



UNIVERSIDADE D  
COIMBRA

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**THE IMPACT OF MANAGING VIRTUAL BRAND  
COMMUNITIES IN THE ESPORTS ECOSYSTEM**

**Dissertation of Masters' in Marketing presented to the Faculty of Economics  
of the University of Coimbra to obtain a Masters' degree**

June 2019





FEUC FACULDADE DE ECONOMIA  
UNIVERSIDADE DE COIMBRA

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# **“The impact of managing virtual brand communities in the *eSports* ecosystem”**

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Advisor: Professor Arnaldo Fernandes de Matos Coelho, PhD

June 2019

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**Abstract:**

**Purpose of study:** Virtual Brand communities are growing in importance in the field of Marketing. The approach and tools that companies utilize in order to develop and sustain these communities are, most of the time, inefficient, since the study of virtual communities is still in its infancy. Therefore, this study aims to tackle the importance of managing of virtual brand communities, its impact on brand performance, active participation, word of mouth oppositional brand loyalty and well-being.

**Design/Methodology/approach:** The data was collected from social media, especially the website “Reddit” and its subreddits of different eSports titles , through a survey using a 1-7 Likert scale, where individuals answered questions regarding their thoughts on the community, their participation in the community, their opinion on the brand in which the community revolves around, the competitors of the brand, their perceptions on brands in general as well as their overall well-being.

**Findings:** The Findings indicate that brand communities, are predictive of increasing brand identification, brand engagement and brand preference. This study also portrays the positive role that brand performance has on active participation, word of mouth, well-being and oppositional brand loyalty.

**Relevance of context/originality:** eSports is a new market, that has been growing exponentially in the past few years, there are few studies linking this context to Virtual Brand Communities. This research proven to portray an innovative role of brand communities identifying new correlation between pre-existing variables and applying them to a context never used before that is the eSports ecosystem. It adds a multi-community study on the impact of communities on oppositional brand loyalty, which is a study, yet, underexplored.

**Research Limitations/Implications:** It mainly encompasses individuals from “Reddit” which is a fraction of virtual communities that can be studied.

**Practical Implications:** This study contributes to the existing study of brand communities, identifying managerial decisions to maximize the effectiveness of these communities, leaving open room for discussion in both the field of communities, and its adaptability from eSports to other markets.

**Key words:** *Virtual Communities, eSports, Brand Identification, Brand Engagement, Oppositional Brand Loyalty*

**Resumo:**

**Objetivo do estudo:** As comunidades de marcas virtuais estão a crescer em importância na área do marketing. A abordagem e as ferramentas que as empresas utilizam atualmente para desenvolver e sustentar essas comunidades são, na maioria das vezes, ineficientes, uma vez que o estudo das comunidades virtuais ainda não tem a significância desejada. Nesse sentido, este estudo visa abordar a importância da gestão de comunidades de marcas virtuais e o seu impacto no desempenho da marca, na participação ativa, passa-a-palavra, lealdade opositiva e bem-estar.

**Design / Metodologia / abordagem:** Os dados foram recolhidos através de redes sociais, especialmente o site “Reddit” em várias comunidades de títulos de eSports. O questionário utilizou uma escala Likert 1-7, onde os indivíduos responderam perguntas sobre seus pensamentos na comunidade, sua participação na comunidade, sua opinião sobre a marca em que a comunidade gira em torno, os concorrentes da marca, suas percepções sobre marcas em geral e seu bem-estar geral.

**Resultados:** Os resultados indicam que as comunidades de marcas são preditivas de aumentar a identificação da marca, o envolvimento da marca e a preferência da marca. Este estudo também retrata o papel positivo que o desempenho da marca tem na participação ativa, no boca-a-boca, no bem-estar e na lealdade opositiva.

**Relevância do contexto / originalidade:** eSports é um mercado recente, que vem crescendo exponencialmente nos últimos anos. Existem poucos estudos ligando este contexto às Comunidades Virtuais de Marcas, e é nesse sentido que esta pesquisa comprova retratar um papel inovador das comunidades de marcas, identificando novas correlações entre variáveis pré-existentes e aplicando-as assim um contexto nunca usado antes. Este estudo acrescenta uma perspectiva multicomunitária sobre o impacto das comunidades na lealdade opositiva às marcas, que é uma perspectiva pouco explorada.

**Limitações / Implicações da Pesquisa:** Abrange principalmente indivíduos do “Reddit”, que é uma fração das comunidades virtuais que podem ser estudadas.

**Implicações práticas:** Este estudo contribui para o estudo existente das comunidades de marca, identificando decisões gerenciais para maximizar a eficácia dessas comunidades, deixando espaço para discussão no campo das comunidades e sua adaptabilidade dos eSports para outros mercados.

**Key words:** *Virtual Communities, eSports, Brand Identification, Brand Engagement, Oppositional Brand Loyalty*

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## ACRONYMS:

AVE	Average Variance Explained
BESC	Brand Engagement in Self-Concept
CFA	Confirmatory Factor Analysis
CFI	Comparative Fit Index
CR	Composite Reliability
DF	Degrees of Freedom
EFA	Exploratory Factor Analysis
FPS	First Person Shooter
IFI	Incremental Fit Index
ICT	Information and Communication Technologies
IT	Information Technologies
KMO	Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin
MMORPG	Massive Multiplayer Online Role-Playing Games
RMSEA	Root Mean Square Error of Approximation
SEM	Structural Equations Model
SRW	Standardized Regression Weights
TLI	Tucker-Lewis Fit Index
WOM	Word of Mouth

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# 1. Introduction

The central discussion of this dissertation revolves around virtual brand communities, their impact on brands and their subsequent influence on active participation, word of mouth, oppositional brand loyalty and consumer well-being.

The study of brand communities starts with its definition by Muniz and O'Guinn which characterize brand communities as a "specialized, non-geographically bound community, based on a structured set of social relationships among admirers of a brand. It is specialized because at its center is a branded good or service" (Muniz & O'Guinn, 2001). On this sense other authors also contributed to the definition of brand community as a non-geographically based group, characterized by a set of social relationships between the brand admirers (Dholakia et al., 2004). Algesheimer et al. identify the concept of like-minded individuals that engage within a community, where engagement is the intrinsic motivation felt by community members in order to cooperate and interact with each other (Algesheimer, Dholakia, & Herrmann, 2005).

With the increase in the globalization, coupled with the rise of the digital technologies and the internet (Goldsmith and Horowitz, 2006), cyberspace has become a new kind of social terrain, crowded with "virtual communities" (Rheingold, 2000), new challenges and opportunities emerge for marketing brands and products (Bellman et al., 2006). In its infancy, the internet appeared as an opportunity for brands to communicate with their consumers. However, consumers are becoming increasingly overwhelmed by marketers' attempts to engage with them in relationship marketing strategies. In order to tackle this issue, brand communities appear as an alternative, where individuals can share their experiences with each other (Flavián & Guinalú, 2005; McAlexander, Schouten, & Koenig, 2002; Yao & Liu, 2003). Following this perspective brand communities are essential to create lasting and meaningful relationships with their clients (McAlexander et al., 2002). This study aims to reinforce the previous literature on the impact brand communities have on brands: the impact brand communities have on , brand engagement in self-concept (Sprott et al., 2009), brand identification (Tuškej et al., 2013) and brand preference (Chang & Liu, 2009).

For this study, virtual brand communities were measured through three core dimensions: identification, commitment and participation. Even though these determinants were previously studied independently (for example: (Hur et al., 2011; Woisetschlager et al., 2008), this study intends to positively create a new perspective to the study of brand communities in general.

The existence of a virtual brand community does not guarantee that fulfilling relationships with the consumers will occur (Akrouf & Nagy, 2018). Almeida et al., introduced an important perspective on the effects of the community management (Almeida et al., 2012). This research however intends to set some managerial guidelines for managers to follow in order to increase the community's engagement and loyalty.

This study presents the some consequents of the impact of brand communities, which are active participation (Casaló et al., 2007), word of mouth (Woisetschlager et al., 2008), well-being (Diener et al., 1985) and oppositional brand loyalty (Kuo & Hou, 2017; Kuo & Feng, 2013). The role of oppositional brand loyalty is still in its infancy and requires more in depth investigation (Kuo & Hou, 2017). Also the literature on oppositional brand loyalty focuses on a single community perspective (Kuo & Feng, 2013), therefore this study intends to add to the previous literature, providing a multi-community approach to oppositional brand loyalty (Kuo & Feng, 2013).

The eSports and video game streaming are rapidly growing over the past years. Currently, hundreds of millions of people watch eSports, and the industry as a whole is attracting several investors (Hamari & Sjöblom, 2017). However little is still known about the motivations underlying viewer engagement in this growing live-streaming multimedia phenomenon (Hamari et al., 2019), and the formation of virtual communities around the eSports ecosystem (Hamari & Sjöblom, 2017). The present investigation intends to understand the communities' role on the brands present within this ecosystem and a set of sub sequential impacts.

## **1.2-Research Problem and Objectives**

### **1.2.1-Research Problem**

In the recent years, activities such as spectating other people play competitive video games and the formation of competitive leagues called eSports rising in popularity (Hamari et al., 2019), and they are becoming a force that can compete with traditional sports, regarding viewership and branding (Lynch, 2017). They create opportunities for studying people and communication systems on a massive scale. Research around esports, however, is in its infancy (Reitman et al., 2019). The growth of eSports its attributed to the value of the experience economy for consumers, the rising in popularity of video games, the increase of social recognition of video game players and the advances in technology (Seo, 2013). The identification of these factors, contributed to the increase of literature, regarding eSports consumption, understanding the networks, individuals and organizations, and designing effective marketing techniques (Burroughs & Rama, 2015; Hamari & Sjöblom, 2017; Hamari et al., 2019; Lee & Schoenstedt, 2012; Seo, 2013; Witkowski, 2012).

Since eSports is a community based construct (Seo & Jung, 2016), it makes sense to study this ecosystem through a brand community scope, since these communities have an important role in, perpetuating the eSports' brands history and defining a new culture, allowing individuals to share their common interests (Muniz & O'Guinn, 2001), creating lasting consumer-brand and intra consumer relationships (Algesheimer et al., 2005).

The importance of virtual brand communities in general is rising every day, since technology and internet access is becoming more available to consumers, and the need consumers have to search for information to base their decisions, or for mere sharing purposes (Casaló et al., 2007). In this context hundreds of millions of individuals consume video games and live internet broadcasts on platforms such as Twitch.tv. This type of new digital media is possible due to advances such as increased bandwidth of networks, the rise of user-generated content culture and the individual's desire to watch other individuals play these games (Hamari et al., 2019).

This paradigm highlights the social influence that brand communities have in today's consumption habits. Individuals not only seek to be satisfied by the brand they



consume, they also seek the relationship with those same brands, as well as fulfilling relationships with likeminded individuals (Carlson et al. , 2008; Carroll & Ahuvia, 2006).

### **1.2.1- Research Objectives**

The research problem urges to understand the impact of managing virtual brand communities, within the eSports ecosystem.

The secondary research objective relies on proposing a conceptual to understand the role of virtual brand communities following these postulates:

Verify how brand communities, represented by the dimensions identification, participation and commitment have a positive impact on brand preference, brand engagement in self-concept and brand preference.

Evaluate the significance of the relationship between brand engagement in self-concept on brand identification and brand preference.

Determine the impact of brand preference, brand engagement in self-concept and brand identification on active participation, word of mouth, oppositional brand loyalty and the overall well-being of individuals.

### **1.2-Research Structure**

This research aims to portray the role that virtual brand communities have on brand preference, brand identification and brand engagement in self-concept, as well as consequents significant to the field of marketing, and the study of brand communities in general active participation, well-being, oppositional brand loyalty and word of mouth.

This dissertation is divided in six chapters:

In the first chapter, it is introduced the main theme and the purpose of study, where the research problem and objectives are mentioned, following of a summary for the whole study.

The second chapter is the literature review, which focuses on identifying the key literature in order to conceptualize the variables of study, as well as the hypothesized relationships that will be studied.

The third chapter will present the conceptual model for this study, which consists of the visual representation of the hypothesis and key variables within this study. In this chapter a summary of the hypotheses discussed in chapter two is also presented.

Chapter four encompasses the methodology adopted: the population and sample selection, how the data was collected and how the statistical analysis of the data.

In chapter five it will be presented the results, and the interpretation of these results. In the end of this chapter a comparison with previous studies is made, in order to confirm if previous literature is corroborated in this research.

Finally, in chapter six, the final considerations of this study will be presented, the contributions and limitations of this study as well as some guidelines for possible future studies.

## **2. Literature Review and study hypotheses:**

This chapter intends to clarify and present the literature analyzed on brand communities, how they are defined through processes of identification, commitment and participation. Furtherly it is explained in this chapter how these communities affect brand identification, brand engagement and brand preference, which manifest themselves in dynamics such as positive Word-of-Mouth, Oppositional Brand Loyalty, Active Participation in said communities and overall individual Well-Being.

In order to achieve these objectives proposed in this chapter, the literature review will be divided in 3 main chapters. The first one in which it is briefly explained the concept of eSports, and its relationship with virtual brand communities, the second one where the concept of communities is dissected and the transition between traditional communities and virtual brand communities. Finally, the last chapter is destined to explain all the other variables and the study hypotheses that the author has deemed important to contextualize and shed light to the importance of managing such communities in the eSports market.

### **2.1- A new media consumption paradigm and the appearance of eSports:**

Even though eSports is considered to be in its early stages, it already demonstrates significant potential in the field of Marketing (Seo, 2013). With the rise of the internet and the ITs, new entertainment distribution platforms such as Twitch.tv and YouTube see their influential power rise, and new entertainment activities surge such as streaming and online sharing (Lee & Schoenstedt, 2012). These platforms are direct competitors conventional forms of entertainment, and researchers are trying to how these platforms will shape the future of consumption influence (Burroughs & Rama, 2015; Hamari & Sjöblom, 2017).

In the recent years, activities such as spectating other individuals play competitive or casual video games, and competition of competitive tournaments and leagues, called eSports are rising in popularity (Hamari et al., 2019). Live streaming and mobile technologies helped closing the gap between consumers and brands/influencers. Whereas

in a traditional entertainment platform, the consumer has a passive role in the process, these new entertainment avenues reshape the role of the consumer, turning it into an active part of the process and even a co-creator of the system. Therefore, it becomes the internet and social media transfigures the consumers' role within a community, facilitating the interaction with their favorite brands and influencers. In this context individuals also appear as an active force of this new entertainment paradigm where they can also become content creators (Burroughs & Rama, 2015).

The importance of discussing these new entertainment avenues regarding this study, ties to the fact that in the eSports market, individuals mostly consume digital media with platforms such as YouTube, Twitch.tv or participate in discussion based websites such as Reddit (Hamari & Sjöblom, 2017; Hamari et al., 2019; Witkowski, 2012). The main difference between traditional and digital media, as previously mentioned, is the crescent active role consumers have regarding content creation. Individuals tend to watch streams and live competitions not only for the leisure aspect, but also for the didactic part of the broadcast, asking questions and analyzing the gameplay from the streamers' perspective in order to develop their own skills (Hamari & Sjöblom, 2017).

Aside from these new platforms and the consumer-centered aspect of this type of entertainment there is another fundamental element to elaborate on the growth of eSports consumption. It is tied to the fact that individuals are more likely to engage in leisure activities and the association of these leisure activities with self-development (Stebbins, 1982), in other words, activities such as mastering a high skill cap video-game such as Counter-Strike, are now being seen with a sense of self-realization, and an opportunity as a career path (Witkowski, 2012).

The study of eSports in the academic world is still relatively new (Wagner, 2006), and the discussion of whether or not this topic are worthy of this kind of analysis are usually locked for discussion by ethical questions, such as the lack of physical contact, or the escapism from reality, mostly due with the comparison with traditional sports or skepticism because since a recent phenomenon, and its community aspect is being discredited (Wagner, 2006).

According to Seo & Jung the marketer and consumer behavior perspectives of "entertainment software industry" such as eSports are still in need to be tackled, where

the importance of managing consumers and their participation with the brands within this ecosystem and its communities are intriguing to the fields of social studies in general, given its potential to be associated with studies regarding brand preference, loyalty and commitment (Seo & Jung, 2016).

Explaining the concept of eSports is somewhat of a challenge mostly due to the novelty of this industry, and the rapid shift towards the digital era we live on.(Jin, 2010). Another hindrance towards understanding this concept is the multitude of platforms (e.g. personal computers, consoles), and genres (e.g. real-time strategy games, sport-themed games)(Seo & Jung, 2016), associated with a plethora of levels that constitute this phenomenon, such as gaming, digital media, ambiguous target audience, sports and community aspects and new ways of interacting (Jin, 2010).

The next two chapters are destined to elucidate the history and the background behind eSports, to understand what eSports stands for, its similarities and differences to conventional sports, and what drives individuals into committing themselves into enjoying and participating in this phenomenon.

### **2.1.1 A brief story of eSports**

The history of eSports is marked by two key developments, the first one is the increasing consumer literacy and growing popularity of video games, and the second one with the evolution of the internet and digital media (Hartmann & Klimmt, 2006).

Lee and Schoenstedt classify the history of eSports in 2 different eras, the arcade era that dates to the 1980's and the 1990's, and the internet era in which we are inserted nowadays. In the first era, the idea of competing over video-games consisted mostly in gatherings in cyber-café's and arcades and the traction these events would gather was minimal, since these events were usual at the local level, and there was not a tool to propagate them like the online streams viewed by millions of spectators nowadays. The history of eSports is tied with the history of brand communities and its transition to virtual platforms (Lee & Schoenstedt, 2012).

The transition to the current era in eSports started in Korea, where in the 1990's a growth in the telecommunication infrastructures, filled with mostly digital television and online gaming. The vast broadband infrastructure in Korea combined with television stations to broadcast computer gaming events, paved the way to the modern era of eSports leagues, with "StarCraft" as the title with the most concurrent players and audience at the time.(Wagner, 2006).

Even though the gaming industry in general was growing, to the point of holding events like the World Cyber Games, there were clear differences in eastern and western cultures manifested in its genre preferences. While the East preferred MMORPG's (Massive Multiplayer Online Role-Playing Games), the West had preference on FPS's (First Person Shooters), or sport-themed games (Wagner, 2006).

Nowadays, the eSports industry is propagated worldwide. Schools are accepting eSports as part of their curriculum, and professional players can request work VISAs in order to compete in weekly eSports leagues, similarly to athletes in regular sports (D. Lee & Schoenstedt, 2012).

There are some motivators that drive individuals to watch sporting events in general. The first one is the release of emotions, the joy and the drama, felt by spectators when watching these types of competitions. There's also the feeling of companionship and community inherent to these kinds of events, through the sharing of opinions, or just being present in a larger scale spectacle such as the Olympics (Southern, 2017).

The phenomenon of eSports has only recently enjoyed worldwide international adoption, there is still resistance to whether classify eSports as sport. This conceptual debate is a lasting issue for not only reaching the definition of eSports, but to conceptualize the boundaries of what can be understood as a sporting activity, and the credibility of the craft (Hamari & Sjöblom, 2017). Since eSports is a recent phenomenon, population in general are not yet aware of its existence, and there are other groups of individuals specially the ones with little to no information on the subject, tend to scrutinize it, regarding eSports as a craft with no craftsmanship involved associated with the pejorative thought that it does not promote social interaction. This idea is generally associated to fans of "traditional sports", that tend to share the ideology that eSports cannot be called as a sport since player competence is not measured by their physical

pro prowess of finesse. Some authors refute this idea, defending that some physical attributes of a player are an important part of these modalities, for instance, their reflexes (Hamari & Sjöblom, 2017; Witkowski, 2012).

### **2.1.1 – The definition of eSports**

A formal, and widely accepted definition of eSports cannot yet be found. The literature on eSports is scarce and most papers usually focus on the phenomenon as a whole, and its future implications (e.g. Seo, 2013; Seo & Jung, 2016; Taylor & Witkowski, 2010) (Coates & Parshakov, 2016). Various authors give emphasis to different perspectives such as storytelling (Buchaman-Oliver & Seo, 2012), the competitive approach and its organization (Hamari & Sjöblom, 2017; Seo & Jung, 2016), player skill (Wagner, 2006), and interaction between digital/computer mediated-environments and humans (Witkowski, 2012). In order to understand the idea of eSports, it is important to accommodate the definition of traditional sports and then contextualize it to its theoretical definition.

Tiedemann defines traditional sports as a “cultural field of activity in which human beings voluntarily go into a relation to other people with the conscious intention to develop their abilities and accomplishments ... and to compare themselves with these other people according to rules put self or adopted without damaging them or themselves deliberately” (Tiedemann, 2004).

Wagner, supported by Tiedemann’s work, defined sports as “a cultural field of activity in which people voluntarily engage with other people with the conscious intention to develop and train abilities of cultural importance and to compare themselves with these other people in these abilities according to generally accepted rules and without deliberately harming anybody”.(Wagner, 2006).

