel (Gunelius, 2018). The author summarises the funnels' role in three types: conversion, nurturing and acquisition. Hanna et al. (2015)

go on to state that when a predefined requirement by the marketer, such as a specific action, is met, the trigger is activated and an automatic message is sent to the recipient. An example of an activity that can be used as a basis for automated email marketing is the so-called “abandoned cart”, i.e. a situation where a user starts the order process but does not complete it (Gunelius, 2018). Another common example mentioned is the so-called welcome funnel, which is triggered when a user subscribes to a newsletter list.

The third approach, newsletters, is mainly, although not entirely, dedicated to non-promotional purposes (Gunelius, 2018). According to Kumar (2021), email newsletters are typically sent out regularly, for example daily, weekly or monthly, depending on the company. Email newsletters are used by consumers for a variety of reasons, including entertainment, interaction, information searching and shopping (Kumar, 2021). It is worth noting that newsletters can contain content that is not exclusively about the company itself; it is more important to prioritise the needs and desires of the recipients, and to provide relevant and useful content, rather than simply sharing information about the company (Gunelius, 2018).

2.2.1 Segmentation and personalisation

Most marketing efforts involve some form of segmentation process, which is primarily used to lower the cost of activities taken towards clients that are not interested in certain offers, while also increasing the efficacy of the campaign (Šinko Morandini & Dobrinić, 2018). The authors go on to state that email marketing can benefit from segmentation as well; by identifying and breaking down email lists into smaller groups, more targeted and relevant communications can be sent to them. According to Gunelius (2018), segmentation may be carried out using a range of variables, based on the data the email subscribers have shared, including age, geography, date of birth, date of most recent purchase, and so on. Gunelius (2018) states that proper segmentation can help improve email performance in terms of conversions, clicks and open rates, for example. These metrics of email marketing performance are discussed in the later sections.

In addition to segmentation, another way to strengthen email marketing is through personalisation (Gunelius, 2018). In an online advertising research synthesis, Liu-Thompkins (2019) highlights online personalisation as a consequence of the growing desire of companies to leverage the concept of 'micro-targeting'. As information technology has developed, businesses have been able to leverage consumer data in new ways (e.g. Montgomery & Smith, 2009; Vesanen, 2007; Wattal et al., 2012), such as through personalising marketing messages (Fong, 2017). Examples of personalised content in email marketing are adding the recipient's name or place of work in the message (Sahni et al., 2018) with the help of automation (Gunelius, 2018). Another way to personalise email messages is through what is known as dynamic content, where the content of a message can be customised from one recipient to another depending on chosen factors such as their location, gender, date of birth or age (Gunelius, 2018). At their best, personalisation and targeted promotions help consumers find products that are relevant to them (Fong, 2017).

2.2.2 Email marketing metrics

For a long time, email marketing has been the primary source of revenue for marketers using interactive media channels (Hartemo, 2023). Among the main advantages of email marketing are its cost-efficiency but also its measurability, which allows a fairly precise and accurate determination of the return on investment (Hanna et al., 2015). According to Bonfrer and Drèze (2009), email marketing performance can be measured by open and click-through rates (CTR, clicks per opens). The open rate is calculated by dividing the number of opened emails by the number of all delivered emails (Hanna et al., 2015). In the 2024 benchmarking reports for email marketing platforms, the average open rate for all industries was 39,74% according to Klaviyo (Davey, 2024) and 35,63% according to Mailchimp (2024). Although open rate is one of the most widely used measures, it is noteworthy that it is not always absolutely accurate due to a variety of technical reasons (Gunelius, 2018; Hanna et al., 2015; Hartemo, 2023). Marketers can improve the open

rates of marketing emails, for example by modifying the subject line or testing a different sending time (Gunelius, 2018), or by reviewing the segmentation of their mailing list: are the emails sent relevant to the targeted audience (Hanna et al., 2015)?

Another relevant metric, the click-through rate, is calculated by dividing the amount of click-throughs by all delivered emails (Hanna et al., 2015). The authors go on to state that a click-through counts when the recipient clicks on a button or link in the email they have received. The above-mentioned email marketing platforms 2024 reports cited average click-through rates of 1,47% according to Klaviyo (Davey, 2024), and 2,62% according to Mailchimp (2024). While a strong open rate depends largely on the headline, the click-through rate is an indicator of the relevance, usefulness and appeal of the content to the recipient (Gunelius, 2018). According to the authors, ways to enhance click-through rates include focusing on improving the overall content and clarity of messages, offering more relevant promotions, increasing urgency (see also Hanna et al., 2015) and testing the use of images and video, for example. In addition to open- and click-through rates, other key email marketing metrics include delivery rate, conversions, average order value, and unsubscribe and complaint rates (Hanna et al., 2015).

2.3 The intersection of brand loyalty and email marketing

In this chapter, the aim is to synthesise the essential theoretical considerations for the present study into one theoretical framework. The framework is visualised at the end of this chapter.

The role of active brand communication in creating and strengthening brand loyalty is widely recognised in brand literature (Merisavo & Raulas, 2004). In their article on using email to enhance brand loyalty, Merisavo and Raulas (2004) mention that according to consumer behaviour and communication theories, consumers who prefer a certain brand are more willing to both search for and receive information about it. The authors go on to cite brand theories: regular communication with the consumer is encouraged,

as it creates value for the consumer by providing relevant information and simplifying their information searches. It is an opportunity to strengthen brand loyalty, as consumers value ongoing communication from brands. Merisavo and Raulas conclude that marketers may be able to maintain their customers' interest in the brand via consistent email communication with relevant information.

Cases et al. (2010) recognise email as a potential tool for generating loyalty as well. They argue that it is increasingly important to understand how email campaigns affect customer attitudes and behaviour, as more and more companies are now using email to communicate with existing customers. This information may then be converted to a competitive advantage through optimising email campaign design. According to Hartemo et al. (2016), there are methods to optimise email marketing performance: they highlight testing as a method to identify the type of content that recipients value and find relevant. A similar idea is adopted in the present study, without however, applying a testing model, but instead through open-ended spoken responses and descriptions by interviewees. This is described in-depth in the methodology section of the study, in chapter 3.

When it comes to increasing brand loyalty, providing customers with a positive experience with the brand becomes essential, and furthermore, brand loyalty can be increased if customers trust the brand more (Bae & Kim, 2023). Then again, in the context of email marketing, Hartemo (2023) presents in their dissertation the "Cycle of trust-commitment-participation-relevant content". According to this model, relevant email marketing content can be seen to strengthen trust. This sets off a virtuous circle where trust leads to commitment, which again drives participation.

One may argue that the theoretical concepts of this model related to email marketing are highly comparable to the elements of brand loyalty. Connections can be found from Hartemo's (2023) and Gunelius' (2018) trust in email marketing to the trust in brand loyalty literature, including Back and Parks (2003) and Yasmin et al. (2015). As for

Hartemo's (2023) concept of commitment, a similarity can already be found in the conceptualisation of brand loyalty in Oliver (1999) and the contribution of Odin et al. (2001). The related concepts of participation (Hartemo, 2023) and involvement (Back & Parks, 2003) are merged for the purpose of this study under the concept of participation. In the theoretical framework of this study, relevant content is the concept that ultimately ties email marketing and brand loyalty together, suggesting how relevance must run through every aspect of email marketing in order to achieve the intended elements of brand loyalty.

These theoretical findings will provide the foundation for the second objective of the present study, to examine the brand loyalty of the case company's customers towards the company and their attitudes towards the current implementation of email marketing. Aligned with the suggestions of Merisavo and Raulas (2004), the subject will be approached through both behavioural and attitudinal loyalty.



Figure 3. Email marketing fostering brand loyalty (Adapted from Back & Parks (2003); Gunelius (2018); Hartemo (2023); Jeshurun (2018); Merisavo & Raulas (2004); Odin et al. (2001); Oliver (1999); Yasmin et al. (2015)).

3 Methodology

This chapter covers the methodological choices of the study. First, the chosen research approach and method are discussed in more detail. This is followed by an overview of the selected data collection and analysis methods. Finally, the trustworthiness, ethical consideration and use of artificial intelligence in the study are addressed.

3.1 Research approach

This study is conducted as qualitative research. According to Hirsjärvi et al. (1997), the starting point for qualitative research is to describe real life. The authors go on to state that qualitative research aims to study the subject as comprehensively as possible. Eriksson and Kovalainen (2008) explain that in qualitative business research, the focus is on the complexities of business phenomena in their real-life contexts. This approach was found to be appropriate for the present study examining brand loyalty and the potential of email marketing to strengthen it, involving the actual customers of a Finnish baby food brand.

There is a wide range of different research approaches within the field of qualitative research (Eriksson & Kovalainen, 2008), and qualitative research itself can be seen as a so-called umbrella term (Tuomi & Sarajärvi, 2018). For this study, the specified qualitative research approach chosen is a case study. Case studies offer a way of illustrating complex and complicated business topics in an understandable and practical way (Eriksson & Kovalainen, 2008).

More precisely defined, the research design of this study can be considered as an intensive case study. The purpose of an intensive case study is to gain an in-depth understanding of a unique case and to develop a holistic description in the context of the case (Eriksson & Kovalainen, 2008). The authors go on to explain that, unlike an extensive case study, the aim is not to seek and test generalisable theoretical outcomes.

In the light of the present study, the aim with the chosen method is to achieve the mentioned above, a deep and comprehensive understanding of brand loyalty and the role of email marketing in the context of the studied Finnish baby food brand.

