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# Exploring the relationship between customer participation and online brand community and consumer loyalty

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## Abstract

*The popularity of online brand communities has maintained the close link between consumers and brands and it encourages consumers to actively participate in online platforms. From this emerges intentions to achieve social and functional goals, leading to the question: How is loyalty affected by online participation? Based on a constructivist perspective, empirical data were generated through in-depth interviews to explore millennial's level of participation in online communities and the extent to which it affects their loyalty to the brand and the community in the fashion industry. The study provides a conceptual framework that links a set of online participation characteristics contingent to different participatory motives. The study proposed four main customer participatory behavioural traits (brand identification, interactivity, media valence and perceived community sentiment) linked to consumers' perception towards a brand in the fashion sector. The main findings reveal how the four categories impact the level of customer loyalty. These key categories are explored to create a framework for future research in this area, and further contribute to the field of online brand engagement, particularly in the fashion industry.*

**Key words:** *Fashion industry, millennials, online brand community, participation, constructivist perspective, social media*

## Introduction

The development of social media as a worldwide user network with real-time interactions has made it a successful communication platform (Mas-Tur, Tur-Porcar and Llorca, 2016; Felix, Rauschnabel and Hinsch, 2017). The engagement success of social media with consumers has been recognised (Malthouse, Haenlein, Skiera, Wege and Zhang, 2013; Nisar and Whitehead, 2016). Online channels consist of brand-related content that is exchanged between brands and customers; thus, the process connects brands and customers (Ibrahim, Wang and Bourne, 2017; Eelen, Özturan and Verlegh, 2017; Eigenraam, Eelen, Van Lin and Verlegh, 2018; Willis, 2018). The usage of online communities has evolved from functional goals to include social goals (Relling, Schnittka, Sattler and Johnen, 2016; Dholakia, Bagozzi and Pearo, 2004; Flanagin and Metzger, 2001; Nambisan and Baron, 2007; Ozuem, Thomas and Lancaster, 2016). Belonging to a brand provides a uniqueness to consumers' identity as it implies an emotional involvement with a group that shares their values and preferences (Dholakia *et al.*, 2004; Azemi, Ozuem and Howell, 2020); it also indicates significant social influence within online communities.

Research into online habits has helped to identify and extend the different values consumers develop from participating within online communities, including emotional value, relational

value, entitativity value and functional value (Ozuem and Lancaster, 2014). The diverse habits and behaviours of consumers in online communities can be linked to the complex nature of fashion. Fashion is considered to be a powerful social symbol that creates and groups several identities (Ahuvia, 2005; Ozuem, Willis and Ng, 2020) and is adapted according to the norms, values and preferences adopted by the consumers (Ranfagni, Crawford-Camicciottoli and Faraoni, 2016; Helal, Ozuem and Lancaster, 2018), and it is heavily impacted by social influence.

The millennial generation, that is, those born between 1982 and 2002 (Howe and Strauss, 2009), exercise the highest level of involvement in online socialisation, information sharing and online purchasing (Bilgihan, 2016). Additionally, they are described as highly conscious regarding fashion brand choice; thus, retailers now use digital platforms to empower consumers (Hur, Lee and Choo, 2017; Patten, Ozuem and Howell, 2020). Millennials' mass involvement in social media has motivated various studies to investigate millennials' usage of social media, including loyalty (Purani, Kumar and Sahadev, 2019; Bi, 2019), brand identification (Sashittal, Hodis and Sriramachandramurthy, 2015; de Kerviler and Rodriguez, 2019) and online purchasing (Flecha-Ortíz, Santos-Corrada, Dones-González, López-González and Vega, 2019; McCormick, 2016). However, there is a paucity of research on whether millennials' participation in online communities is linked to their intentions to remain loyal to brands. Studies have investigated the motives of participation in online communities, in particular, the fulfilment of functional and social goals (de Almeida, Scaraboto, dos Santos Fleck and Dalmoro, 2018; Relling *et al.*, 2016; Fang and Zhang, 2019), to support and identify with brands (Algesheimer, Dholakia and Herrmann, 2005; Eelen *et al.*, 2017; Eigenraam *et al.*, 2018) and purchase intentions (Bagozzi and Dholakia, 2006; Hsu and Lawrence, 2016; Colicev, Kumar and O'Connor, 2019). However, there is limited research on the impact of consumers' participation within online communities on their loyalty towards a brand and what level and kind of participation directly motivates loyalty towards a brand.

## **Theoretical context**

### ***Brand communities***

Brand communities provide companies with vast opportunities to reach and maintain relationships with consumers (Hakala, Niemi and Kohtamäki, 2017; Muniz and O'Guinn, 2001; McAlexander, Schouten and Koenig, 2002; Schau, Muñiz and Arnould, 2009; Zhou, Zhang, Su and Zhou, 2012). Although brand communities are regarded as populated with social relations formed around a brand (Muniz and O'Guinn, 2001), the trend in online brand communities (OBCs) has shifted from consisting of purely brand-related users to a range of participants (Baldus, Voorhees and Calantone, 2015) who exhibit different levels and types of participation. Firms play a significant active role in motivating the degree of activity through content that provides users with the quality of engagement they seek (Goh, Heng and Lin, 2013; Miller and Tucker, 2013; Rishika, Kumar, Janakiraman and Bezawada, 2013). However, the resulting active participation will vary depending on the consumers' perception of the content. Homburg, Ehm and Artz (2015) considered consumers' responses to firms' active engagement in communities by measuring their reaction to active engagement and types of conversations. The findings indicated a positive link between a firm's engagement and consumers' responses to functional concerns but less to social needs, which indicates a need for members who are not part of the firm to have an active role to motivate participation.