Following the cultural importance and the competitive aspect of traditional sports, Wagner concluded that eSports can be formally defined as “an area of sport activities in which people develop and train mental or physical abilities in the use of information and communication technologies” (Wagner, 2006).

Witkowski pointed out some questions regarding Wagner's work, alleging that this definition has a lot of room left for interpretation, not solving the question of what sporting activities can be classified as an electronic sport, or a traditional sport, because some aspects of the latter can be mediated or assisted by computers (e.g. "eagle eye" in tennis, or video assisted referee in football), therefore Witkowski argues that the central aspect that distinguishes traditional and electronic sports should be the human to machine/tool relationship (Witkowski, 2012). Another problem with this definition pointed by Hamari and Sjöblom, is that the definition provided by Wagner refers to a large set of activities, it's generalist to the point that even some office-based software training could be included as a eSport. (Hamari & Sjöblom, 2017). There is a complex dynamic involving a mixture of physical activities and the electronics aspects that should be the focus in order to define eSports (Hamari & Sjöblom, 2017; Witkowski, 2012).

Hamari and Sjöblom, argue that the main difference between a traditional sport and an eSport is centered in the way that player or team activities determine the outcome of the sport.(Hamari & Sjöblom, 2017). In other words, outcomes in traditional sports happen in the "real world", with the exception of computized systems that assist these activities (e.g. VAR, or video assisted referee in soccer). In eSports the outcome-defining activities happen in a "virtual world", within digital/computer-mediated environments, reinforcing the argument made by Witkowski, about the human to machine interaction, adding the implication that eSports are defined by human beings act and decide in the "real world", where the outcome of their actions is mediated and governed by the rules of the eSport's software and technology. (Hamari & Sjöblom, 2017).

Hamari and Sjöblom then define eSports as "a form of sports where the primary aspects of the sport are facilitated by electronic systems; the input of players and teams as well as the output of the eSports system are mediated by human-computer interfaces."(Hamari & Sjöblom, 2017). In more practical terms, eSports also refer to video game competitions (amateur and professional), coordinated through leagues, ladders and tournaments where players commonly belong to teams or other organizations financed by various business institutions.(Hamari & Sjöblom, 2017).



## **2.2- Communities, Brand Communities, and its transition to Virtual Brand Communities:**

### **2.2.1- The concept of Community**

Community is the “core construct of social thought” and its often the basis of discussion for different contexts. The study of this thematic is an outgoing problematic for sociologists of the latest centuries, continued by contemporary contributors (Muniz & O’Guinn, 2001).

Scholars have grappled empirically and conceptually with communities, examining the various dimensions that shape them (McAlexander et al., 2002). From comparing genuine, emotional, and rural bonds that make a community contrasting the mechanical, emotionless concept of society (Tönnies, 1887), the focus on common interests, and values of individuals (Muniz & O’Guinn, 2001; Muñoz & Schau, 2007; Rothaermel & Sugiyama S, 2001), common intentions and positive relationships between members of the community (R. Bagozzi & Dholakia, 2002), the degree of sociability between individuals that defines communities, rather than a physical location (Gusfield, 1978; Tönnies, 1887; Wellman, 2005).

In order to understand the role of brand communities, it is important to understand the notion of communities, since they have a mediating role in social interaction, and individuals decisions such as purchase preference (Soares, 2018).

Bauman describes community as a place of comfort, coziness and warmth, where all individuals can trust and feel safe most of the time, a place where we can discuss all topics in a friendly manner, and everyone has the right and duty to help each other without the need to repay a favor. In short, the author states that community stands for the utopic world that is not available to us (Bauman, 2001).

A community is a group of individuals, who have intrinsic motivations to help each other for a common interest (Muniz & O’Guinn, 2001) . These authors pointed out the core components that characterize a community: consciousness of kind, which is the feeling that connects the individuals among the community; rituals and traditions carried out by individuals, manifested in behaviors such as the way of dressing; The sense of

responsibility, carried on by elements of the community, as a result of moral commitment (Muniz & O’Guinn, 2001). There integration and retention of members that guarantees the community longevity and it’s a constant challenge for companies on how to tackle these issues (Casaló et al., 2007).

For Etzioni, there are two main attributes to which a social group can be defined as a community. The first one is focused on the interactions between individuals that intertwine in a web that aggregates an agglomerate of individuals, in which their actions and relationships “crisscross and reinforce one another”. The second attribute mentioned by this author, refers to the degree of comprehension and commitment from individuals in order to maintain and preserve certain values, convictions and ideologies, or in other words, the building of a “culture” (Etzioni & Etzioni, 1999).

However, the notion of community is continuing to develop over time. Formerly this term was associated with family, geographical proximity, and overall homogeneity between individuals. Nowadays, with the phenomenon of globalization, communities are becoming more and more heterogenic, where physical proximity is not a criteria to form a community, and individuals raised in different cultures interact within common interests and objectives (Gusfield, 1978; Tönnies, 1887; Wellman, 2005).

In order to understand this shift in communities are suffering, Ferdinand Tönnies created a dichotomy in order to describe two types of social organization, “*gemeinschaft*” (community) and “*gesellschaft*” (association). In the first concept he describes the “traditional” communities where individuals focus on personal interactions, with similar values and a homogeneous culture, situated in a near geographic space, like the interactions in a neighborhood, or a small village. The latter describes individuals that belong in the community, utilize their interactions to meet a common goal, marked by impersonal interactions, geographical disparity and a heterogeneous set of elements present in the society. This type of impersonal communities (associations) are compared by Ferdinand Tönnies to the urban industrial societies of the present time, reinforced with digital technologies replacing personal interactions (Tönnies, 1887).

Impersonal communities are also explored by Fernback and Thompson, following the vision of virtual communities by Howard Rheingold which are connected by social relationships formed in the cyberspace, where individuals gather within a common

interest rather than a geographical aggregate or affective bonds (Fernback & Thompson, 1995; Rheingold, 1993). Although virtual contacts may eventually generate personal interaction, in most cases virtual communities serve a purpose of support, rather than substitute other forms of social exchange (Andersen, 2005). Virtual communities will be discussed after explaining the concept of brand communities.

### **2.2.2- Brand Communities**

According to Boorstin, consumers with similar values, norms and habits of consumption, tend to associate themselves in groups denominated as “communities of consumption (Boorstin, 1973). These brand affiliations enable consumers to share opinions, ideas and preferences referring to brands that are impactful in their lives in which constitutes important brand relationship experiences (Bagozzi, et al., 2012).

Muniz and O’Guinn, follow Anderson’s (1983) view of “imagined” communities, suggesting that communities larger than small villages are held by imagined elements, common beliefs and sense of community (Anderson, 1983; Muniz & O’Guinn, 2001), and concluded that these “imagined” communities represent a form of human interaction within a consumption context.

These authors define brand communities as “specialized, non-geographically bound community, based on a structured set of social relationships among admirers of a brand”. These communities are referred as specialized since the brand is the mediator factor that centers individual’s interactions, these communities are vital to the brands legacy and longevity (Muniz & O’Guinn, 2001). For these authors, brand communities share the three main elements of traditional communities portrayed before, namely: Shared consciousness, rituals and traditions.

The members of these communities have an intrinsic motivation to cooperate and understand each other and such phenomenon can contribute to increasing the longevity of the brand and the community (Algesheimer et al., 2005; Casaló et al., 2007; McAlexander et al., 2002). Some examples of successful brand communities given by (R. Bagozzi & Dholakia, 2002) are the Harley-Davidson Motorcycles’ Harley Owners

Group, Apple, Volkswagen drivers (Brown, et al, 2003) and Sun Microsystems' Java center community (Cothrel & Williams, 2000).

This approach on brand communities is continued by McAlexander, Schouten and Koenig, extending that these communities are customer-centric, and that the existence and meaningfulness is centered on the customer's overall experience, rather than the brand in which the community. Brand communities display several dimensions, including geographic concentration, social context and temporality (McAlexander et al., 2002).

The view of community proposed by Muniz and O'Guinn, is complemented by (McAlexander et al., 2002), alleging that indeed consumers feel a bond towards the brand, but more importantly they feel an even stronger connection towards one another.

Bagozzi and Dholakia, shed some criticism to the studies of (Muniz & O'Guinn, 2001), claiming that their analysis lack the detailed understanding of the social and physiological aspects of communities and the absence of a clear distinction between large communities and "small friendship groups and other types of influences on consumers such as those from subcultures"(Bagozzi & Dholakia, 2002).

Communities exist in a continuous process of morphology. The ICT's (information and communication technologies), have facilitated the effectiveness and reach of information, reducing barriers and reconfigured the possibilities of social interaction among the participants of communities. This juncture creates the possibility for the appearance of virtual communities(Andersen, 2005). Therefore, there a significant relevance to study the specific nuances of virtual brand communities, given the context of technology transfiguring the way in which we communicate and organize in communities. In the next chapter we will explain the idea of virtual brand communities, alluring to the previous studies on "traditional" brand communities.

### **2.2.3-Virtual Brand Communities**

Online brand communities tend to work on different patterns to real world ones (Sicilia & Palazon, 2008). The various forms of social media where these communities are manifested in are classified on two criteria: social presentation/disclosure and social

presence. High social presentation is manifested in social networks such as Instagram contrasting with communities with low self-presentation such as online forums and YouTube profiles. Examples of high social presence are virtual game communities contrasting with the low social presence of collaborative projects such as Wikipedia (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010).

The concept of virtual communities is firstly approached by Howard Rheingold, as a social group where people utilize the internet as a communication channel (Rheingold, 1993). Virtual communities as a concept appeared immediately as a consequence of the internet, however its importance to the field of marketing is only being seriously studied more recently, leaving room for more academic contributions (Flavián & Guinalú, 2005).

A virtual community is a specific, and disperse community, based on an dynamic set of relationships between groups of varying sizes, in which they share common interests, and beliefs, and achieve shared goals (Dholakia et al., 2004). They are social spaces mediated in the digital environment that allow groups to form and sustain themselves through continuous communication processes (Bagozzi & Dholakia, 2002). A significant number of virtual communities center themselves around consumption activities (Kim & Jin, 2006; Kozinets, 1999) and they have the influence to promote the adoption, stimulation and use of products and services (Sicilia & Palazón, 2008).

Virtual brand communities can also be defined as a “group of individuals with common interests in a brand who communicate each other electronically in a platform provided by the company which supports the brand”(Sicilia & Palazón, 2008). The interaction that occurs within the community can be stimulated either by the company itself or the consumers themselves, and potentialize the exchange of ideas and opinions(Sicilia & Palazón, 2008). Constance Porter defines virtual brand communities as an aggregate of individuals or business partners, sharing a common interest, whose relationship is less supported and/or mediated by technology on a set of platforms and norms. Virtual brand communities can come from distinct realities, assuming that a community built outside the internet, may be complemented by virtual communities, and vice-versa (Porter, 2004).

Virtual brand communities are delineated on three dimensions, according to Wirtz et al.: Brand orientation; Internet-use; Funding and Governance. Brand orientation can be the brand itself, the brand-related consumption experiences, a shared interest, or both. Internet-usage measures the degree in which the consumer is familiar and utilizes computer mediated platforms. Funding and Governance stands for the funds that allow the community to work, either by the brand, by consumer enthusiasts, or third parties(Wirtz et al., 2013).

Consumers are turning to digital forms of communication in order to get the information and the stimuli to base their decisions and guide their thoughts, and are using several online formats to share ideas about a brand, or reach to other consumers about their experiences and emotions towards a certain product (Kozinets, 1999).

Thus, virtual communities would be based on proximity intellectual and emotional rather than mere physical proximity. Community participants recognize themselves as part of something meaningful and feel the responsibility to maintain their relationships. In this way, it can be inferred that this perception of community identity, is often, greater in these groups than in situations of geographically based communities, such as a neighborhood or condominium. Based on physical proximity, many of these communities often lack any emotional approach (Primo, 1997). In any case, one should not conclude that because online aggregates lack attributes of offline communities such as the lack of personal interaction, virtual communities are not "real", that is, meet the prerequisites that are needed to form full edged communities (Etzioni & Etzioni, 1999).

This context dictated by technological evolution, facilitates the effectiveness and range of information, reducing barriers and increasing new possibilities of interaction between the various participants of similar opinions and tastes, which makes possible the conditions of creation of development of a new type of communities branded, virtual ones (Andersen, 2005). Branded virtual communities leverage the interaction of brands with consumers, and between consumers (Andersen, 2005).

The Internet and virtual communities are very attractive from the company's point of view, in which brands come the potential to discover sub-communities, gain feedback from consumers, increase affective relationships with their consumers, and improving the

distribution channels of a company. Therefore its undeniable its influence on marketing strategy (Flavián & Guinalú, 2005; Yao & Liu, 2003).

## **2.2.4-Brand Community Dimensions**

Brand communities are comprised by a variety of dimensions (McAlexander et al., 2002), previous studies attempt to grasp the conceptually and empirically the various dimensions that shape brand communities (Arnould & Price, 1993; Celsi et al., 1993; Fischer et al., 1996; Granitz & Ward, 1996; Holt, 1995; McAlexander et al., 2002; Moore, et al., 1996; Muniz & O’Guinn, 1996, 2001; Schouten & McAlexander, 1995, Wirtz et al., 2013).

In this study, we intend to conceptualize brand community as an aggregate of three core dimensions: commitment (Hur et al., 2011), identification (McAlexander et al., 2002; Woisetschlager et al., 2008) and participation (Woisetschlager et al., 2008).

### **2.2.4.1- Participation in the Community**

The human being, as a social species, inherently searches for interpersonal relationships, in the sense of personal and collective development that derives from the community, which is the core construct of social thought (Muniz & O’Guinn, 2001). The positive influences individuals experience, lead them to participate, interact and cooperate with other members of the community (Algesheimer et al., 2005).

According to (Shao et al., 2000), the individual participation in a brand community which is tied by the individuals’ desire to seek and maintain close interpersonal relationships, the feelings that these situations elicit may influence participation.

It is important to create a distinction between the traditional customers’ social participation present in offline communities with its online counterpart. The latter has seen a growing in importance in the field of marketing (Chae & Ko, 2016). Participation in activities within a virtual community is its main factor of sustainability and favoring

group cohesion. Participation also has a direct positive correlation with involvement and perceived trust towards a brand, (Casaló et al., 2007).

Bagozzi, Dholakia and Pearo, on studying the perspective which builds upon the individual-level and group-level variables work to ultimately influence the participation. These authors study the perspective where some individual-level variables are antecedents of group-level ones, and so using the uses and gratifications paradigm proposed five values that members can derive from participation in online communities, including purposive benefits, self-discovery, maintaining interpersonal interconnectivity, social enhancement and entertainment benefits(Dholakia et al., 2004). Sicilia and Palazón also applied the uses and gratification method to investigate consumer participation in the Coca-Cola online community in Spain and concluded that functional, social and entertainment benefits provided by the community can also induce user participation in the community (Sicilia & Palazón, 2008).

Woisetschläger, Hartleb, and Blut, identified that identification with the brand community, and satisfaction with the brand community have a great impact towards the individual's participation regarding the community, and that these variables are powerful drivers for ensuring brand community participation(Algesheimer et al., 2005; Woisetschläger et al., 2008). Woisetschläger et al., also explain the importance of studying the effects of consumer participation, since these could be used to establish a successful brand community. These authors verified that consumer participation has a lot of brand and community performance influence such as reinforcing positive word of mouth, improve of brand image and community loyalty (Woisetschläger et al., 2008).

Woisetschläger et al. also refer that community member participation has a direct impact in loyalty to the community, to the word of mouth and the overall community's image. The study of the consequences of consumer participation is equally important to the field of marketing, due to three main reasons. In the first place these consequences are outcomes of community member engagement (Algesheimer et al., 2005; Muñiz & Schau, 2007), secondly these are also important in order to understand how to establish a brand community and finally, community member participation is considered vital to the longevity success of the community. Another outcome equally important of consumer



participation within a community is the influence it has on brand image. (Woisetschlager et al., 2008)

Participation in a community, a factor with potential effect on user's behavior, refers to the interactivity of the community. Burnett divides the behavior of members through the degree of their interactivity, in two categories: the noninteractive ones, individuals who gain benefits from social interaction without contributing back, not participating in the discussion and interactive ones, enthusiasts that are active and generate content to the community (Burnett, 2000).

#### **2.2.4.2- Identification with the Community**

Algesheimer, Dholakia and Herrmann describe identification with a community, with the degree in which a person construes himself or herself as to be a member with the brand community (Algesheimer et al., 2005).

Dutton et al. define identification as the “degree to which a member defines him/herself by the same attributes that he or she believes define the organization” (Dutton et al., 1994, p.239). The concept of social identity involves both cognitive and affective components (Bergami & Bagozzi, 2000). While referring to the cognitive component, identification with the brand community is related to the process of self-categorization, in which the consumer traces the similarities between him or herself, and the other members of the community, reflected in the question: “I see myself as a part of this community”, emphasizing the similarities and dissimilarities with nonmembers of the community.(Algesheimer et al., 2005). According to (Algesheimer et al., 2005), this dimension would capture the shared or belonging consciousness, that (Muniz & O’Guinn, 2001) necessary for the existence of a community. In a virtual community the awareness of belonging or participation occurs when the individual believes that their values meet those of the other members of the group, making the common intentions of continuing to participate in the community larger (R. Bagozzi & Dholakia, 2002).

Regarding the affective component, the identification with a community implies a sense of emotional involvement with the group (Casaló et al., 2007). This identification promotes the well-being of the consumer (Algesheimer et al., 2005), positive word of

mouth (Carlson et al., 2008) and this means that it agrees with the norms, traditions, rituals and objectives established as the fundamental characteristics of a communities described by (Muniz & O'Guinn, 2001). The concept of identification with the group implies the relation of group individuals who support each other mutually and that their goals go beyond the utilities of a mere interaction. The objectives of the individuals benefit the whole community rather than the individual (Etzioni, 1996; McAlexander et al., 2002).

Studies of consumers' identification with a community highlight its significance as a basic principle that permits the formation of committed and meaningful relationships with other members of the community, as well as the brand in which the community is formed around (Bhattacharya & Sen, 2003; T. J. Brown et al., 2005; Carlson et al., 2008; Del Rio et al., 2001; Kim et al., 2001; Tuškej et al., 2013). Bagozzi and Dholakia suggested that social identity and group behavior are key explanatory variables of brand behavior (Bagozzi & Dholakia, 2006), Carlson et al. pointed out the importance of identification in the development of a psychological sense of brand community (Carlson et al., 2008), Algesheimer et al. showed that brand community identification has a positive impact on community engagement (Algesheimer et al., 2005), direct motivator for community trust and engagement, and forming oppositional brand loyalty (Hsu et al., 2012), and Woisetschläger et al. concluded that identification has a strong impact on participation in a community, and direct association with satisfaction (Woisetschläger et al., 2008).

In a study regarding the virtual communities Microsoft (XBOX Brazil), the official XBOX community, which is managed by the brand, and Portal Xbox, a community managed by enthusiast of the brand, Almeida et al. reached out interest conclusions regarding consumer identification with the community. The first one being, consumer managed communities are more likely to generate identification with the community itself, rather than the brand, since the members are more aware of the persuasion intentions in official communities. Secondly, enthusiast managed communities are more likely to generate more identification due to the commitment perceived by them, that will convert to the community members. Third, social influence is a stronger factor in the Portal Xbox community, which leads to more consumer identification. This factor has to do with the personalities that impact the community, rather than a rather "depersonalized" influence on the brand managed community. The

consumer managed community also demonstrated higher levels of participation, this is justified by the more genuine connection individuals feel with the community managers. In conclusion, the results of this study shed light to an interesting paradox about brand communities, related to the fact that some of the most favorable effects for the brand occur within the community that is not directly controlled and administered by the brand itself (Almeida et al., 2012). Communities managed by consumers, with a significant dimension and well-managed, as well as being shaped by the intrinsic motivations of consumers and their high degree of brand attachment, (Muniz & O'Guinn, 2001) are hard to replicate by the brand itself (Almeida et al., 2012).

Bagozzi et al. claimed that there is a sense of social identity beyond that found in identification with membership in a group or in a role-relationship. That is the identification with an idea, object, or person, the third previously mentioned, important to the process of creating social relational identities (Bagozzi et al., 2012).

Sluss and Ashforth, proposed a complementary perspective on social identity of individuals in communities that are based on role-relationships. These authors defined relational identification as “the extent to which one defines oneself in terms of a given role-relationship” (Sluss & Ashforth, 2007).

There are two key aspects of relational entities for the participant in a role-relationship. The first one is the role-based identity present in the goals, values norms, beliefs, and interactions, whereas the second is the person-based identity, which stands for the personal qualities of the role occupant (Sluss & Ashforth, 2007).