3.2 Case: Green Planet Astronauts

3.2.1 Baby food definition and regulations

In food legislation, baby food is defined as industrially manufactured baby food that is designed to be complementary to the nutritional needs and diet of children under the age of three (Finnish Food Authority, 2024a). These include products such as children's gruels and porridges, and purees made from berries, fruit, vegetables, meat and fish. There are various brands, products and flavours of baby food available, and it is sold according to the child's stage of development (Maguire et al., 2004). Commercially prepared or ready-made baby foods are usually mass-produced and bought pre-prepared, requiring little, if any, additional cooking or heating prior to consumption (Maslin & Venter, 2017; Maguire et al., 2004). Ready-made baby food is a convenient and safe alternative to homemade meals, according to the Finnish Food Authority (2024a). According to the organisation, baby food products have their own product-specific regulations, for example on their nutritional content. In addition, ingredients used in the production of industrial baby food are subject to stricter purity requirements than those for ordinary food products. The regulations also concern labelling, nutrients in the composition and their minimum and maximum levels, hygiene, and the use of pesticides and additives, among other things (European Commission, 2024).

The Finnish Food Authority (2024a) states that it is important to note that, although in day-to-day language all food products designed or marketed for children are commonly perceived as baby food, many are not *legally* considered to be baby food. A product that is legally considered to be baby food can be identified by an age label, which indicates

the appropriate age from which the product can be used (Finnish Food Authority, 2024b). In this case, the product must meet the consistency, quality and purity requirements for baby food laid down in the legislation.

3.2.2 Baby food and buying behaviour

The first baby food products are often bought to support introducing the baby to solid foods (Maguire et al., 2004). When it comes to deciding what children eat, parents are ultimately the ones making the decisions, and the ones who inevitably influence their children's eating habits (Baldassarre et al., 2016). An intriguing aspect of studying the context in which baby food is purchased is the specific type of shopping behaviour involved. What it requires of the consumer is buying for someone other than oneself; more precisely, in the context of buying for children, it is of "the obligatory nature of shopping for someone else" (Gillison & Reynolds, 2016). Gillison and Reynolds (2016) point out in their article that, contrary to actual reality, current shopping research usually assumes that the buyer and the end-user are the same individual, thus ignoring the fact that consumers tend to act differently depending on who they are buying for. For example, according to Liu and Sam (2022), as young children are at a developmentally crucial stage, parents may perceive and determine their purchasing decisions for children's organic food differently from adults. On the other hand, children themselves have an influence on parents' purchasing decisions, for example through pester power (Wilson & Wood, 2004). In addition, it is noteworthy that "advertising to children is highly sensitive" (Wilson & Wood, 2004), and that "marketing that targets children must not encourage the child to influence the family's purchasing decisions" (Finnish Competition and Consumer Authority, 2024). Derived from all this, an insightful perspective of the present study is that the theoretical concept of brand loyalty can be considered in this context of buying for someone else.

3.2.3 Case company Green Planet Astronauts

The following sections quote personal communication (24-25 September 2024) exchanged with Milla Westerling, founder and CEO of Green Planet Astronauts:

“Green Planet Astronauts was born in 2018 out of the founder’s personal desire to be part of the solution to the climate crisis. The IPCC climate report was widely in the news back then, reporting that the biggest impact on an individual level to minimise carbon footprint is to eat plant-based. At the same time, however, many studies have shown that how we eat as adults is largely determined by the age of 0-3 years.

Human gut and taste buds develop the most when we are children. They start developing already in the womb at week 16 and continue to do so until the age of 3. According to research, children should be introduced to as wide a range of foods as possible to avoid allergies and intolerances, as well as get accustomed to a spectrum of healthy, plant-based taste and texture.

The oat milk brand Oatly had just done a massive rebranding at that time and made a breakthrough against the dairy industry by having consumers ditch cow milk over plant-based one. The millennial generation was their biggest target group. Millennials were also the ones having babies amid arising awareness of the impact food has on our health and planet.

Health care instructions on how to feed babies in an ideal manner were not changing as rapidly as consumer behaviour; millennial parents were confused by the incoherence between plant-based revolution taking place in retail shelves and the old-fashioned dietary advice they were getting from the officials. However, national nutrition recommendations have since become more planet-friendly. Green Planet Astronauts was created to fill this specific gap: an easy and convenient way to introduce plant-based taste and texture to babies when they start eating solids.

First product on the market was accidentally developed in the founder's home kitchen. It became the world's first baby food certified oat milk product that was instantly listed by Finland's biggest retailers at 450 stores across the country upon launch late 2019. After launching five more products, the company mission was first time put into words and printed on millions of packaging the company has sold since then: *Raising a healthy, planet-friendly generation.*

In less than 5 years from launch, the company has expanded its portfolio to 23 products sold in three countries with over 2-million-euro revenue. The plant-based premium baby food products are topping sales charts due to best taste, quality and convenience, according to the consumer. In a customer survey carried out by the company, 93% of parents recommend the products also widely due to the strong mission, which resonates with the consumer.

The company has been able to create a highly engaged consumer community by involving the parents in product development, as well as testing marketing communication and visuals since the beginning. The first products created in the home kitchen were introduced to retail clients immediately after the concept was structured which allowed the company to absorb as much category information as possible in the beginning. It helped to adjust the brand to fit the market ideally and essentially to find the first early adopter consumer target group.

Marketing has relied heavily on low-cost testing. The successful direct-to-consumer subscription service model was first tested in the founder's home basement and new markets have been researched by talking to parents on the streets. Consumers appreciate the extreme transparency and people behind the brand which sets the company apart from its multinational corporate competitors. In terms of marketing channels, the focus is on cost-effectiveness through social media and influencer marketing, email marketing and sampling at events. The company is constantly willing to experiment boldly with new approaches.

Future growth relies much on continuous product innovation creating hype around the brand and building on the exceptionally strong consumer community. The company's winning strategy is hyper focused on creating value to consumers and customers and transforming how children are fed. Transformation can already be seen how keen parents are to add more plant-based to their children's diets and how buying behaviour has become hybrid including both retail and e-commerce."

3.3 Research method

The choice of research method is typically guided by the type of information being sought and from whom or where it is being sought (Hirsjärvi et al., 1997). According to Hirsjärvi et al. (1997), qualitative research typically favours methods of data collection that capture the perspectives and opinions of the research subjects. They provide examples of such methods, including thematic interviews, participant observation, group interviews and discursive analyses of documents and texts. In the context of business research, the primary method of producing empirical data is often in-depth interviews (Eriksson & Kovalainen, 2008).

The research method chosen for this study is personal interviews. The reasons for this choice are as follows. Interviews have been the main method used in qualitative research (e.g. Hirsjärvi et al., 1997). Tuomi and Sarajärvi (2018) put it simply: when we want to know what a person thinks or why they act the way they do, it makes sense to ask them. A major advantage of interviewing over other forms of data collection is that it allows for flexibility in how the data can be collected, adapting to the situation and respondents (Hirsjärvi et al., 1997; Tuomi & Sarajärvi, 2018). Hirsjärvi et al. (1997) go on to state that the order of the interview topics can be adjusted, and that there are more possibilities to interpret the answers than, for example, in a questionnaire. Hirsjärvi et al. (1997) highlight the opportunity to ask for justification for the opinions expressed by the respondent, and to ask follow-up questions, if necessary, as advantages of an interview.

Eriksson and Kovalainen (2008) classify the different types of interviews according to their level of structuring: structured, semi-structured and unstructured interviews. For the present study, a semi-structured interview is selected. This allows both the how and what questions to be explored (Eriksson & Kovalainen, 2008). The authors continue that the strength of this type of interview is its conversational nature, as the semi-structured format allows for variations in question order and wording. Due to the complex nature of the research topics, and, for example, given that brand loyalty is not a completely unambiguous concept (See e.g. Gounaris & Stathakopoulos, 2004), it was the flexibility and conversational nature of semi-structured interviews that was perceived to be of advantage in the present study.

3.4 Data collection

Eriksson and Kovalainen (2008) stress that the interview questions should be related to the research questions of the study, but that they are not identical. According to them, the aim of the interview questions is to produce material which, once analysed, will help to answer the original research questions. The primary purpose of the present study is to examine the potential of email marketing as a tool to strengthen brand loyalty in the context of a Finnish baby food company. The semi-structured interview design used in the empirical part of the present study has been created to support this purpose.

3.4.1 Creation of the interview framework

In case study research, proper research questions are usually defined in conjunction with empirical data (Eriksson & Kovalainen, 2008). The authors explain how the researcher may have some initial research questions in the beginning, but will need to refine them as the research progresses and the researcher familiarises themselves with the topic in more depth. A similar idea has been adopted in the present study to formulate the

interview questions. To facilitate the formation of the interview questions, rehearsing or piloting the interview can be useful (e.g. Gillham, 2000). Such pilots have been widely applied in qualitative research to refine research tools (Sampson, 2004).

For the present study, the preliminary interview questions were piloted with a test respondent. With the pilot interviewee, the aspects of the interview relating to the purchase of baby food and brand loyalty were generically tested in order to understand, for the purposes of the present study, what kind of factors emerge in the discussion. It is noteworthy that the focus with the pilot interview was not on discussing brand messaging and email marketing, but rather on consumer behaviour and factors influencing brand loyalty. The responses to the pilot interview were found to be promising and fruitful. It provided confirmation that the questions designed seemed to examine the desired topics, and on this basis the questions were further deepened and added to. The full theoretical background to the interview questions, along with the references cited, is presented in the appendices to this study, in Appendix 1.