### ***Brand loyalty***

Loyal consumers are likely to have strong associations with a brand (Keller, 1993; Krishnan, 1996), which may be stronger when consumers have vivid memories from direct experience (Baumgartner, Suajan and Bettman, 1992). Attitudes to specific brands are more easily generated by loyal consumers than non-loyal consumers (Alba and Chattopadhyay, 1986; Yoo and Donthu, 2001; Park, Eisingerich and Park, 2013; Park, MacInnis, Priester, Eisingerich and Iacobucci, 2010). Eelen *et al.* (2017) focused on consumers' loyalty towards brands and how it related to the spread of electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM). They found that consumers' loyalty to a brand was the source of motivation to participate in eWOM to support the brand or display their identity through the brand. Similarly, Algesheimer *et al.* (2005) indicated that consumers' relationships with a brand had a significant effect on loyalty. The authors compared consumers with weak and strong brand identification concluding that weak brand identification results in consumers feeling normative community pressure whereas strong brand identification motivates the intention to remain with the community.

Chae and Ko (2016) considered the influence of customer participation in social networking sites on the customer equity of global fashion brands. They demonstrated a positive connection between customer–media, customer–brand as well as customer–customer. Customer–customer interaction, also known as user–user interaction (Ennew and Binks, 1999), is determined by the level of control users have to exchange with other participants. This type of interaction is highly community-driven (Chae and Ko, 2016) but cannot be grouped at a universal level according to the type of participation because differences between brands can lead to different practices and effects of participation (Hollebeek, 2013). Eigenraam *et al.* (2018) identified five distinct types of engagement practices: fun practices, learning practices, customer feedback, work for a brand and talk about a brand. This study demonstrated the range of participation activities and the different functional and social factors involved.

### ***Functional and social goals***

The literature found a positive relationship between the pursuit of functional and social goals and community participation (Bruhn, Schnebelen and Schäfer, 2014; de Almeida *et al.*, 2018; Mathwick, Wiertz and de Ruyter, 2008; Mathwick and Mosteller, 2016; Nambisan and Baron, 2010; Pansari and Kumar, 2017). Prior studies have applied gratification theory, which links the choice of media type and the personal goals being sought (Katz, Blumler and Gurevitch, 1974), to explain consumers' participation in online communities (Dholakia *et al.*, 2004; Flanagin and Metzger, 2001; Nambisan and Baron, 2007). Using gratification theory, Relling *et al.* (2016) investigated whether the type of community and consumers' goals had an impact on consumers' active participation in these communities. They analysed the moderating effect of eWOM participation on the influence of a community that strived to achieve social or functional goals. The study concluded that consumers responded more in social-goal communities than in functional-goal communities to both negative and positive eWOM.

Mathwick *et al.* (2008) demonstrated that exchanges in OBCs started with practical motivations before developing into motivations reflecting symbolism. For continuous participation in communities, symbolic values had a more significant effect than informational values in the community (Tseng, Huang and Setiawan, 2017). Consumers respond to OBCs when seeking social capital that they can both contribute to and benefit from (Etzioni, 1996; Paxton, 1999). A shared language, vision and commitment provides a foundation to the sought social capital

(Meek, Ryan, Lambert and Ogilvie, 2019). Fang and Zhang (2019) considered the different functional, social and psychological motivations that affect intentions to continue to participate. Their findings revealed a range of factors linked to the three motivational antecedents that shaped the consumers' attitude towards participation intentions. Thus, brand communities thrive on enabling the regular involvement of consumers to ensure commitment to the community (Shen, Li, Sun, Chen and Wang, 2019).

### ***Social impact theory***

Several studies have investigated the connections between community members, highlighting a 'we' culture in which there is a shared feeling of belonging with others (Fournier, 1998; Bergami and Bagozzi, 2000; He, Chen, Lee and Pohlman, 2017; van Meter, Syrdal, Powell-Mantel, Grisaffe and Nesson, 2018). Latané (1981, cited in Nowak, Szamrej and Latané, 1990) defined social impact as the influences on individuals' behaviour of the real or imagined presence of actions of others, and stated that the social impact is moderated by the strength, immediacy and number of people. A high number, also called perceived critical mass, has been shown to signify social influences that predict the acceptance of technology adoption and buying behaviour (van Slyke, Ilie, Lou and Stafford, 2007; Cheng, Wu and Chen, 2018) and social network value (Shen, Cheung and Lee, 2013). However, in socially orientated communities, more targets of impact may have less impact on each individual (Karau and Williams, 1995), for example, feeling that community comments are more generically directed than personally, indicating the users' identification with other members to be a major factor in community participation (Dholakia *et al.*, 2004).

The concept of user identification links with two of Kelman's (1958) levels of influence that impact individuals' attitude and behaviours: identification and internalisation. Identification considers individuals' acceptance of influence to retain desired relationships (Kelman, 1958; Warshaw, 1980) and internalisation reflects an individual's acceptance of influence after perceiving it to be beneficial and aligned with existing values (Kelman, 1958). Kelman's compliance-led social influence is expected to last short term, whereas identification and internalisation is a long-term process that evolves as individuals combine their judgements and others' judgements (Fulk, 1993; Venkatesh and Morris, 2000; Wang, Meister and Gray, 2013). This progressing exchange of information evolves into shared values and goals (Dholakia *et al.*, 2004) creating a strong empathy between community members encouraging positive behavioural intentions and group attachment (Ellemers, Kortekaas and Ouwerkerk, 1999; Luhtanen and Crocker, 1992; Ren, Kraut and Kiesler, 2007).

## **Methodology**

### ***Research paradigm and research method***

The social constructivist research paradigm is applied in this study; it represents an embodiment of multiple realities in contrast to a positivist paradigm that searches for practicality (Ozuem, Patel, Howell and Lancaster, 2017). The key characteristic of social constructivism applied in this study is the assumption that individuals subjectively form realities based on social constructions (Guba, Lincoln and Denzin, 1994). In this paper, the key factor investigated in OBCs is the impact of online participation on consumers' loyalty to fashion brands. Habermas (1987) characterised subjectivist studies as 'historical-hermeneutic'. In other words, individuals develop understandings following the experience of situations,

which will vary among individuals; therefore, reality is perceived as unique in contrast to the positivist approach which views reality as universal (Patel, 2016).