Identification with an idea, object or person can also be used by a person to build or maintain social identities or interpersonal relationships and achieve goals with like-minded members. Individuals tend to incorporate the identities of others and organizations into their own, morphing their own, reinforcing the bonds and ideas within the community. This identification process is important to the managerial standpoint, to understand and develop these identification processes to increase consumer, brand and community identification in order to reach a diverse number organizational benefits, such as brand equity (Bagozzi et al., 2012).

### **2.24.3- Brand Community Commitment**

Commitment allures to the state of nurturing and developing stable relationships with individuals, making short-term compromises in order to maintain their relationship's longevity and stability (Anderson & Weitz, 1992). Commitment can also be defined as customers' faith that the functional and affective perks from maintaining these relationships are greater than the benefits that would result from ending the relationship (Geyskens et al., 1996).

When approaching the context of consumer-brand relationship, community commitment refers to the individuals' attitude towards the community. Therefore, community commitment can be used as a predictor variable of consumers' behaviors, such as participating in the community activities, offering advice to other members and generating content to the community (Hur et al., 2011).

Community commitment should be approached as an attitudinal factor that is has emphasis when members acknowledge the value of maintaining relationships between the community and themselves, due to its role of with mediating actual behaviors within the community (Hur et al., 2011). This mediating role of community commitment has shown positive effects in brand performance metrics, such as brand loyalty (Füller et al., 2007; Jang et al., 2007).

The positive fondness that is built by brand community activities will enhance committed responses, namely consciousness of kind (Muniz & O'Guinn, 2001) and also generates a positive integration of individuals in the brand community (McAlexander et al., 2002).

Wiener considers commitment to as a process of connecting a set of variables and the resulting behavioral outcomes, then this author concludes that commitment is therefore a motivational factor (Wiener, 1982). Staw classifies the variable commitment as attitudinal or behavioral. The first one revolves around emotional attachment to a community and often leads to strong community association: the second results in actual behaviors transcendent of mere emotional attachment (Staw, 1980).

Hur et al., in a study regarding the implications of managing brand community commitment on brand loyalty, denoted three important implications: The first one,

regarding previous studies on the topic, that highlighted the effect of community commitment on attitudinal loyalty and repurchase intentions (Algesheimer et al., 2005; Jang et al., 2007); the second implication is the role that community commitment has in enhancement different types of consumer loyalty, which in turn will be important to guide different ways of managing brand communities, and marketing strategies for each loyalty behavior (Hur et al., 2011); the third implication of this study, refers to the mediating role that brand community commitment plays in attitudes from the individuals towards the brand community, such as trust and brand loyalty (Hur et al., 2011; Jang et al., 2007).

Commitment is an important variable to considerate of relationship marketing management (Doney & Cannon, 1997; Macintosh & Lockshin, 1997). Gundlach et al., describe commitment as a critical tool in relational marketing, since it has the influence to turn “deals” into “relationships”, increasing brand loyalty, the longevity of the relationship and brand credibility (Gundlach et al., 1995). If a customer shows commitment towards a brand, it is more likely that this individual will cooperate actively and gain more resistance towards being enticed by competitors, increasing the profitability of the company. Long and stable relationships are the core of the company’s competitiveness, it influences the overall profit of the company, helps receiving feedback and improving the overall product/service and generates positive word of mouth and the “premium price effect” (Reichheld, 1996).

Finally, Hur et al., point out three managerial implications that result from brand community commitment: The first one being, that company’s brand community marketing activities have the potential to influence the strength of the relationships among the community participants, the overall community and the brand itself (Gundlach et al., 1995; Hur et al., 2011; Reichheld, 1996); secondly, the provision of a space in which customers can participate would have a direct effect towards enhancing customer’s loyalty towards a brand (Almeida et al., 2012; Hur et al., 2011). Finally, their study raised the question as to how a company can increase trust and affect in the mind of the brand community members.

### **2.3- Brand Preference**

In the field of marketing, preference indicates desirability or choice in an array of alternatives (Oliver & Swan, 1989). Preference can be described also as a behavioral disposition that manifests itself in the way an individual acts and manifests its intentions, rather than what its thoughts (Zajonc & Markus, 1982). Tomer differentiates consumer types of preferences into four main categories: the actual preference, which the customer enjoys and develops the capacity to utilize certain goods. Meta-preferences reflected in the normative judgments of the higher-order self. True preferences which are a unique set of best representatives of what the individual truly really wants (neglecting the biases given by other external factors). Unrestrained preferences are the ones that meet the consumer's lower of physical needs (Tomer, 1996).

The definition of brand preference is addressed by Hellier, Geursen, Carr and Rickard, where these authors describe this phenomenon as "the extent to which the customer favors the designated service provided by his or her present company, in comparison to the designated service provided by other companies in his or her consideration set" (Hellier et al., 2003). Brand preference is the degree "of brand loyalty in which a consumer will choose a particular brand in presence of competing brands but will accept substitutes if that brand is not available" (Online Business Dictionary) and is manifested in different ways, depending on the conditions and time, the consumer bias and the degree of the bias (Ebrahim, 2013).

The preference for convenience, accessibility, chance encounters, and repertoire buying behavior represent some of the causes that may lead to consecutive purchase patterns (de Chernatony et al., 2004).

Brand preference refers to the bias that a consumer has towards a particular brand (Chang & Liu, 2009). Hsee, Yang, Gu and Chen differentiate between two kinds of brand preference. The first being the likings preferences that reflect the hedonic responses towards a brand and the revealed preferences, or the choice reflecting the behavioral responses towards the brand itself (Hsee, et al. 2008). These two articles share the same vision of brand preference, exposing consumer's predisposition towards the brand, which

is reflected by affected, cognitive and behavioral responses(Chang & Liu, 2009; Hsee et al., 2008).

Consumers usually are ready to acquire a specific brand, even if its physical features are hard to differentiate with its direct competitors. Research indicates that the vast majority of consumers will usually buy one specific brand of beer, cola, or a magazine, even though the price may change significantly in the course of time, and even if the consumers cannot tell their preferred brand from blind “taste tests”, such as the example of Pepsi blind tasting its product with Coca-Cola (Dekimpe et al., 1997). This phenomena occurs because individuals seek to ease their purchasing process, developing brand preferences so that they do not have to analyze all available products constantly, hence facilitating the purchasing process (Dekimpe et al., 1997).

These impressions consumers have with brands, make them distinctive, and it goes beyond the perceived quality that the brand itself promises, they relate to the intangible properties manifested in the brand equity (Aaker, 1997).

Regularly, brand preference is built, when the brand itself has been in the market for a long period of time. Studies indicate that consumers could have a preference for a good sold by a company, simply justified by the company’s name and its symbolism, constructed by its long period competing in the market (Dinlersoz & Pereira, 2007).

There is an undeniable importance in building a strong brand equity, since it has been proven to have a strong influence on brand preference (Berry, 2000; Cobb-Walgren et al., 1995; Myers, 2003), and consequently a direct influence on consumers’ purchase intention (Hellier et al., 2003). Purchase intention is considered to be the consumer’s plan or intention to acquire a specific brand (Chang & Liu, 2009), it is directly influenced by brand equity and brand preference, revealing the importance that managers should give regarding the foundation of a strong brand equity(Chang & Liu, 2009).

### **2.3.1- Identification and Brand preference**

As previously mention, Tuškej et al. shed light on how the identification process between the consumers’ predisposition of its “self” has a direct impact on brand performance (Tuškej et al., 2013), such as affecting its purchase decisions (Ahearne et

al., 2005) and establishing brand preference (Tildesley & Coote, 2009; Tuškej et al., 2013).

Consumption is the primary currency of the customer-brand relationships, this identification-based commitment is likely expressed via the establishment of long and lasting relationships, conveyed through, for example, the open manifestation of brand preference. This type of identity based relationship, constituted in a “Company identity” is studied by (Bhattacharya & Sen, 2003).

Carlson et al. add an extra layer to this type of relationship, demonstrating that the constituents of the individuals’ self, create avenues for identification with a brand, and identification with a community. These two types of identification will then convert themselves into a Psychological Sense of Brand Community, and give rise to brand commitment, and in a later stage brand preference (Carlson et al., 2008).

### **2.3.2- Commitment and Brand preference**

Previous studies have shown the importance of commitment in the field of relationship marketing (Gundlach et al., 1995; Morgan & Hunt, 1994). According to Carlson et al., the greater the Psychological Sense of Brand community, the greater the level of commitment by the individuals towards the focal brand in which said community revolves around. In their study these authors establish, as previously mentioned, the positive interaction with high levels of commitment, and brand preference (Carlson et al., 2008).

Hur et al. also studied the effects of brand community commitment and concluded that individuals with a high degree of commitment towards the community will lead to the increase of consumers’ intentions in maintaining long and lasting relationships with a brand, manifested in brand preference, brand bias and consequently repurchase intentions (Hur et al., 2011). To strengthen this claim, Algesheimer et al. also identify a clear connection between community commitment, manifested in community engagement, pressure, membership continuance intentions (with the community) and participative behaviors, with the increase with brand preference (Algesheimer et al., 2005).



Finally, Jang et al., also shed light on the positive relationship that community commitment, preceded by influence individuals have, stimuli for interaction, the type of relationships moderated between the brand community characteristics, and the characteristics of the platform in which the community stands upon will translate in stronger brand preference to the brand in which the community revolves around (Jang et al., 2007).

The time and effort invested into participating in a community represents a sunk cost for the consumer, it will morph itself into a strong sense of consumer commitment. Individuals will eventually create a resistance to change, and the incentives to maintain the relationship with the brand increase, generating brand preference (Iwasaki & Havitz, 1998).

### **2.3.3- Participation and Brand preference**

The interpersonal interactions that a consumer experiences in a virtual community may influence its members' attitudes, purchase intentions, and brand preference (Bickart & Schindler, 2001).

Active participation in virtual communities may favor higher levels of consumer investment towards the brand that the community revolves around (Koh & Kim, 2004), since a key aspect of membership and participation in these communities is the ongoing purchase and usage of the brand products, where individuals share their personal experiences and trade information, the more the individuals are engaged within the community, the stronger will be their preference towards that brand (Algesheimer et al., 2005; Andersen, 2005; Casaló et al., 2007).

### **2.3.4- Community Dimensions and Brand preference:**

Following the literature previously mentioned, we concluded that the Brand Community Dimensions defined for this study have a positive influence on Brand Preference, therefore we conclude the following hypothesis:

## **H1a: Brand Community has a positive influence on Brand Preference**

### **2.4- Brand Engagement in self-concept**

While engagement as a concept gathered a considerable amount of attention across the various academic disciplines, brand engagement is a fairly recent concept in marketing literature expanding the domain of relationship marketing (Hollebeek, 2011; Vivek et al., 2011). This concept has been studied in this field as a promising variable that may provide brand with an enhanced predictive power of customer loyalty outcomes, while comparing to the traditionally used marketing constructs (Bowden, 2009; Heath, 2007) where it is typically applied as “customer engagement” (Bowden, 2009; Patterson, et al., 2006), in which it reflects the consumers’ individual context-specific engagement with these particular objects, such as brands (Spratt et al., 2009), organizations and products (Patterson et al., 2006).

Brand engagement is composed of experiential and social dimensions (Gambetti, et al., 2012) and it is defined as “the level of an individual customer’s motivational, brand-related and context-dependent state of mind characterized by specific levels of cognitive, emotional and behavioral activity in direct brand interactions” (Hollebeek, 2011). The social dimension of brand engagement encompasses consumers’ attention, interaction, participation, co-creation, and sharing of brand related content in social networks (Gambetti et al., 2012). Some authors share the perspective that consumers have a propensity to include brands within their self-concept (Spratt et al., 2009; Wallace et al., 2014).

At the same time that more studies appear on brand engagement on social networks, more challenges appear over time, due to the relational structure and volatility of social media, as well as the impersonal aspect and the influences online platforms have on consumers, dissipating the brand message in the “haze” of millions of interactions carried out by individuals. In other words, social media can be a blessing towards brand engagement, but at the same time can create some gaps between groups of consumers and brands, increasing the importance on how brands should manage these situations (Kozinets et al., 2010).

Hoffman and Fodor elaborate on different avenues to develop brand engagement on social networks, as well the metrics that should be used to assess a brand's social media performance. These authors argue that an appropriate metric for brand engagement on social media network is the number of "likes" a brand can achieve when shared by individuals (Hoffman & Fodor, 2010). This study has been carried out by Wallace, Buil and de Chernatony, following the premise that "liking" is an expression of brand engagement, and that consumers tend to engage with brands that support the self-concept (Wallace et al., 2014). Consumers who engage with inner self-expressive brands show evidences of brand love, are more likely to contribute with positive word of mouth and will be more prone to accept brand wrongdoing (Wallace et al., 2014).

Brand engagement in self-concept should be an answer to a variety of brand related research questions (Spratt et al., 2009). These authors studied the effects of different measures of brand engagement in self-concept and concluded that higher levels brand engagement in self-concept not only associate themselves with their favorite brands, but will also distance themselves, on a psychological level, from the other brands (Spratt et al., 2009). Loyal consumers may demonstrate a positive attitude towards a brand, however only individuals with high levels of brand engagement in self-concept will fully appreciate and purchase the brand's products with evident brand identification (Spratt et al., 2009).

A satisfactory relationship with a brand may lead the consumer to interact with others with similar interests, values, tastes, similar thoughts and the same enthusiasm to form a relationship with the brand (Algesheimer et al., 2005).

Muñiz and O'Guinn in their study about brand communities, using ethnographic data, were able to understand and measure the level of relationship that the consumer has with a specific brand, indicating which brands are preferred by the consumers that are inserted in brand communities (Muniz & O'Guinn, 2001). Brand engagement is considered to have a positive impact on brand communities when presented as its antecedent (McAlexander et al., 2002; Muniz & O'Guinn, 2001).

Gambetti, Graffigna and Biraghi, point out to the current inadequacy of existing business models to sustain consumer notoriety capable of affecting brand equity and point out some managerial implications in order to engage consumers with the respective

brands. To achieve this objective, brands should orient their strategy based on three key elements: value-based affinity; brand embeddedness in consumers' daily lives and the leverage of consumer's protagonism(Gambetti et al., 2012).

#### **2.4.1- Identification and BESC (Brand engagement in self-concept)**

Identification has a strong influence in creating and developing long and lasting relationships between consumer and the brand, through the increase of consumers' commitment (Casaló et al., 2007; Tuškej et al., 2013). The constituents of self-identity in conjunction with channels that enable self-expression, such as an online virtual brand community, induce consumer-company identification which, consequently, will lead to scenarios of consumer-brand engagement (e.g. consumer recruitment by the company) (Bhattacharya & Sen, 2003). Carlson et al. also concluded the positive impact that identification with a group has, towards building avenues for consumer-brand engagement (Carlson et al., 2008). Woisetschlager et al. also came to the conclusion that community identification has a positive influence on interaction and engagement with the brand and the community around the brand (Woisetschlager et al., 2008).

#### **2.4.2- Commitment and BESC (Brand engagement in self-concept)**

A virtual brand community can influence members' perceptions, behavior and even brand loyalty. Virtual brand communities enable the community members to intensify the connection individuals have in common via their interactions, generating competitive advantage for the company. Based on past empirical experiences, consumers often have valuable product knowledge and may contribute to the development of core business ideas, where industrial marketers may listen to this feedback and adjust how they operate. In other words, the community member's' projection of self within the community, in conjunction with their interactions with the community, will generate brand engagement, in line with the values, beliefs and knowledge of these members with the brand itself (Andersen, 2005).

Individuals who tend to feel strong brand affinity often utilize brands as a projection of their own self. This type of individuals usually tends to socialize with others who share the same interest, ideas and affection for the same brand. Virtual brand communities facilitate these interactions, bringing closer not only the individuals that join the community, but also the brand in which these communities revolve around, enhancing brand engagement as a projection of the “self”, (Millán & Díaz, 2014), developing a commitment- trust relationship (Morgan & Hunt, 1994).

#### **2.4.3- Participation and BESC (Brand engagement in self-concept)**

Jonna and Menzel highlight the importance of the effects of participation in online platforms towards brand performance and loyalty. These communities have the power to bridge the gap for members’ engagement and consumer-brand interaction. Participation is a stepping stone for brand engagement, the more feedback an online discussion is generating, the more likely it is for brands to be involved in (Jonna & Menzel, 2001).

For participants of network-based online communities, purposive value was found to be a key driver for participation. From the managerial standpoint, understanding how to deliver value desired by community participants is important to generate discussion, therefore, obtaining feedback and responding appropriately to how the community’s reaction (Dholakia et al., 2004). Participation and integration in a community is a catalyst for developing identification, which in turn will have a positive effect on brand engagement (McAlexander et al., 2002; Millán & Díaz, 2014; Woisetschlager et al., 2008). Active participation in a community, through four components such as functional benefits, social-psychological benefits, hedonic and monetary benefits, will have a positive impact in generating brand trust and brand commitment, resulting in positive lasting consumer-brand relationships (Kang et al., 2014).

#### **2.4.4- Community Dimensions and BESC:**

Following the literature previously mentioned, we concluded that the Brand Community Dimensions defined for this study have a positive influence on BESC, therefore we conclude the following hypothesis:

## **H1b: Brand Community has a positive influence on BESC**

### **2.4.5- BESC and Brand Preference**

In the previously mentioned study by Sprott et al. on Brand Engagement in Self-Concept, these authors concluded in their “Study 4” that BESC has a direct influence on product and brand preferences, where individuals subjected to the study shown that high-BESC consumers take a longer-term perspective regarding to their brand preferences. The degree of BESC on consumers dictate how they behave, and also how they respond to their least favorite ones (Sprott et al., 2009).

Following this study proposition, we decided to include this hypothesis:

**H3e: BESC has a positive influence on Brand Preference.**

### **2.4.6- BESC Brand Identification**

Sprott et al., in their “Study 1” studied the relationship between Brand Engagement in Self-Concept and Brand identification, arriving to the conclusion that high-BESC consumers not only associate themselves more with their favorite brands, but will at the same time psychologically distance themselves from brand that are not part of their self-construct(Sprott et al., 2009). In “Study 4” these authors also indicate that even though loyal consumers may have positive attitudes towards a brand, only high-BESC consumers will fully appreciate the brand’s products with evident brand identification. This study also indicates the effects of symbolism such as brand logos, the message these carry and the responses to these brand identifications carry on, towards individuals with high levels of BESC. This assessment proven positive attitudes for these individuals (Sprott et al., 2009).

Following this study proposition, we decided to include this hypothesis:

**H3f: BESC has a positive influence on Brand Identification.**

## **2.5- Consumers' identification with a Brand**

Brands have been considered for a long time as a staple for building lasting relationships with consumers, assuring a company's long-term success. Sometimes the process of transposing brand values towards the consumers is not an easy path, conjugated with the decline of the impact of traditional media in promoting brands, questions concerning consumer-brand identification with the nuances of virtual brand communities gain more importance for brand management (Tuškej et al., 2013).

Consumers' identification with a brand refers to the individual's sense of "sameness" regarding a particular brand (Tuškej et al., 2013), Kim et al. define the degree of consumer-brand identification as the extent to which the brand itself enhances and expresses the consumers' identity (Kim et al., 2001), similarly to the concept of "relationship with a brand", that measures the degree in which the consumer sees the brand as a partner available to have a satisfactory relationship with (Algesheimer et al., 2005).

Despite its growing awareness, there is a lot to learn about the process of identification with a brand, as well as its connection to consumer behavior and branding strategies (Bhattacharya & Sen, 2003; Tildesley & Coote, 2009).

The process of identification with a brand has a strong influence on the individuals' actions, including purchase intentions (Ahearne et al., 2005), brand preference (Tildesley & Coote, 2009), consumer loyalty (Bhattacharya et al., 1995; Kim et al., 2001), brand commitment (Casaló et al., 2007; Tuškej et al., 2013), the psychological sense of a brand community (Casaló et al., 2007), consumer's satisfaction towards a brand, increase of repurchase intentions (Kuenzel & Halliday, 2008), positive word of mouth (Del Rio et al., 2001; Kim et al., 2001; Kuenzel & Halliday, 2008; Tuškej et al., 2013), it increases the willingness that a consumer has in paying a premium price for a product or service (Del Rio et al., 2001).

There are two main approaches of studying consumers' identification with a brand: the interpretative/sociological and the psychological approach (Tuškej et al., 2013). The sociological approach mainly interprets structures within which the process

of identification occurs and unfolds, while the psychological shed light on the corresponding processes at the individual's level (Ravasi & van Rekom, 2003).