Gillham (2000) explains that as part of creating an interview framework, the researcher should include prompts – “things you may need to remind the interviewee about”. According to the author, the purpose of the prompts is to ensure that the right issues are raised in the interview. By this they mean that the researcher can ‘prompt’ the respondent by asking “what about...?” but without leading them to answer in any particular way. The interview framework for the present study has been constructed using the Gillham (2000) template, which pairs interview questions with prompts that will be used if necessary. The prompts are presented alongside the interview questions, in Appendix 2.

3.4.2 Interview arrangements

The selection of interviewees for the present study follows the view of Hirsjärvi et al. (1997) on the typical selection of the research subjects in qualitative research: the group

is selected purposively, instead of using a random sampling method. The interviewees were gathered by accessing the existing database of email marketing subscribers of the company in question. A segment was created from the customer profiles in the larger database using the following criteria. A customer profile was included in the segment if the customer has ordered a product at least four times over all time, has opened an email sent by the company at least once in the 30 days, and can receive marketing emails. These criteria were chosen with the assumption that the customers in the segment would express some degree of brand loyalty, at least in the form of repurchase, and would be able to comment on email marketing.

The segment resulted in a total of 341 profiles. An invitation to an interview was sent to these individuals, for which 10 participants were sought. The invite sent to the contacted profiles was in Finnish, briefly describing the topic of the interview and instructing those interested to book a suitable interview time. A moderate incentive was also used in the interview invitation. Each participant would be rewarded with a small package of the brand's products. The appointment scheduling tool of Google Calendar was used to schedule the interviews. One-hour slots were reserved for each interview, which was estimated on the basis of the pilot interview. The invite was sent out on a Saturday afternoon in April 2024, and all ten interviewees were found the same day. The interviews were conducted over the next eight days.

Table 1. Breakdown of respondent demographics.

Respondent	Age	City	Number of children	Child/children's age
A	-	-	1	1,5yr
B	-	-	2	3yr and 1yr
C	-	-	5, two of which adults	23yr, 20yr, 14, 12yr and little less than 3yr
D	-	Helsinki	1	3yr
E	30	Helsinki	1	1,5yr
F	34	Helsinki	1	8 months
G	31	Tuusula	1	8 months
H	38	Helsinki	1 own, 1 step	2yr and 7yr
I	33	Pori	2	3yr and 1yr
J	-	-	-	-

Since one interviewee did not eventually participate, a total of 9 interviews were conducted individually. Initially, group interviews were also considered as an option. However, in this study, individual interviews were chosen to gain as in-depth an understanding of the individual's experience as possible. In addition, it was intended to avoid as much as possible the social desirability bias that might occur in a group setting, especially when dealing with somewhat sensitive topics related to children and parenting (See e.g. Bornstein et al., 2015). The topic is discussed in more detail in chapter 3.6. The interviews were conducted using Google Meet video conferencing. All interviews were audio-recorded, as indicated in the interview invitation and booking tool, and confirmed at the start of each interview. The recordings were made using the voice memo function on a mobile phone. Based on the audio recordings, the final duration of the interviews ranged from 30 minutes to 1 hour and 20 minutes, with an average of around 50 minutes.

Table 2. Breakdown of interview schedule.

Respondent	Date and time	Duration
A	28 April 2024, 11:00am	39 min
B	28 April 2024, 3:30pm	48 min
C	28 April 2024, 5:00pm	43 min
D	29 April 2024, 6:15pm	1 h 20 min
E	30 April 2024, 8:00am	1 h 4 min
F	2 May 2024, 5:00pm	30 min
G	2 May 2024, 7:30pm	37 min
H	3 May 2024, 5:00pm	54 min
I	3 May 2024, 6:15pm	59 min

Interview questions were not sent to interviewees in advance. This choice was made to facilitate the interview itself to be as conversational and spontaneous as possible, and to avoid creating a highly formal question-and-answer format.

3.5 Data analysis

For the present study, content analysis was chosen as the method of analysis. Drisko and Maschi (2016) define content analysis as “a family of research techniques for making systematic, credible, or valid and replicable inferences from texts and other forms of communication”. Content analysis falls into the category of qualitative research analysis, which is not inherently guided by theory or epistemology, but to which a wide range of theoretical and epistemological approaches can be applied relatively freely (Tuomi & Sarajärvi, 2018). The present study applies the theory-driven analysis described by Tuomi and Sarajärvi (2018). Unlike *theory-based* analysis, in *theory-driven* analysis, theory can be used as a tool, but the analysis is not directly based on it.

In their book, Tuomi and Sarajärvi (2018) present a framework originally proposed by researcher Timo Laine to describe the process of analysis in qualitative research, which is structured as follows. *The first step* is to decide what is of interest in the data and make a clear exclusion. *The second step* is to go through the data, distinguishing and marking what is not included in the chosen selection. This involves dismissing everything else from the study, and gathering the flagged items together and apart from the rest of the material. *Third*, the data are classified, thematised or typified. *The fourth and final step* is to draw conclusions.

As regards the third step of the framework (Tuomi & Sarajärvi, 2018), the technique chosen for the present study is thematisation. According to the authors, thematisation is about dividing and grouping qualitative data according to different themes. This allows comparing the occurrence of certain themes in the data. The idea is to look for insights from the material that reflect a particular theme, i.e. to focus on what is said about each theme.

In a qualitative study, no conclusions are drawn from the data in terms of generalisability (Hirsjärvi et al., 1997). Hirsjärvi et al. (1997) go on to state that the idea is the following: by examining an individual case in sufficient detail, what is significant about the phenomenon and what is often repeated when the phenomenon is examined at a more general level can be revealed. The authors (1997) argue that generalisations should not be exaggerated when interpreting the results, as the data is context- and situation-specific: respondents might speak differently in an interview situation than in another situation.

This study focuses on the primary data collected in this particular study (See e.g. Eriksson & Kovalainen, 2008). The data analysis does not include secondary datasets, such as the numerical purchase histories collected from the customers interviewed. While it could be fruitful to explore these types of datasets to investigate behavioural loyalty and, for

example, possible gaps between attitudes and behaviour, these opportunities are excluded from this study and are instead presented as one suggestion for future research.

3.6 Trustworthiness and ethical consideration

Whereas validity, reliability and generalisability are considered the traditional evaluation framework for business research (e.g. Eriksson & Kovalainen, 2008), Guba (1981) presents an alternative concept of *trustworthiness* for the evaluation of qualitative research. This model consists of four components: “credibility, transferability, dependability and confirmability” (e.g. Eriksson & Kovalainen, 2008; Shenton, 2004). The present study is assessed in the light of these elements.

Credibility refers to the internal validity of a study (Shenton, 2004). In other words, the aim is to ensure that the research is measuring what is ultimately intended, and that the researcher has accurately captured the phenomena being studied. The researcher may reflect on, for example, whether there is sufficient data to support the conclusions, whether the conclusions drawn from the findings are solid, or whether another researcher would reach the same conclusions by interpreting the data (Eriksson & Kovalainen, 2008). The credibility of the present study is affected by the relatively limited number of respondents interviewed. However, it is noteworthy that in an intensive case study, the aim is to develop a holistic description in the context of a unique case, not to search for and test generalisable theoretical results (Eriksson & Kovalainen, 2008). From this point of view, a relatively small sample is not in itself a limitation. It should also be noted that the interpretation of results is indeed always an interpretation, and dependent on the researcher alone, presumably leading to some degree of bias.

Transferability refers to the external validity of a study (Shenton, 2004). In other words, it is intended to demonstrate how the present study connects to previous research (Eriksson & Kovalainen, 2008). In the present study, the aim has been to provide a strong and extensive theoretical basis to illustrate clearly how the phenomenon under study

and its theoretical background are interlinked. Moreover, the theoretical concepts and marketing tools of this study can be seen as somewhat universal and not industry-specific, allowing potential similar research to be carried out in a wide range of contexts.

Dependability refers to the importance of providing adequate information and ensuring the research process is appropriately documented, traceable, and coherent (Eriksson & Kovalainen, 2008). Logic has been pursued in this study by continually revisiting the starting points of the research, i.e. its purpose and objectives. They are carried consistently throughout the study. In turn, the theoretical framework provided in this study supports the remaining research, thus laying a coherent foundation for the analysis, creating structure throughout the study. As for the documentation of information, it has been carefully considered to present the matters as clearly as possible. Various figures and tables have been created to support the understanding of broad or complex issues.

The purpose of *confirmability* is to try to ensure that the outcomes of the study are based on the information provided by the respondents and not on any biases the researcher may have (Shenton, 2004). In the present study, the aim has been to support confirmability by ensuring a neutral approach and analysis of the empirical parts and the findings in them. However, it is important to note that the researcher of this study is employed by the case company, and therefore some bias may be assumed in their views. In this study, this bias can occur, for example, by the researcher interpreting the answers as they would prefer them to be, by unconsciously influencing the respondents' answers, or by inadvertently omitting something essential to the study, assuming that the respondent would already know it. Again, this potential bias was recognised, and a conscious effort was made to avoid its effects.

Ethical consideration is a broader concept, where the essential element is both the mutual trust within the research community and the relationship between the researcher and the subjects (Eriksson & Kovalainen, 2008). This was considered in the

interviews by emphasising the anonymity and confidentiality of the responses, so that the respondents could not be identified in the findings of the study. In addition, it was made clear that there were no so-called right or wrong answers, also referring to the fact that it was hoped that respondents would give as honest answers as possible.