In an inductive approach, researchers begin with raw data and allow theory to emerge (Strauss and Corbin, 1998, p. 12). The inductive approach enables researchers to identify frequent and significant themes that emerge from raw data without the official structure that deductive methodologies apply; this aligns with the social constructivist perspective (Perry, 1998) which is subject to different realities thus contributing different conclusions. The ontological position of social constructivism considers various accounts of social realities and rejects the value-free concept; this has enabled this study to address the real-life processes that construct millennials' loyalty intentions in OBCs. A case study approach was adopted to explore the dynamic marketplace in OBCs. The approach is suitable for research that explores the emerging processes of behaviour in real-life cases; the case study approach enabled a detailed investigation of whether these participants feel that online community participation affects their decision to maintain loyalty within fashion brands' online communities (Hartley, 2004).

### ***Data collection methods***

The social constructivist nature of the study made open-ended questions necessary for this study, enabling respondents to answer in their own words (Geer, 1988) without limiting their response length. However, although the aim was to allow respondents control over their responses, the researcher applied a semi-structured approach. According to Crittenden and Hill (1971), levels of intercoder reliability with open-ended coding tasks are low. Often specific research questions, even open-ended ones, require researchers to find specific answers to allow a logical coding formation. Therefore, it is important to locate participants who are able to respond to the research questions addressed to them. When being addressed with questions on a particular subject, participants may be unable to respond due to a lack of relational experience and that could impact the extent of elaborated responses they can provide (Geer, 1988). To address this issue, the authors of this study ensured that they selected a sample whose experiences and knowledge would be closely, if it not exactly, linked to the topic of this study; sampling is explained in the next subsection.

### ***Sampling technique***

The participants were selected on the basis of specific criteria. Although inductive studies involve generalisation, conversations in a study of the topic of online communities could lead to generic experiences rather than ones related to narrowly defined research topics. The aim of qualitative data collection is to prompt a direction in which specific real-time events and situations are described without generating interpretive generalisations from the participants (Adams and van Manen, 2008, p. 618). A purposeful or criteria-based sampling procedure was applied to select participants who would possess the experience and knowledge required to contribute towards the study. Participants would need to have had a level of either active or passive involvement with an online community linked to a fashion brand in order to be able to voice in-depth knowledge and experiences on the topics mentioned in the interview questions.

**Table 1: Participants' demographic information**

| No            | Age (years) | Gender | Occupation              |
|---------------|-------------|--------|-------------------------|
| Participant 1 | 27          | Male   | IT Technician           |
| Participant 2 | 26          | Female | Administrator Assistant |

|                |    |        |                                      |
|----------------|----|--------|--------------------------------------|
| Participant 3  | 20 | Female | University Student (Economics)       |
| Participant 4  | 22 | Female | University Student (Accounting)      |
| Participant 5  | 25 | Female | University Student (MBA)             |
| Participant 6  | 21 | Male   | University Student (Marketing)       |
| Participant 7  | 23 | Male   | American University Exchange Student |
| Participant 8  | 30 | Male   | Customer Service Operator            |
| Participant 9  | 28 | Female | Receptionist                         |
| Participant 10 | 27 | Male   | Human Resource Officer               |
| Participant 11 | 22 | Male   | University Student (Economics)       |
| Participant 12 | 28 | Male   | Accountant                           |
| Participant 13 | 22 | Female | American University Exchange Student |
| Participant 14 | 26 | Female | Fashion Blogger                      |
| Participant 15 | 24 | Female | University Student (Marketing)       |
| Participant 16 | 30 | Female | Procurement Officer                  |
| Participant 17 | 27 | Male   | Travel Blogger                       |
| Participant 18 | 18 | Female | University Student (Economics)       |
| Participant 19 | 26 | Female | Human Resource Assistant             |
| Participant 20 | 22 | Male   | University Student (Marketing)       |
| Participant 21 | 23 | Male   | University Student (Finance)         |
| Participant 22 | 38 | Male   | Graphics Designer                    |
| Participant 23 | 28 | Female | Social Media Coordinator             |

The recruitment criteria for the sample were individuals: (1) of the millennial generation, the population with the highest social media usage, age ranging between 18 and 38 years; (2) who were active users of social media; and (3) who followed brands linked to the fashion industry through social media. The snowball sampling concept was applied, that is, recruited individuals referred other respondents to the study (Ozuem, Howell, and Lancaster 2008). A total of 23 semi-structured interviews were conducted; several responses were discounted from the analysis as these were not relevant to the study, and responses that appeared similar to others or repetitive were also discounted.

## **Analysis and discussion**

### ***Categorisation of codes***

Data were developed using thematic analysis following Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase process of thematic analysis. Thematic analysis is a useful method to summarise key findings in large datasets as it compels the research to adopt a well-structured approach to handling qualitative data to produce a clear result (King, 2004), yet it is highly flexible and can be modified when necessary. Data were transcribed into written form consisting of 26 pages with the exact wording of the participants. In the next step, as indicated by Braun and Clarke's thematic analysis approach, the researchers read and analysed the transcripts from the 23 participants to identify specific patterns that emerged from the participants' responses. Relevant phenomena were highlighted from the transcripts, such as repetitive mention of specific words or sentences, and were analysed to determine similarities, differences and patterns among the individuals (Coffey and Atkinson, 1996). The researchers were able to group words into codes reducing data to develop the analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2006). Using quoted statements from the interviewed participants and theoretical literature, codes were

allocated themes based on the meanings revealed (see Table 2). Codes and themes were developed based on the participants' responses and applied to develop a theoretical framework.