The sociological and interpretative approaches, try to explain consumer behavior as a fraction of the construct of self (Belk, 1988; J S Johar & Sirgy, 1991; Kleine et al.,1993). Scholars in the field of marketing, established that brands, as the manifestation of consumption goods, are important in creating and communicating consumer identity (Kuenzel & Halliday, 2008; Rodhain, 2006). Brands and possessions can express the uniqueness in one's identity, providing a sense of recognition with the values and ideals of a brand with the ones from the consumer (R. W. Belk, 1988; McEwen, 2005).

Consumers also tend to humanize brands, facilitating the process of identification, and relationship with a brand, therefore forming brand love (Bairrada, 2015; Wallace et al., 2014). Del Rio et al. create a distinction between the personal and social identification functions of a brand (Del Rio et al., 2001). The personal identification function refers to the process where individuals can identify with a specific brand as well as develop feelings of affinity towards it, and the social identification process stands for the capacity that a brand has to be a gateway for consumers to communicate and interact in a social environment (Del Rio et al., 2001).

With the increase of virtual communities, companies have been focusing in developing a strong customer relationship management. Brand identification has demonstrated to have a strong impact in building a strong relationship with customer and a brand, or in other words, brand identification occurs when an attractive brand personality is created.

Following this logic, if brand identification increases, then consumers present in online communities will be more participative with the brand, staying in contact in platforms that revolve around it, therefore if managers identify the importance of this variable, and seek the creation of a strong consumer brand identification it will reinforce a long-term relationship with the consumers, which is the main objective of CRM (Kim et al., 2001).



### **2.5.1- Identification and Brand Identification:**

Bhattacharya and Sen demonstrate that there is a clear correlation between the constituents of self-identity, and its projection through channels such as virtual brand communities. This projection of personal identification will lead to consumer-company identification (Bhattacharya & Sen, 2003). The general understand of consumers' identification with a brand derives from social psychology( Kim et al., 2001), where individuals attempt to express themselves through brands, considering them as an extension to their identity. Following this correlation, some authors have proven that consumer-brand identification comes from the extension of personal identity (Carlson et al., 2008; Del Rio et al., 2001; Kim et al., 2001; Tuškej et al., 2013).

Bagozzi and Dholakia also identify the importance of social identity, the identification with the community and the importance of these two concepts with brand identification (R. P. Bagozzi & Dholakia, 2006a).

### **2.5.2- Commitment and Brand Identification:**

Algesheimer et al. allege that community commitment manifested in pressure by individuals, constant engagement and continuance intentions are directed correlated with their perception towards the brand, facilitating their brand identification (Algesheimer et al., 2005). In other words, members who commit more time and effort to their online communities perceive the brand identity more positively and clearly, intensifying their relationship (Algesheimer et al., 2005). This dynamic is consistent with the consumer-brand identification conceptualization made by (Bhattacharya & Sen, 2003). The assessment that consumers' commitment towards a community is also evidenced by (Millán & Díaz, 2014).

### **2.5.3- Participation and Brand Identification:**

The construed external image of a company, can be changed or enhanced via the participation of individuals sharing their experiences with a brand, and lead to consumer-brand identification (Ahearne et al., 2005). One important outcome of participation in the community is the community presenter's brand image, defined as the perceptions individuals have about a brand and reflected by subjective associations individuals make, establishing brand identification (Keller, 1993; Woisetschlager et al., 2008). Other noteworthy studies that reflect the importance to participation in regards to brand identification are (Escalas & Bettman, 2003; Millán & Díaz, 2014).

### **2.5.4- Community Dimensions and Brand Identification:**

Following the literature previously mentioned, we concluded that the Brand Community Dimensions defined for this study have a positive influence on Consumers' Identification with a Brand, therefore we conclude the following hypothesis:

**H1c: Brand Community has a positive influence on Brand Identification**

## **2.6-Oppositional Brand Loyalty:**

When consumers wish to express their preferred brands in a specific market At the same time, they tend to demonstrate an opposing behavior regarding the competitors of the brand in which they placed their liking (Muniz & Hamer, 2001; Muniz & O'Guinn, 2001; Thompson & Sinha, 2008). This sentiment is known as "oppositional brand loyalty" (Kuo & Feng, 2013). It is a psychological phenomenon observed through individuals within a community who hold negative views regarding rival brands (Kuo & Hou, 2017). The behavior of the consumers with oppositional brand loyalty is centered to their favorite brand, demonstrating clear favoritism towards this brand and avoid purchasing competitor brands. (Kuo & Hou, 2017; Kuo & Feng, 2013).

Individuals with oppositional brand loyalty not only will express hostility towards rival brands, they will also have antagonistic feelings towards other individuals in communities revolving rival brands (Kuo & Feng, 2013). Some instances of oppositional brand loyalty can be observed in previously mentioned cases such as the automobile consumer, with the Saab brand community members sharing opposition towards Volvo (Muniz & O'Guinn, 2001) and open source software communities (R. P. Bagozzi & Dholakia, 2006b).

Oppositional brand loyalty is more common in larger brand communities, and it's an important factor that dictates the experience of members in the community, and also its very important for these members to understand the meaning of the brand in question (Muniz & O'Guinn, 2001). Community members will express their oppositional brand loyalty in different ways, including limiting their pool of product choices (Kuo & Feng, 2013), putting down the image of the opposing brands and recommendation of a product from the brand they feel attached to, even though they may or may not have experienced the product (Muniz & Hamer, 2001).

In their study, regarding automobile online communities, Kuo and Feng, demonstrated a positive relationship between community commitment and oppositional brand loyalty, where individuals that demonstrate strong commitment tend to generate oppositional brand loyalty towards rival brands (Kuo & Feng, 2013). In addition to this, they observed that in certain cases, some members will cast doubt on whether these sentiments towards competitor brands are justified, generating discussion and participation in the community. If managed correctly these discussions will serve to strengthen community cohesion, and possibly even increase oppositional brand loyalty through dissuasion (Y. F. Kuo & Feng, 2013). Moreover, participation by members that have oppositional brand loyalty within the community's activities (e.g., sharing negative views about rival brands) may encourage current consumers to reinforce their support for the brand and avoid rivals, ultimately resulting in a more consolidated relationship between consumers and the brand (Thompson & Sinha, 2008)

For the business standpoint oppositional brand loyalty generated voluntarily by consumers is a multiplying variable of brand equity, it strengthens consumers brand preference and weakens the rivals. Brand communities are a catalyzer for this phenomenon, and currently there is little to no studies of oppositional brand loyalty in

multi community studies, since previous studies focused on investigating single community cases (Kuo & Feng, 2013).

### **2.6.1- Brand Preference and Oppositional Brand Loyalty:**

Integrant members of a brand community express negative views and oppositional behaviors towards direct competitors of their preferred brands, with the objective of consolidating their market status. As previously mentioned, this behavior is called oppositional brand loyalty, and it is a direct consequence of the choices individuals make, in this case purchase preference, and brand preference (Y. F. Kuo & Feng, 2013; Muniz & Hamer, 2001; Muniz & O'Guinn, 2001; Thompson & Sinha, 2008). Members of a virtual community can express their oppositional brand loyalty in various ways, including by forcibly limiting their product choices and influence other members of the community (Muniz & Hamer, 2001).

This type of response that individuals with oppositional brand loyalty is directly bound to their preferred brand. For instance, these individuals will actively search for their favored brand in detriment of the opposing one, consolidating their relationship with the brand with other community members (Y. F. Kuo & Feng, 2013).

Following these authors ideas, we create the following hypothesis:

**H2a: Brand Preference has a positive influence on Oppositional Brand Loyalty.**

### **2.6.2- BESC and Oppositional Brand Loyalty:**

Consumers that have loyalty, commitment and engagement with a brand, will usually maintain their contact with other members and even the brand itself through their participation in a virtual community, furtherly being exposed to the community and brand culture, manifested in a sense of belonging (Y. F. Kuo & Feng, 2013).

Members who actively seek to establish community and brand relationships are prone to develop consciousness of kind where individuals' interests can be projected towards the community. Members with consciousness of kind also establish the difference from the brand that they have a relationship with, and the rival brands, exhibiting oppositional brand loyalty. Some individuals with consciousness of kind may even boycott products of rival brands (Muniz & O'Guinn, 2001).

Because longer-term membership enhances social identification, members of a brand community may possess an out-group bias towards products from rival brands, leading to oppositional brand loyalty in the form of low adoption of competing brand products. In other words, oppositional brand loyalty can be seen as the manifestation of the individuals' social identification projected and morphed through a continuous community relationship (Thompson & Sinha, 2008). When products from both the preferred and the competing brands are available, long-term relationship enhance the likelihood of adopting the product from the preferred as well as decreasing the likelihood of adopting the opposing brand (Muniz & O'Guinn, 2001; Thompson & Sinha, 2008).

Following these authors ideas, we create the following hypothesis:

**H3a: BESC has a positive influence on Oppositional Brand Loyalty.**

### **2.6.3- Brand Identification and Oppositional Brand Loyalty:**

We follow the perspective that social relationships provide a wide range of benefits to consumers, including an enhance sense of belonging and social identity (Dholakia et al., 2004; Sicilia & Palazón, 2008). The social identity individuals develop, is a culmination of the identification between the consumer self-construct, the brand identity and the brand community identity (R. P. Bagozzi & Dholakia, 2006b; Muniz & O'Guinn, 2001; Sicilia & Palazón, 2008; Thompson & Sinha, 2008).

Consumers derive meaning and identity from what and also how they consume (R. Belk & Costa, 1998; R. W. Belk, 1988; Celsi et al., 1993; Englis & Solomon, 1995; Schouten & McAlexander, 1995) and define themselves in relation to what they consume, and what they choose not to (Bhattacharya & Sen, 2003; Englis & Solomon, 1997; Tuškej et al., 2013). Loyal users of a given brand derive an important component of their

interpretation of the brand meaning. In conjunction with their sense of self from their perceptions of other competing brand and may express their brand loyalty by opposing those rival brands (Muniz & Hamer, 2001).

Brand communities are composed of individuals who possess a social identification with others that share the same interest and identification with a brand. Because brand communities advocate the brand use, often strongly dissuade members from trying or using other rival brands, where individuals are more forgiving of their preferred brand's failure and less apt to switch brands even when confronted with superior performance by competing products (Algesheimer et al., 2005; McAlexander et al., 2002).

Following these authors ideas, we advocate the following hypothesis:

**H4a: Brand Identification has a positive influence on Oppositional Brand Loyalty.**

#### **2.7- Active Participation:**

Active participation is the continuous commitment that individuals feel, manifested through posting content, responding to messages and engaging in discussions. It is one of the main drivers for the creation, development and sustainability of a virtual brand community (Casaló et al., 2007). It strengthens the bonds of the members, since members can share information and experiences, relating to the common interest that individuals share (Casaló et al., 2007; Hagel, 1999; Rheingold, 1993), reflecting each members' ego or self-image (Bloch et al., 1986).

Previous studies suggest that participation occurs when individuals seek information (Chan et al., 2004; Romm et al., 1997) and when they have problems fixable by interacting in the community (Shang et al., 2006). These two factors are driven from the individuals' search for a sense of cognitive involvement (Beatty & Smith, 1987; Bloch & Richins, 1983; Mittal, 1987).

If the levels of participation in a community increase, the more knowledgeable individuals will be on the topic, because the more ideas will circulate freely and it will provide for a stronger emotion support among the participants(Koh & Kim, 2004), thus

participation in activities and discussions may promote identification with the community and consequently the brand (Algesheimer et al., 2005), an increase in consumer loyalty and trust towards the product, brand or organization around which the community is developed (Casaló et al., 2007).

As previously mentioned, there are two types of individuals in a community, the passive users (commonly denominated as “lurkers”), those who post very few to no interactions in the community, and are the vast majority of individuals that comprise the sample of the community (Takahashi, et al., 2003), and the active users. Kim and Koh, recommend a list of factors able to measure the degree of participation by a consumer in a virtual community: The effort made to stimulate the community; the motivation to interact with other members; the enthusiasm to post messages, and responses and the value of the comments, in order to help other members in the community (Koh & Kim, 2004). Active participation occurs when a consumer is willing to spend time, energy or other type of resources associated with the brand in question (Bergkvist & Bech-Larsen, 2010).

Casaló et al. create a clear distinction on studying active participation within free share software communities, due to their great development in the recent years, and the existence of other choices that can easily replace the use of these types of communities (Casaló et al., 2007). Free sharing communities demonstrate a clear relationship between the members’ contributions and collaboration with the development of the virtual community (Casaló et al., 2007).

Involvement as a whole, can be seen as the community’s ultimate goal (Shang et al., 2006), since it’s the factor that ultimately will guarantee the community’s survival in the long term (Koh & Kim, 2004). Adding to this point, the increase of consumer participation may help convert consumers into “evangelists” of the community and also the brand in which the virtual community is centered around (Casaló et al., 2007).

To further consumers’ participation in communities, Casaló et al., propose some measures companies should follow (Casaló et al., 2007). The first measure is satisfying the community’s needs (e.g. providing special offers to community members). Communities should be designed around the member’s needs, not be aligned around the company needs (Flavián & Guinalú, 2005). Secondly companies must guarantee the

sustainability of the virtual community through gathering feedback, and constant analysis of the consumer's morphing needs (Fesenmaier et al., 2002). Lastly, companies should increase the consumers' familiarity with the virtual community and promote communication (Casaló et al., 2007).

### **2.7.1- Brand Preference and Active Participation:**

Sharing of product experiences among community members facilitates the formation of a triad consisting of members. The preference for a specific brand leads individuals in joining and participating in a determined community (Y. F. Kuo & Feng, 2013; Muniz & O'Guinn, 2001). Users who find themselves isolated from sharing their favorite brands, may overcome this "odd-man-out" effect by participating in a community (Andersen, 2005).

Virtual communities provide a functional and social value, intertwined by the preference that individuals have towards a brand. Individuals seek to share their interests and preferences and see in an online community the potential to fulfill that need. These two values provided by the online community are indicative of producing user participation (Sicilia & Palazón, 2008).

Following these authors ideas, we formulate the following hypothesis:

**H2b: Brand Preference has a positive influence on Active Participation.**

### **2.7.2- BESS and Active Participation:**

The relationships individuals strive to maintain with their favorite brands, stems from the identification with the community and the existent brand relationship quality, leading to community engagement, which represents the positive and self-instigated aspects of the brand community's influence that are likely to be experienced positively. Members should be enthusiastic to repeat behaviors that lead to these positive rewards. Therefore, they should have higher levels of behavioral intentions as a result, namely



community participation intentions, that will consequently convert to community participation behaviors (Algesheimer et al., 2005).

Following these authors ideas, we formulate the following hypothesis:

**H3b: BESC has a positive influence on Active Participation**

### **2.7.3- Brand Identification and Active Participation:**

Bagozzi and Dholakia hypothesized that identification and internalization were significant predictors of participation (R. Bagozzi & Dholakia, 2002). Their hypothesis, was formulated in compliance with Etzioni's view that a virtual community entails a group of fulfilling relations among a group of individuals, reinforcing one another, and going beyond the utilitarian purpose of the interaction such as identification (Etzioni, 1996).

Social identity captures the main components of the individual's identification with the group and the brand in the sense that the community member views himself/herself as a part of the community (Carlson et al., 2008; Dholakia et al., 2004). This identification with the brand and the group will lead to a stronger brand commitment, and consequently active participation, such as the attendance of brand events (Carlson et al., 2008). Dholakia et al. also accommodate the assumption that identification can influence participation in a virtual community (Dholakia et al., 2004). The affective connections individuals form within the community stem from their shared interests and values. The common identification individuals have with the brands to which the community revolves around, intensifies their relationships and leads the community members to interact and participate within the community (Muniz & O'Guinn, 2001).

Following these authors ideas, we create the following hypothesis:

**H4b: Brand Identification has a positive influence on Active Participation**

## **2.8- Word of Mouth:**

Word of mouth has been shown to play an important role in influencing consumers buying intentions and attitudes (Richins & Root-Shaffer, 1988). The introduction of the internet has increased the avenues to obtain information about a product and allows consumers to share their purchase experiences. This phenomenon is the electronic word of mouth (Hennig-Thurau et al., 2004). Positive Word of Mouth is the degree to which the individual praises the brand to others. Satisfied consumers are, inherently, the ones more inclined to spread positive Word of Mouth (Carroll & Ahuvia, 2006).

The study of word of mouth is important when talking about brand communities, especially with virtual ones, since Word of mouth not only is directly influenced by community commitment, but also brand community affect, community trust (Hur et al., 2011), brand love (Carroll & Ahuvia, 2006) and self-expression of the inner and social self (Wallace et al., 2014).

Studies show that there can exist a emotional connection between brands and individuals. This connection generates consumer commitment and engagement, where individuals will value more the benefits of the continuity of the relationship more than the benefits of its termination. Individuals who experience this type of connection will have a defensive posture regarding that same brand, towards other members of a community, manifested in positive word of mouth (Kim, et al., 2010).

Word of mouth has a greater influential power in the mind of the consumer than static publicity or commercial ads. Through its spontaneous and dynamic way of interacting with the consumers' intellect, through their consciousness, expectations, perceptions, attitudes and intentions (Herr et al., 1991). There are two forms of word of mouth: positive and negative. The latter is more impactful than the former, since consumers who have negative experiences with a brand are more prone to speak negatively about it (Arndt, 1967).

As previously mentioned, consumer participation in a community has a direct influence in generating word of mouth, consequently managers should facilitate and even participate in the community discussions, in order to encourage community interaction

(Woisetschlager et al., 2008). The management of virtual brand communities can use the moderating effect of interaction preference to cluster community members, and design specific actions in order to increase "word-of-mouth", (Woisetschläger, Hartleb, Blut, 2008).

### **2.8.1- Brand Preference and Word of Mouth:**

The idea that consumer-brand affective relationship and positive Word of Mouth is that existing research and theory, supported by satisfactory interactions between exchange partners (Bergkvist & Bech-Larsen, 2010; Carroll & Ahuvia, 2006; Morgan & Hunt, 1994; Wallace et al., 2014). Social media such as "Facebook" allows consumers to interact with brands, and with others who share the same brand preferences (Hollenbeck & Zinkhan, 2006; Wallace et al., 2014). The preferences individuals deposit on their favorite brands, in which consumers are so invested to the point of engaging in brand advocacy (Word of Mouth) as a culmination of their identification (Bergkvist & Bech-Larsen, 2010; Brown et al., 2005; Tuškej et al., 2013), commitment (Brown et al., 2005), loyalty (Woisetschlager et al., 2008), engagement (Kim et al., 2010) and even love (Carroll & Ahuvia, 2006) with brands.

Following this chain of study, we posit that:

**H2c: Brand Preference has a positive influence on Word of Mouth.**

### **2.8.2- BESC, Brand Identification and Word of Mouth:**

As individuals have self-schemas, consumers tend to demonstrate different attitudes towards objects that are aligned with those schemas, including engagement with brands that shape their self-concept (Spratt et al., 2009). The brands that can shape consumers' identity are responsible for generating stronger emotional behaviors and responses out of individuals affect to those brands. We advocate the research of Carroll and Ahuvia, as we consider the proven relationship between self-expressive brands and the outcomes brand love, Word of Mouth, on the context of social networks (Carroll &

Ahuvia, 2006). One example of those types of responses is the positive Word of Mouth (Tripathi, 2009; Wallace et al., 2014).

Kim et al. extends the work of Carroll and Ahuvia, and proven across a series of their sample studies that the drive consumers have to maintain long and affective relationships has a partial mediator role of service quality, that consequently generates positive Word of Mouth (Kim et al., 2010). This perspective of consumer-brand relationship with Word of Mouth is also demonstrated by Bergkvist, and Bech-Larsen, concluded that Brand Identification has a positive influence on Brand Loyalty, brand love and finally on active engagement (one example of active engagement being Word of Mouth) (Bergkvist & Bech-Larsen, 2010).

It is also noteworthy to point out the underlying importance of consumer-brand identification as an antecedent of positive Word of Mouth intentions and behaviors, moderated by consumer commitment studied by (Brown et al., 2005; Tuškej et al., 2013). The higher is the intensity of brand identification, the more chances there are that the consumer is going to generate positive Word of Mouth about the brand (Millán & Díaz, 2014), studied as regards prescription medication (Ahearne et al., 2005), with automobile clubs (Algesheimer et al., 2005) and also in relation to car brands (Kuenzel & Halliday, 2008).

This proposed relationship, derives from the self-expressive nature of a brand and its influence on positive Word of Mouth. Talking about a brand to other consumers is an important part of the process of brand identification and engagement by which consumers use brands to help construct their own identity (Holt, 1997, 1998). As such, consumers are then expected to produce more positive Word of Mouth when the brand is more self-expressive (Carroll & Ahuvia, 2006; Wallace et al., 2014).