The overall trustworthiness of the interview method may have been affected by the tendency of interviewees to give socially desirable answers (Hirsjärvi et al., 1997). This so-called *social desirability bias* refers to the individual's tendency to be perceived as more altruistic by denying socially undesirable behaviour and admitting desirable one (Zerbe & Paulhus, 1987, as cited in Chung & Monroe, 2003). What is considered socially desirable is subject to cultural differences, and it is crucial that the researcher is able to interpret the respondent's answers in the light of such cultural meanings (Hirsjärvi et al., 1997). Bornstein et al. (2015) point out that socially desirable responses can occur particularly in the context of parents answering questions about themselves, their children and their parenting, all of which are central to the present study. This was respected in the interview situations by attempting to create a neutral, accepting and safe environment for diverse opinions on sensitive topics.

3.7 Use of artificial intelligence

In this study, the artificial intelligence platform DeepL has been used to support the language translations of the study. In particular, the tool was an essential part of the transcription of the Finnish interviews, which for the purposes of this study had to be translated into English. In addition, ChatGPT has been used as a tool in the present study to support initial thought processes, for instance, to explore options for theoretical choices for the original research topic. The final decisions and both linguistic and theoretical choices are made by the researcher, for which I am fully responsible.

4 Findings

In this chapter, the data from the interviews conducted is presented and analysed. In order to clarify the analysis, the information has been grouped under themes that emerged from the data. The three themes were labelled as: *Baby food buyers – reasons and motivations to buy*, *The many faces of brand loyalty* and *Email marketing that engages*. However, the following chapters are named according to the theoretical parts of the study. Based on the analysis in this chapter, the aim is to identify and organise relevant insights for the third objective of the study, the managerial recommendations on how to strengthen brand loyalty through email marketing.

4.1 Behavioural brand loyalty of baby food buyers

The first focus was specifically on brand loyalty in terms of behaviour. This was explored by asking respondents to describe how much they have used the case company's products and how well they feel they know them. The most common answer was that the products have been used a lot. Some respondents reported that they have a monthly subscription to the products via the online store, while others had bought individual packages several times. This was to some extent to be expected, as the original selection criteria of respondents was aimed at finding these types of "heavy users". The vast majority of respondents felt they knew the brand's product portfolio well, to the extent that one respondent commented that she knew the products as well as one could without working for the company. The different products in the portfolio had also been extensively tested, some with several, some with all available products.

To gain an understanding of the reasons and motivations behind the respondents' baby food purchasing in general, the interviews started by exploring baby food purchases and the different drivers behind them. All respondents are mothers, some also stepmothers, to one or more children. The ages of the children ranged from 8 months to up to 23 years. Of these, the children who were said to eat Green Planet Astronauts products were on

average just under 2 years old. The mothers interviewed displayed different habits and patterns of buying baby food. For some, it was typical to buy baby food several times a week, while at the other end of the spectrum, less frequent, large one-off purchases were preferred. A common message was that the volumes of baby food required are high, according to the respondents.

I'm having the Green Planet Astronauts monthly box. It usually runs out, after which I usually buy a refill from the store, whatever they happen to have. – A

Either from you or from the store, S-market or supermarket. More often from the stores, but from you in larger quantities at a time. – F

The respondents' purchase of baby food can be described as **multi-channel**. All of them reported having ordered from the Green Planet Astronauts online store, a selection criteria already applied during the interviewees' search phase. In addition to the online store, most of the respondents also buy baby food together with their grocery shopping, in actual retail stores. Respondents mentioned S-Group stores Prisma, S-market and Alepa, K-Group stores, Lidl and ordering groceries online as their preferred choice of grocery stores. In these cases, baby food is also purchased from other brands. When respondents were asked which other brands of baby food they buy, in addition to Green Planet Astronauts, Nestlé's Piltti, Semper, Valio's Onni, Alex & Phil, Muru Baby, and the stores' own private labels Pirkka and Rainbow were mentioned.

The choice of the brands mentioned was based on various factors, such as domesticity, variety, such as meat- or yoghurt-based dishes available from a particular brand, affordability and quantity discounts. When looking at choices at product level, factors such as the ingredient lists, additives and no added sugar, familiar and trusted products and what the child will agree to eat also influenced the choice. In addition, the eating habits, special diets and ideological choices of family members played a role in the decision-making process.

When asked about their reasons and motivations for buying ready-made baby food in general, many similarities, but also differences in tone, emerged. All but one respondent mentioned some form of **convenience** in their response regarding baby food. The only respondent who did not specifically mention convenience was a mother of a child with special needs who struggles with eating in general. Convenience, however, was experienced in a variety of forms and situations. Several responses indicated that ready-made baby food was a source of help in the life of a family with small children.

Yes, maybe it's the hectic pace of everyday life, there are so many balls in the air. [– –] Maybe in daily life with children, it is to go from where the fence is lowest, so that energy remains and it is then easier to focus on other things when eating is as easy as possible. – E

I feel that this family life with children is so hectic and busy, [– –]. To make everyday life easier, that's the biggest reason. – G

A frequently mentioned word combination was “easy and quick”. In this context, it was mentioned how baby food makes it easier for parents themselves and helps save time. According to one respondent, by using ready-made baby food instead of cooking, she gains time which she prefers to spend on other things instead. Another respondent told that it is not so much that it takes a long time to cook homemade porridge, for example, but with the ready-made she can just hand it to the child and it is eaten just as quickly. She described it as not necessarily being about ease in the sense that it's harder to cook yourself, but the fact that the ready-made product is quickly in front of the child's nose.

Another driver of purchase, which was also seen as contributing to convenience, was various reasons related to transport, **life on the go**. Ready-made baby food was provided on car journeys, right before going somewhere, and on the way to and back from daycare. The reasons behind this were practical: for example, the products are given to a child in the car to avoid sudden stops at gas stations, when something is needed quickly before leaving, as an easy snack for a hungry child after daycare, and as a snack alternative with the right consistency that is not as messy as some other options. In this context, the

packaging of the product was seen as highly important. Several respondents found the plastic pouches, also used by the case company, to be more convenient than the glass jars offered by some other manufacturers. According to one respondent, the pouch is easier to take with you, whereas with the glass jar she has to worry about it breaking. In addition, the glass jar requires bringing a spoon, unlike the pouch, which the child can suck on themselves.

Some of the responses revealed a common purchase driver, the **child's preference**. For example, the child's preference driver manifests in buying baby food in general and influences purchasing decisions when something is needed quickly that the parent knows the child will like. According to one respondent, it is natural to stick to certain products once you find ones your child likes. The child's preference was thus said to contribute to the choice of certain brands or products. Some respondents described the child's preference as a major or one of the main contributing factors to their purchasing. Interestingly, a large proportion of respondents said they had also tasted the products and liked the taste themselves.

Continuing with the overall motivations to buy baby food, several responses expressed a common search for **variety**. This was expressed in the desire to build a complete diet for the child, and to add fruit and vegetables to it. Buying baby food was considered a way of being able to provide something that was perceived as potentially challenging to prepare on one's own, such as fruit purees. The ready-made products were also found to make feeding picky eaters easier.

[– –] it's easier to give your child a wider variety of foods compared to what you would make yourself. For example, ingredients that you probably wouldn't handle yourself at all. For example, vegetables in a very wide variety and then all the couscous and other things [– –]. – F

Our 2 year old doesn't eat fruit or vegetables except "sneakily" like this. They also eat veggie meals from your brand. They are pretty much the only way they can get fruit and veggies [through such a product]. If they see them on a plate they will not put them in their mouth. – H

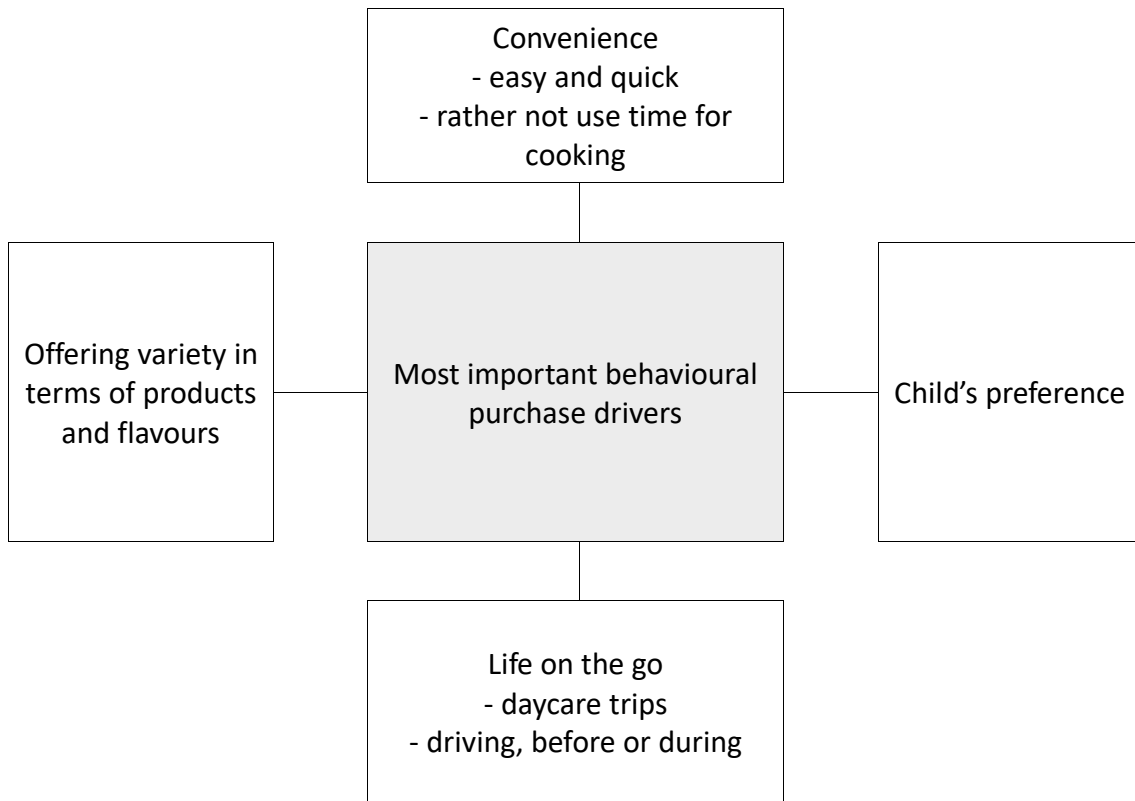


Figure 4. Most important behavioural purchase drivers.