**Table 2: Thematic categories**

| <b>Major theme</b>            | <b>Description</b>   | <b>Key issues</b>   |
|-------------------------------|--|---|
| Brand identification          | This is the extent to which consumers perceive to have characteristics similar to a brand. Those who strongly identify with the brand are more likely to participate or search for content linked to the brand in online communities.  | Preference<br>Relatable<br>Uniqueness<br>Differentiation<br>Awareness<br>Brand influence<br>Brand awareness<br>Learning intentions<br>Informative<br>Social impact    |
| Interactivity                 | In online communities, consumers are able to exchange information to develop a rich learning and interactive environment. However, the level of participation the technology platform enables may impact the consumers' ability to interact the way they desire.   | Participation desire<br>Technology platform<br>Media richness<br>Accessibility<br>Response<br>Discussions<br>Informative<br>User-generated content<br>Personalisation |
| Media valence                 | When online communities enable consumers to contribute visual content, they trigger a motivation to share content that indicates an identity and an association with brands. This develops an intrinsic attractiveness that encourages on-going online participation that is developed through vivid visual content. | Vividness<br>Content quality<br>Visual content<br>Trend identification<br>Emerge<br>Evolving<br>Collaboration<br>Community<br>Emotion<br>Social identification        |
| Perceived community sentiment | In the background of published content is an emotion, attitude or opinion related to the brand. From observing overall content published following an online participation activity, the sentiment behind that participants content can impact their brand loyalty.  | Personalisation<br>Individualism<br>Brand identity<br>Adaptation<br>Social influencer<br>Diversity<br>Social groups<br>Message tone<br>Loyalty impact<br>Biasness     |



## ***Brand identification***

Brand identification is often associated with consumers' preference towards a particular brand that motivates them to promote it to others. Brand identification has been linked to the perspective that community members possess a social identification with others who share their interest in a particular brand (Algesheimer *et al.*, 2005; McAlexander *et al.*, 2002). Several authors have argued that social impact predicts the acceptance of different factors such as information and online community behaviour (Cheng *et al.*, 2018; Shen *et al.*, 2013). However, the number and the types of community members within community participation can often lead consumers to leave a brand community if there is too much membership similarity as indicated by Participant 2, a 26-year-old female Administrator Assistant :

Sometimes too many individuals who comment on every post can ruin a brand. If everyone is commenting on every brand post it sort of loses its uniqueness to certain groups, making it universal, and people lose that unique psychological belonging to 'a community' so they feel no need to partake in the online talk.

A large brand community can have a negative impact on brand preference, for example, members may feel anxiety from being in an overcrowded community or they might have feelings of self-threat when exposed to community users who do not exhibit similar characteristics to the brand, resulting in some members choosing to withdraw from any future participation in the brands community (Puzakova and Kwak, 2017; Wang and John, 2019). This identifies that community members' participation can impact consumers' perception of the equity of the brand; if online participation consists of members who seem too dissimilar to the brand, this can lead individuals to feeling dissimilar to the brand, which could potentially reduce intentions to remain loyal. Furthermore, this indicates the importance of the brand as the central mechanism of online communities. Several studies have explored how the brand itself impacts loyalty intentions to remain within an online community (He, Chen, Lee, Wang and Pohlmann, 2017; Ilhan, Kübler and Pauwels, 2018; Eigenraam *et al.*, 2018; Hollebeek and Macky, 2019), they identified that the brand itself is a significant factor that motivates online participation. It has been argued that consumers do not necessarily need to identify with a brand to interact through its online community, especially new members (He *et al.*, 2017), who, through observing frequent interactions, may align a brand's characteristics with their own identity (Pansari and Kumar, 2017). This was indicated by Participant 5, a 25-year-old female MBA student, who stated:

Every fashion brand is very volatile, growing and changing. With every consumer's published content we get to see what the next trend is from brands we observe, which we may find suits us but we wouldn't know if we don't see existing users' discussions.

Similarly, Participant 3, a 20-year-old female Finance and Economics student, stated:

There is one fashion brand I like called Fashion Valet who is very active in launching new products online. From Facebook I will go see users' comments to judge the new products. I would rather see these comments about the brand's product, so I know what the popular trends are.

This indicates that frequent and long-term participation of community members can encourage new users to eventually identify with the brand. Additionally, it can be argued that online participation is significant for individuals to retain knowledge of brands in order to maintain

their established loyalty with the brand, as indicated by Participant 10, a 27-year-old male Human Resource Officer:

The level of participation matters if you want to really know and relate to the brand. If you want the latest trends and information you need to participate because trends are constantly evolving and content including comments, likes and shares make it known.

However, several studies have found that loyal consumers identification with a specific brand motivates them to follow that brand compared to non-loyal or partially loyal consumers (Alba and Chattopadhyay, 1986; Park *et al.*, 2013; Chae and Ko, 2016; Eelen *et al.*, 2017; Eigenraam *et al.*, 2018). The online participation of consumers with low identification with a brand is likely to have a weak signal if they are not able to relate to the normative community culture (Algesheimer *et al.*, 2005). This is demonstrated through the statement of Participant 20, a 22-year-old male University Marketing student:

There is a difference between Fashionista of a brand or two and those who simply want an idea on what to wear next regardless of a brand. Some will be a major fan of a brand and keep up with a brand's updates and are very engaging in the community and anticipating the next update. Others will not be so involved.

Similarly, Participant 16, a 30-year-old female Procurement Officer, stated:

When I observe online discussions or pictures, I find myself liking a lot of the products of my Liked fashion brands, but I don't buy or even follow the brand. It's more of an observation for future reference.

As mentioned earlier, authors have argued that consumers do not need to identify with a brand in order to interact within the community (He *et al.*, 2017; Pansari and Kumar, 2017); however, consumers may not have the motivation to explore in-depth every fashion brand online community as indicated by Participant 4, a 22-year-old female University Accounting student:

I only look at content related to brands I actually like because it takes a lot of time and energy to keep up-to-date with trends of fashion in general, so it's easier to follow specifics using pictures and hashtag. I would deeply search those liked brands' page history, but for unfamiliar brands I would only look at the surface.