Following these authors ideas, we posit that:

**H3c: BESC has a positive influence on Word of Mouth.**

And:

**H4c: Brand Identification has a positive influence on Word of Mouth.**

## 2.9- Well-Being:

Understanding well-being can be a difficult task. Its definition is somewhat subjective since it depends on how individuals make priorities and the situations in which they face themselves (Diener, 1984). Following this view of well-being, Diener et al. explores the concept of “Subjective well-being”, where these authors try to understand the processes that underlie happiness, rather than the demographic characteristics that correlate with it (Diener et al., 1999). It is more important to focus on the “Persona x Situation” take on well-being, since demographic factors, even though they seem appealing, they were proven to show small effects on subjective well-being (Diener et al., 1999).

Subjective well-being is a broad category of phenomena, that includes individuals’ emotional responses, domain satisfactions and their global on judgments of optimal life satisfaction (Diener et al., 1999). Table 1 represents the major divisions and subdivisions of the subjective well-being (Diener et al., 1999):

**Table 1: Components of Subjective Well-Being:**

Pleasant Affect	Unpleasant Affect	Life Satisfaction	Domain Satisfactions
Joy	Guilt and shame	Desire to change life	Work
Elation	Sadness		Family
Contentment Pride	Anxiety and worry Anger	Satisfaction with current life	Leisure Health
Affection	Stress	Satisfaction with past	Finances
Happiness	Depression	Satisfaction with future	Self
Ecstasy	Envy	Satisfaction with others’ view of one’s life	One’s group

Consumer satisfaction literature proposed the study of well-being through a consumer perspective, namely “consumer well-being”, being denominated as the extent to which a consumer good or service generates an overall perception of the impact of the quality-of-life of that same product (Grzeskowiak & Sirgy, 2007; Lee, et al., 2002).

There are countless of conceptualizations of consumer well-being. These include conceptual models such as: the living model, consumption equity model, quality model, possession model, satisfaction model, acquisition/possession model, community model, among many others (Grzeskowiak & Sirgy, 2007). Sirgy et al., focus their develop their quality-of-life model, in which posits that consumer well-being, in relation to consumers’ perception of the impact of the product on their overall life, moderating their preferences, in function of maximizing their well-being. The perception of satisfaction in the various life domains, is influenced by the perceived product benefits and costs within the respective domains (Grzeskowiak & Sirgy, 2007).

Regarding the topic of virtual communities, in compliance with this study, Sirgy et al. developed a study with the measure of internet well-being, which was based on the theoretical notion that the perception of the overall impact of the internet on users of digital platforms is determined by their perception of the impact of their usage of the internet in regards to their life domains such as marketplace, work life, leisure life, social life, education, community, and others. This model was successful in establishing these relationships (Sirgy et al., 2006).

### **2.9.1- Brand Preference and Well-Being:**

Continuing the chain of thought, in the previous hypothesis, the identification individuals feel towards a brand, and their expression through them will lead to brand preference. Individuals will demonstrate favoritism over brands that are aligned with their own values, ideas, and idealized abstract image (Bergami & Bagozzi, 2000; Grzeskowiak & Sirgy, 2007; Sirgy et al., 2006). Sirgy and Grzeskowiak, not only concluded that Well-being is directly affected by brand loyalty, but also by brand community belongingness (as previously mentioned) (Grzeskowiak & Sirgy, 2007). Osselaer and Janiszewski studied the role of product evaluation and choice by individuals, and how individuals will

align their personal brands and their purchase intentions in accordance with their personal goals and benefits (van Osselaer & Janiszewski, 2012). The desire to enhance ones' self-worth increased the individual's preference for prestigious items in detriment of less prestigious items (van Osselaer & Janiszewski, 2012).

Therefore, we can conclude that this hypothesis is very important for the context of this study, and we propose the following relationship:

**H2d: Brand Preference has a positive influence on Well-Being.**

### **2.9.2- BESC and Well-Being:**

The higher is the level of congruence between the brand image and the consumers' perceived self-image, the greater is the consumers' perception of the brand's impact on the individual's quality-of-life (Grzeskowiak & Sirgy, 2007; Johar & Sirgy, 1991; Sirgy & Lee, 2006). Another approach to generate meaning of products is to develop consumer-brand relationships, in which the brand serves as a "relationship partner" (Algesheimer et al., 2005). Recent research has concluded the importance of brand-community belongingness, with brand relationships (Muniz & O'Guinn, 2001; Schouten & McAlexander, 1995). This relationship individuals form with brands, and their respective communities, the greater is the consumers' perception on the brand's impact on his Well-Being (Grzeskowiak & Sirgy, 2007)

Bagozzi and Bergami, shed light on a concept called "Organization-based self-esteem" which stands for the "evaluations of self-worth, deriving from one's membership in the organization", (Bergami & Bagozzi, 2000, p.8) in other words, is the "degree to which organizational members believe that they can satisfy their needs by participating in roles within the context of an organization" (Pierce et al., 1989). The study of Bagozzi and Bergami, follow the vision first elucidated by Pierce et al. of the relationship of social identity, organization identification, affective commitment and organized-based self-esteem (Bergami & Bagozzi, 2000). Engaging in a community where individuals are, in a psychological sense, connected to the community and the brand, has a positive impact on the self-esteem benefits of the participants, given the value they attribute to their rising

influence and credibility to the eyes of the community and even to some intermediaries of the brand itself (Y. F. Kuo & Feng, 2013).

Following these authors ideas, we concluded that there is indeed a correlation between brand engagement associated with the individuals' self-concept, in line with its positive influence on various aspects that are encompassed by subjective consumer Well-being, such as "happiness, love, joy, attachment, realization" among others (Bergami & Bagozzi, 2000).

Therefore, we create the following hypothesis:

**H3d: BESC has a positive influence on Well-Being.**

### **2.9.3- Brand Identification and Well-Being:**

Consumer motives for purchase and consumption are mediated in great measure from the meaning of the consumption act and the value that attributed meaning provides (Levy, 1959). Brand value-expressiveness is considered as the extent in which the brand is associated the consumer self-image. Purchase buying intentions are more likely to occur if consumers recognize some convergence between the brand-user image and their own self-image, through the process of identification (Sirgy, 1986). One example of this process is Starbucks, that wished to recreate the coffeehouses of Milan, creating the brand-user association that Starbucks represents the "European in style and mannerism". Consumers who project their self-image on this association are likely to identify with the brand itself, this satisfying their need for self-consistency (Epstein, 1980; Lecky, 1945). When consumer-brand identification occurs, and individuals will manifest themselves by expressing themselves through the brand. This confirmation of self-consistency is a driver to generate consumer well-being, by improving the individuals' own self-esteem (Bergami & Bagozzi, 2000; Johar & Sirgy, 1991).

Following these authors ideas, we create the following hypothesis:

**H4d: Brand Identification has a positive influence on Well-Being.**



### **3. Conceptual Model and Hypotheses**

#### **3.1- Introduction:**

In the previous chapter, it has been discussed the importance and previous contributions on the topics of *brand community*, *community identification*, *community participation*, *brand community commitment*, *brand preference*, *brand engagement in self-concept*, *consumer-brand identification*, *active participation*, *oppositional brand loyalty*, *word of mouth*, and lastly the individuals' *well-being*. This following chapter is destined to present the conceptual model and the proposed hypotheses, illustrating how these variables interact with each other, in this study proposition.

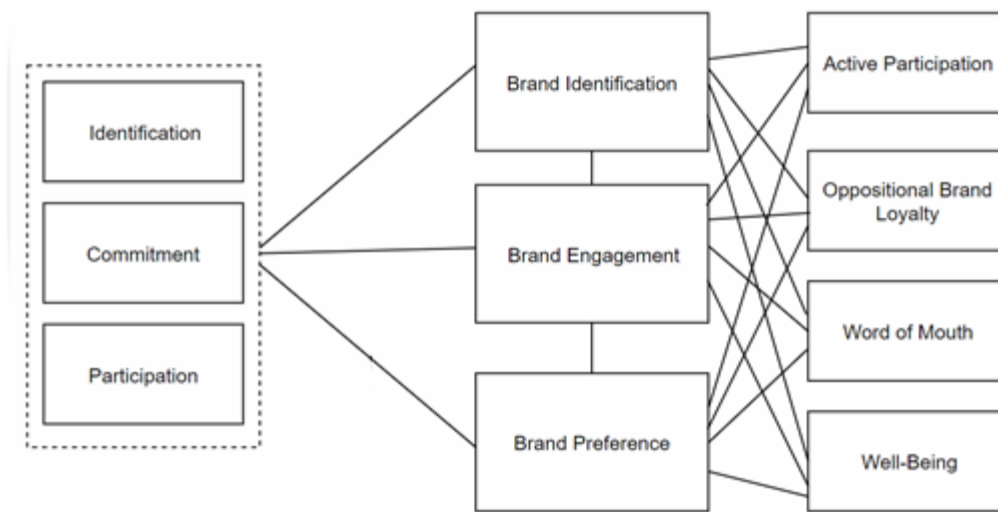
Before defining the theoretical and conceptual framework, it was important to understand the central variable first, which is brand communities, with increased focus on virtual brand communities, through the studies (Algesheimer et al., 2005; R. Bagozzi & Dholakia, 2002; R. P. Bagozzi & Dholakia, 2006a; McAlexander et al., 2002; Muniz & O'Guinn, 2001; Woisetschlager et al., 2008). The management of virtual communities is one the main drivers for consumption and longevity of eSports, and since there are very few studies that highlight this direct correlation, the author identified the importance and novelty of this study. For this study we will also be including Social Influence as a mediator variable.

#### **3.2- The conceptual model:**

A theoretical and conceptual framework, has the function of elucidate the trajectory of a research, as well as lay down its core theoretical constructs, giving a generalized view on the research (Adom, et al., 2018). In other words, a framework should serve as a "blueprint" or a guide for the research, reflected on the existing literature in a certain field, and it also defines the study philosophically and analytically (Grant & Osanloo, 2014). The conceptual model should guide and resonate with every phase of the research, from the early stages (definition of the problem) to the conclusions that are drawn (Adom et al., 2018).

The early stages of constructing this model, were focused on virtual and traditional brand communities, starting with establishing the three dimensions of brand communities, followed by its impacts towards brands themselves and possible outcomes of these two stages of involvement. This study was based on the works of (Casaló et al., 2007; Chang & Liu, 2009; Diener et al., 1985; Hur et al., 2011; Kuo & Feng, 2013; Sprott et al., 2009; Tuškej et al., 2013; Woisetschlager et al., 2008), among others.

The next figure represents the conceptual model that will serve as a pillar for this research.



**Figure 1: The conceptual Model**

### 3.2- Research hypothesis:

Once the conceptual model is formulated, with the certainty of being scientifically valid, it is proposed a "supposed, probable and provisional answer to a research problem". This is the definition of hypothesis, according to Marconi and Lakatos. Both, problems and hypotheses, are statements of relations between variables (facts, phenomena); The main difference between these two concepts is that the problem is an interrogative sentence and the hypothesis is a more detailed affirmative sentence (Marconi & Lakatos, 2007)

According to Kerlinger hypothesis are crucial to develop a successful research. Hypothesis are “working instruments” of theory since new hypothesis can be deduced through them, they also can be tested and judged as true or false. Hypothesis are also influential instruments to the advancement of science, since their confirmation requires that they become independent from the values, opinions, ideas of the individuals that propose them. Finally, hypothesis guide the research, indicating to the researcher what to look for or research (Kerlinger, 1973, p.28-35).

Since the research hypothesis have already been discussed in the literature review, we will present them in a summarized format:

**Table 2: Research Hypotheses**

<b>H1a</b>	Brand Community has a positive influence on Brand Preference
<b>H1b</b>	Brand Community has a positive influence on BESC
<b>H1c</b>	Brand Community has a positive influence on Brand Identification
<b>H2a</b>	Brand Preference has a positive influence on Oppositional Brand Loyalty
<b>H2b</b>	Brand Preference has a positive influence on Active Participation
<b>H2c</b>	Brand Preference has a positive influence on Word of Mouth
<b>H2d</b>	Brand Preference has a positive influence on Well-Being
<b>H3a</b>	BESC has a positive influence on Oppositional Brand Loyalty
<b>H3b</b>	BESC has a positive influence on Active Participation
<b>H3c</b>	BESC has a positive influence on Word of Mouth
<b>H3d</b>	BESC has a positive influence on Well-Being
<b>H3e</b>	BESC has a positive influence on Brand Preference
<b>H3f</b>	BESC has a positive influence on Brand Identification
<b>H4a</b>	Brand Identification has a positive influence on Oppositional Brand Loyalty
<b>H4b</b>	Brand Identification has a positive influence on Active Participation
<b>H4c</b>	Brand Identification has a positive influence on Word of Mouth
<b>H4d</b>	Brand Identification has a positive influence on Well-Being

## **4- Methodology:**

### **4.1- Introduction:**

After defining the research theme, discussed the literature review, presented the conceptual model and its research hypothesis it is important to elaborate on the methodology adopted. Given the context of brand communities, we have chosen to study our variables through a quantitative analysis.

According to Marconi and Lakatos, quantitative researches are usually more adequate to ascertain explicit and conscious opinions and attitudes of the interviewees, since they use standardized instruments (questionnaires). They are used when it is known exactly what should be asked in order to achieve the research objectives, allow projections to be made for the represented population and also allow to accurately test the hypotheses raised for the research and provide indicators that can be compared with others (Marconi & Lakatos, 2007) . Quantitative measurement follows the according sequence: conceptualization, operationalization and the collection of data (Neuman, 2013).

In a first instance, we will describe the population and sample selection, followed by the method used to collect data. In this chapter we will also shed light on how the proper metrics have been chosen to develop the questionnaire. After developing the questionnaire, it was required to do a pre-test, in order to confirm if our item were chosen appropriately, in case changes were needed. Finally, we will approach the methodological components of the research, as well as its statistical analysis through the Exploratory Factor Analysis and the Confirmatory Factor Analysis.

### **4.2- Population and Sample Selection:**

In this section of our study we intend to define processes by which the sample is determined. According to Marconi and Lakatos, a sample is a suitably selected portion of the universe (population) (Marconi & Lakatos, 2007).

Sampling occurs due to the lack of resources to study the whole population. If the sample is characteristic of the population, its results can be positively extrapolated, and

used to serve as a base to propose conclusions, therefore, verifying the validity of the hypotheses (Neuman, 2013, p.247.) Most with it we incur the problem of sampling, which is choosing the most possible representative part of the universe (Marconi & Lakatos, 2007)

There are two sampling strategies, the “probability sample” and the “nonprobability sample”. The first one is usually referred as the “gold standard”, where the researcher tries to accurately create a representative sample that has mathematically predictable errors. The second one, usually less preferred, has two alternatives: the convenience and the quota samples. In convenience sampling our primary criteria for selecting cases that are accessible and convenient, it may be legitimate for a few exploratory preliminary studies and even some qualitative studies when our purpose is something other than creating a representative sample. However, this method usually produces nonrepresentative samples, therefore, it is not recommended. The quota sampling is an acceptable nonprobability substitute method. It is a nonrandom sample, where the researcher classifies general classes into which cases or people will be placed, and then select cases to reach a predetermined number in each category (Neuman, 2013, p.249)

**In the case of this specific research, the total population of virtual communities that are formed within the eSports ecosystem is composed by:**

- Individuals who are avid players and follow eSports titles, but not the professional leagues/tournaments;
- Individuals who are avid players and follow eSports titles, and professional leagues/tournaments;
- Individuals that only follow one specific eSports title;
- Individuals that follow various eSports titles;
- Individuals with different profiles;
- Individuals that participate in various online platforms, namely: Reddit, YouTube, Facebook, Instagram, Twitch, Discord among various other sites and forums online.

It was difficult to not only get a proportional sample of each individual archetype, but also due to restrictions that some platforms and communities proven had. Some limitations proven were:

-Twitch, YouTube, Instagram: These platforms have an intrinsic passive nature, with little to no proactive participation from the consumer side. These platforms have demonstrated to have little to no support in sharing the survey.

-Facebook, Discord, Online Forums: The groups on these platforms are usually smaller, and more homogeneous compared to the rest. These groups usually have very strict community guidelines, most of them prohibiting surveys. Another difficulty was the time-based nature of this platforms' posts (where a post will only be featured for a short period of time, then dragged by newer ones). Finally, these two platforms are losing relevancy, when compared to Twitch, YouTube and Reddit.

Given our limited resources and access to all types of individuals, we decided to follow a nonprobability, probabilistic convenience sampling, even though it is not the most optimal choice, it was the only method possible to follow.

The individuals picked are mostly participants from the platform "Reddit". This website encompasses individuals that use the other social networks, demonstrate various individual profiles and comprehends individuals that follow different eSports' games, through their designated "subreddits" (Subreddits are specific groups where individuals only discuss its central theme. For example, in the "Tekken" subreddit, individuals mainly discuss "Tekken"-the game, their community and its eSports scene).

### **4.3- Data Collection Method:**

#### **4.3.1- The questionnaire:**

For this study, given the online nature of the communities, the volatility of information in each platform, and the high number of individuals present in these communities together with the quantitative method chosen for this research, we decided to conduct a questionnaire as our data collection method. A questionnaire is a data

collection instrument consisting of an ordered series of questions, which must be answered without the presence of the interviewer. The questionnaire must present a note, explaining the nature of the research and why the interviewer is looking for answers. (Marconi & Lakatos, 2007).

The questionnaire exhibits several advantages. It economizes time and resources, it reaches more people simultaneously, ignores geographic restrictions (in the case of a virtual questionnaire), it's easier to answer, has anonymity which leads to more unbiased answers and consequently there is less risk of distortion, due to the decreased influence of the researcher. However, the questionnaire also includes several disadvantages. It is harder for the interviewer to explain any difficulty felt by the interviewee, usually is comprised by a large number of answers that may lead the interviewed to answer (Marconi & Lakatos, 2007).

During the period of February, until May of 2019, we collected 432 answers through an online questionnaire ("Google Forms"), shared through Facebook, Instagram, Discord Groups and most importantly, as previously mentioned, Reddit, where most of the answers were collected from. These platforms were chosen due to (aside from the previously mentioned reasons) them being easily accessible and free, and simple to convey the message of the survey.

The questionnaire consisted of six main segments. The first where the individual was asked to think of a brand, and a social platform that he/she utilizes in order to follow and participate in that same brand's related discussions. Posteriorly, the individuals were asked about community related questions, in order to understand how they perceive the community, and the level of identification individuals feel with the community. In the third main segment, individuals were asked questions about their active participation in the community, with the objective of understanding if the individual was an active or passive member of the community. Next the individuals were asked about how they perceive and interact with their favorite brands in general, followed by how they view the brand that they answered and its competitors. The sixth and final part of the survey presented a set of questions with the intention of characterizing the profile of the respondents.

In this questionnaire, a Likert scale was adopted. The scale used in the study ranged from 1 to 7, with the following meaning: 1 = totally disagree, 2 = disagree, 3 = slightly disagree, 4 = not agree or disagree, 5 = slightly agree, 6 = I agree and 7 = totally agree. We've decided to utilize this scale, since it is the most consensual for most authors to measure their answers. Also in this survey we opted to create closed questions since this format has the advantage of being quicker to answer, lead to less mistakes and makes easier to spot an irrelevant question (Neuman, 2013).

For this study two versions of the questionnaire were proposed: One questionnaire was designed to share to individuals in general, the other version was tailored as a community specific survey, where individuals would answer based on the community the survey was shared on and the brand to which the community revolves around.

The questionnaire can be found in Appendix I & II (Appendix II illustrates the differences the elaborated community specific questionnaires have, regarding the general one).

#### 4.3.2- Metrics:

In this chapter, we present the metrics used to study the variables present in our research and the studies that they have been adopted from. Most of these variables were not subjected through translation, since the research is fully conducted in English.

Bellow we present the items used, and the according references:

**Table 3: Participation within the community**

<b>Article: How to Make Brand Communities Work: Antecedents and Consequences of Consumer Participation</b> <b>Utilized by: Woisetschläger et al., (2008)</b> <b>In: Journal of Relationship Marketing</b>	
<b>Participation</b>	1. Members of the [Name] community help each other.
	2. When I seek for advice, I am likely to find someone supportive in the [Name] community.
	3. I found new friends as a result of joining the [Name] community.
	4. Friendships in the [Name] community are important to me.
	5. Social contacts and friendships are supported by the [Name] community's offers for interaction.



**Table 4: Identification with the community**

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**Article: How to Make Brand Communities Work: Antecedents and Consequences of Consumer Participation**  
**Utilized by: Woisetschläger et al., (2008)**  
**In: Journal of Relationship Marketing**

<b>Identification</b>	1. I see myself as belonging to the [Name] community.
	2. The [Name] community plays a part in my everyday life.
	3. I see myself as a typical and representative member of the [Name] community.
	4. The virtual [Name] community confirms in many aspects my view of who I am.
	5. I can identify with the [Name] community.
	6. I have strong feelings for the [Name] community
	7. I feel like I belong in the [Name] community.