To gain an even deeper understanding of respondents' baby food purchasing, respondents were asked about their families' eating habits. When asked, several responses indicated a willingness to introduce the child to new and different tastes and textures. Various mothers felt it was important for the child to try a wide variety of flavours and not grow up to be a picky eater. One respondent pointed out that she herself is very picky and does not want the same for her children. She mentions, however, that in basic everyday life it is not ultimately such a serious concern.

Following the topic of food introduction, the subject of healthiness of children's diets was addressed. In general, the healthiness of children's food was of high importance to the respondents. This was even though the concept of healthiness can be very ambiguous at the individual level. The importance of including vegetables was

highlighted in most of the responses. When talking about healthiness, the respondents mentioned a varied diet, balancing healthy and “unhealthy” foods, avoiding hidden sugars and processed foods, and thinking about gut health and fibre. However, several respondents point out that maintaining a healthy diet for children is not always possible, especially in a hurry. Also, several respondents mentioned not wanting to be too extreme or slavishly devoted to healthy diets. Overall, part of the responses indicated how consumption decisions made for others, in this case toddlers and babies, follow different thought processes than when buying for oneself (See e.g. Gillison & Reynolds, 2016; Liu & Sam, 2022).

I bet the baby eats healthier than I do a lot of the time. – F

Regarding eating habits, respondents were asked about the role of plant-based, vegetarian and vegan food in their child’s diet. In general, respondents expressed their consideration of such aspects. Some of the respondents identified themselves as vegetarians and their families as omnivores. One of them said that she considered the proportion of plant-based foods to be both important and a natural part of her children’s diet. One of the respondents said that they are a family of omnivores, and that she thinks it is important to get her child used to vegetarian food, as the world cannot sustain the meat consumption of today. It appeared from the responses that for some this was a meaningful and thought-provoking question of values. Values were further explored later in the context of attitudinal brand loyalty.

4.2 The many faces of attitudinal brand loyalty

Secondly, the focus of the interviews extended to attitudinal loyalty. Respondents were asked to describe their perception and attitudes towards Green Planet Astronauts, particularly in relation to competing brands. In general, perceptions were described as positive. The responses also revealed other common factors describing attitudes towards the brand. Several responses mentioned some element of domesticity or **being**

Finnish. Being a Finnish brand was perceived as a plus compared to competitors, as a factor that is consciously favoured, and as something to be appreciated for. Being a smaller brand was also seen as something to appreciate.

When asked about their perception of the brand, the **ideology of the brand** emerged in some way in most responses. The mission of the case company states: *raising a healthy and planet-friendly generation*. The idea behind it is that research shows that a plant-based diet is best not only for the planet, but also for children and people in general. To the customer, Green Planet Astronauts promises that with their products, you can make it happen. Therefore Green Planet Astronauts is the easiest and most fun way to get your child to eat plant-based. One respondent said that this was in line with her own values and she never has needed to think twice about buying from the brand again. Another respondent said that the brand has included the idea of where we should be going, towards plant-based. It was also clear to one respondent that the brand's advertising has revealed these values or principles by which the food is made.

The brand is incredibly attractive to me. I buy into the idea behind it. I like the fact that the brand wants to do good as well [– –]. – G

The overall **concept and branding** were also mentioned in the responses. The products and branding were considered successful, with examples such as nice colours and packaging that is more than just packaging, and therefore part of the circular economy. Most respondents also mentioned how **children are considered in the design**. Several respondents mentioned the stickers that come with the package. The fact that the package comes with the child's astronaut name was also mentioned.

In a way, that the child has been taken along with it, that in a way the child gets something from there when the package comes, now from a monthly subscriber's point of view. That no other brand sends children a colourable package or stickers. I think they are quite nice, especially when a child has the eating challenge, so then the fact that there are stickers shaped like certain vegetables, so it's a pretty big deal that then we can go through the [vegetables] [– –]. – C

The final aspect that emerged when talking about perceptions of Green Planet Astronauts was the different **characteristics**. These included overall positivity and a hands-on attitude, as well as being approachable. One respondent also spoke highly of customer service and warehouse staff.

I have the impression that you are a bit of a trendsetter, a forerunner in this children's food. You're thinking outside the box a little bit. – I

To me, I think it's kind of a good way to kind of have a little bit of a random element. There's the child's astronaut name, and then those [flavour] combinations. It's kind of so non-traditional, it's kind of fun. – E

- - when you have a smaller organisation and company - - it's like that when the company's people are acting or are involved. It is in that way, more fun perhaps, than one that someone - - Piltti is probably owned by someone - - they go all the way up the chains of ownership - - they are so like so global. So maybe it also gives a nice kind of buzz [of you]. – E

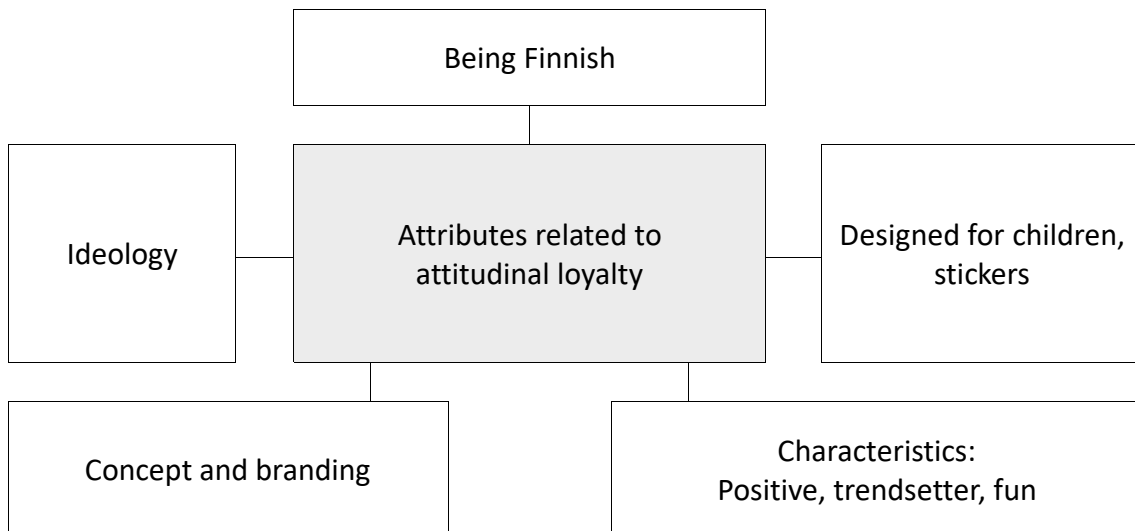


Figure 5. Attributes related to attitudinal loyalty.

One essential element of attitudinal brand loyalty is willingness to recommend the brand to others (e.g. Kha, 2008). When asked if you would recommend Green Planet

Astronauts products to your close friends and family, for example, all respondents answered yes. Several of them said that they had recommended and talked about the products in different situations and settings, such as with friends, in a family group, and other children-related circles.

4.3 Email marketing driving behavioural and attitudinal brand loyalty

The final section of the interviews focused on the marketing communication, specifically email marketing, of the case company, to gain an understanding of the effects of and the attitudes towards it. The aim of this section was to explore the role of the case company's email marketing on the supposed brand loyalty of the interviewees. The topic was approached through both behavioural and attitudinal loyalty.

4.3.1 Email marketing and behavioural loyalty

To explore the role of email marketing on the behavioural elements of brand loyalty, the interviews started by exploring how respondents described their own reactions to having received email marketing from the case company. Attention was paid to whether the respondent had opened the emails and read their content. A particular area of interest was whether receiving the email resulted in purchasing.

The vast majority of the respondents told they had received email marketing messages from the case company. When asked if they had opened the messages, most of them stated that they usually do. The importance of the headline of the message was highlighted in several responses. This was reported as a basis for assessing whether the message was relevant to them.

Most of the emails and newsletters I look through. It depends a bit on whether I feel the headline is topical for me. – A

- - if the headline [arouses interest], that you have a campaign coming up or some you know special thing, then yes, I'm immediately awake. – E

The email marketing of the case company includes announcing new products and promotions, tips on how to use the products as well as on everyday life and activities with children. Based on the responses, the content of email marketing messages is a key factor influencing how respondents behave after opening the message. Many of the respondents said they were particularly interested in promotions and offers. If the email contains a promotion or a discount code, respondents stated that it often led to a purchase.