It is important to differentiate users who are motivated to participate in online communities with the intention to remain loyal to the brand from those who are simply fond of the brand; this relates to whether the online participation they observe is used to direct their loyalty intentions. John, Emrich, Gupta and Norton (2017) concluded that though a fondness of a brand motivates consumers' willingness to join its social network or 'Liking' it, even consumers' 'Like' of a brand does not directly affect their attitude, endorsement acceptance or loyalty behaviours. Every consumer will have different levels of desire to participate in online communities, which is reflected through the kind of online activity in which they actively participate. For example, rather than simply 'Liking' a brand's page, some consumers will generate their own hashtags or search for hashtags specifically linked to a brand. Online activity such as user-generated social tags or hashtags next to content in online communities is more likely to provide insights into how the consumers view the content (Nam, Joshi and Kannan, 2017). When considering loyalty outcomes from online participation, it is clear that consumers

must have some level of identification with the brand and that the community must maintain a direct link with the brand.

### ***Interactivity***

Research into online activity suggests that sociability and social cues positively affect the perceptions of online users (Holzwarth, Janiszewski and Neumann 2006; Wang, Baker, Wagner and Wakefield, 2007), which should develop into a positive relationship between the firm and customers. The objective of sociability, as related to online environments, is to enable users to socialise and engage to develop rich relationships (Sweeny and Soutar, 2001); sociability facilitates opportunities for users to gain emotion support and a sense of belonging, which increases their desire-based attachment (Wang, Yang and Ding, 2019). However, social relationships may reveal a potential mismatch of exchanges between online users that do not correspond with their objectives (Köhler, Rohm, de Ruyter and Wetzels, 2011). In regards to online participation, some consumers might not necessarily intend to socialise with other users and may instead prefer the interactivity of the online participation, as indicated by Participant 18, a 18-year-old female University Economics student:

I don't feel the need to participate; the content and messages I get through online interactions about brand trends showcased in social media are more effective.

Similarly, Participant 7, a 23-year-old male American University Exchange student, explained that the interaction itself was more important, stating:

If I think something was not addressed in a discussion based on community posts I will involve myself in the discussion to raise the topic, but only when it is relevant to me. I don't necessarily need to form a connection with the users to do so.

These participants' perspectives emphasise the importance of interactivity over sociability in online participation to motivate loyalty to the brand through online environments and is consistent with previous studies (Köhler *et al.*, 2011; Wang *et al.*, 2019). Interactivity refers to enabling online participants to interact within the online platforms, and, unlike sociability, interactivity allows users to interact with online platform tools and participate in modifying or contributing content in real time (Animesh, Pinsonneault, Yang and Oh, 2011). Some users are able to use this interactive activity as a method for searching for different information, as identified by Participant 14, a 26-year-old female Fashion Blogger:

From the online discussions and content I see on Pinterest, YouTube and Instagram, I gain so much information, including ideas on fashion trends, quality of items and when is the best time to get them.

Interestingly, participants identified that the level of interactivity of a platform enables users to illustrate themselves through visual content that extends an indirect version of their own identity, similar to the effect that online self-created avatars have in virtual communities (Belk, 1988), as supported by Participant 12, a 28-year-old male Accountant:

It's mostly the image content that gets my attention. If it's Instagram I see unique pictures that illustrate different scenarios. I feel those build more discussion.

From this online participation activity, online users can use the content to identify the personalities or identities of other users; for example, Participant 9, a 28-year-old female Receptionist, stated:

In online communities, you can identify individuals' social lifestyle through their comments, shared pictures and Liked brand updates. Mostly I see this through content published by individuals who comment or visualise how the brand's product suits them.

This can be linked to Vilnai-Yavetz and Tifferet's (2015) study, which found that online users rely more on posted images that reflect, for example, emotions or dress preference than on explicit statements, such as Facebook's declarations of interests or favourites, to reduce the uncertainty of interacting with users. It can be argued that a platform that limits consumers' ability to control their content activity is likely to reduce online participation. The following participants identified that the technology of the platform they use makes a difference regarding the level of interactivity they can deliver through user-generated content. For instance, Participant 17, a 27-year-old male Travel Blogger, mentioned company-generated content stating:

In the community, many observers will simply skim through the content, most likely because it's more company content with some views and likes. It's different if it's your friends' or your own content.

Participant 1, a 27-year-old male IT technician, added further to this perspective stating:

With Facebook you are purely scrolling whereas with Instagram you can get a 'Wow' moment, you feel the timeline is more personalised to you, so you interact more, it's a natural response. On Facebook its personalised based mostly on what you last saw or clicked on which may not be what you even like so you will scroll right pass it.

Similarly, Participant 6, a 21-year-old male University Marketing student, stated:

On Facebook you are observing content, on Instagram you are actually using your content and people respond with their own content and eventually build a discussion. This enables participation which affects the engagement outcome.

According to Wang *et al.* (2019), if users can control their online activity and select or contribute content of their choosing, a higher level of interactivity is likely to occur and users are more likely to remain with the online community, which will ultimately affect loyalty retention with a brand. Although the participants for this theme did not directly link loyalty intentions with interactivity participation, it is clear that participation activities that enable interactivity through user-generated content are significantly important to ensure consumers continue to feel involved with the brand, and are able to communicate about the brand through their own abilities, which motivates them to remain loyal to the brand.

### ***Media valence***

The virtual environment has resulted in marketing communication channels becoming more interactive (Malthouse and Hofacker, 2010), which has made it easier to identify the valence of consumers through the emotions indicated by the content they exchange. In psychological terms, valence specifies and characterises emotional values linking them to events, objects and situations (Frijda, 1986, p. 207). de Vries, Gensler and Leeflang (2017) identified that brand-

generated social messages complement paid advertising efforts and, unlike paid advertising, brand-generated visual content tends to be unique for every new post (Rietveld, van Dolen, Mazloom and Worring, 2020). Participant 22, a male 38-year-old Graphics Designer, found that unique content is highly effective in prompting interactivity and positioning of brands:

Every new post is almost flashier than the previous post, so it keeps people talking about the brand when they have something new to see. If they keep evoking the same positive emotion it will maintain the loyalty.