**Table 5: Brand community commitment**

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**Article: Building brand loyalty through managing brand community commitment**  
**Utilized by: Hur et al. 2011**  
**In: Management Decision**

<b>Commitment</b>	1. I feel a sense of belonging in this brand community
	2. I will visit this brand community continuously
	3. I will exchange information and opinions with the members of this brand community
	4. I will collect information through this brand community

**Table 6: Brand Preference**

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**Article: The impact of brand equity on brand preference and purchase intentions in the service industries**  
**Utilized by: Chang & Liu, 2009**  
**In: The Service Industries Journal**

<b>Brand Preference</b>	1. I think [Name] is superior to other competing brands
	2. I prefer [Name]
	3. When considering purchasing the product/service, I would consider [Name] first
	4. I am not interested in playing other brands
	5. I do not intend to replace this product/service provider [Name] with other brands

**Table 7: Brand Engagement in self-concept**

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**Article: The Social Influence of Brand Community: Evidence from European Car Clubs**  
**Utilized by: Sprott et al., 2009**  
**In: Journal of Marketing Research**

<b>BESC</b>	1. I have a special bond with the brands that I like.
	2. I consider my favorite brands to be a part of myself.
	3. I often feel a personal connection between my brands and me.
	4. Part of me is defined by important brands in my life.
	5. I feel as if I have a close personal connection with the brands I most prefer.
	6. I can identify with important brands in my life.
	7. There are links between the brands that I prefer and how I view myself
	8. My favorite brands are an important indication of who I am.

**Table 8: Consumers' identification with a Brand**

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**Article: The role of consumer–brand identification in building brand relationships**  
**Utilized by: Tuškej et al. (2013)**  
**In: Journal of Business Research**

<b>Brand Identification</b>	1. I feel that my personality and the personality of this brand are very similar
	2. I have a lot in common with other people using this brand
	3. I feel that my values and the values of this brand are very similar

**Table 9: Active Participation**

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**Article: The impact of participation in virtual brand communities on consumer trust and loyalty**  
**Utilized by: Casaló et al. (2007)**  
**In: Online Information Review**

<b>Active Participation</b>	1. In general, I'm very motivated to participate actively in this virtual community's activities
	2. In general, I participate in order to stimulate our virtual community
	3. I usually provide useful information to other community members
	4. In general, I post messages and responses in the community with great excitement and frequency

**Table 10: Oppositional Brand Loyalty**

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**Article: Relationships among community interaction characteristics, perceived benefits, community commitment, and oppositional brand loyalty in online brand communities**  
**Utilized by: Kuo & Feng, 2013**  
**In: International Journal of Information Management**

<b>Oppositional Brand Loyalty</b>	1. I will not consider buying products of opposing brands even if the products can better meet consumers' specific needs (e.g. better graphics, gameplay).
	2. I will express opposing views or opinions to products of opposing brands even if the products are considered better by other people
	3. I have low intention to try products of opposing brands even if the products are widely discussed by other people
	4. I will not recommend people buying products of opposing brands even if an opposing brand has new and better products.

**Table 11: Word of Mouth**

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**Article: How to Make Brand Communities Work: Antecedents and Consequences of Consumer Participation**  
**Utilized by: Woisetschläger et al., (2008)**  
**In: Journal of Relationship Marketing**

<b>WOM</b>	1. I have said positive things about [Name] community to other people.
	2. I have recommended [Name] community to people who seek my advice.
	3. I have encouraged other people to join [Name] Community

**Table 12: Well-Being**

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**Article: The Satisfaction with Life Scale**  
**Utilized by: Diener et al. (1985)**  
**In: Journal of Personality Assessment**

<b>Well-Being</b>	1. In most ways my life is close to my ideal
	2. The conditions of my life are excellent
	3. I am satisfied with my life
	4. So far, I have gotten the important things I want in life
	5. If I could live my life over, I would change almost nothing

**4.4- Pre-test:**

Before the survey could be released to the target audience, it was necessary to conduct a pretest, to a smaller sample, with similar characteristics of the population. We interviewed 30 candidates for the pre-test.

These individuals were avid eSports followers, some consuming the represented brands in the eSports leagues, while a small number simply following the competitive scene. The demography of the pretest sample was also similarly to the target population, consisting mostly in men within the 18-25 age interval.

The pre-test questionnaire was sent via” Facebook Messenger”, aiming to verify the comprehension of the items, and to understand how long it would take the interviewees to fill the survey. The feedback was mostly positive, the total response time averaged 5 to 7 minutes.

The statistical study of the pre-test consisted in the Cronbach’s alpha and item correlation test. All the items shown a Cronbach’s alpha  $>0,8$  and an item correlation  $>0,25$ , therefore, we concluded validity of these metrics (It will be explained in the next topics how we concluded that these results were acceptable). The pre-test was proven a success given the positive feedback received by the interviewees and the results of the statistical tests, therefore, we could advance to the next stage.

#### 4.5- Sample Characterization:

In this topic we will present a characterization of the sample of the totality of gathered answers. As previously mentioned, 432 answers were gathered from the various “subreddits” and other online communities. The profile of the individuals was distinguished by gender, age and the virtual community they mentioned:

**Table 13: Age of Respondents**

AGE	F	%
1- <18	69	16
2- 18-25	261	60.4
3- 26-35	87	20.1
4- 36-45	15	3.5
5- 46-55	0	0
6- >56	0	0
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>432</b>	<b>100</b>

In this survey, we presented six age categories. As predicted from previous studies, the eSports audience were mostly in the lower age groups (Pan, 2016). As the table above shows, the age group with the most representation was the 18-25 tier, which made up 60.4% of total answers, followed by the 26-35 and the <18 groups with similar expression, which made up 20.1% and 16% respectively. Of the higher age tiers, only the 36-45 group was represented with 3.5% of the total sample.

**Table 14: Gender of Respondents**

<b>GENDER</b>	<b>F</b>	<b>%</b>
<b>MALE</b>	402	93.1
<b>FEMALE</b>	21	4.9
<b>PREFER NOT TO SAY</b>	9	2.1
<b>TOTAL</b>	432	100

Also as predicted, the eSports audience is predominantly male dominated (Pan, 2016). The results of the questionnaire demonstrated this expectation, with 93.1% male individuals and only 2.1% of female respondents.

**Table 15: Virtual community of the respondents**

<b>COMMUNITY</b>	<b>F</b>	<b>%</b>
<b>ROCKET LEAGUE ESPORTS SUBREDDIT</b>	79	18.3
<b>SMASHBROS SUBREDDIT</b>	69	16.0
<b>TEKKEN SUBREDDIT</b>	50	11.6
<b>COMPETITIVEOVERWATCH SUBREDDIT</b>	37	8.6
<b>BATTLEFIELDV SUBREDDIT</b>	33	7.6
<b>SMITE SUBREDDIT</b>	28	6.5
<b>STARCRAFT SUBREDDIT</b>	26	6.0
<b>DOTA 2 SUBREDDIT</b>	21	4.9
<b>FIFA SUBREDDIT</b>	18	4.2
<b>OVERWATCH SUBREDDIT</b>	15	3.5
<b>STREETFIGHTER SUBREDDIT</b>	9	2.1
<b>HEARTHSTONE SUBREDDIT</b>	8	1.9
<b>COMPETITIVEHEARTHSTONE SUBREDDIT</b>	6	1.4
<b>APEX LEGENDS SUBREDDIT</b>	6	1.4
<b>LEAGUEOFLEGENDS SUBREDDIT</b>	4	0.9
<b>RAINBOW6 SUBREDDIT</b>	3	0.7
<b>DEDICATED ONLINE FORUMS</b>	3	0.7
<b>OTHERS</b>	17	3.7
<b>TOTAL</b>	432	100.0

The distribution of community members is dependent on the previously mentioned limitations that some communities and social platforms presented (see item

4.2 – Population and Sample Selection). We inquired 415 individuals from different “subreddits” from the “Reddit” website, which represents 96.1% of the respondents’ sample. This distribution is completely different from the total population. Here is a comparative example of this misdistribution:

In this sample the Rocket League subreddit is the predominant source of data with 79 respondents, and the League of Legends subreddit counted 4 respondents. However, this does not reflect the actual communities’ dimension since the first has 20 thousand members, while the second has 3 million members. The number of respondents was settled by traction of the community, which cannot be controlled by the interviewer. Also, social platforms such as Twitch, YouTube and Instagram which are amongst the most popular platforms currently used by consumers represent a small percentage of the sample from this study.

This distribution also does not account for individuals that are active in multiple communities. These two points are for discussion as a study limitation.

#### **4.6- Statistical Analysis:**

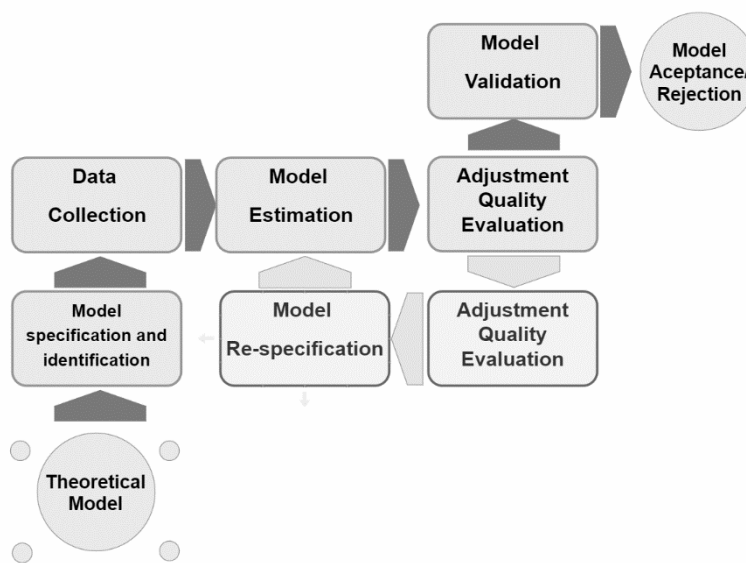
In this topic, it will be approached and explained all the methods utilized in the different analysis developed, present the statistical data and draw conclusions from the results. In order to analyze this data, we have chosen the Structural Equations Model (SEM), using the statistical software IBM SPSS AMOS, version 24.

According to Lisboa et al. the “Structural Equations Model combine multiple regression techniques and factorial analysis, and are particularly useful when it is intended to study multiple relations between variables simultaneously, where a certain variable is assumed as a dependent variable in a relation established in the model and then becomes an independent variable in later relations of the model.” (Lisboa, Augusto, & Ferreira, 2012, p. 388). It establishes the relation between variables, either manifested or latent ones. This model can be organized in two sub models: the measurement sub model and the and the structural model. The relative importance of the factors on each manifested variable can be displayed through its factorial weights (Marôco, 2014, p.19).

The measurement sub model defines the way the hypothetic constructs, or latent variables are operationalized by the observed or manifested variables (Marôco, 2014, p.19). The structural sub model defines the causal relations or associations between the latent variables (Marôco, 2014, p. 21)

This analysis will allow us to observe the average behavior of the sample, as well as the perceptions and insights of the individuals regarding the communities they belong to, as well as the brands involved.

**Figure 2: Stages of the analysis of structural equations**



**Source:** (Marôco, 2014)

#### 4.6.1-Exploratory Factor Analysis:

The factor analysis is an exploratory, general and linear modeling technique, which is used to uncover the factorial structure, by identifying a group of latent variables that explain the observed correlational structure amongst a set of manifested variables (Marôco, 2014, p.180). Despite its apparent mathematical complexity the basic principle of the factor analysis is simple: the covariance/correlation amongst a set of variables occurs through the existence of one or more latent factors, common to these manifested variables. (Marôco, 2014, p. 179).



The factor analysis can be classified in two different types: The Exploratory Factor Analysis (EFA) and the Confirmatory Factor Analysis (CFA).

According to Pestana and Gageiro, the EFA represents a “set of statistic techniques that aim to explain the correlation between observable variables by simplifying the data through the reduction of variables needed in order to describe them (Pestana & Gageiro, 2014). Being used a wide range of statistical techniques, the interrelationships that exist between the variables will define the factor or factors that best explain the variance (Hair et al., 2013). The EFA is utilized when the researcher lacks the underlying information on the factorial structure that explains the previously mentioned correlation, or when the researcher needs to confirm or reject a certain factor structure. Factor rotation allows to explore structural patterns, it permits to understand which latent variables are responsible for the behavior of the manifested variables. (Damásio, 2012). According to Damásio there are two methods implemented to evaluate if the database is adequate to undergo a factor analysis (Damásio, 2012): The Keyser-Meyer-Olkin (KMO) index and Bartlett’s test of sphericity (Dziuban & Shirkey, 1974).

The KMO, or index of sample suitability, is a statistical test that suggests the proportion of variance of the items that may be explained by a latent variable. The closer this index is to 1, the better the result, that is, the more adequate the sample is to the application of the factor analysis. The Bartlett’s test of sphericity aims to evaluate the degree to which the variance and covariance matrix is similar to the identity matrix, therefore, indicating if a lack of correlation amongst the data exists. This test also evaluates the overall significance between all the correlations within an examined data matrix (Damásio, 2012). In this study we utilized the Varimax rotation since it minimizes the number of variables with elevated loadings, obtaining a solution in which each main component is approximated to -1 or +1 (if correlated) or 0, in case a linear association is nonexistent. In case the factors demonstrate correlation in the orthogonal rotation, it transforms them in independent, nonrelated factors. (Pestana & Gageiro, 2014).

In order to present the percentage of explanation of the data by the factors, it is also verified the total variance, that allows to evaluate the percentage of the model explained based on the explanation of the factorial data (Hair et al., 2013). If the variance explained is above 0,6 or 60% it is possible to conclude that the values are considered as satisfactory.

**Table 16: Interpretation of KMO values**

KMO	FACTOR ANALYSIS
1 - 0,9	Very Good
0,8 - 0,9	Good
0,7 - 0,8	Average
0,6 - 0,7	Reasonable
0,5 - 0,6	Bad
< 0,5	Unacceptable

(Pestana & Gageiro, 2014, p. 521)

Following these tests, an analysis of internal factor consistency was conducted through the Cronbach's Alpha, which allows to verify if there is internal correlation between the variables used. This analysis is defined as the "expected correlation amongst the used scale and other hypothetical scales of the same universe, with the same number of items, measuring the same characteristic". This correlation ranges from 0 (unreliable) to 1 (reliable) (Pestana & Gageiro, 2014, p.531). Table 17, presents the Cronbach's Alpha's values and their respective interpretation:

**Table 17: Interpretation of Cronbach's Alpha values**

VALOR	INTERAL CONSISTENCY
>0,9	Very Good
0,8 - 0,9	Good
0,7 - 0,8	Average
0,6 - 0,7	Bad
<0.6	Inadmissible

(Pestana & Gageiro, 2014, p.531)

#### 4.6.2-Exploratory Factor Analysis Results:

**Table 18: Exploratory Factor Analysis**

Variable	No. items	Items	Cronbach's Alpha	Correlation between items	KMO	Bartlett's Test	% Explained Variance
<b>PARTICIPATION</b>			0.959098		0.856983	0.000	85.974944
	5	P1		0.855113			
		P2		0.878467			
		P3		0.897050			

		P4		0.899668			
		P5		0.893933			
<b>IDENTIFICATION</b>	7		0.965111		0.947999	0.000	82.769843
		I1		0.907940			
		I2		0.855731			
		I3		0.881788			
		I4		0.863200			
		I5		0.888500			
		I6		0.839351			
		I7		0.893404			
<b>COMMITMENT</b>	4		0.936290		0.856704	0.000	84.089899
		C1		0.796151			
		C2		0.883107			
		C3		0.861060			
		C4		0.858722			
<b>WORD OF MOUTH</b>	3		0.928243		0.754742	0.000	87.451961
		WO1		0.817825			
		WO2		0.875193			
		WO3		0.867243			
<b>ACTIVE PARTICIPATION</b>	4		0.960997		0.875377	0.000	89.600326
		AP1		0.910286			
		AP2		0.921096			
		AP3		0.881673			
		AP4		0.902680			
<b>BRAND ENGAG SELF-CONCEPT</b>	8		0.970358		0.946091	0.000	82.886530
		BE1		0.824399			
		BE2		0.908585			
		BE3		0.905587			
		BE4		0.905337			
		BE5		0.911679			
		BE6		0.888950			
		BE7		0.834413			
		BE8		0.872238			
<b>BRAND PREFERENCE</b>	5		0.945253		0.868921	0.000	82.246188
		BP1		0.838330			
		BP2		0.881135			
		BP3		0.873205			
		BP4		0.794444			
		BP5		0.871043			
<b>BRAND IDENTIFICATION</b>	3		0.932782		0.756966	0.000	88.208496
		BI1		0.863155			
		BI2		0.834377			
		BI3		0.888041			
<b>OPPOSITIONAL BRAND LOYALTY</b>			0.957764		0.869197	0.000	88.835683
		O1		0.907178			
		O2		0.856858			
		O3		0.931475			
		O4		0.891074			
<b>WELL-BEING</b>	5		0.922582		0.896224	0.000	78.827590
		WB1		0.879969			
		WB2		0.877458			
		WB3		0.892000			
		WB4		0.853973			
		WB5		0.553241			

The reliability of the factor structure was verified through the Cronbach's Alpha. The results were above 0,9 which indicates that the items possess a very internal consistency. The KMO indexes found were all over 0,7 and the Bartlett's sphericity tests were all equal to 0,00. These results indicate the existence of a correlation between variables. . In relation to the explained variance, all values were above 78%, which means that all variables are significative in explaining the data.

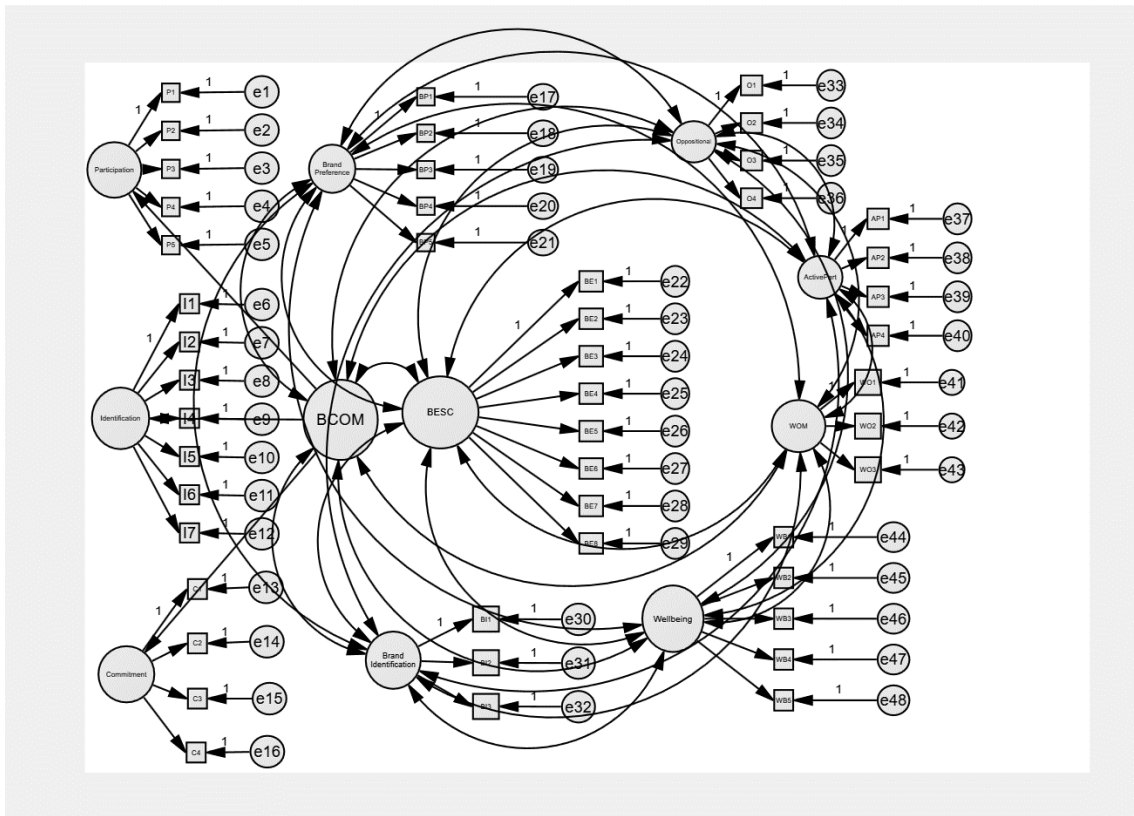
#### **4.6.3- Confirmatory Factor Analysis:**

After presenting the results of the EFA we can now present the results of CFA. The main objective of the CFA is to verify the factor structure that has been proposed without significant modifications, therefore, unlike the EFA, we cannot conduct the CFA unless the researcher has information on the factor structure, established via previous literature or studies. The CFA is used as a technique of evaluating the adjustment quality of the measurement model with the observed correlational structure amongst the items (Marôco, 2014).