Maybe I'm bit of a person who chases after an offer, but I'm the kind of person who rarely orders without a campaign or discount. I then order more at a time, so in that sense [the campaigns] have been successful, they have at least made me buy. – B

I receive the newsletter by email. It's been good. That's what got me excited about becoming a monthly subscriber. There was some kind of nice offer for the first trial. Then I stayed, thinking that this is really easy, that why bother go to the store to get everything when you can get it all in one. – C

- - I really want the newsletter, because I want to know about some offers and such, because some things can go unnoticed. - - Very few things make me feel that I really want that. So then you know, [I'm thinking], "please give me a discount code sometime". Then I'll order again and so on. – E

When discount codes and offers were discussed, some respondents appeared to be actively price-aware. They reported that they monitor prices and make calculations on the value of promotions and the unit prices of products. In addition to the campaigns, respondents expressed interest in new products.

New products and all kinds of discount codes are always of interest, of course. – F

- - I've been trying to do the math and see if it's actually cheaper to order the Space box than to buy [products] individually from the store. – G

- - I have said to my husband that - - even though these are otherwise more expensive, in principle, but then when you have a discount code, and then order more, then the price per piece is already less than say Piltti's - - it becomes the kind of "value for money" even more. - E

Respondents were also asked about the type and frequency of emails they would like to receive. According to several respondents, the messages should be reasonably short and well-packaged, making it easy and quick to get the point across. For emails to remain relevant, they should not be sent too often. One respondent used the example of daily email marketing from an online clothing store, which she found to be annoying.

- - It should be one that you read in between when your child is playing by themselves for two minutes. Reading should not require too much of a time commitment. - A

- - reading from a mobile phone, so not too detailed. If you read it in the morning or during your workday, you want to scan it pretty quickly to see what it's about. Do not have time to concentrate too much. Something pretty light, but maybe something fun. - E

4.3.2 Email marketing and attitudinal loyalty

When exploring the role of email marketing on the attitudinal elements of brand loyalty, the respondents' overall attitude towards email as a marketing channel could be described as generally positive. Email was described as a channel that reaches respondents well and provides them with the information they are interested in. Some responses indicated that respondents are somewhat selective about which brands or organisations they are willing to receive email marketing from. This can be attributed in particular to how relevant and interesting the respondents consider the sender's products or services to be in their own life situation.

I rarely subscribe to newsletters, because I want it to be relevant content if I receive something. - - And in a way, perhaps I want to expose myself to them when I know that I am going to order anyhow - -. - E

There's such a flood of information on Instagram that [your content] can sometimes get lost in the middle. But then the emails are such that I tend to read through them. It's always nice to see if there's some novelty or something. I want to keep up with them. – F

Referring to Hartemo (2023) and linking to section 2.3 of the present study, the relevance of the content of email marketing messages plays an important role in building trust. Further, trust is seen as an element of attitudinal brand loyalty (e.g. Luarn & Lin, 2003). Relevance of the content was a factor that emerged also from the responses that influenced respondent attitudes to an email marketing message. An example of a measure of relevance was the suitability of the product offered for the developmental stage (age) of one's own child. Furthermore, the relevance of the messages was linked to their format, respondents mentioned, among other things, the importance of subject lines, brief and compact content, readability on mobile and a short enough message to fit in with a busy family life. In addition to relevance, respondents mentioned the importance of the relatability of all marketing content.

Relatability in content is everything. - - If the content is about life with a toddler or with children, then my attention is drawn to it. – A

I do like your tone of voice, it's nice and clear. – G

Kind of playful and kind of fun in that sense. That's how you stand out. – E

At best, relatable content was described in a way that was closely related to the respondent's values and questions about identity.

It was really relatable content, because I've been the "good mom" who thinks breakfast porridge should be cooked. At some point, my husband gave [your products] to me for breakfast porridge. Then I realised, why do you have to cook breakfast porridge if the child might not even eat it, isn't it more important that the child eats. In a way, the content was so relatable and memorable. – A

As illustrated in section 4.2, the respondents' overall attitude towards the case company was found favourable. When examining attitudinal brand loyalty and email marketing,

the focus was also on exploring respondents' **trust** and **involvement** in the brand (Back & Parks, 2003). This was approached by asking whether they felt a sense of community when thinking about the case company brand and email marketing. The discussion on sense of community divided the respondents, with some experiencing some sense of community, while the other end of the spectrum felt strongly that they neither experienced nor wanted one from a brand. Common elements were also found between the responses, such as profound satisfaction as a customer and a certain degree of pride in being a customer.

- - I feel that I can be somewhat "proud", which may not be the right word, when I order your products. I can't explain or put it into words. – G

- - No, but I feel that I'm not the type of person who would feel belonging to a community with any other brand [either]. But I am a very satisfied customer. – B

I don't feel that sense of community maybe, I'm more of a - - sincere and proud user, and really want success for a company that I like more than others. – E

As Hartemo (2023) states, relevant email marketing content plays an important role in building trust. However, other issues affecting trust also emerged from the responses, which are particularly relevant in the context of baby food.

The individual factors [affecting choice of product] are the variety of food, and the fact that I can trust the brand. If you have a new product coming in, I don't have to scroll through the ingredients and see what's on the label myself, I dare to feed it to the child directly. – B

I thought the website was well done and gave a trustworthy impression. That may have contributed to the fact that I ended up ordering it once, then found it good and ordered again. – B

Piltti has been [around] for so long, so I have a built-in trust in that product. It's been the only one in Finland for a long time. When you look on the shelf, there are all kinds of products nowadays. But they are not advertised, and I know nothing about them. Your advertising has revealed the values or the principles on which the food is made. – H

As regards the special features of the context of children's food, the respondents' experience shows that word-of-mouth recommendations play a significant role. For instance, families with children can share product recommendations that they have found helpful. The case company has sought to facilitate this through its email marketing by offering a referral program that benefits both the referrer and the friend who order based on the recommendation. As for intention to engage in positive word of mouth, it is considered as an element of attitudinal loyalty (e.g. Kha, 2008).

Yes - - And especially when we go to this family group, we almost always have porridge as a snack for the younger child. If a friend has been over, I've served them some. I don't know if the recommendations have been taken on board, but I've been satisfied myself and have shared my experiences. – B

I used one of these that when you recommended to a friend, you got a discount code. – A

5 Discussion

5.1 Theoretical implications

The purpose of this study was to examine brand loyalty in the context of a Finnish baby food company and how email marketing can be used in strengthening it. Three research objectives were derived from the purpose of the study, the first of which was *to propose a theoretical framework to connect brand loyalty and email marketing*. This was achieved by first defining the concept of brand loyalty and examining its different dimensions: behavioural and attitudinal loyalty. This was followed by a comprehensive overview of what email marketing is today. The aim of the framework connecting brand loyalty and email marketing was to deepen the understanding of the interaction between the two theoretical concepts.

The theoretical framework of the present study was outlined in Figure 3. Email marketing fostering brand loyalty. The theoretical foundation of the study was influenced by, among many others, the Odin et al. (2001) article on conceptual and operational aspects of brand loyalty, and the Dick and Basu (1994) contribution, an integrated conceptual framework for customer loyalty. One of the key aspects of brand loyalty that can be raised is its dual nature; the division between behavioural and attitudinal brand loyalty. Behavioural brand loyalty can be expressed as the repurchase of a particular brand. However, the behavioural approach does not take into account the psychological reasons for repurchase and should therefore be explored alongside attitudinal brand loyalty. In addition to favourable attitudes, attitudinal brand loyalty addresses the relationship between the brand and the consumer and, among other aspects, the desire to recommend the brand to others. When these approaches are integrated into a single model, in line with Baldinger and Rubinson (1996), so-called “real loyals” can be identified.

As for email marketing, the theoretical foundation of the study was particularly influenced by a Merisavo and Raulas (2004) study on the impact of email marketing on brand loyalty, as well as Hartemo's work on email marketing, specifically the doctoral dissertation on empowering email marketing (2023). The main contribution of the Merisavo and Raulas (2004) article is that email marketing has been found to have a beneficial effect on brand loyalty. Email marketing has long been one of the most profitable online marketing channels, and is both versatile and cost-effective. As for Hartemo (2023), the dissertation demonstrates how "relevant content, trust, commitment and participation" are correlated in the context of empowering email marketing. Furthermore, these elements are also considered to be factors influencing brand loyalty (See e.g. Back & Parks, 2003; Odin et al., 2001). This theoretical framework provided the foundation for the empirical part and findings of the study.

The second research objective was *to examine the brand loyalty of the case company's customers towards the company and their attitudes towards the current implementation of email marketing*. This objective was addressed by conducting the empirical part of the study, based on semi-structured interviews with a sample of the case company's customers. As in the theoretical framework, it was essential to address the empirical part of the study through both a behavioural and an attitudinal approach to brand loyalty (e.g. Back & Parks, 2003), which was taken into account in the framing of the semi-structured interview questions. Regarding the behavioural brand loyalty of the respondents, each of them displayed loyalty towards the case company through behaviour and re-purchases. However, this was anticipated in part due to the sample of the study, as the selection criteria for respondents required having purchased from the company's online store at least four times over time. To provide some context, and as a sort of crossover between behaviour and attitudes, respondents were asked to describe their reasons for buying industrially produced baby food in general. The most prominent themes that emerged from the responses were *convenience*; ready-made food is easy and quick, no time spent cooking; the ability *to offer variety* to the child in terms of products and

flavours; *the child's preferences*; and the *general life situation* with a small child on the go.