However, the previously mentioned comments of participants indicate that this online participation activity is likely to have a more significant effect if it involved user-generated content. Several studies have found that consumers' perception of a brand improved when consumers were enabled to co-create in online communities (Hsieh and Chang, 2016; Sugathan, Ranjan and Mulky, 2017; Chen, Drennan, Andrews and Hollebeek, 2018), whereas others emphasised the importance of technology platforms that enable user-generated content or at least the actual usage of provided content (Liu-Thompkins and Rogerson, 2012; Chae and Ko, 2016; Eigenraam *et al.*, 2018; Wang *et al.*, 2019). Participant 15, a female 24-year-old University Marketing student, reflected on the positive impact that user-generated content had on online participation, which had an impact on loyalty to a brand:

Other consumers' pictures initially provide inspiration, they showcase a consumer's story which I feel is more unique than when the brand does it, and I feel people respond more to personal posts than actually comment on brand's posts, whereas they might be put off if the brand controls the posting.

This emphasises that emotion or valence plays a significant role in generating attachment to interactivity, which reflects on the brand, and it depends on how much the consumers are able to showcase the brands they are loyal to (Rietveld *et al.*, 2020). Several authors found that emotions were important indicators of consumer loyalty (Smith and Bolton, 2002; Holbrook and Batra, 1987; Cheng *et al.*, 2018). For example, Participant 8, a 30-year-old male Customer Service Operator, and Participant 19, a 26-year-old female Human Resource Assistant, indicated that the visual content posted in online communities can evoke the emotion the poster has linked with the brand, prompting them to continue observing the online participation:

On YouTube you will get demonstration on how to wear an item, then, when you look at the comment sections you will find other users who will comment on it. You can sort of feel the emotion of the person demonstrating its usage. (Participant 8)

I see others posting pictures posing with their clothes or new makeup style; sometimes, I'm tempted to join in. It shows the emotion this activity triggers almost instantly in the moment. I feel loyalty is influenced not so much through electronic word-of-mouth anymore but through online visuals. (Participant 19)

Researchers have reasoned that mental processes are influenced by sensory input (Barsalou, 2008; Niedenthal, Barsalou, Winkielman, Krauth-Gruber and Ric, 2005); consumers' experiences are based on sensory input that impacts their judgement (Krishna, 2012; Petit, Velasco and Spence, 2019) as well as their loyalty towards a brand, as supported by the comments of Participant 13, a 22-year-old female American University Exchange student:

When seeing pictures posted by consumers with certain brands, this evokes an emotion to join in or keep looking, and it maintains the motivation to stay with the brand as it's constantly on-going, and new trends emerge with every new post linked to the brand.

Although interactivity may not impact consumers' direct loyalty to brands themselves, it may impact their level of positive responsiveness within an online community which often reflects loyalty to a brand. Therefore, if online participation activities evoke emotions and are interactive, then users are likely to remain loyal; online platform support of consumers' development of a psychological attachment can extend consumers' basic fondness for a brand to an active following and engagement with the brand.

### ***Perceived community sentiment***

Customers' emotional states will influence the nature of their online participation in OBCs, which is likely to be captured through sentiments (Meire, Hewett, Ballings, Kumar and Van den Poel, 2019). Social media activities can reinforce customers' experiences as well as knowledge. Negative messages issued by unsatisfied consumers can affect the attitudes of other members (Brown and Reingen, 1987; Murdock and Rajagopal, 2017; Herhausen, Ludwig, Grewal, Wulf and Schoegel, 2019), which could potentially lower loyalty. Minor activities, such as firms' responses to consumers' comments, can potentially create negative responses that begin to build a negative community sentiment. However, despite this, consumers with a strong connection with the brand may not necessarily change their loyalty, as indicated by Participant 11, a 22-year-old male University Economics student:

Companies like H&M and Zara use a very generic tone when responding and engaging, giving neutral answers to all consumers, so the conversations are off-putting, and active commenting consumers make that clear, but that doesn't mean I stop liking the brand.

Authors have explored the usefulness of sentiment analysis and how to interpret it (Agnihotri and Bhattacharya, 2016; Micu, Micu, Geru and Lixandrou, 2017). Sentiment analysis has been adopted by many marketers; however, many marketers use sentiment metrics that do not fully reflect the fundamental customer perspective (Schweidel and Moe, 2014). Similarly, consumers may process a similar approach and only access a limited amount of online participation that reflects a certain sentiment, which may influence the observing consumers negatively (Ibrahim *et al.*, 2017) and can even go so far as to link brands to specific external stigmas (Kudo and Nagaya, 2017). Participant 2, a 26-year-old female Administrator Assistant, illustrated this issue stating:

For brands there is a constant threat of consumers' unlimited ability to participate in online discussion to the point they initiate a boycott of a brand. The response to Nike's advert with Colin Kaepernick 2016 is proof that consumers link social issues with the brand and can sway a negative discussion trend causing a loss of customer loyalty.

However, it is possible that consumers will be aware of biased perceptions and may want to resist the perceived control that is based on the influence of others (Hsiao, Lee and Chen, 2016). Furthermore, a perceived critical mass may not always signify acceptance of online behaviour and may have less impact compared to individuals own initiative to determine the usefulness of online information or behaviour (Karau and Williams, 1995). Interestingly, Participant 21, a 23-year-old male University Finance student, suggested that if influential individuals are

involved in the participation, then the likelihood of the acceptance of community sentiment is greater than if non-influential individuals are involved:

On YouTube you get vloggers or influencers that promote a brand. Followers will be impacted more by the influencer than the brand, because the influencer connects and engages more with the followers directly in conversations.