The SEM comprises two key components. The causal nature, since its represented by a number of latent variables and the second one, which involves the representation of a theoretical model in order to depict the relations amongst these variables. (Marôco, 2014), Being a multivariate technique, the SEM allows the use of unbound networks for each set of dependent variables. This modeling provides a mode adequate and efficient estimation technique when compared to a set of separate but independent regression equations that must be estimated (Hair et al., 2013). It is also important to mention that the variable Brand Community was measured through a 2<sup>nd</sup> order hierarchy with the variables Participation, Commitment and Identification.

This representation can be seen in Figure 3:

**Figure 3: Initial Measurement Model**



#### 4.6.4- Model Fit:

There is a variety of measurements proposed by literature, in order to evaluate the quality of the adjustment of the model from the data of the sample. With this diversity, the problem of choosing the most fitting measurement tools for the data rises. Contrary to other techniques of multivariable analysis, there is not a consensus regarding the best statistical tests to be made that evaluate the adjustment of the model of data (Lisboa et al., 2012, p.428).

Therefore, following the literature of (Lisboa et al., 2012; Marôco, 2014), the results of some of the most utilized measures to evaluate the adjustment precision of the model will be presented. There measures are: Chi-Square  $\chi^2$ , the Comparative Fit Index (CFI), Tucker-Lewis fit Index (TLI), the incremental Fit Index (IFI) and the Root Mean Square Error of Approximation (RMSEA). In Table 19 we present the interpretation of the values found in each of these measurements:

**Table 19: Model Fit**

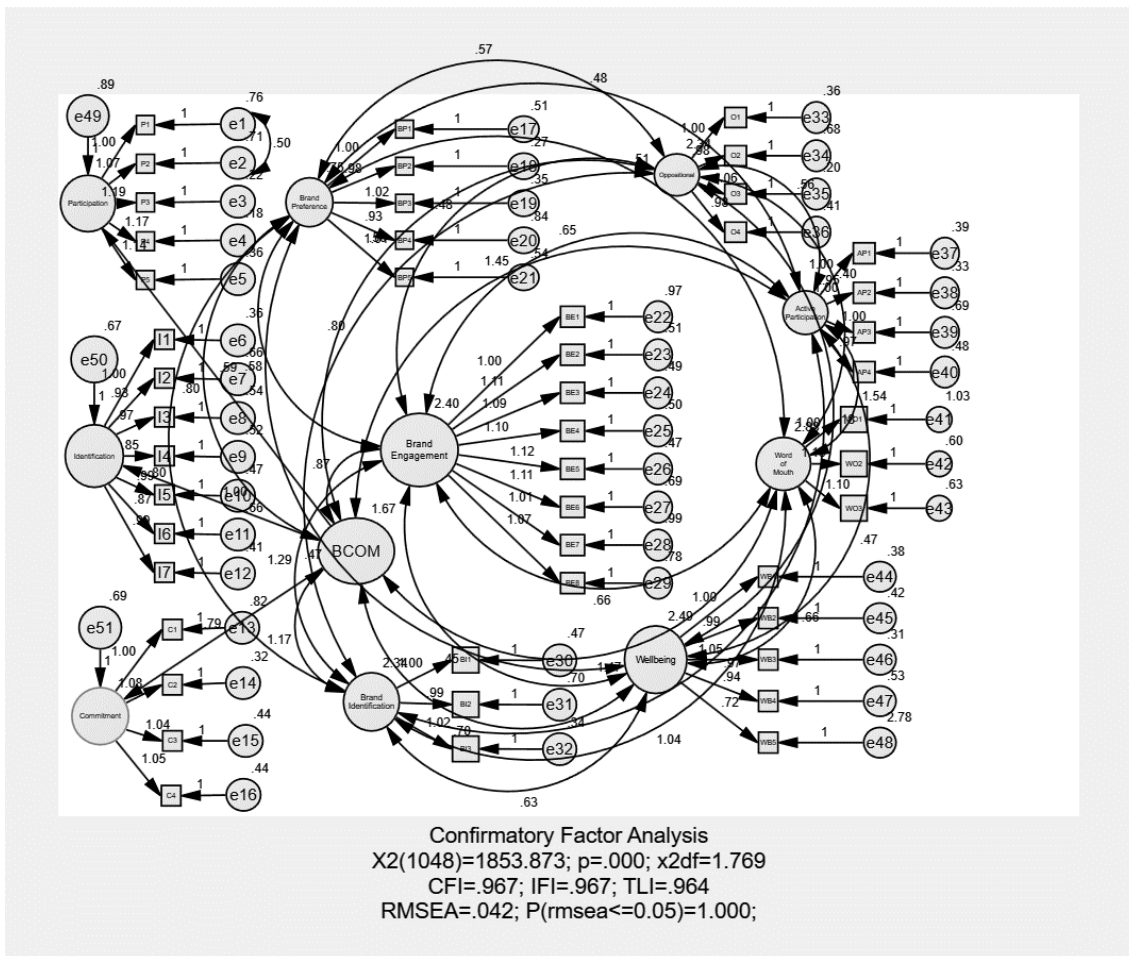
Indicator	Values	Reference
$\chi^2$	-	The smaller, the better (Marôco, 2014)
$\chi^2/df$	<5	Bad Fit
	]2;5]	Average Fit
	]1;2]	Good Fit
	~1	Very good Fit
CFI TLI	<0,8	Bad Fit
	[0,8;0,90[	Average Fit
	[0,9;0,95[	Good Fit
	≥0.95	Very Good Fit
IFI	≥0.95	Very Good Fit (Lisboa et al., 2012)
RMSEA	>0,10	Unacceptable Fit
	]0,05;0,10]	Acceptable Fit
	≤0,05	Very Good Fit

The results of the Initial Measurement Model were near the intended ones, apart from  $\chi^2$  and  $\chi^2/df$  indicators shy of the intended results. In order to artificially optimize the model, we proceeded to analyze the modification indices to investigate the possibility of a better adjustment. After analyzing the modification indices, some changes were necessary, in order to improve the model adjustment. The criteria to improve our model followed the literature of (Marôco, 2014). The model presented 1048 degrees of freedom which demonstrates a good adjustment. The values of IFI, CFI, TLI and RMSEA all demonstrated very good results. Below we present the values of the global fit and the final measurement model.

**Table 20: Measurements of the Global Fit**

Global fit	Sample
$\chi^2$	1853.873
DF	1048
IFI	0.967
TLI	0.964
CFI	0.967
RMSEA	0.42

**Figure 4: Final Measurements Model**



#### 4.6.5-Quality of the Measurement Model:

After analyzing and evaluating the measurement model, and confirming an overall good global adjustment it is important to evaluate the parts that comprise the measurement model. (Lisboa et al., 2012). In order to proceed an evaluation of the measurement model has to be conducted therefore, it is important to measure the individual-item reliability, the latent variable reliability and the average variance extracted of each factors as explained by (Marôco, 2014).

#### 4.6.6-Individual Item Reliability:

The individual item reliability, is estimated by the fraction of the variable's variance that is explained by its latent factor, therefore, it is measured by the squared correlation between the latent variable and each of its indicators (Lisboa et al., 2012; Marôco, 2014). This correlation is referred as the Multiple Correlation Coefficient ( $R^2$ ). Generally the researchers are looking for  $R^2$  values  $<0,25$  in order to identify if the factor explains less than 25% of the variance manifested, indicating that there is an adjustment problem within a variable (Marôco, 2014).

Table 21 displays the individual values of the Standardized Regression Weights (SRW):

**Table 21: CFA Results – SRW (Standardized Regression Weights) and C.R (Critical Ratio)**

Items	Estimate	C.R
<b>Participation</b>	0.628	11570
<b>Identification</b>	0.845	-
<b>Commitment</b>	0.774	13982
<b>Participation</b>		
<b>P1</b>	0.81	-
<b>P2</b>	0.839	37.203
<b>P3</b>	0.951	25.589
<b>P4</b>	0.959	25.909
<b>P5</b>	0.917	24.085
<b>Identification</b>		



<b>I1</b>	0.93	-
<b>I2</b>	0.868	29.261
<b>I3</b>	0.897	32.189
<b>I4</b>	0.874	29.817
<b>I5</b>	0.91	33.587
<b>I6</b>	0.854	27.979
<b>I7</b>	0.92	34.844
<b>Commitment</b>		
<b>C1</b>	0.823	-
<b>C2</b>	0.928	24.822
<b>C3</b>	0.899	23.618
<b>C4</b>	0.901	23.691
<b>Brand Engagement in Self-Concept</b>		
<b>BE1</b>	0.844	-
<b>BE2</b>	0.924	26.918
<b>BE3</b>	0.923	26.889
<b>BE4</b>	0.924	26.942
<b>BE5</b>	0.93	27.271
<b>BE6</b>	0.901	25.598
<b>BE7</b>	0.843	22.719
<b>BE8</b>	0.883	24.639
<b>Brand Preference</b>		
<b>BP1</b>	0.881	-
<b>BP2</b>	0.928	29.646
<b>BP3</b>	0.916	28.773
<b>BP4</b>	0.801	21.868
<b>BP5</b>	0.876	26.021
<b>Oppositional Brand Loyalty</b>		
<b>O1</b>	0.931	-
<b>O2</b>	0.876	29.958
<b>O3</b>	0.964	41.148
<b>O4</b>	0.919	34.717
<b>Active Participation</b>		
<b>AP1</b>	0.94	-
<b>AP2</b>	0.948	40.214
<b>AP3</b>	0.899	33.167
<b>AP4</b>	0.924	36.433
<b>Well-Being</b>		
<b>WB1</b>	0.932	-
<b>WB2</b>	0.925	35.429
<b>WB3</b>	0.948	38.758
<b>WB4</b>	0.898	32.146
<b>WB5</b>	0.563	13.395
<b>Word of Mouth</b>		

<b>WO1</b>	0.858	-
<b>WO2</b>	0.927	26.759
<b>WO3</b>	0.92	26.472
<b>Brand Identification</b>		
<b>BI1</b>	0.913	-
<b>BI2</b>	0.875	27.533
<b>BI3</b>	0.937	32.046

#### 4.6.7-Composite Reliability:

Composite reliability is an indicator used to measure how each latent variable is measured by its respective indicators (Lisboa et al., 2012). In order for this indicator to be indicative of composite reliability, its value should be above 0,7 (Hair et al., 2013). The Cronbach's Alpha is also considered important for this analysis, where variables considered appropriate should result in an alpha over 0,7 (Marôco, 2014). The Composite For a factor  $j$  with  $k$  items, the composite reliability is calculated through the following mathematic equation (Fornell & Larcker, 1981):

$$\widehat{CR}_j = \frac{(\sum_{i=1}^k \lambda_{ij})^2}{(\sum_{i=1}^k \lambda_{ij})^2 + \sum_{i=1}^k \epsilon_{ij}}$$

Where  $\lambda_{ij}$  represent the factorial weights in a standardized form and  $\epsilon_{ij} = R^2 \approx \lambda_{ij}^2$

Reliability values of the studied variables can be seen in table 22, in accordance with the stipulated values by the literature:

#### 4.6.8-Average Variance Extracted:

This indicator measures the proportion of variance of the indicators affect to the measurement of a determined latent variable to that same latent variable (Lisboa et al., 2012). For this indicator to be considered acceptable its value should be at least 0,5 (Hair et al., 2013; Marôco, 2014). For a factor  $j$  with  $k$  items, the Average Variance

Extracted is calculated through the following mathematic equation (Fornell & Larcker, 1981):

$$AVE = \frac{\sum_{i=1}^k \lambda^2 ij}{\sum_{i=1}^k \lambda^2 ij + \sum_{i=1}^k \epsilon ij}$$

The AVE values of the studied variables can be seen in table 22, in accordance with the stipulated values by the literature:

**Table 22: Standard Deviation, Correlation Matrix and Cronbach's Alpha-Final CFA**

Variable	SD	X1	X2	X3	X4	X5	X6	X7	X8	C.R	AVE
Brand Community	1.291	0.954								0.796	0.569
Brand Identification	1.53	0.594	0.933							0.934	0.826
Word of Mouth	1.698	0.672	0.403	0.928						0.929	0.814
Well-Being	1.577	0.342	0.26	0.247	0.923					0.936	0.749
Active Participation	1.717	0.654	0.367	0.527	0.172	0.961				0.961	0.861
Oppositional Brand Loyalty	1.529	0.255	0.34	0.156	0.073	0.212	0.958			0.958	0.852
Brand Preference	1.323	0.468	0.396	0.227	0.225	0.213	0.28	0.945		0.946	0.777
Brand Engagement in Self-Concept	1.548	0.433	0.544	0.25	0.182	0.245	0.203	0.286	0.97	0.971	0.805

## 5- Results:

### 5.1- Introduction:

In this chapter we will proceed to the analysis of the results from the statistical analysis. In a first stage it will be discussed the model estimation as well as the hypothesis thesis, followed by the discussion of the obtained results from the community dimensions as well as its consequents. In a later stage of this chapter we will present a summary of the results. These analyses were conducted using *IBM SPSS AMOS*.

### 5.2- Hypotheses testing:

For the structural model, the indices to evaluate the adjustment quality can be found in table 19. The results revealed that the estimated structural model had indices within adequate levels:  $\chi^2$  2117.27=,  $df$  =1059  $\chi^2/df$  =1.999, IFI =0.956, TLI =0.953, CFI= 0.956 and RMSEA =0.48.

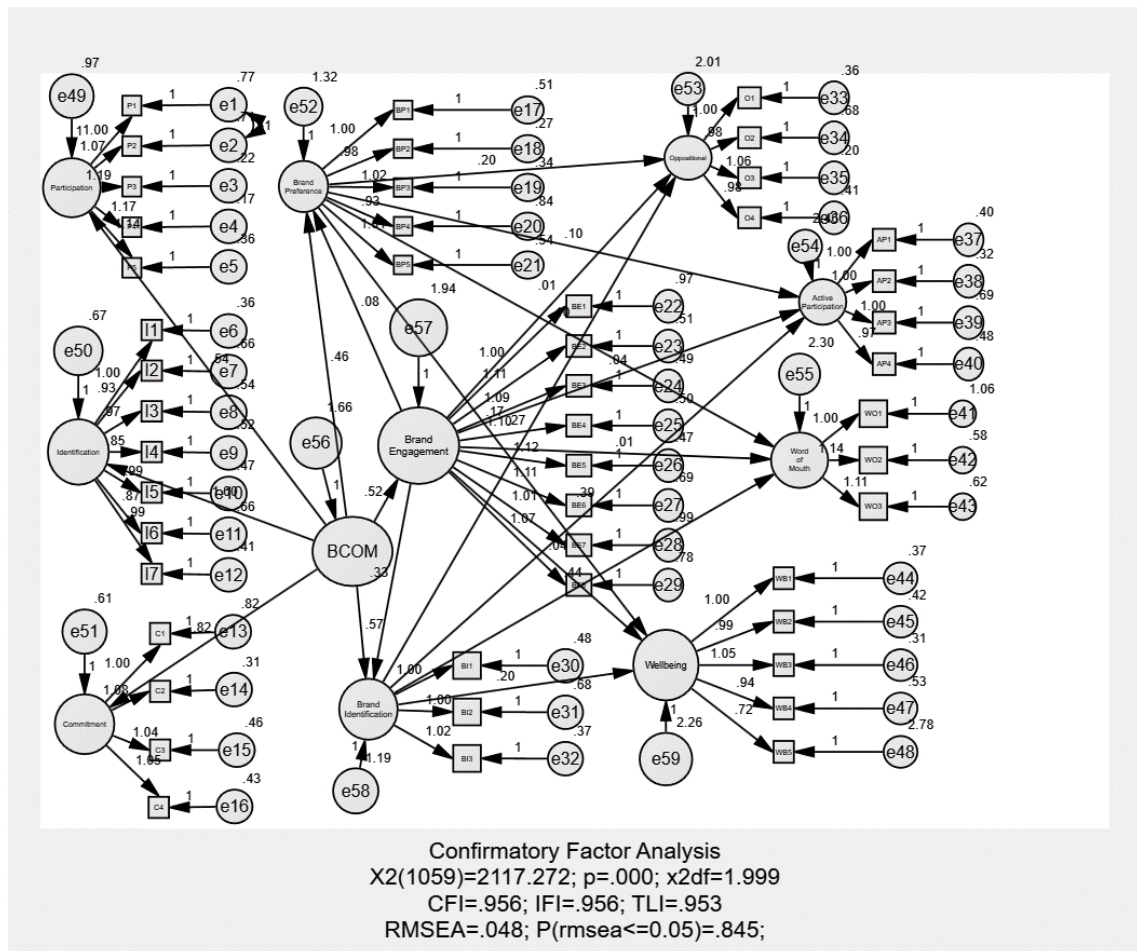
**Table 23: Structural Model adjustment indices**

Global fit	Sample
$\chi^2$	2117.272
DF	1059
IFI	0.956
TLI	0.953
CFI	0.956
RMSEA	0.48

The overall results of the structural model adjustment levels suffered a slight decrease from the previous model fit, however these values are considered within

adequate levels from values ranges from table 19. The structural model is presented below in figure 5:

**Figure 5: Final Structural Model**



Now that we presented the Structural Model and its adjustment indices it is possible to proceed to the hypotheses tests. This stage is one of the most important parts of a research since it allows to verify if the hypotheses previously deduced from the literature apply to this specific research. Following the structural equation modeling, the results find statistical significance when P is inferior to 0,05.

Bellow we present the results from hypotheses test:

**Table 24 – Hypothesis Test**

			Hypothesis	SRW	P
Brand Preference	<-----	Brand Community	H1a	0.451	**
BESC	<-----	Brand Community	H1b	0.436	**
Brand Identification	<-----	Brand Community	H1c	0.481	**
Oppositional Brand Loyalty	<-----	Brand Preference	H2a	0.174	**
Active Participation	<-----	Brand Preference	H2b	0.078	$p \geq 0,05$
Word of Mouth	<-----	Brand Preference	H2c	0.08	$p \geq 0,05$
Well-Being	<-----	Brand Preference	H2d	0.142	**
Oppositional Brand Loyalty	<-----	BESC	H3a	0.005	$p \geq 0,05$
Active Participation	<-----	BESC	H3b	0.034	$p \geq 0,05$
Word of Mouth	<-----	BESC	H3c	0.013	$p \geq 0,05$
Well-Being	<-----	BESC	H3d	0.035	$p \geq 0,05$
Brand Preference	<-----	BESC	H3e	0.09	$p \geq 0,05$
Brand Identification	<-----	BESC	H3f	0.337	**
Oppositional Brand Loyalty	<-----	Brand Identification	H4a	0.272	**
Active Participation	<-----	Brand Identification	H4b	0.349	**
Word of Mouth	<-----	Brand Identification	H4c	0.394	**
Well-Being	<-----	Brand Identification	H4d	0.197	**

**Note:** \*\*  $p < 0.01$ ; \*  $p < 0.05$ ;  $p \geq 0,05$  (not significant)

As predicted after analyzing the hypotheses test, the relationships between brand community and Brand Preference, Brand Engagement in Self-Concept (BESC) and Brand Identification proved to have statistical validity. The relationship between Brand Community and Brand Preference described in H1a (SRW=0.451;  $p < 0.01$ ), Brand Community and BESC, described in H1b (SRW=0.436;  $p < 0.01$ ) and the relationship between Brand community and Brand Identification, described H1c (SRW=0.481;  $p < 0.01$ ) have been statistically accepted, therefore, supporting H1a, H1b and H1c.

Regarding Brand Preference it was possible to determine two distinct outcomes. The first one, is the positive relationship between Brand Preference and Oppositional Brand Loyalty (SRW=0.174;  $p < 0.01$ ), described in the hypothesis H2a and the positive relationship between Brand Preference and Well-Being (SRW=0.142;  $p < 0.01$ ), represented through the hypothesis H2d. The second outcome is the rejection of the

relationship between Brand Preference and Active Participation (SRW=0.078;  $p>0.05$ ), described in H2b and the rejection between Brand Preference and Word of Mouth (H2c) (SRW=0.08;  $p>0.05$ ).

The variable Brand Engagement in Self-Concept (BESC) demonstrated to be the most problematic. Contrary to expectations, we rejected its relationships with all variables except for Brand Identification. We rejected the relationship between BESC and Oppositional Brand Loyalty, described in H3a (SRW=0.005;  $p>0.05$ ), Active Participation (H3b) (SRW=0.034;  $p>0.05$ ), Word of Mouth (H3c) (SRW=0.013;  $p>0.05$ ), Well-Being (H3d) (SRW=0.035;  $p>0.05$ ) and Brand Preference (H3e) (SRW=0.09;  $p>0.05$ ). However, it was possible to confirm significance from the relationship with BESC and Brand Identification, described as H3f, (SRW=0.337;  $p<0.01$ ).