When examining attitudinal brand loyalty, the aim was to establish whether respondents also display attitudinal brand loyalty, and to identify the attributes they associate the brand with. The most notable attributes indicating attitudinal loyalty that were identified from the responses were the *Finnishness* of the case company; its *ideology* and mission to raise a healthy and planet-friendly generation, how the concept and products are *designed with children in mind*, including sending stickers; the overall *concept and branding* of the products; and the attributes associated with the brand: *positive, fun, trendsetting*. As the studied case company is strongly mission-driven, it is a significant finding that it seems to appeal to the sample of this study. While competing brands might be able to compete on similar product attributes, for the case company, the mission is a unique differentiator that its loyal customers seem to value. Further, this can be linked to brand loyalty as an enabler of competitive advantage (See e.g. Dick & Basu, 1994; Gommans et al., 2001; Gounaris & Stathakopoulos, 2004; Kabiraj & Shanmugan, 2011).

Based on the findings, it can be concluded that the respondents in this study can be considered to represent the “real loyals” in the Baldinger and Rubinson (1996) model, as both their behaviour through repurchases and their attitudes are highly positive towards the brand. However, it is important to point out that while such deep loyalty was observed, it is not in the nature of *absolute loyalty* or *brand devotion* (See e.g. Pimentel & Reynolds, 2004). This was reflected in the fact that almost all respondents reported buying baby food from other brands in addition to the case study brand. Whether this is seen as an issue or a challenge in itself, or whether buying purely from one brand is even realistic, is up to interpretation by the studied case company.

Finally, brand loyalty was connected to email marketing in order to understand its impact and attitudes towards it. The aim was to investigate the role of email marketing towards the case company's supposed brand loyalty. Following the logic of the previous sections,

a distinction was made between behavioural and attitudinal brand loyalty in the context of email marketing. Overall, when considering the case company's email marketing and the behaviour described by the respondents, there can be seen strong indications that email marketing contributes to behavioural brand loyalty of the respondents. The majority of respondents reported having ordered products as a result of email marketing. In particular, promotions and discounts were highlighted in the responses. As a result, price sensitivity and awareness was found to be a common factor in the responses. This finding is further discussed from a managerial perspective in chapter 5.2.

When examining email marketing and attitudinal loyalty, the first key finding focused on the relevance of marketing messages. First of all, respondents were naturally selective in terms of *which brands* they perceived as interesting and relevant to them and which they wanted to receive email marketing from. In this context, the email marketing messages of the case company were considered desirable and were said to be read regularly. Second of all, relevance was sought *in the messages themselves*. This would include the said importance of subject lines, brief and compact content, readability on mobile and a short enough message to be read in hectic family life. In addition, the relevance or lack of it was expressed by the suitability of the products offered to the age of their child. This can all again be linked to the theoretical framework of the study on the importance of relevant content for strengthening brand loyalty in email marketing, and is therefore one of the main findings of this study.

As regards the brand loyalty of behaviour and attitudes in the context of email marketing, it is necessary to note once again the separation of the concepts, yet also their interaction with each other. As an illustration, the willingness to engage in word-of-mouth marketing, i.e. recommending the brand's products to others, expressed by the majority of respondents in the present study, is theoretically seen as a feature of both behavioural (e.g. Szczepańska & Gawron, 2011) and attitudinal brand loyalty (e.g. Kha, 2008). The studied case company currently has a referral program, which allows a user to refer a friend, and benefit financially from this. The programme is currently marketed

mainly via email. It can be seen as an example of how email can be used to strengthen brand loyalty. Overall, where a financial benefit such as a discount campaign promoted via email can be seen to support repeat purchases and thus behavioural brand loyalty, attitudinal loyalty should be supported by relevant content that resonates with the attitudes and values of the recipient.

5.2 Managerial implications

The third research objective of the present study *was to provide actionable managerial implications for the studied case company on how email marketing can be used in strengthening brand loyalty*. This objective is addressed by reflecting the findings of the empirical part on the theoretical framework of the present study, and drawing conclusions on this basis. These managerial implications have been drawn from the presented analysis and serve as potential suggestions for the case company.

As a starting point, it is essential to mention that in the light of this empirical sample, the case company seems to have been successful in creating brand loyalty among its customers in a highly competitive industry. Among respondents, the brand is associated with many positive attributes, its products and services are perceived as superior on many levels, and the brand's mission and values are considered important. In terms of email marketing, respondents reported being very selective about which brands they want to receive messages from; however, email marketing messages from this case company were received and read with delight.

It is therefore highly recommended to continue focusing on email marketing as part of the marketing mix and to continue to develop it further. Email marketing has proven to be a cost-effective way for the company to drive sales, announce new products and offers, and ultimately support brand loyalty. Email marketing should therefore be seen in the studied company as a way of strengthening and maintaining the relationship and loyalty between the brand and the consumer.

It is important to note, however, that email marketing is only one of the contributing factors and tools to brand loyalty. It should also be remembered that email marketing is not isolated from other marketing channels and activities. As a managerial proposition, it might be necessary to examine how email marketing relates to other marketing channels used; what is its role; what is the strategy behind its use; are they all aligned? Could every channel support each other more efficiently? As for the actual format of emails, several interviewees highlighted the importance of subject lines, brief and compact content, readability on mobile and a short enough message to fit in with a busy family life.

Another managerial implication relates to the audience for email marketing. Now that brand loyalty has been identified in existing customers, including Baldinger and Rubinson's (1996) description of "real loyals", it is fascinating to consider how the same brand loyalty could be created and fostered in first-time buyers and potential clients. In the light of the present study, it can be suggested that the potential of email marketing can be applied in this context. Being a baby food brand, the duration of a customer relationship can be expected to be relatively short, as it is highly dependent on the age, development and preferences of the child. In order to maximise the duration of the customer relationship and the benefits of brand loyalty, it can be argued that a first-time buyer should be "turned into" a loyal customer as early on as possible.

In the context of a baby food brand, this would mean the stage when the baby is as young as possible, possibly tasting their first solid foods, and is introduced to industrially produced baby food. At this point, the case company would benefit in its email marketing from the findings of this study on the attributes the interviewed loyal customers valued; *Finnishness, ideology, design with children in mind, concept and branding*, as well as being *positive, fun, and trendsetting*. There is much to learn from the already loyal customers, and having clarified these attributes can guide the case company sharpen its communication angles, when aiming to gain new loyal customers. The challenge and

opportunity for the studied case company is to find these potential customers at an early stage; or even further, is there a possibility to reach them in advance, already before the baby is ready for the brand's products?

Regarding the age and developmental stages of the child, email marketing should remain relevant to the recipient in order to create and maintain brand loyalty. After all, relevance was a recurring theme that emerged consistently in respondents' comments in one way or another. Moreover, relevant email marketing content is associated with building trust and commitment, which in turn are elements of attitudinal brand loyalty (See e.g. Back & Parks, 2003; Hartemo, 2023; Odin et al., 2001). A managerial proposal to the company can be made, as far as possible, to further segment the email recipients according to the age of the child. This would allow the recipient to receive, for example, the relevant product recommendations, tips and ideas for their child in the form of an email funnel, with the recommendations also evolving according to the child's development. In the long run, the same personalisation idea could potentially be extended to any data shared by the customer, such as location, gender, favourite product or even allergies. However, this assumes that respondents are willing to share such information. Another application of this theme would be to allow newsletter subscribers to pick and choose themselves which topics they are interested in and want to receive emails on.

The following managerial suggestion is closely linked to behavioural brand loyalty and transactionality. The majority of responses indicated some form of price awareness, whether in terms of unit prices, comparisons between online and retail prices, interest in different promotions and discount codes, or price comparisons with competitor brands. Price awareness can be seen as a logical consequence of the financial situation of families living with one or more children and taking into account the current economic situation. The sample of this study suggests that while respondents value premium baby food, price is still a critical factor in the purchasing decision process. Therefore, the case company is encouraged to continue offering interesting promotions and special offers, thus reinforcing repurchase and behavioural brand loyalty.

As an alternative to individual campaigns, there is also a broader approach: a loyalty reward programme. This type of programme can be built to take advantage of the benefits of email marketing, such as trigger-based email funnels. Whilst rewarding customers for purchases with points or levels can be seen to encourage repeat purchases and reinforce behavioural brand loyalty, at its best a loyalty programme also enables elements of attitudinal brand loyalty. One of the essentials, recommending the brand to others, could potentially be integrated into this type of programme. As baby food is often perceived as a sensitive topic (See e.g. Bornstein et al., 2015), a product or brand recommendation is of huge importance, and the case company is recommended to try and facilitate this whenever possible. Ultimately, recommendations can be seen to increase the sense of community and pride in using the products mentioned by respondents, which in turn reinforces brand loyalty (See e.g. Hur et al., 2011). Taking it a step further, the case company could take advantage of the multichannel nature of its current customers by bringing its online business and retail sales closer together through a loyalty programme.

The responses suggest that as the child grows, loyalty changes shape. In this sense, the loyalty and relationship with the brand is fluid. On this basis, it can be assumed that the customer relationship and loyalty will also eventually end when the child “outgrows” the baby food products. This can be approached from a few angles. On one hand, marketing and product development can be used to try and extend the loyal customer relationship; perhaps even to hope that the same customer will have another child in the future. On the other hand, it can be approached by striving to make a loyal customer relationship as meaningful and beneficial as possible for as long as it lasts for both the customer and the case company. In conclusion, the case company is advised to continue to actively engage in email marketing, noting now that it has great potential both to strengthen the relationship of existing brand loyal customers, and to nurture loyal customers from first-time buyers. Email marketing must be relevant to its target audience and support both behavioural brand loyalty and repurchase, and attitudinal loyalty through positive

associations and trust. Ultimately, when brand loyal customers have the opportunity to share their experiences forward, new loyal customer relationships are ideally created.

5.3 Limitations and suggestions for future research

In conducting the present study, a number of limitations applied, which are addressed in this chapter alongside suggestions for future research. See also chapter 3.6 for a discussion of the potential bias that may have influenced the conduct of this study. The first limitation of the study relates to the marketing channel studied. It is noteworthy that the marketing channels used, only one in this context, namely email marketing, is just one of the various tools that can be used to strengthen brand loyalty. Based on this study alone, there is not enough evidence to suggest that this marketing channel can be leveraged, in a fully replicable way, across industries with the same implications. In turn, the research design of this study was a so-called intensive case study, which aims to gain an in-depth understanding of a unique case and develop a holistic description in the context of the case, not to search for and test generalisable theoretical results (Eriksson & Kovalainen, 2008).

Given this limitation of this study, a suggestion for further research can be made to expand or shift the research scope to another marketing tool, such as social media marketing, influencer marketing or marketing through events, and their potential to strengthen brand loyalty. It is also relevant to stress that email marketing is not an isolated entity in relation to brand loyalty, but can be seen as one of a number of factors that may influence brand loyalty. This study did not address the assumption that for brand loyalty to occur in the first place, the so-called basics must also be in place. Email marketing alone cannot compensate for an inadequate or otherwise flawed brand. Another suggestion relates to the possibilities of the different categories of email marketing; future research could be even more narrowly focused on either one-time campaigns, newsletters or automated sequences, as in the present study they were not specified for respondents.

The second limitation of the study is connected to the relatively limited number of respondents interviewed. It can be stated that no conclusions can be drawn from the demographics of the respondents, for example, geographically for the whole Finland, nor by age group, as there was little to no significant diversity. The same applies to the supposed gender identity of the respondents. In the context of this limitation, a proposal for future research can be suggested, where a quantitative study replicating the current one would be conducted. Although this approach does not directly provide the same depth of understanding, it could be scaled up with a low-threshold approach, for example by sending a questionnaire to be filled in by the respondent, sent out via email. This could potentially reach large survey samples and provide a more diverse and comprehensive picture of how the larger masses perceive brand loyalty and email marketing. Moreover, the focus of this study was mostly on the online environment; it would be useful to conduct a study on similar topics, but with more emphasis on the retail aspect. After all, (retail) availability has an impact on brand loyalty; if products cannot be found in the nearest grocery store, it can be a direct barrier to potential brand loyalty. In addition, whether in an online or offline environment, it would be valuable to carry out a study similar to the present one, but combining it with data on the purchase history of respondents.

The theory-based proposal for future research is linked to the knowledge that parents have a profound influence on their children's diet (See e.g. Baldassarre et al., 2016). In the light of previous research and the present study, it would be worthwhile to investigate whether a similar phenomenon can be found in the context of brands. In other words, can parental brand loyalty spill over into children's consumption choices, and if so, to what extent and age? And again, what happens to the loyal parent, what about their child, after they grow out of baby food products?

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Appendices

Appendix 1. Theoretical background of the interview questions

CATEGORY	SOURCE	QUESTION
Purchase drivers	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Purchase drivers: brand, price, packaging, promotions, advertising, children's requests, characteristics described on labels (derived from Baldassarre et al., 2016) • Importance of brands (derived from Baldassarre et al., 2016) 	Q5-Q6
Eating habits	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Eating habits developed in childhood influence dietary health later in adulthood (derived from Baldassarre et al., 2016; Best, 2017) • The importance of exposure to different foods (Skinner et al., 2002) 	Q7-Q8
Behavioural loyalty	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Word-of-mouth marketing (Szczepańska & Gawron, 2011) • Two dimensions: length of relationship and level of purchase concentration (Paavola, 2006) 	Q9-Q14
Attitudinal loyalty	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Comprehension of the consumer-brand relationship and the drivers behind brand loyalty (Temessek & Touzani, 2009) • The connection between emotional attachment and loyalty (Grisaffe & Nguyen, 2011) 	Q15-Q18
Brand loyalty and communication	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How emails contribute to brand loyalty, how consumers value email marketing, what type of email content they value (derived from Merisavo and Raulas, 2004) • Relevant content (Hartemo, 2023) 	Q19-Q26

Appendix 2. Semi-structured interview questions

KEY QUESTIONS		PROMPTS (IF NECESSARY)
	Background	
Q1	How many children do you have? How old are they?	
	General baby food purchasing	
Q2	In general, from any manufacturer, how often do you buy ready-made baby foods and snacks?	
Q3	Where do you most often buy baby food and snacks?	Ask if also from grocery stores in addition to the online platform.
Q4	Which baby food brands do you usually buy?	Ask why these brands; ask how about private labels.
	Purchase drivers	
Q5	If you reflect on the reasons and motivations behind your ready-made baby food purchases, what could be the most important reasons for you to buy?	The respondent can be given examples such as convenience, saving time and child's preferences; what does convenience mean to the respondent, is it not having to cook yourself, is it that ordering online is convenient.
Q6	If you take a moment to think about yourself as a baby food buyer, whether online or on the shelf, can you name any factors that stand out that would most influence your choice of product?	The respondent can be given examples such as price, quality, ingredients and brand; if ingredients, what specifically about the ingredients is meant.
	Eating habits	
Q7	If you think about yourself in your everyday family life, how much thought and time do you put into introducing your child to new tastes and textures? Is this important to you?	
Q8	In general, how important do you think it is to have plant-based/vegan/vegetarian foods for children? Does this influence your choice of products? Is it important to you to offer plant-based foods to the child?	If found fruitful, the respondent can be asked about their personal eating habits and beliefs.

KEY QUESTIONS		PROMPTS (IF NECESSARY)
	Behavioural brand loyalty	
Q9	Please describe in your own words how much you have used our products and how familiar you are with them.	The respondent can be reminded of Green Planet Astronauts products: baby purees, smoothies, meals, nutty porridges, puffs, bars and oat bites. The custom box is called Space Mail (Avaruusposti).
Q10	Why do you buy Green Planet Astronauts products?	The respondent can be give examples such as price, quality and ingredients; if, what does quality mean to the respondent; ingredients – why these particular ones. This question was not asked of every respondent if the answer to the question had already been provided elsewhere.
Q11	How often do you buy Green Planet Astronauts products compared to competitors?	Competitors such as Nestlé’s Piltti, Semper, Hipp, Valio’s Onni, Alex&Phil and Muru Baby can be mentioned.
Q12	How long have you been a customer? How did you find out about the brand? Do you remember the first time you bought our products? Why did you decide to buy?	
Q13	Have you previously used another brand and then switched to Green Planet Astronauts?	If so, which brand did you use before and why did you switch? Or have you perhaps just incorporated our brand into the overall selection of what to buy for your child?
Q14	Do you think you would recommend Green Planet Astronauts products, for example, to your close circle?	The respondent may be asked if they remember recommending the products to someone.

KEY QUESTIONS		PROMPTS (IF NECESSARY)
	Attitudinal brand loyalty	
Q15	If you reflect on yourself as our customer, what are the most important reasons for you to buy Green Planet Astronauts products?	This was only asked if similar points had not been made in previous answers.
Q16	How would you describe your attitude towards Green Planet Astronauts compared to competing brands?	
Q17	Green Planet Astronauts has a mission: to raise a healthy and planet-friendly generation. The idea behind this is that research shows that a plant-based diet is best not only for the planet, but also for children and people in general. To the consumer, we promise that you will succeed with our products, making GPA the easiest and most fun way to add more plant-based to your child's diet. Did you know about our mission? What kind of thoughts does this topic evoke in you? Do you find it resonating or important?	The respondent can be asked whether they think this is important and whether they think this is something they would think about with their child; if found important, ask why.
Q18	Are there any other values you consider important in relation to your child's diet?	
	Brand loyalty and communication	
Q19	Green Planet Astronauts shares a variety of content on the website, social media channels and email marketing, among others. Do you follow our content, and if, where?	
Q20	Can you recall some of our recent content or messages? How do you find our content in general?	The respondent can be given examples of content: tips, recipes, parenting themes and humour, competitions - and adjectives: inspiring, funny, informative.
Q21	Let's now focus on email marketing. If you receive marketing emails from us, how often would you estimate you read them?	
Q22	If you think about the Green Planet Astronauts emails, do you think they highlight content that interests you?	If yes, what / if no, what

KEY QUESTIONS		PROMPTS (IF NECESSARY)
Q23	How useful do you think it is that the emails provide tips on parenting and activities with children, recipes and planet-friendly ideas?	The respondent can be asked if they see this as an important part of this brand-customer relationship.
Q24	Can you identify times when you have purchased because of our marketing email?	
Q25	If you think about the Green Planet Astronauts brand, our email marketing, and the big picture, do you feel part of a community?	If yes, why / if not, what do you think would add to this sense of community?
Q26	Do you think there is something we could improve in our email marketing that would make you feel more engaged with our brand and perhaps with other customers? Do you think email marketing is the best channel for this?	