This can be linked to social impact, which emphasises community strength as well as numbers. The impact of community sentiment on consumers' perception of their participation can be positively affected by their identification with members within a community. However, as mentioned earlier, a shared community environment, or lack of, does not necessarily mean that loyalty will be directly affected. Participant 12, a 28-year-old male Accountant, identified that communities will have diverse information sources:

Everyone has their own conversations about a brand; it is unlikely those will affect my loyalty because I may have a different perspective about the information and trends that emerge from the participation.

Building on this perception, Participant 23 a 28-year-old female Social Media Coordinator, emphasised that despite community sentiment, consumers are likely to consider the brand over other consumers' sentiment that emerges from their online participation:

Brands need to be careful when publishing a post topic scenario to initiate online participation; their brand equity is catered to certain social groups, so they need to pay attention to them. Brands cannot adapt to every single consumer, it risks almost changing the brand.

It is clear that consumers thought that community sentiment, which emerges through active users' online participation, would not necessarily impact their individual sentiment regarding the brand itself. Although negative eWOM is likely to generate negative brand sentiment through the community, the consumers' main focus is still likely to revolve around their individual experience or existing loyalty with the brand itself. Furthermore, although brands are encouraged to adapt online participation around events to influence customers' sentiment, they can do so without changing their objective performance during events (Meire *et al.*, 2019) or changing the image of the brand. Overall, it can be argued that the activity within online participation itself has an effect on loyalty within a community, and the connection with the brand is more likely to outweigh community sentiment regarding the decision to remain with the brand.

## **Discussion**

The objective of this study is to explore the relationship between consumer participation and loyalty in OBCs in the fashion industry. The findings reveal some important predictors of online participation, which in turn significantly influence the intention to remain loyal in the brand's online community. The study identifies four themes that reflect consumers' behavioural traits in participation in OBCs that were revealed during interviews: brand identification, interactivity, media valence and perceived community sentiment.

As shown in Appendix A, the defined themes reveal a process that influences consumers' attitude towards online participation which influences their intention to remain a loyal brand follower within the community. However, loyalty to the brand is not necessarily motivated

directly by the online participation the consumer observes or actively participates in. The choice to follow an OBC is influenced by a consumer's identification or preference towards a brand, as the choice of a specific brands is more easily generated by loyal consumers than partial or non-loyal consumers (He *et al.*, 2017; Hollebeek and Macky, 2019; Park *et al.*, 2010, 2013; Yoo and Donthu, 2001). Some academics place emphasis on the brand as the central variable encouraging loyalty towards an online community (Algesheimer *et al.*, 2005; Eelen *et al.*, 2017) where consumers will volunteer to participate in a range of online activities to support the brand (Eigenraam *et al.*, 2018). The ability to first identify with the brand encourages the motivation to contribute or even simply observe the online participation in an online community.

Although the consumers will individually have a range of diverse goals, interviews from this study identified that consumers, including ones following fashion brands, demonstrate more social-goal behaviour in online communities compared to functional-goal communities (Relling *et al.*, 2016; Tseng *et al.*, 2017). This is demonstrated through the main identified activity that emerged from the interviews, image content, which is commonly applied in many fashion brands' social media channels. The themes of interactivity and media valence are shown to be interlinked: consumers' ability to generate and use their own content is a significant activity in fashion online communities (Chae and Ko, 2016; Eigenraam *et al.*, 2018; Wang *et al.*, 2019). This ability is limited on Facebook to declarations of consumers' interests and favourites, and users are unable to publish their own content that they feel reflects them (Vilnai-Yavetz and Tifferet, 2015). User-generated content, such as pictures, is personalised and unique to the users, prompting them to contribute content. This also has a social impact on users observing the content, who obtain a sensory-based experience in the online community which has an impact on their judgement (Krishna, 2012; Petit *et al.*, 2019) and their actions, including the motivation to follow a brand. Although the sample of our study consisted of a majority of non-active community participants, they reflected the significant emotional effect that visual content had on their observations, which led them to psychologically link that form of online participation to the brand.

The activity of sharing visual content is arguably a sociable online participation activity, based on how many shares and comments a user-generated post can generate from other followers. However, for this study, individuals did not identify a need to socially engage with other community members. The study finds that consumers, who may lack social connections with other community members, favour interactivity over sociability in online community participation (Köhler *et al.*, 2011; Wang *et al.*, 2019). Interestingly, the results from our study show an opposing perspective to social impact research that indicates that the number of people participating within a community can predict the acceptance of online communities (Cheng *et al.*, 2018; Shen *et al.*, 2013), including features and characteristics emerging from online participation. Participants strongly emphasised the importance of a moderately sized population that reflects more similarities to the brand and other community members than a large population, in contrast to having a perceived critical mass in a significantly diverse environment. This can be linked to the interactivity theme: a moderately sized population of participants, consumers' control over their online activity and the valence generated from visual content, are likely to generate a higher level of interactivity which will ultimately impact consumers' intention to remain loyal followers within the OBC.



Following brand identification, interactivity and media valence together play a significant role in initiating online participation and developing psychological attachment. The valence developed from user-contributed media and the interactivity following the posting of content leads a passive or observing consumer to develop a sentiment for the community. However, perceived community sentiment is less significant compared to the previous themes regarding the impact of online participation on loyalty. Although a negative sentiment could emerge through content published during online participation, thus effecting the observers' attitude (Murdock and Rajagopal, 2017; Herhausen *et al.*, 2019), consumers are likely to be aware of the biased perceptions of other online users (Hsiao *et al.*, 2016) without letting it effect their loyalty towards a brand. The results indicated that consumers are aware that other online users link negative outcomes back to the brands (Kudo and Nagaya, 2017); however, considering that online participation and community sentiment does not typically represent the brand's loyal customers as a whole (Schweidel and Moe, 2014), consumers are more likely to refer to their own identification with the brand. Therefore, perceived community sentiment will have some impact on consumers' perception towards a community, but it can be regarded more of an outcome of community interactivity as well as a result of the valence generated by published content than a direct link to loyalty outcomes.

## **Conclusion**

This study has extended the investigation into whether online participation within online communities impacts consumers' loyalty towards a brand. The analysis based on the responses from the participants did not indicate a direct relationship between online participation and loyalty towards a brand, however online participation is arguably necessary to maintain the sentiment of the brand through motivation to continue using the brands online community platforms. The study has found four key themes that reflect consumers behavioural traits in online participation in OBC's, brand identification, interactivity, media valence and perceived community sentiment. The brand itself is a key factor in online participation as many consumers' loyalty intentions revolve around the brand (He *et al.*, 2017; Ilhan *et al.*, 2018; Eigenraam *et al.*, 2018; Hollebeek and Macky, 2019). Although firms use social media as a tool to generate a large population of participating consumers, firms must consider the social impact a large population will have on consumers, such as a loss of uniqueness and feeling dissimilar to a community in which the members do not reflect the brand (Dholakia *et al.*, 2004; Puzakova and Kwak, 2017; Wang and John, 2019).

The brand itself provides consumers with a topic to discuss in online communities, however, the capability to use user-generated content has been found to be a significant factor of interactivity in online participation. Participants' responses indicate that the consumers' ability to interact in online platforms and the activity they are able to deliver is more important to them than connecting with other members (Wang *et al.*, 2019), especially in regards to online participation activities. Consumers may lack connectivity with other members and may not feel they gain from sociability, whereas with interactivity they have the ability to both interact with the online platforms tools and to participate in modifying or contributing to content in real time (Animesh *et al.*, 2011), thus motivating discussions to take place in the online environment. Most participants identified picture posting as an online activity that motivated them to participate compared to basic interest declarations, such as 'Liking' a brand (Vilnai-Yavetz and Tifferet, 2015), because picture posting reflected emotions as well as visualisation of the usage of a brand's products. This finding revealed the importance of facilitating user-generated

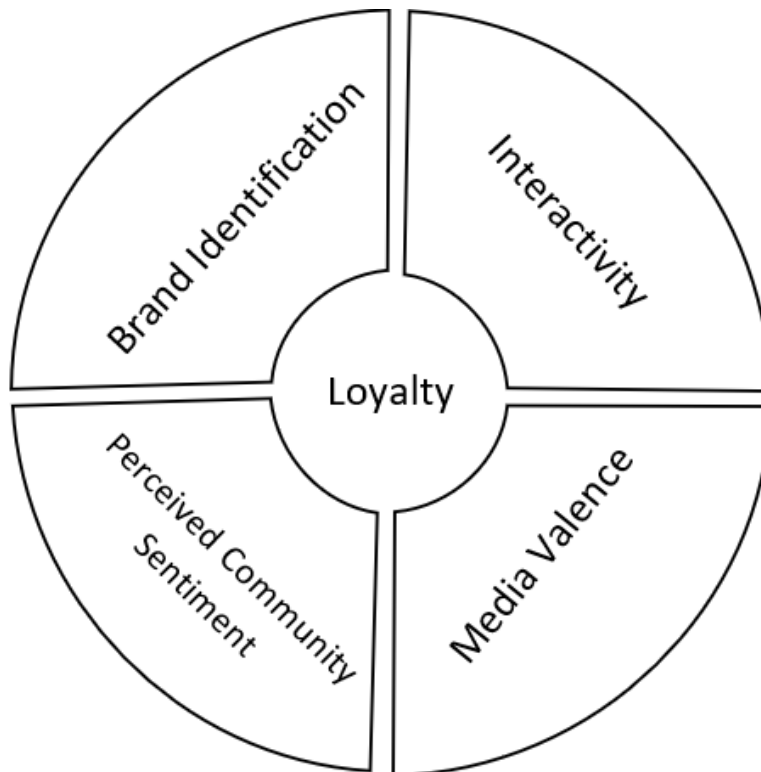
content (Liu-Thompkins and Rogerson, 2012; Chae and Ko, 2016; Eigenraam *et al.*, 2018) because user-generated content provides a psychological connection to the brand being discussed on the online platform both to the observer and the publisher, which promotes continuing participation which impacts the indicated loyalty within the online community.

### **Limitations and suggestions for future research**

The study explored consumers' comparison of visual content with sensory effects with online activity that mostly emphasises text or brand-generated messages and the impact of interactivity on participation. However, because participants only commented on activities involving visual content this study is limited to providing insights into online communities that are designed specifically for that online activity. Future research should explore further the impact of visual content and its effect on encouraging online participation and the extent that it impacts loyalty to brands. Furthermore, although several respondents indicated the importance of user-generated content, brands also contribute content that encourages online discussions. Future studies may benefit from comparing consumers' perceptions of brand-generated participation with user-generated activity to explore the emotional attachment within the community and the psychological ownership of the brand. This may allow future research to explore in-depth the different kinds of interactive participation activities and whether consumers relate them to the brand or to the community and its members.

Although this research is based on a range of experiences, the researchers acknowledge the results are taken from a limited number of interviews and it focuses on the surface of brand identification, interactivity, media valence and perceived community sentiment. The majority of participants from this study can be classified as observers of online participation, therefore, they are likely to practice a different level of interactivity compared to active contributors to online communities. Although active contributors are not expected to have different perceptions of online participation or the brand, they may have a different mental process when deciding to interact and may adopt the influence of other online users differently from users who mostly observe online participation. An in-depth understanding is required to understand the extent of social impact and individual's characteristics on online participation because the question of perceived critical mass is still considered to be relatively important in generating loyalty within online communities. This will further develop guidelines on how brands can develop online activities that motivate consumers' participation which can be linked back to the brand's equity.

**Appendix A: BIMP model (brand identification, interactivity, media valence and perceived community sentiment)**



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