Regarding Brand Identification all its relationships found statistical support. Its relationship with Oppositional Brand Loyalty (H4a) (SRW=0.272;  $p<0.01$ ), Active Participation (H4b) (SRW=0.349;  $p<0.01$ ), Word of Mouth (H4c) (SRW=0.394;  $p<0.01$ ) and Well-Being (H4d) (SRW=0.197;  $p<0.01$ ), were considered relevant, therefore, accepted.

It is concluded the analysis of the study hypotheses, where we were able to conclude pre-established relationships from the literature, carefully to the variables Brand Community and Brand Identification, that proven to have a positive relationship to all established variables. We also denied some previously predicted hypotheses, with the glaring case of Brand Engagement in Self-Concept, that was found to be insignificant in the context of its results. These results present significant impact in extending the literature of Brand Communities.

### **5.3-Discussion:**

Now that the hypotheses are analyzed it is possible to draw conclusions from the evidenced relationships, thus layering a foundation for following studies on the relationships between brand communities through consumer attitude (identification, participation and commitment) and brand performance (through brand identification, brand engagement in self-concept and brand preference), and further consequents such as



the ones predicted through this study (Active Participation, Oppositional Brand Loyalty, Well-Being and Word of Mouth).

### **5.3.1- Consumer Attitude on Brand Community and Brand Performance:**

As previously mentioned, the literature suggested that brand communities display a multitude of dimensions that shape them (Arnould & Price, 1993; Celsi et al., 1993; Fischer et al., 1996; Granitz & Ward, 1996; McAlexander et al., 2002; Muniz & O'Guinn, 2001), given the dynamic nature of brand communities (McAlexander et al., 2002).

As a starting point of construction of the hypothesis, three dimensions of Virtual Brand Communities were identified (identification, participation and commitment), and the statistical analysis successfully supported the relationship of this Virtual Brand Community construct with Brand Preference, Brand Engagement in Self-Concept and Brand Identification, meaning that higher levels of identification with the community and its members, participation within the community and commitment to the community will create a stronger community and therefore have a positive impact on brand performance. This relationship is identified through the hypotheses H1a, H1b and H1c respectively.

These results are aligned with previous research such as the study on social influence of brand communities from European car clubs by Algesheimer et al. that suggested the impact of group identification and engagement behaviors within a community and its influence on brand loyalty (Algesheimer et al., 2005), the role of brand community commitment on attitudinal loyalty and purchase intentions (Algesheimer et al., 2005; Hur et al., 2011; Jang et al., 2007) and the positive influence of community interaction on brand identification and brand preference (Millán & Díaz, 2014).

### **5.3.2-Brand Engagement in Self-Concept:**

Brand Engagement in Self-Concept was considered the second key part of this study since we identified the importance on measuring how its individual-based perspective associated with social elements of consumer-brand relationship (Gambetti et

al., 2012; Sprott et al., 2009) would perform. However, this variable was underwhelming since most of the established relationships did not meet the statistical criteria required. Its relationship with Oppositional Brand Loyalty, Active participation, Word of Mouth, Well-Being and Brand Preference portrayed in the hypotheses H3a, H3b, H3c, H3d and H3e was not supported by the results of the statistical analysis. The only positive relationship of BESC was H3f, portraying its relationship with Brand Identification, corroborating the findings of the fourth study by (Sprott et al., 2009).

### **5.3.3- Brand Preference and Brand Identification Outcomes:**

Regarding Brand Preference, we concluded two sets of results. The first set is the positive relationship of Brand Preference with Oppositional Brand Loyalty (H2a) and Well-Being (H2d). Oppositional Brand Loyalty was measured as a direct consequence of the choices individuals make, such as purchase intentions and brand preference, corroborating the findings of (Y. F. Kuo & Feng, 2013; Muniz & Hamer, 2001; Muniz & O'Guinn, 2001; Thompson & Sinha, 2008). The relationship between Brand Preference and well-being, followed the literature linking the favoritism individuals place over certain brands, in order to confirm their own values and achieve an idealized self-abstract image (Bergami & Bagozzi, 2000; Grzeskowiak & Sirgy, 2007; Sirgy et al., 2006).

However, we could not verify the relationship between Brand Preference and participative behaviors such as Active Participation (H2b) and Word of Mouth (H2c). This hypothesis was explored as an exploration of participative studies such as the example of the outcomes of Brand Love and Brand Loyalty on Word of Mouth (Carroll & Ahuvia, 2006), to which we could not corroborate.

The same outcomes were all identified as valid, while concerning Brand Identification. We concluded that the relationships between Brand Identification and Oppositional Brand Loyalty (H4a), Active Participation (H4b), Word of Mouth (H4c) and Well-Being (H4d) were all statistically valid, confirming the literature of (R. Bagozzi & Dholakia, 2002; Bergami & Bagozzi, 2000; Carlson et al., 2008; Dholakia et al., 2004; Muniz & O'Guinn, 2001).

#### **5.4- Conclusion:**

We concluded the discussion of the observed results from the research model. It is important to highlight the key points of this study. Regarding the construct of Brand Communities through identification, participation and commitment, we concluded that these have in fact a positive influence on Brand Preference, Brand Identification and Brand Engagement in Self-Concept. It was also possible to find out that Brand Identification is a consistent variable regarding all the presenting outcomes. BESC was considered an outlier in this study, since it was only possible to confirm its relationship with Brand Identification. Finally, regarding Brand Preference it was interesting to observe its importance on generating Oppositional Brand Loyalty and increasing the individuals' Well-Being through self-expression, and its apparent inability in generating online traffic through interactions and posts to which we included Word of Mouth and Active Participation.

## **6- Conclusion:**

This chapter is dedicated to the final considerations of this dissertation, regarding the importance of managing virtual brand communities in the context of eSports. In the next topics, the goal is to present a summary of the conclusions drawn from the obtained results, the theoretical and practical contributions of the study as well, the limitations of the study as well as a discussion and possible guidelines for future research.

This study aimed to demonstrate how virtual brand communities can impact brand performance, in order to generate word of mouth, participation, oppositional brand loyalty and the overall well-being of the individuals. Following the literature such as (Algesheimer et al., 2005; Casaló et al., 2007; Hur et al., 2011; McAlexander et al., 2002; Muniz & O'Guinn, 2001; Woisetschlager et al., 2008), it was possible to achieve a better understanding of the most significant variables regarding brand communities as well as its nuances and relationships.

This empirical study was based on data collection through a questionnaire, via social media, the large majority from the platform "Reddit", where it was possible to gather 432 answers, comprised of a predominantly male audience from the age range from 18 to 25 years old. This questionnaire featured an introduction of the research's study, the goals of the study, some questions regarding the community the interviewees belong, the brand and some personal questions regarding their well-being.

After collecting the data, we proceeded to measure it through the Structural Equations Model (SEM), using IBM SPSS for the creation of the database and IBM SPSS AMOS to analyze the study's hypotheses. The EFA and CFA analyses were considered as satisfactory, as it was shown on sections 4.6.2 and 4.6.3.

The hypotheses study revealed that brand communities (which was measured as a second order variable through identification, participation and commitment) had a positive influence on brand identification, brand preference and brand engagement in self-concept. This result revealed the significance of virtual brand communities as the literature suggested.

Brand identification corroborated its relationship with word of mouth, active participation, oppositional brand loyalty and well-being. However, brand preference was not indicative of generating word of mouth and active participation.

Contrary to the predicted results, brand engagement in self-concept did not corroborate its relationships, except for its relationship with brand identification.

### **6.1-Theoretical Implications**

The growth of social media platforms urged companies to intensify their presence on websites such as Reddit. Enthusiasts of the brand will better spread its message across their social networks than non-fans. However, the existence of a virtual brand community around a brand will not guarantee that a company will establish a successful on-going relationships with these members (Akrouf & Nagy, 2018). This study contributes to this problem in various ways, to which we will proceed to explain.

In a first instance by identifying key determinants such as identification, participation and commitment within a virtual brand community, this research underlines the importance of the social aspect of virtual brand communities. These determinants were previously studied in other studies separately, see also (Hur et al., 2011; Woisetschlager et al., 2008), however the study of these three determinants simultaneously was yet to be measured.

Most of the literature regarding brand communities explore the nature of brand communities, and the measurement of community effects. However, there are few studies on how to implement and manage both company-run virtual brand communities and communities managed by “enthusiast”, one good example of this nuance is the study of (Almeida et al., 2012) that measures the moderating impact of the type of management of a community. This research however sets some good pointers and guidelines for managers to follow in order to increase the community’s engagement and loyalty. Another theoretical contribution of this study relies on the fact that there is a scarcity of virtual brand communities aligned to the context of eSports.

Oppositional Brand Loyalty generated through a community not only will increase brand loyalty but will also weaken the rival brands. It brings a set of competitive benefits to businesses, the exploration of how it is formed is an important research issue. However, there is little importance given to the study of this variable and requires deeper investigation. Such problem is pointed out by (Kuo & Hou, 2017; Kuo & Feng, 2013). This study highlights the importance of this variable, given its formation through communities, mediated by brand identification and brand preference.

Finally, this study has the advantage of portraying a multi-community approach, where most of the literature focus the study of a specific community, or a small group of communities.

## **6.2-Practical Implications**

Brand communities are a staple for brand and consumer relationships (McAlexander et al., 2002). As mentioned in the literature review, virtual brand communities are growing in importance, and brands show view these communities as a competitive factor, since the participation within one community may lead to weaken the participation of individuals in other communities, or even lead to antagonistic behaviors towards other communities (Kuo & Hou, 2017). It is important for firms to understand how to manage these communities, so that they can increase their brand equity. Some methods they can utilize to measure the community's success is analytics, feedback obtention and study the performance of controllable variables of the community (e.g. defining if the community should be managed by the company itself or giving the resources to individuals to allow them to build a consumer-focused community).

The gaming market in general, consists on a plethora of parallel markets, that thrive off each other, such as the computer parts market (e.g. Graphics Cards market, with Nvidia and AMD both entering the eSports communities through sponsoring) or the energy drinks market (e.g. Red Bull, Monster and GFuel) . Therefore, this study can also be considered as a pillar for companies present in this vast ecosystem.

### **6.3-Limitations and Recommendations for Future Research**

Even though this study presented a successful contribution to the literature of brand communities there were some limitations to be considered. The first limitation centers around the fact that the sample present in this study did not present a probabilistic character. Due to the lack of time, resources and the limitations of the characteristics of some social networks, it was impossible to collect a sample that perfectly could be extrapolated to the overall population. Social platforms such as YouTube, Twitch.tv and Instagram were considered difficult to share the questionnaire, due to the short character interactions, and the adequacy of the posts in comment sections. Another limitation regarding the sample, is the lack of answers from influential communities such as the “League of Legends subreddit” and the “Counterstrike Go subreddit” due to community guidelines prohibiting surveys. Most of these communities were studied regarding one specific community, even though some individuals may belong to multiple communities. It would be considered as relevant the study of these communities independently and the comparison of the results, since some of these communities present significant differences in the individuals that comprise them.

As for the future research, there is a need for the study of virtual brand communities, given its core importance to the field of marketing, and the context of the digital era that consumers live. It was also identified the lack of the social aspect of virtual communities is underexplored, as mentioned by ( Bagozzi & Dholakia, 2002).

For this study the variables Identification, Participation (Woisetschlager et al., 2008) and Commitment (Hur et al., 2011), were considered the attitudinal aspects present in our definition of communities. Other studies should elaborate different community dimensions, as mentioned by (McAlexander et al., 2002) as well as a more in depth focus of virtual brand communities, given the fact that this study only covered a portion of the differences these communities have, when compared to traditional ones.

In order to complement this study, it would be relevant to measure the motivations behind individuals participation within a community, such as (e.g., Hedonic Benefits (Akrouf & Nagy, 2018)).

As previously mentioned, literature on how to manage virtual communities is rare, therefore, a study with the emphasis on the managerial implications on virtual communities would benefit the understanding of this concept.

Finally, more relationships could be studied regarding brand performance, such as the case of brand loyalty (Carroll & Ahuvia, 2006; Hur et al., 2011), Brand Commitment (Kuo & Hou, 2017) and other possible outcomes such as Repurchase Intentions (Hur et al., 2011).



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## Appendix I:

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# Survey about the importance of managing virtual brand communities in the eSports industry.

This survey has the purpose of collecting data within the scope of a dissertation of the Masters in Marketing from the Faculty of Economics of the University of Coimbra. The survey is anonymous and strictly confidential. There are no right or wrong answers, just a request for an honest feedback.

The only information I can give about this survey (without creating a bias), is its intention, which is to measure the way virtual brand communities interact and why they are important to brands within the eSports ecosystem.

Examples of eSports brands(not a closed list!!!):

- Games: League of Legends, CSGO, Fortnite, among others...
- Teams: Fnatic, Team Liquid, etc.
- Game Publishers: Blizzard

Examples of communities (not a closed list!!!):

- Subreddits
- Facebook groups
- Discord servers
- Twitch
- Youtube
- Online Forums

\*Obrigatório

Do you follow any eSports related brand through social media, forums, reddit, Twitch, Discord, etc? \*

- Yes
- No

SEGUINTE

Nunca envie palavras-passe através dos Google Forms.

# Survey about the importance of managing virtual brand communities in the eSports industry.

\*Obrigatório

**Now please indicate the name of a eSports brand that you like, and the platform/community that you use to keep up with said brand:**

Some examples of Brands, communities/platforms are given in the introduction:

Answer as follows: BRAND: \_\_\_\_\_ SOCIAL MEDIA  
PLATFORM: \_\_\_\_\_ \*

A sua resposta

ANTERIOR SEGUINTE

Nunca envie palavras-passe através dos Google Forms.

# Survey about the importance of managing virtual brand communities in the eSports industry.

\*Obrigatório

**These next statements are related to the community/platform that you just mentioned:**

Indicate your level of agreement / disagreement with each of the following statements

\*

	1-Strongly disagree	2	3	4- Neither agree nor disagree	5	6	7- I Totally Agree
Members of the this community help each other	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
When I seek for advice, I am likely to find someone supportive in this community.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I found new friends as a result of joining this community	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Friendships in this community are important to me.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Social contacts and friendships are supported by this community's offers for interaction.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

## Survey about the importance of managing virtual brand communities in the eSports industry.

\*Obrigatório

These next statements are related to the community/platform that you just mentioned:

Indicate your level of agreement / disagreement with each of the following statements

\*

	1-Strongly disagree	2	3	4- Neither agree nor disagree	5	6	7- I Totally Agree
I can identify with this community.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I see myself as a typical and representative member of this community.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I see myself as belonging to this community	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I feel like I belong in this community.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
This community plays a part in my everyday life.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I have strong feelings for this community	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
This virtual community confirms in many aspects my view of who I am.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

# Survey about the importance of managing virtual brand communities in the eSports industry.

\*Obrigatório

**These next statements are related to the community/platform that you just mentioned:**

Indicate your level of agreement / disagreement with each of the following statements

\*

	1-Strongly disagree	2	3	4- Neither agree nor disagree	5	6	7- I Totally Agree
I will exchange information and opinions with the members of this brand community	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I will collect information through this brand community	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I will visit this brand community continuously	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I feel a sense of belonging in this brand community	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

ANTERIOR

SEGUINTE

## Survey about the importance of managing virtual brand communities in the eSports industry.

\*Obrigatório

**These next statements are related to the community/platform that you just mentioned:**

Indicate your level of agreement / disagreement with each of the following statements

\*

	1-Strongly disagree	2	3	4- Neither agree nor disagree	5	6	7- I Totally Agree
I have encouraged other people to join this Community	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I have said positive things about this community to other people	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I have recommended this community to people who seek my advice.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

## Survey about the importance of managing virtual brand communities in the eSports industry.

\*Obrigatório

**These next statements are related to your PARTICIPATION in the community:**

Indicate your level of agreement / disagreement with each of the following statements

\*

	1-Strongly disagree	2	3	4- Neither agree nor disagree	5	6	7- I Totally Agree
In general, I'm very motivated to participate actively in the virtual community activities	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
In general, I participate in order to stimulate our virtual community	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I usually provide useful information to other community members	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
In general, I post messages and responses in the community with great excitement and frequency	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>



# Survey about the importance of managing virtual brand communities in the eSports industry.

\*Obrigatório

These next statements are related to your FAVOURITE BRANDS in general:

Indicate your level of agreement / disagreement with each of the following statements

\*

	1-Strongly disagree	2	3	4- Neither agree nor disagree	5	6	7- I Totally Agree
I have a special bond with the brands that I like.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I consider my favorite brands to be a part of myself.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I often feel a personal connection between my brands and me.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Part of me is defined by important brands in my life.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I feel as if I have a close personal connection with the brands I most prefer.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I can identify with important brands in my life.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
There are links between the brands that I prefer and how I view myself	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
My favorite brands are an important indication of who I am.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

## Survey about the importance of managing virtual brand communities in the eSports industry.

\*Obrigatório

**These next statements are related to the ONE BRAND that you previously mentioned:**

Indicate your level of agreement / disagreement with each of the following statements

\*

NOTE: In case you havent been asked a name of a brand, (due to answering "NO" in the 2nd section) please think of one brand that you associate with, and answer according with it:

	1-Strongly disagree	2	3	4- Neither agree nor disagree	5	6	7- I Totally Agree
I think this brand is superior to other competing brands	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I prefer this brand	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
When considering purchasing the service, I would consider this brand first	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I am not interested in trying other brands	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I do not intend to replace my provider (game publisher/dev) with other brands	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

# Survey about the importance of managing virtual brand communities in the eSports industry.

\*Obrigatório

**These next statements are related to the brand that you just mentioned:**

Indicate your level of agreement / disagreement with each of the following statements

\*

NOTE: In case you haven't been asked a name of a brand, (due to answering "NO" in the 2nd section) please think of one brand that you associate with, and answer the following questions according with it:

	1-Strongly disagree	2	3	4- Neither agree nor disagree	5	6	7- I Totally Agree
I feel that my personality and the personality of this brand are very similar	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I have a lot in common with other people using this brand	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I feel that my values and the values of this brand are very similar	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

# Survey about the importance of managing virtual brand communities in the eSports industry.

\*Obrigatório

These next statements are related to **COMPETITORS** of the brand that you mentioned:

Indicate your level of agreement / disagreement with each of the following statements

\*

	1-Strongly disagree	2	3	4- Neither agree nor disagree	5	6	7- I Totally Agree
I will not consider buying products of opposing brands even if the products can better meet consumers' specific needs (e.g., better graphics).	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I will express opposing views or opinions to products of opposing brands even if the products are considered better by other people	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I have low intention to try products of opposing brands even if the products are widely discussed by other people	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I will not recommend people buying products of opposing brands even if an opposing brand has new and better products.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

# Survey about the importance of managing virtual brand communities in the eSports industry.

\*Obrigatório

## These next statements are related to your overall WELL-BEING:

Indicate your level of agreement / disagreement with each of the following statements

\*

	1-Strongly disagree	2	3	4- Neither agree nor disagree	5	6	7- I Totally Agree
In most ways my life is close to my ideal	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
The conditions of my life are excellent	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I am satisfied with my life	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
So far I have gotten the important things I want in life	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
If I could live my life over, I would change almost nothing	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

## Survey about the importance of managing virtual brand communities in the eSports industry.

\*Obrigatório

Finally, we need some information about the profile of the respondents:

Gender \*

- Male
- Female
- Prefer not to say
- Outra:

Age: \*

- <18
- 18-25
- 26-35
- 36-45
- 46-55
- >56

## Appendix II:

Differences in a community specific questionnaire, example: “Street Fighter” subreddit

### Survey about the importance of managing virtual brand communities (the case of /r/StreetFighter)

This survey has the purpose of collecting data within the scope of a dissertation of the Masters in Marketing from the Faculty of Economics of the University of Coimbra. The survey is anonymous and strictly confidential. There are no right or wrong answers, just a request for an honest feedback.

The only information I can give about this survey (without creating a bias), is its intention, which is to measure the way virtual brand communities interact and why they are important to brands within the eSports ecosystem, in this specific case communities such as the /r/StreetFighter subreddit.

SEGUINTE

Nunca envie palavras-passe através dos Google Forms.

Community questions refer to the specific community, and not to the answered community:

### Survey about the importance of managing virtual brand communities (the case of /r/StreetFighter)

\*Obrigatório

These next statements are related to the /r/StreetFighter subreddit:

Questions regarding the brand refer to the brand to which the community is formed around:

## Survey about the importance of managing virtual brand communities (the case of /r/StreetFighter)

\*Obrigatório

These next statements are related to "Street Fighter" as a brand: