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EXPLORING DRIVERS AND OUTCOMES OF COGNITIVE ONLINE BRAND IDENTIFICATION OF SPORTS FASHION IN SOCIAL MEDIA CONTEXT

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Abstract

The present dissertation aims to explore the drivers and consequences of *Cognitive Online Brand Identification* within Portuguese consumers, by investigating how brands can evoke and incite a strong identity connection with their customers, in order to reinforce and strengthen their proximity through a virtual connection with a brand. Furthermore, it seeks to provide insights about the benefits of these relationships and if they can, ultimately, lead to the establishment of brand advocacy as one of the greatest sustainable corporate advantages. Accordingly, a research model was drawn and tested based on social identity theory to explain online customer identification in social media. To better evaluate and scrutinize the proposed model, it was conducted two studies: the secondary data approach, developed to provide insights on the activewear market, where the study was conducted; and quantitative research with the use of primary data to test the model and its hypothesis through partial least square analysis.

The results obtained show that online brand prestige, online brand credibility and lifestyle congruency are, assuredly, related with cognitive online brand identification and its outcomes. However, the relationship between online customer engagement and brand advocacy was not found significant. This can be explained by the fact that to become a brand advocate, fully compromised with the brand and able to forgive any mistake and recommend to others, the online engagement can be part of the process, but it might not be a fundamental requirement as an isolate concept.

Resumo

A presente dissertação tem por objetivo explorar os antecedentes e consequências da *Identificação Cognitiva com uma Marca Online* por parte dos consumidores portugueses, através da investigação sobre como suscitar e encorajar uma forte conexão de identidade com os clientes, por forma a reforçar e fortalecer a sua proximidade virtual com a marca. Adicionalmente, visa providenciar novos conhecimentos sobre os benefícios decorrentes deste relacionamento e, se poderá em último caso, conduzir à constituição de advocacia por uma marca como uma das grandes vantagens competitivas no universo empresarial. Desta forma, foi desenhado e testado um modelo baseado na teoria de identidade social, por forma a explicar a identificação online do cliente nas redes sociais. Para melhor compreender e avaliar o modelo proposto, foram realizados dois estudos: uma abordagem através de dados secundários para proporcionar uma visão do mercado de roupa desportiva, sobre o qual incide o estudo; e uma pesquisa quantitativa com a utilização de dados primários por forma a testar o modelo e as suas hipóteses através da análise de parciais dos mínimos quadrados.

Os resultados obtidos indicam que o prestígio online da marca, a credibilidade online da marca e a congruência com o estilo de vida estão correlacionados com a identificação cognitiva da marca online e com as consequências propostas. No entanto, a relação entre o envolvimento online do consumidor e a advocacia a uma marca não se revelou significativa. O mesmo pode ser explicado pelo facto de para um cliente se tornar defensor de uma marca, integralmente comprometido com esta, disposto a perdoar erros e recomendar a outros indivíduos, o envolvimento online pode fazer parte do processo, mas poderá não ser um requisito fundamental enquanto conceito isolado.

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"Don't judge each day by the harvest you reap,

but by the seed you plant."

Robert Louis Stevenson

1 | INTRODUCTION

In the current digital era, social media has transformed the way businesses communicate with consumers, opening new marketing possibilities and becoming even clear the importance of building and maintaining lasting customer relationships. This paradigm shift in the literature and recent culture adjustment in communication toward a more interactive dialogue, have led to the increase of relevance on some concepts, such as, online brand identification.

During the time of prominent consumer skepticism toward brands, along with the value depreciation of traditional media marketing shifting to a more virtual and two-way communication, questions concerning consumer-brand identification have become even more relevant for brand management (Tuskej, Golob & Podnar, 2013). This concept has been recently explored as an antecedent of customer-brand relationship, however few research has been conducted so far (Adbghani & Tuhin, 2018).

In what concerns to its relevance, scholars argue that the consumer identification process exerts a great influence on the individual consumer behaviour, able to mold their buying decisions, brand preferences, loyalty, commitment, satisfaction, repurchase intention and even encourage positive word-of-mouth (Tuskej et al., 2013). Thus, to generate a valuable and sustainable relationship with a particular trade name, able to evoke strong emotions such as arouse or passion, consumers have to experience a previous identity connection with that certain brand. This connection or identification that can occur with a product, company or with its community members, highly influences the brand perception and emotional commitment of other members with the brand (Palazon, Delgado-Ballester & Sicilia, 2018).

As a valuable relationship-building and extremely globalized tool, social media emerges as a powerful mechanism to greatly promote and encourage this identification phenomenon to happen. Allied to this, in a digital environment individuals are naturally prone to engage in relationships and interact with others of identical interests (Clark & Melancon, 2013). Hence, for a company to be able to strategically build this online identification process, it is decisive to deeply understand what might be the factors that lead consumers to a state of connectedness and self-brand identity, as well as the potential corporate outcomes and benefits that might uprise from this enlightenment.

Research Problematic and Objectives Definition

The core theme of the project, consumer-brand relationships, has been studied and extensively explored by several businesses and researchers since the late nineties of 20th century (Loureiro, 2015). Since then, countless perspectives, concepts, theories, and models have been introduced to investigate the genesis of the relationship between brands and consumers (Adbghani et al., 2018). However, there is a lack of research on how social media communication influences the process of building and maintaining relationships between both parties (Clark et al., 2013; Tuskej et al., 2013), more properly, regarding the concept of brand identification through a digital standpoint.

Most of the research on brand identification in the literature focus mainly on subjects such as, consumer engagement, brand loyalty, brand image, repurchase intention or brand experience, and few have articulated this concept through a structural model adapted to an online reality (Stokburger-Sauer, Ratneshwar & Sen, 2012; Rather, Tehseen & Parrey, 2018; Qiao, Song & Nan, 2021). In addition, there is a paucity of research on the measurement of the social media effectiveness from a relationship marketing approach (Achen, 2017), and it remains limited the studies conducted on the clothing category, particularly concerning the activewear market.

After the research problematic identified, it is now of great importance to define the objectives aimed to accomplish in the present dissertation. Taking this into consideration, this dissertation has the purpose to explore and measure online brand identification and its related dimensions, comprised by three antecedents and three outcomes, in the activewear industry among Portuguese consumers.

Therefore, the objectives of this paper are the following ones:

(1) Explore and understand what might lead consumers to feel more identified with a certain sports fashion brand and what consequences it might bring to an organization in a digital environment.
(2) Achieve the top identification sports fashion brands by Portuguese consumers.
(3) Gather insights about the Portuguese activewear consumers regarding their online purchasing behaviours, social media activity and their demographic profile.

Main Research Questions

Aligned with the objective's definition, the following statements regard the central issues that are going to be addressed in this project with the purpose of facilitating and clarifying the literature research and the hypothesis development. Those statements are:

(1) Can online brand prestige, online brand credibility and lifestyle congruency act as antecedents of cognitive online brand identification in social media context?

(2) Can brand love be a direct outcome of cognitive online brand identification in social media context?

(3) Are online customer engagement and brand advocacy consequences of brand love and, therefore, indirect outcomes of cognitive online brand identification in social media context?

(4) Can online customer engagement be a predictor of brand advocacy in social media context?

Structure of the dissertation

To achieve a clear organization and concise understanding, this dissertation is distributed along five different sections. The first segment is the contextualization and introduction of the theme, where it is explained the relevance of the topic and are discussed the study objectives that aim to be accomplished during the project.

Secondly, a literature review is presented to reveal the current scientifical knowledge around the concepts illustrated in the structural model and its respective hypothesis are developed. Then, it follows the methodology chapter, where two studies will be conducted using primary and secondary data, which is based on a quantitative analysis from an online survey and on the collection of several statistical insights concerning the market under study and the digital context applied. Subsequently it is presented the results discussion, theoretical contributions, and managerial implications of the investigation.

Finally, the conclusions, study limitations and further research recommendations are mentioned in the last segment.

2 | LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 SOCIAL MEDIA

2.1.1 The Role and Impact of Social Media on Corporations

According to Shawky, Kubacki, Dietrich & Weaven (2019), social media has revolutionized the way consumers interact with each other and with the organization itself. It has been proven that social media is currently considered more powerful on building intimate customer-brand relationships than traditional media, given the growth of popularity achieved over the years by these type of channel (Bannor, Asare & Bawole, 2017). The construct provides an inexpensive approach to reach a considerable wide audience and, simultaneously, solves the problem of geographic barriers (Dooley, Jones & Iverson, 2014). Sokolova and Kefi (2020) also claim that in the era of social media boom, is decisive for companies to be present on social platforms and develop strong online marketing strategies.

Social media (SM) brings a vast range of advantages, both for marketers and users. This more recent way of communication allows companies to build interactive relationships, encourage consumer engagement with brands (Ashley & Tuten, 2015; Sashi, 2012), simplifies ongoing information between social marketers, targets the audience and their networks and fosters the audience to develop their own content. Also, it can be seen as a way of stimulating the customer to act as advocates and partners of the organization (Ashley et al., 2015; Gamble & Gilmore, 2013; Sashi, 2012). Breslauer and Smith (2009) added that companies also use social media to increase their website traffic, spot new business opportunities, create communities and collect customers' feedback. Following the perspective of Michaelidou, Siamagka, & Christodoulides (2011), this is also beneficial for customers since it represents another avenue to communicate with the brand and to provide their instant feedback.

This urgent need for brands be closer and in permanent contact with their customers can be justified by the fact that this proximity hugely intensifies the establishment of the brand unique identity in users' minds and represents another approach to differentiate from the remaining market players (Michaelidou, et al., 2011).

2.1.2 UGC, Online Social Networks and the Social Media Environment

During the last decade, the rapid growth of the internet has drastically changed the business landscape since consumers are taking the place of "media" for cooperating to share brand information (Verma & Yadav, 2021).

The construct user-generated content (UGC) can be defined as the content created by consumers in social network platforms (Bilro, Loureiro & Guerreiro, 2019). Indeed, UGC has changed the way individuals communicate, since people are now able to connect with each other in so many different ways than before, including through social network sites, online communities, blogs, and recommendation sites (Hennig-Thurau, Malthouse, Friege, Gensler, Lobschat, Rangaswamy & Skiera, 2010). It also allows consumers to create content and enables the interaction between users and between the companies and their audiences (Dooley et al., 2014).

Compared with the traditional communication, online UGC has some distinctive and particular characteristics that places this type of channel in a privileged position, namely: the intervenients can be identified by usernames or choose to be anonymous; the information generates and processes quickly; has a global reach and has an easy access nature for an undetermined period of time (Wilk, Harrigan & Soutar, 2018). Therefore, in a world where consumers are in control of their online experiences, creating and consuming digital content (Hoffman & Fodor, 2010), online social networks provide an opportunity to build consumer-brand relationships and enlarge the organization reach "*beyond their immediate circles of influence*" (Wilk, et al., 2018 p.1).

2.1.3 Electronic Word-of-Mouth (e-WOM) on Social Media

The concept of e-WOM is considered to be any positive or negative comment made by prior, actual or potential customer about a brand, product or service that has a large reach over the internet (Bilro et al., 2019).

WOM emerges as the most critical and effective communication channel (Keller, 2007), being recognized as one of the information sources most relevant and persuasive on social media sites. This is explained by the fact that consumers highly rely on the knowledge and opinion of others to leverage their awareness regarding certain brands (Park, Hyun & Thavisay, 2021), since it helps them to look for information, find prior comparisons and learn about other consumers' experiences (Pentina, Basmanova & Zhang, 2015).

Recommendations and feedback in the form of e-WOM also relies on the level of trust a customer holds on a certain company (Farzin and Fattahi (2018). Indeed, when a consumer relies on a brand they tend to share their experience and personal assessment with others which, consequently, will help the company to reduce customer acquisition costs (Park et al., 2021). This willingness to continually recommend an organization, highly depends on the level of engagement (Bilro et al., 2019), which is the factor that explains the cognitive response and motivation towards a certain brand and online WOM (Baldus, Voorhees, & Calantone, 2015).

Despite the level of engagement and trust regarding a brand, previous research has also shown the existence of other component that highly impacts the customers' propensity to provide positive brand recommendations and supportive assessment. This component is denoted as customer-brand identification (So, Wu & Xiong, 2018).

2.2 ONLINE BRAND IDENTIFICATION

2.2.1 Online Brand Identification Conceptualization

The term Customer-Brand Identification (CBI) can be defined as the *"consumer's psychological state of perceiving, feeling, and valuing belongingness with a brand"* (So et al., 2018, p.2). As a multidimensional construct, CBI suggests that consumers can develop a strong connection with a brand based on their level of identification with that specific brand (So et al., 2018), experiencing the companies' achievements and failures as their own (Mael & Ashforth, 1990).

In the current era of social media technologies and intense use of internet, marketers are facing new opportunities and challenges to boost their customer-brand relationships. Thus, it is of great importance to maintain permanent contact with their audience by reaching new ways to foster this connection and reinforce their distinctive brand identity (So et al., 2018). This brand identity expresses what a brand provides and stands for (Keller, 2007) and it satisfies far more the consumer symbolic needs than their functional needs (He, Li & Harris, 2012). Accordingly, Rather et al. (2018) affirmed that functionality is not an isolate requirement in the moment of purchasing a good, the meaning a brand adds to customer's lives exerts great influence throughout their decisional path.

Following Wolter and Jr. (2016), CBI is based on a consumer decision to whether or not define their "self" through the incorporation of a brand into their "self-concept". Tuskej and Podnar (2018), defined the construct as a perceived emotion of union and connection with a corporate brand as a commonly shared symbol of a group.

Further scholars added that CBI is stablished in a direct interaction between the consumer and the firm, having in mind their own projected identity (Stokburger-Saueret et al., 2012). Given that consumers tend to link their purchasing objects and respective brands to their own identity, this indicates that brands can actually represent a considerable part of the consumers self (Tuskej et al., 2018). Thus, this induces that the purchasing object portrays considerable symbolic value for both customer's personal and social identification (Podnar, 2015). Moreover, studies have proved that an individual tend to generate a social identity that goes beyond their own personal identity in order to manage and express their sense of self. Thereby, this tendency to seek for identification on brands might be triggered by the customers 'need to fulfil certain self-definitions and consolidate their self-identities (So et al., 2018).

Wolter et al. (2016), stated that this brand identification produces a mutual benefit for both parties. Considering that customers use the brand products and their symbolic properties to communicate part of their identities, on the other hand the organization highly profits from the exhibition, recommendation and from the customer willingness to pay a premium price. Studies carried out by some researchers proved that the individuals' consumption experience is highly regarded by their close reference groups (Josiassen & Assaf, 2013). Thereby, consumers are constantly trying to upgrade or firmly stick to their social self-esteem based on the image of their own social identity modelled by their consumption habits (So et al., 2018).

CBI can also be grouped into a cognitive category, including three distinct factors: (1) the extent to which customers have a similar personality to a certain brand (brand-self similarity), (2) whether or not customers perceive a brand to be unique or distinctive (brand distinctiveness) and (3) if the brand is considered to be prestigious or not (brand prestige) (Susanty & Tresnaningrum, 2018).

2.2.2 Social Identity Theory

In sequence with the literary evidence abovementioned, several scholars have acknowledged the importance of having an effective communication that can motivate customer's identification with corporate brands (Ma, Cherian, Tsai, Sial, Hou & Álvarez-Otero, 2021). This type of identification phenomenon that a customer can develop for a company, can be examined through Social Identity Theory (SIT), first introduced by Henry Tajfel in 1978.

This perspective proposes that all individuals are motivated to achieve and sustain a positive self-concept. To do so, people assemble aspects of their personality by classifying themselves accordingly with a social category (brand) or a social group (other users of the same brand), wherein they sustain a personal identity - distinctive individual characteristics (e.g. achievements and qualities) - and a social identity - salient group characteristics that are recognized as being part of the self (Wilk, et al., 2018). The theory suggests that people who considers themselves to be part of a specific group, frequently recognize that the group's performance influences their personal self-esteem (Kuo & Hou, 2017).

Ma et al. (2021), argues that a company is able to modify the behaviour of consumers by transforming and shaping their self-concept towards that brand. When this brand identification happens, consumers tend to feel as a member of the social group, triggering behaviours of defence and advocacy towards that specific brand. Such behaviours might include promoting the brand, recommending to others on different social media platforms and spread positive electronic word-of-mouth (e-WOM).

Previous research also suggests that brands with an image consistent with an in-group reinforces customers' self-brand connection (Kuo et al., 2017). With this in mind, marketers are battling to stimulate customers' interactions to influence their social identification with social media brand communities (SMBCs). Thus, to arouse this identification it becomes imperative to display relevant and meaningful content that behaves as a catalyst for engagement and genuine interaction (Fujita, Harrigan & Soutar, 2018).

The members' identification with a brand community and their sense of belongingness are known to trigger positive feelings, which can exert a great influence on customers' relationship with the brand, the product, or even other members (Fujita et al., 2018). This

connection leads to overestimating the group' accomplishments to which they belong and underestimate the performance of competitor groups (Kuo et al., 2017).

Given the importance of achieving an online brand identification, scholars and in particular marketers, need to delineate new and more effective strategies to stablish solid and long-lasting relationships to better connect with their audience. Henceforth, it is of great value to determine and clearly understand what might induce individuals to experience and reveal this identification behaviour toward a corporation.

2.3 DRIVERS OF COGNITIVE ONLINE BRAND IDENTIFICATION

2.3.1 Online Brand Prestige

Further research reveals that the perception of a prestigious brand exerts a great influence on consumer behaviour (Tuskej et al., 2018). Brand prestige is considered a reflection of a product high position, unique performance, assured quality and as a consequence, higher price. Prestige represents the consumer's rational or emotional perception regarding a brand and differs from consumer to consumer depending on their social and economic condition (Rahimnia & Sarvari, 2019).

Vigneron & Johnson (1999), stated that the customer assessment of brand prestige can be examined through five factors, depending on a social and individual criteria. Considering the first one, there are three elements that were proved to affect people's perception of prestige based on a **social impact**, which are: (1) individual's wealth and social status, (2) brand or product rareness and (3) social perceived value based on the company membership in certain social groups. In what concerns to the **individual impact**, this construct might vary depending on the consumer (4) perceived enjoy value regarding a psychological and emotional state and (5) the perceived brand quality value.

Despite these differential measures to evaluate brand reputation, the human being manifests a common need for self-enhancement and to incessantly see themselves in a positive light. This aspiration is partially met through customers' identification with prestigious social corporations, inciting a clear relationship between brand prestige and CBI (Stokburger-Sauer et al., 2012). Similarly, the consumer behaviour mentioned is paralleled with the concept of the extended self in which the individual incorporates specific products or services into their sense of self that will positively affect on the owner (Mirbabaie, Stieglitz, Brunker, Hofeditz, Ross & Frick, 2021).

Bachman and Wilkins (2014) also found a link between these two constructs, proposing that the higher the perceived congruity between the self and a brand (CBI), the higher will be the positive assessment of the corporation (brand prestige). Thus, consistently with the literature above mentioned, further empirical support needs to be assembled. Therefore, it is hypothesized that brand prestige is a driver of CBI (see figure 1).

- **H1: Online brand prestige is positively associated with consumers' cognitive online brand identification.**
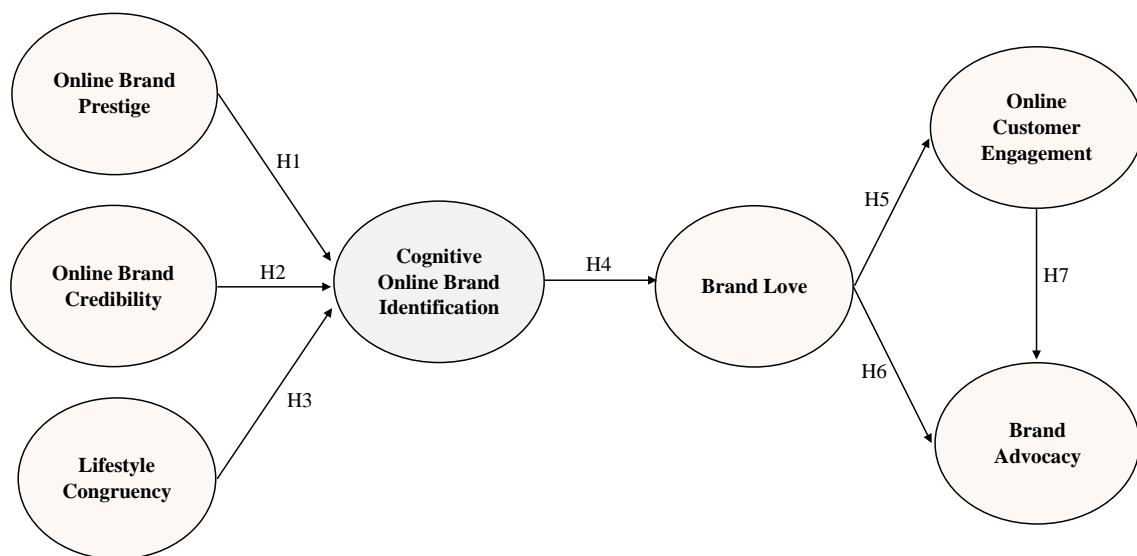
Figure 1 – Proposed Model.

2.3.2 Online Brand Credibility

Brand credibility is described as the trustworthiness of the product information provided by a brand. It requires the consumer perceptiveness of the company regarding their ability (expertise) and willingness (reliability) to comply and fulfil with what it promises (An, Do, Ngo & Quan, 2019).

An et al. (2019), stated that people are in permanent need to make sense of self and the acquisition or incorporation of certain brands represent vital resources for the construction of customers' identity. This brand connection with the self occurs when the corporation manages to help consumers achieve their goals, which are motivated by the self. Considering that individuals identify themselves with social categories or groups to reinforce their self-esteem, consumers are more likely to relate and connect with social

categories or brands that are rated positively, especially when they represent a credible entity.

According to social identity theory, the human being has the tendency to connect with social groups which hold attractive characteristics, reputation, and distinctiveness with the purpose of improving their own image (Bhattacharya & Sen, 2003). There is also evidence that people tend to use trusted brands in order to communicate their self-concept (An et al., 2019). An et al. added that when a brand is perceived as credible due to its declared beliefs and consistent behaviour (such as delivery investment, brand-related values, and brand positioning), consumers are more likely to identify with that corporation. Based on these arguments, it is argued that the level of a consumer identification with a brand is significantly dependent on the company credibility.

- **H2: Online brand credibility positively impacts consumers' cognitive online brand identification.**

2.3.3 Lifestyle Congruency

The concept of lifestyle concerns to the beliefs, attitudes, and aspirations toward life, representing the consumers' psychological preferences and an indicator of their behaviour (Solomon 2015). Tangsupwattana and Liu (2017), argue that the most important information in predicting customers' purchasing behaviour is not their demographic characteristics, but the way of measuring their lifestyle.

This construct expresses a pattern of consumption that dictates the amount of time and money a consumer spends, revelling their identity, as well as their everyday needs and wants. In this perspective, brands work as a mechanism that allows consumers to pursue a certain desired lifestyle, based on their activities, interests, and opinions (Manthiou, Kang, Hyun & Fu, 2018). Under this view, lifestyle congruency (LC) is defined as the extent to which the brand supports their consumers' way of living and help them express their values and customs in their social environment (Keller, 2003 in Manthiou et al., 2018).

As argued by Tuominen (1999), a brand can reflect status, improve the consumer image, and project their lifestyle in a way that the ownership or use of the brand exerts great value over the individual. According to Alnawas and Altarifi (2015), consumers develop emotions such as loyalty for brands that convey a similar behaviour and lifestyle. Having

this in mind, these authors proposed that the closer the overlapping of the brand image with the consumer personal lifestyle, the greater their identification with a product or brand. This can be explained by the consumer tendency to identify with and develop personal attachments towards a company that reflects their desired lifestyle.

To support this, Buyukdag and Kitapci (2021), stated that brands that follow a self-congruity principle – focusing on a match between consumers' self-concept and the user image of a given product or brand - manage to positively affect the consumers' self-image and behaviour, as well as their level of identification, connection and self-expression.

In order to confirm whether brand lifestyle congruency exerts an influence on the consumers' identification with a corporation, the following hypothesis will be examined in the empirical part:

- **H3: Lifestyle congruency positively influences consumers' cognitive online brand identification.**

Bearing in mind the three OBI (online brand identification) antecedents previously discussed and reasoned through prior hypothesis, it is now of great importance to address the potential consequences that might occur from the model mediator based on those referred drivers.

2.4 OUTCOMES OF COGNITIVE ONLINE BRAND IDENTIFICATION

2.4.1 Brand Love

The construct of brand love can be defined as the degree of passionate and emotional attachment that a consumer nurtures for a brand (Carroll & Ahuvia, 2006), which is dependent on the relationship ties not only with the brand itself (self-brand connection), but also with other brand consumers (sense of brand community) (Palazon et al., 2018).

Batra, Ahuvia and Bagozzi (2012) claim that the term "passion" refers to a strong desire for a particular brand, regularly representing higher arousal emotions. These researchers defend that individuals can develop feelings of brand love according to distinct brand/product attributes such as great quality, intrinsic rewards, self-identity, emotional bonding, a sense of natural fit, positive affect or through recurrent use and thought of the brand. This construct help brands to predict more effectively key variables such as repurchase intentions, positive WOM, resistance to negative information (Batra et al.,

2012), increases consumers' willingness to pay a premium price and facilitates the forgiveness of brand failures (Thomson & Park, 2005).

Regarding this subject, there are some authors that consider the analogy between brand love and interpersonal love, assuming that the love relationships between humans are identical to the ones felt between consumers and brands (Drennan, Bianchi, Cacho-Elizondo, Loureiro, Guibert & Proud, 2015). One of the most referred and adapted theories in the literature concerning brand love research is the *Triangular Theory of Love* created by Sternberg in 1986. This theory holds that love can be analysed through three core components – intimacy, passion, and decision/commitment – assuming that the first dimension (intimacy) is the one exerting prior importance in the model.

Previous research indicates that brand love can be linked to brand identification taking into consideration that, in order to consumers arouse and experience brand love, they have to previously identify with that particular trade name. In a study conducted by Palazon et al., (2018), the customer connection or identification with other community members have also been proved to be a central element in directly enhancing brand love. This is due to the influence that brand meaning shared among consumers has on the brand perception and emotional commitment of other members with the brand, since they appropriate and regard it as an experience of their own. This reinforces that the emotional bond established with other brand consumers may, indeed, influence the consumers feelings towards the brand. Therefore, when consumers develop feelings of love toward a product or brand and realize that their image and lifestyle overlaps, it becomes central to the consumer identity. Thereby, they will become attached to the company and brand love consequently emerges as a result (Palazon et al., 2018).

Alnawas et al. (2015), added that the more a brand develops strategies to help customers relate their identity with the brand, the greater will be the passion and affection towards that certain brand, since they will experience *"positive emotions from satisfaction at the lower-intensity end to joy and pride at the higher-intensity end of positive emotions"* (p.7).

Additionally, other researchers stated that one of the reasons that led customers to interact with a brand through a social platform (liking, commenting, sharing) is emotional attachment. Users become more active when they recognize high levels of entertainment and when they get a great experience from it, resulting in a favourable attitude toward the

corporation that, ultimately, can be expressed through a strong emotion - *Brand Love* (Salem, Tarofder, Chaichi & Musah, 2019).

Thus, having in mind the literature above referred and considering that there is a positive association between consumers online identification and brand love, it can be hypothesized the following:

- **H4: Cognitive online brand identification is positively associated with brand love.**

2.4.2 Online Customer Engagement

The interpretation of engagement in a digital age have significantly changed from focusing on the organization to focus on the consumer. Since then, social marketers have been progressively relying on social media to improve their engagement with target audiences (Shawky et al., 2019). Researchers described engagement as *"a strong state of "connectedness" between consumers and organizations"* (Van Doorn, Lemon, Mittal, Nass, Pick, Pirner & Verhoef, 2010 p.205) in which social media promotes the customer engagement evolution process by strengthening the relationship between the company and consumers (Shawky et al., 2019). This construct emerged as a central marketing phenomenon (Brodie et al., 2013) considered as an essential tactic to improve profitability, brand performance and competitive advantages (Sarkar & Sreejesh, 2014).

Sashi (2012), added that engagement consists of customized experiences that enables consumers to generate value by creating content, giving feedback, becoming advocates, and by spreading information about the company with their peers. Thus, according to Sashi (2012), engagement occurs when the consumer is delighted, loyal (committed) and have a strong emotional bond with the brand in which they become advocates and co-creators of value.

Keeping in line with the definitions given above, consumer engagement in social media can be acknowledged as interactions that include commenting, liking, sharing and reproducing the firm content (Martín-Consuegra, Faraoni, Díaz & Ranfagni, 2018). For these attitudes to be triggered, the engagement in these social networking sites (SNS) significantly depends on the time, effort, and importance of the SNS given by the users (Park et al., 2021).

Following Hollebeek, Glynn and Brodie (2014), consumer engagement in a social media context can be defined in three core dimensions: **cognitive processing** (it is a more rational dimension regarding the consumer level of brand-related thoughts processed in an interaction between the company and the customer); **affection** (refers to a more emotional dimension representing the customers' degree of brand-related affect in the customer-brand interaction) and **activation** (illustrates a more behavioural dimension concerning the level of energy, time spent and effort that a consumer places on the interaction with the brand). This is aligned with what Brodie, Juric and Hollebeek (2013) had previously identified as consumer engagement dimensions for a virtual brand community.

Bilro et al. (2019), developed a research about the consumer engagement dimensions where it was proven that the cognitive processing differentiates from the remaining dimensions from having the highest positive sentiment score, followed by affection and activation. This reveals that the thoughts and positive emotions developed during the interactions are more valued by consumers and that they are actually conscious of the relevance of their reviews to others. Therefore, when sharing their personal opinion, consumers are mainly driven by the possibility to help other users and be useful than influenced by activation reasons.

Following another perspective, Kumar and Pansari (2016) designed a conceptual framework comprising four distinct variables that were confirmed to significantly impact customer engagement, which was incorporated in the model being tested in the present study. The variables are, namely:

- **Direct influence:** *Customer Purchases* – it is considered that the acquisition of a company good has a direct influence on the customers' level of connectedness with a firm that, ultimately, contributes to the company value;

- **Indirect influence:**

  - *Incentivized Referrals* – as a form of customer involvement, referrals work as a non-traditional marketing channel used by both B2B and B2C to attract new customers in a more profitable approach than by non-referrals;

  - *Customer Influence* – represents the customer impact on social media by shaping other customers' perceptions and understanding. It behaves as a

"ripple effect" quickly spreading and amplifying highly beyond the short circle of a customer social network, reaching a wide group of individuals somehow related to each other;

- *Customer knowledge* – is based on customers' feedback and suggestions to improve the company offer by providing a clear understanding of customers preferences and giving insights or co-creating in the knowledge development process.

This construct is considered to be a combination of emotive and cognitive senses felt by consumers during a customer-brand interaction. When these interactions become frequent, it can lead to a development of a stronger sentiment and state of connectedness toward a brand that entails a passion component (Batra et al., 2012). There are important factors that were proved to trigger brand love, such as the connection between the consumers' self-concepts and the brand, the emotional bonds with a brand, the meaningfulness a consumer attribute to a specific brand and the intrinsic rather than the extrinsic rewards provided by a brand (Batra et al., 2012).

When considering the virtual environment of the social network, Wallace, Buil and Chernatony (2014) argue that individuals can stablish and develop brand love for companies with whom they have made some contact with, such as "liking" or "sharing" on a social media page. This behaviour can suggest a "*favourable and rewarding interactive relationship*" (Loureiro, Gorgus & Kaufmann, 2017, p.7), wherein emotional bonds are used as a tool to engage customers.

In line with the literature above presented, the following hypothesis is proposed:

- **H5: Brand love positively impacts online customer engagement.**

Although the current understanding associating both constructs - customer engagement and brand love - there is still lack of knowledge regarding the possible effects that consumer online interactions might have on the individual relationship with the brand as well as their implications on their level of advocacy for the corporation (So et al., 2018).

2.4.3 Brand Advocacy

Brand Advocacy emerge in the literature as the penultimate stage of the customer engagement cycle in converting customers into fans (Sashi et al., 2019). This construct

can be perceived as the consumer willingness to try new products or services, recommend the company to others and, particularly, the willingness to forgive any mistake committed by the brand (Bilro et al., 2019). It has also an analogous meaning as positive WOM or recommendations given from highly involved consumers (Wilk et al., 2018).

Advocacy occurs when delighted consumers stablish an interaction with others through their social networks to broadcast their positive experience (Shawky et al., 2019). As stated by Bhati et al. (2020), customers who proactively recommend the brand are referred to as advocates, customer champions and WOM evangelists.

Consumer access to new media is expanding and it has become vital the use and development of customer advocacy strategies. Bhati et al. (2020) reported that a major percentage of the reach resulting from marketing campaigns comes from customer advocacy networks, which indicates that this behaviour can be considered one of the best predictor of companies' top-line growth (Keller, 2007). According to some authors, advocacy is a form of value creation by customers (Wallace, Buil & Chernatony, 2012), expresses brand power and is a stronger indicator of consumer loyalty compared to the repeat purchase behaviour. Thereby, to benefit from this behaviour, managers need to focus their marketing efforts on developing a relationship with their audience, become advocate of their needs and give special importance to opinion leaders in order to activate them as future promoters of the brand (Bhati et al., 2020).

Recent studies concluded that consumer's online opinions frequently predict their purchase attitudes (Cai & Qu, 2018). Following Farzin et al., (2018), product reviews and recommendations posted by users on social media represent a key factor in incentivizing consumers to proceed with their purchasing decision, since it exerts an influence on the decision making of their friends or other potential consumers who might see the content shared. Therefore, brand advocacy emerges as the strongest force affecting the consumption decision (Bhati et al., 2020). It is also recognized as the most influential source of information for being perceived as more trustworthy, honest, and less biased compared to the one obtained through the brands' website or advertisements (Moliner, Monferrer-Tirado & Estrada-Guillén, 2018).

Keeping in line with the insights given above, Brightlocal (2016) stated that 91% of consumers search for the information in online platforms such as blogs, previous reviews, or any other user-generated content (UGC) before purchasing a good. Based on a survey

conducted by Gallegos (2020), 70% of consumers trust significantly more on user-generated media (UGM) than on any brand content provided directly by the corporation. Additionally, around 93% of consumers considers it to be a very helpful criteria before making their final decision, since 41% read four to seven consumer reviews to be more consciously informed about the products. It was also proved that comparing to the brand performance statistics, users have the potential to get 28% higher engagement levels when they share or create content on social media, which have led more than 86% of companies to have incorporated UGC into their marketing strategies.

Moreover, in a study carried out by Keller (2007), nearly half of the respondents rated 9 or 10 (in a scale from 0-10) on the possibility to make a purchase based on the opinion received from another person. The same findings were also achieved in the research of Farzin et al. (2018), where they reported the influence of e-WOM on the consumers' purchase intention, stating that this type of brand information has a great potential to trigger and speed up favourable messages in a SNS.

In order for messages to be contagious in the online environment and for users to pass them on, it is of great relevance to have in mind some other differentiative factors. Thus, when a user accepts other user invitation, these two profiles stablish a link and the opportunity for brand advocacy grows considerably if those profiles happen to be similar to each other, since they are more likely to exerted greater influence over one another. For this reason, in order to reinforce the potentialities of this communication tool, it is decisive for companies to deeply understand consumers' behaviours and intentions to provide them with what they look for. *"When brands offer something meaningful, consumers attach the brand to their identity. This empowers them to advocate the brand, because it has become part of themselves"* (Wallace et al., p.133).

Concerning this meaningful interactions, some researchers argue that one of the possible antecedents of brand advocacy can be the passion consumers evoke for a certain corporation (Harrigan, Roy & Chen, 2021). On a social media dimension, if a brand has the great capacity to efficiently engage their audience and show that they care for them, it is likely to reinforce customers' perceptions of reciprocation, leading to brand love or evangelical behaviours (Junaid, Hussain & Hou, 2020).

Complementary, Algesheimer, Dholakia and Herrmann (2005) stated that when a brand love connection happens, brands become an extension of their consumers. If consumers

have a love sentiment for a particular brand, they will repurchase that brand over the years, will speak positively about it and defend the brand in any circumstance. Regarding this subject, Wallace et al. (2014) added that consumers who consider themselves to be brand advocates commonly love the brand and are engaged with it, recommending to their friends and acquaintances and are more likely to forgive or accept the wrongdoing committed by that brand. Thus, if advocates are able to forgive the brand, it means that there is a strong relationship between brand love and brand advocacy.

Harrigan et al., (2021) also found evidence that customer brand engagement exerts a significant impact on brand advocacy, stating this construct as a potential driver of evangelical brand behaviours. Having said that, it is possible to assume that engaged consumers are likely advocates of that brand (Harrigan et al., 2021). Wilk et al. (2018), discovered that in a digital context advocates tend to be more engaged with the brand than the regular customer. Analogous findings were reported by So et al. (2018) who claimed that engagement triggers favourable behaviours, which can result in loyalty. Thus, the stronger the engagement, the higher the motivation behind these supportive attitude (advocacy behaviour), which leads to the assumption that brand advocacy is likely an outcome of engagement (Harrigan et al., 2021).

Given the insights above mentioned, it is possible to propose the following two hypothesis:

- **H6: There is a positive relationship between brand love and brand advocacy.**

- **H7: Online customer engagement positively affects brand advocacy.**

Drivers of Brand Advocacy

Bhati et al. (2020) suggested three broad categories as major antecedents impacting brand advocacy that partially supports some of the constructs being tested in the present model. The antecedents regard personal, relational and social factors.

In the **personal factor,** it was considered only one subcategory - *Opinion leadership* - which refers to the individual's ability to influence the attitudes and behaviour of others.

The second category, **relational factors** comprise six subcategories:

- *Brand Trust* - Emerge when there is confidence in the exchange integrity of the other partner. The higher the level of trust, the greater the tendency to offer favourable WOM;

- *Customer Satisfaction* – Indicates the post-purchase assessment of a purchase decision. The higher the levels of satisfaction, the higher the positive WOM activity;

- *Brand Identification* – Regards the consumer self-image convergence with the image of the brand, being perceived as part of their own, where the consumer feels motivated to advocate for the brand (Wallace et al., 2012);

- *Customer-Based Brand Equity* – Represents the status of the brand in the consumer's mind and increases the possibility of positive WOM and loyalty;

- *Active Commitment* – When consumers become psychological attached to a brand, they become evangelists and advocators of the brand;

- *Normative Commitment* – An individual who feel indebted to a certain company tends to reciprocate by advocating for the brand.

The third category concerns the **social factor** – *Normative Influence* – which is the propensity to conform to the expectations of others in order to gain acceptance. Individuals develop attitudes and behaviours via consumer socialization which lead them to display a specific inner state or behaviour.

3 | METHODOLOGY

This chapter aims to explain the procedure involved to achieve the objectives initially settled down for the research, as well as the methods and techniques used during the investigation process, for both data collection and analysis.

The research purpose is to explore and measure the cognitive identification stablished by Portuguese consumers toward sports fashion brands, in the scope of social media environment. The intention is to (1) understand which factors might induce consumers to develop a subconscious connection with a brand through a platform massively used as social media, (2) perceive what can possibly result from this powerful identification phenomenon and, lastly, to (3) determine the eventual corporate implications that this state of linkage might imply when applied and explored at its full potential.

Given the lack of studies on the subject, especially on the apparel sector, as an initial step it is required to conduct a secondary data research to better understand this market. The use of secondary data consists of "*existing data which were originally collected for other purposes*" to "*generate new knowledge, new hypotheses, or supporting existing theories*" (Sheriff, 2018, p.2, 3). According to Malhotra (2017), "*The act of sourcing, evaluating and analysing secondary data can realise great insights for decision makers. It is also vital for successful problem diagnosis, sample planning and collection of primary data*" (p.109). Thus, the secondary data collected in this study, represents the initial approach taken for the primary analysis development (Goodwin, 2012).

Regarding primary data, this dissertation is premised on quantitative research technique in order to quantify the data collected and provide statistical analysis. The quantitative research technique used to obtain information was through a structured questionnaire, distributed to a sample of the target population (Malhotra, 2017). The approach used to display the research was by means of an online survey, which allowed respondents to answer the questionnaire independently from the place and electronic device used. The online survey was available in a period of time of 30 days and, as a current dominant approach, it hugely benefited the research in terms of: speed - regarding survey execution and responses collection; quality of response - given the range of design features, tailored possibilities and costs; and data quality - considering that respondents already type in answers ready for analysis with automatic logic and validity checks (Malhotra, 2017).

3.1 | Study 1. Secondary Data

Having in mind the digital context in study, it was required to carry out an introductory research on the subject to understand the evolution and current online trends in order to formulate an appropriate research design. First, it was necessary to conduct a market landscape analysis to evaluate which industry or sector held the higher purchased online rates to segment the research and develop a sampling plan (Malhotra, 2017). From the data platform Statista, studies conducted in 2018 identified "Clothing" as the global most popular online shopping category, with 57% international users purchasing a fashion-related product through the internet, as it can be confirmed in the following figure.
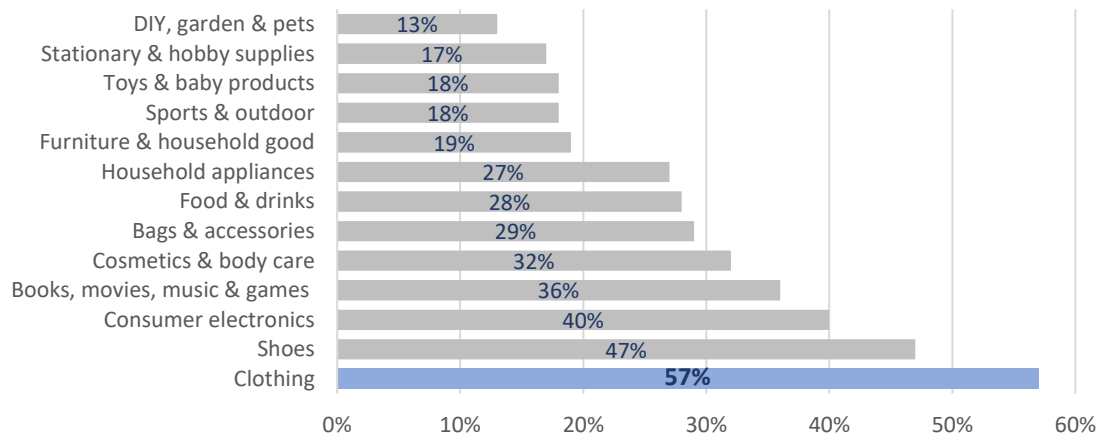
Figure 2 – Global Online Shopping Categories.
Source: Statista, 2018.

Despite the constant and sturdy growth of this category in the last decade throughout the internet, it could also be observed another interesting phenomenon. In 2020, the year of the COVID-19 pandemic, the sector registering the strongest online traffic performance after the groceries retail industry, was sports equipment with an increase of 24% comparing to 2019 (see figure 3). This demonstrates that in a crisis condition where people are restricted to their own space and subject to a completely new reality, consumers tend to readjust their old habits and create new ones, leading to an abrupt change of demand for every-day items such as groceries, clothing, and retail tech products. This is explained by the fact that people, in order to contain the spread of the virus, adopted digital channels as the most viable alternative to avoid crowded stores and in-person shopping, enabling an unparalleled expansion for the e-commerce market.
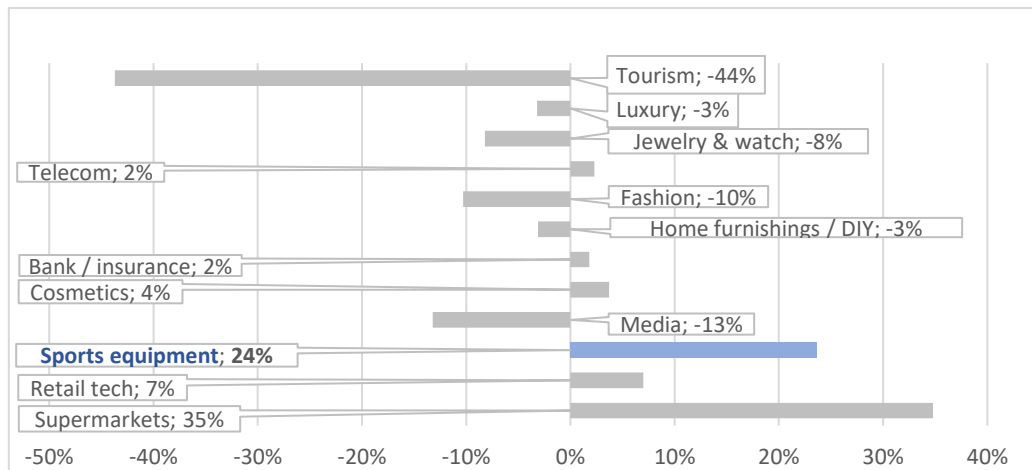
Figure 3 – Coronavirus impact on online traffic by industry.
Source: Statista, October 2020.

Given the data collected from the above graphs from Statista, it was possible to outline the industry and category most suitable for the dissertation research – Sports Apparel. Therefore, to better understand the context environment, it was conducted a separated analysis for both apparel market and the activewear category as well as for the SM environment.

- *Apparel Industry*

Apparel was stated by Statista as the greatest non-food consumer goods category worldwide, in 2021. This market is characterized by presenting short product lifecycles, especially in recent years due to the increase of fast fashion retailers like Zara and H&M. However, this trend has been slowly carried over to a more sustainable production. The market is divided into three segments: Women's apparel, Men's apparel, and Children's apparel, each one separated into other sub-segments which regards clothing and footwear.

Despite having a short product life cycle, this industry is also described as "*unpredictable demand, quick response time, large product variety, and a volatile, inflexible, and complex supply chain structure*" (Singh & Khajuria, 2018). Recent data from Statista adds that the fashion industry points to a continue positive growth, particularly in emerging markets within the Asia-Pacific and European regions, having as the world largest apparel markets (1) United States, (2) China and (3) Japan, by descending order.

This industry registered a value of 1.5 trillion dollars in 2020 and is expected to reach 2.25 trillion dollars by 2025, expressing a significant growing demand for this fashion sector across the world, keeping a consistent geographical distribution.

Apparel is also a valuable and substantial market in Europe. From Statista, it was identified which EU countries had a higher household consumption expenditure on apparel items in the year of 2018. The results reveal that, by order, United Kingdom, Germany, and Italy hold the first three places for the countries that spend the most on fashion clothing, with UK reaching a value of around 65.000 million euros, closely followed by the last ten years leader Germany, with almost 63.000 million euros (see figure 4). Portugal is situated in the 11th place, however, bellow the European Union average with a total apparel expenditure of 6.350 million euros. Despite the mentioned, this is a great position considering that it should be evaluated as a relative value, since it is not proportional to the population density or other external factors such as the economic condition that strongly conditionate its internal purchasing power. Malta, Iceland, and Cyprus lead the three first positions for the less consumerist EU countries.
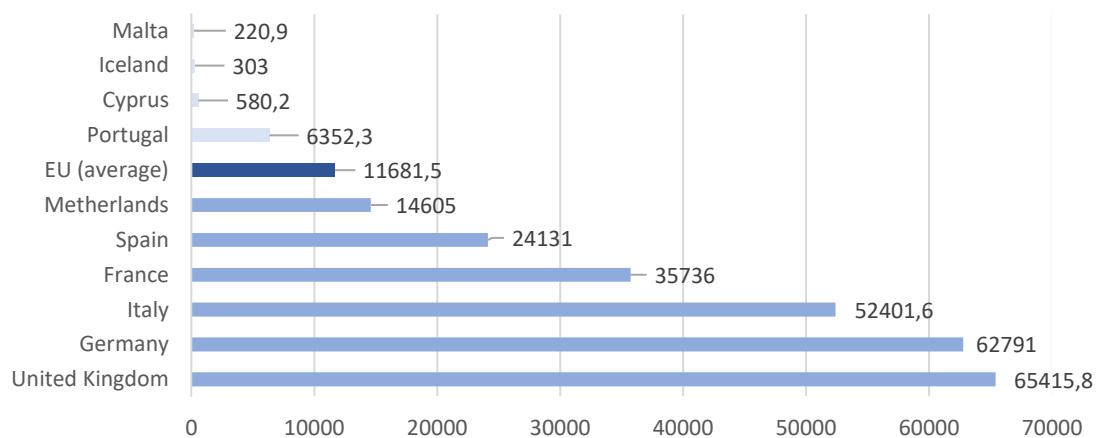
Figure 4 – Household Consumption Expenditure on Clothing in Europe (Million €)
Source: Self-elaboration based on Statista, 2018.

- *Activewear Market*

For this fashion subsegment, data reported from Statista in 2019 demonstrate that the market share is mainly focused on North America and Europe, followed by Asia and Australia (medium market share) and lastly, the region of South America and Africa (low market share). United States is the largest international player in the activewear category with North America achieving a market share of neatly 30% in 2017, followed by Europe as the second largest consumption region with a market share of 26%.

Sports apparel is mostly used in amateur sport and professional athletic, having a higher consumption proportion of 85% for amateur sport. Statistics from the United States reveal that in 2020 the majority of all sportswear revenue come from the subsegment of women's

sportswear, generating about 39.43 billion dollars, which is more than the revenue combined from the men's and children's sportswear. Although the innumerable sportswear retailers across the globe, the biggest companies control the majority of the market and some of the most valuable brands are Nike, GUCCI and Adidas, with Nike and Adidas having the highest sales revenue and Nike leading with over 50% of the market share.

In accordance with the industry main category, sports market apparel also registered a high level of growth in 2020, valued in 185.2 billion dollars. The projections of the activewear market point out for a positive and consistent increase of 80,5% from 2020 to 2026, reaching a new peak of 439,4 billion US dollars by the end of 2026. Statista reported that nearly 65% of global inquired consumers use sportswear in their regular daily lives, which can be attributed to the rise of streetwear style and the increase of consumers with a more fitness consciousness that have been incorporating activewear into their personal style.

In 2020, COVID-19 pandemic also had a profound impact on this market category. McKinsey and Company developed a report revealing that sportswear companies were found to be more resilient during the pandemic than all the other companies from the apparel industry (see figure 5). The impact on the sports brands also varied depending on their accessibility during the lock-down, making the hole digital environment and, especially, ecommerce a beyond imperative reality.
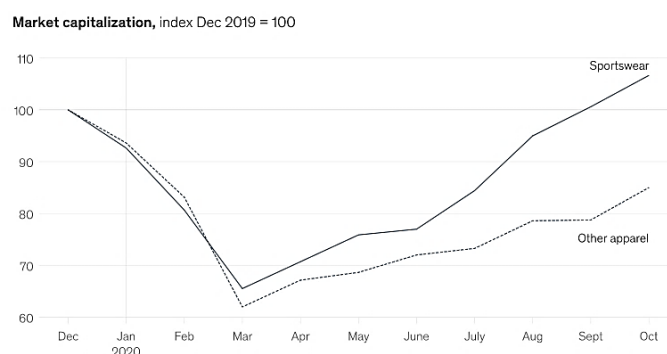
Figure 5 – Evolution of the sportswear and other apparel categories during Covid-19.
Source: McKinsey & Company, 2020.

With the mentioned in mind, social media context is also of great relevance to be explored before proceeding with a more in-dept research.

- *Social Media Environment*

Social media includes distinct forms, such as blogs, forums, photo-sharing platforms, business networks, chat apps, social gaming, microblogs, and social networks. Social networking is considered one of the most popular online activities in the world, with a number of worldwide monthly active users expected to reach 3.43 billion by 2023, correspondent to almost a third of earth's entire population. Statista reports mention that on average, global internet users spend almost 2 hours and a half (144 minutes) per day on social networks, making this type of marketing channel a great opportunity of time and screen space for social advertising and to strongly promote consumer-brand interactions.

Statista stated that by January 2020, the global social penetration rate reached 49%, with East Asia leading with the highest penetration rate of 71%, followed by North America (69%) and Northern Europe (67%). In the figure above, Malta appears as the first European nation with the highest active social media penetration of 91%, with Portugal placed in the 7th position along with Denmark with a 69% penetration rate. At the end of the list are Moldova, Monaco and Belarus which did not exceeded 41% penetration rate.
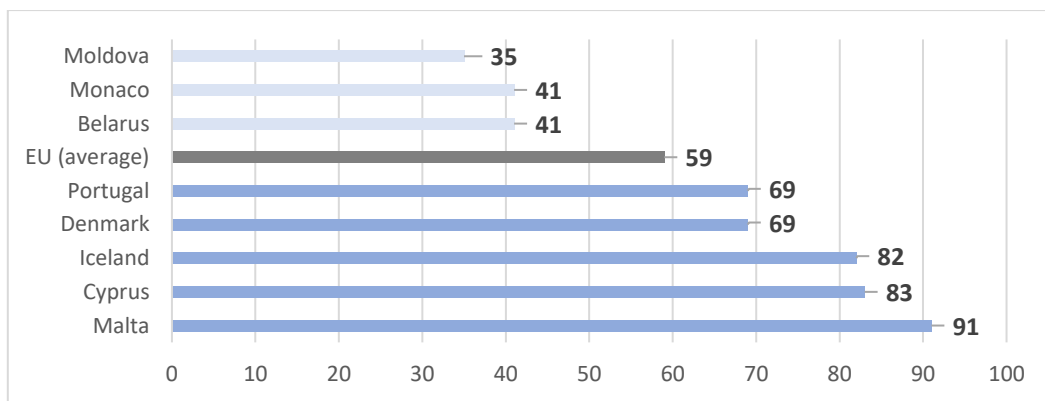
Figure 6 – Active Social Media Penetration (%) in Europe.
Source: Self-elaboration based on Statista report outputs, January 2020.

Recent research reveals that in the last years, social networking has clearly shifted towards mobile platforms, with 99% of social media users accessing via mobile phones by July 2021, as reported by Hootsuite. This social networking is also a growing force regarding e-commerce because of increased social feature integration on e-commerce sites, since consumers can login to websites with social network ID's, simplifying their registration. Facebook is the most chosen social login network ID, followed by Google and Yahoo.

The world most-used social platform is *Facebook*, with 2.6 billion monthly active users (MAU) worldwide, followed by the photo and video sharing platform *Instagram* with 1 billion MAU registered in the first quarter of 2020 and 500 million daily active users for its stories feature. *WhatsApp*, *Facebook Messenger* and *WeChat* are also high ranked social messaging channels (Statista, 2020). By July 2021, Hootsuite reported new ranks, placing *Youtube* as the second most used social platform, with 2.3 billion active users (AU), followed by *Whatsapp* (2 billion AU) and *Instagram* (1.4 billion AU), with *Facebook* holding the first place reaching a new peak of 2.9 billion AU.

3.2 | Study 2. Primary Data – Quantitative Research

As previously mentioned, study two represents a quantitative method of research, which was conducted to obtain primary data and provide statistical analysis through an online survey. This quantitative method was characterized by a large sample size in which the participants were asked a variety of questions regarding their intentions, behaviours, motivations, awareness, demographic, and lifestyle characteristics (Malhotra et al., 2017), regarding a certain sports fashion brand. Therefore, this method of research aims to: (1) complement the secondary data collected, by testing the hypothesis previously developed and (2) test the validity of the model in order to define possible drivers and consequences of cognitive brand identification felt by Portuguese consumers in a digital context.

Data Collection and Procedures

The data was generated to address the research questions initially established and it was collected through a questionnaire published online, with the purpose of achieving a greater number of responses (Malhotra, 2017). The survey was elaborated and released by means of the online platform *Qualtrics*, where the collection of data took place between 17th of March and 15th of April. Since the aim was to analyse the Portuguese population, the questionnaire was conducted in Portuguese and then back translated to English. In order to verify understandability and clarity of concepts or identify any language error, the questionnaire was only released after the elaboration of a pilot-test that included a total of 10 participants. From the pilot-test, section two was modified, and a few corrections were made to improve statements comprehensibility. The respondents were invited to participate anonymously and voluntarily via social media through the use of *Facebook*, *Instagram* and *Linkedin*. From 412 respondents who attempted the survey,

only 304 were considered completed and valid. After collection, the data was transferred to *SmartPLS* in order to be amply analysed.

Target Population

The target population is characterized by the aggregation of elements that possess the data that the researcher aims to obtain (Malhotra, 2017). Thus, the target population of this study is individuals with a Portuguese nationality, which are 18 years old or over and use at least one social media platform.

Instrument of Research – Online Survey

In a data-collection process, a survey can provide valuable insights about who the consumers are, how they process information, what their habits are, how they behave and why they behave in certain ways. A questionnaire englobes a set of predetermined questions aligned with the objectives defined in the beginning of the investigation, where participants are asked to choose which option better suits to her/his opinion (Malhotra et al., 2017). The questions can be asked by different methods, in person, by telephone, through the use of mailed questionnaire or electronically via computer (Malhotra et al., 2017). For this project, it was selected an online survey, presented in appendix A.

The questionnaire is composed by a total of 66 questions (54 Likert scales questions, 10 multiple choices and 2 open-ended questions) distributed in 10 sections. This segmentation aims to facilitate the data collection, the coding process and, subsequently, the analysis of the data collected and its specific dimensions.

The first section of the survey regards the introduction of the questionnaire, where participants took notice about the theme, objectives, data confidentiality, average time spent and were asked whether they wanted to proceed or declined its fulfilment. If accepted, it would redirect to the official questionnaire, which starts in section two.

The second section is composed by three initial questions that aimed to understand some relevant insights about the consumer relation and behaviour concerning a selected trade name. The first question is structural since it dictated which brand respondents would refer to when approaching all the following queries, being mentioned its importance in the beginning of the section. Thus, it started by: "Please, mention a sports fashion brand with whom you identify with", followed by two multiple choices: "Have you ever

purchased this brand before?" and "If so, how did you buy it the last time?" with the options "Physical store" and "Online". None of the questions implied a filter selection, since it was not mandatory to be a consumer of the brand to feel identified with the company and, thus, be relevant to the survey.

The following seven sections refers to the 54 items scales questions, representing each dimension being tested in the model. To measure the items, it was used a seven-point Likert-type scale with a range from one (completely disagree) to seven (completely agree). All the scales used for each question and the measurement of the seven constructs under analysis were adapted based on the following articles presented on table 1.

Construct	Source
Online Brand Prestige (OBP)	Tuskej, U. & Podnar, K. (2018)
Online Brand Credibility (OBC)	Loureiro, S. (2017)
Lifestyle Congruency (LC)	Alnawas, I. & Altarifi, S. (2016)
Cognitive Online Brand Identification (COBI)	Mael, F. & Ashforth, B. (1992)
Brand Love (BL)	Berhami, M & Bagozzi, R. (2000)
Online Customer Engagement (OCE)	Kumar, V. & Pansari, A. (2016)
Brand Advocacy (BA)	Bilro, R., Loureiro, S. & Ali, F. (2018)

Table 1 – References of the constructs' measurement.
Source: Own authorship.

The final section of the questionnaire focuses on the demographic variables of the respondents, namely, gender, age, nationality, education level, current occupation, marital status, region of residence, annual household income and frequency of social media use. All the questions were closed and in the format of multiple choice, except from the nationality, where the individuals had to write it down in a short note.

Sample Characterization
The sample is composed by 304 Portuguese individuals, predominantly represented by woman (58,2%) and aged between 18 and 34, corresponding to a total of 266 participants (87,5%).
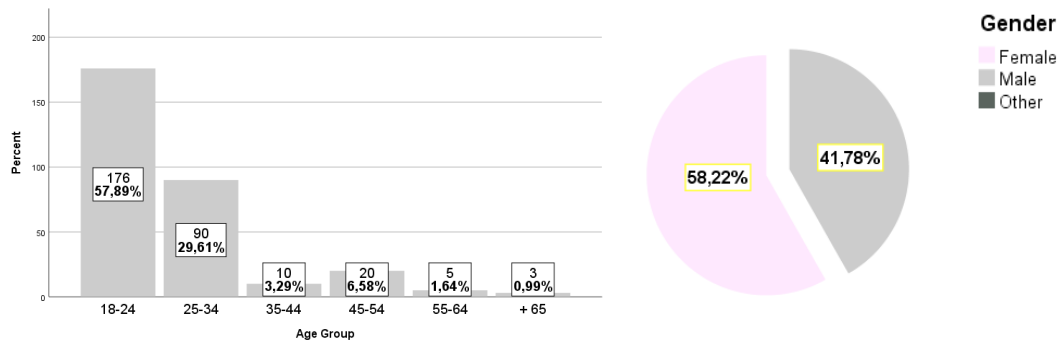
Figure 7 – Descriptive analysis of the respondents, by age group and gender.
Source: SPSS

Concerning the geographical distribution of the sample, it is possible to verify in figure 8 that the large majority is placed in the metropolitan area of Lisbon, represented by 70,4%. It is composed mainly by high educated people, where 157 individuals (50,3%) have a bachelor's degree, followed by 74 participants (24,3%) who have completed a master graduation (see table 20 from appendix E). Additionally, individuals with less than 25.000€ of annual household income represent the group with higher weight (50%), whereas only four respondents (1,32%) earn more than 200.000€.
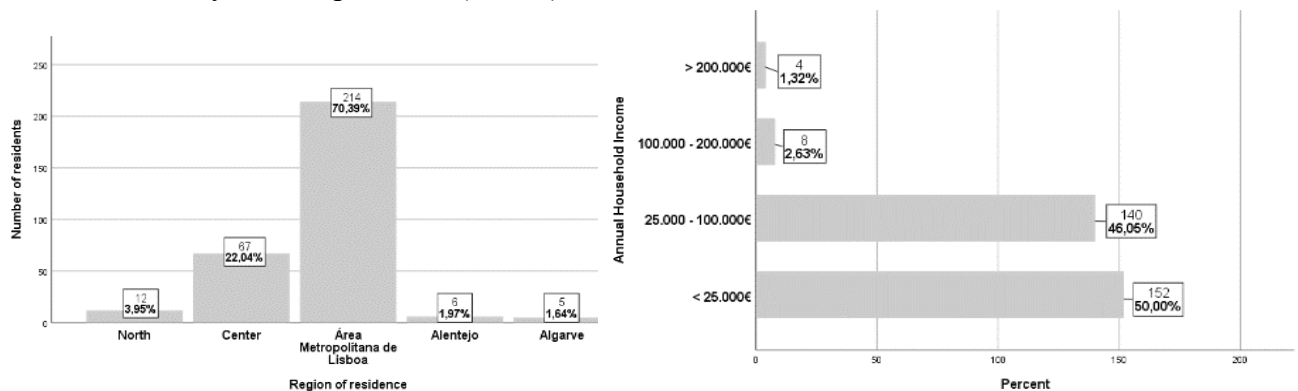
Figure 8 – Descriptive analysis of the respondents by region of residence and income level.
Source: SPSS

In reference to the type of channel in the moment of purchasing a sports fashion brand, 197 respondents (67%) continue to prefer to do it in-store, with only 33% choosing to do to it via internet. To what concerns the usability of social media platforms, students and employees represent the groups with a stronger presence on digital, whereas self-employed and retired individuals express a weaker connectivity, only using social media a few times a week or less (see figure 9).
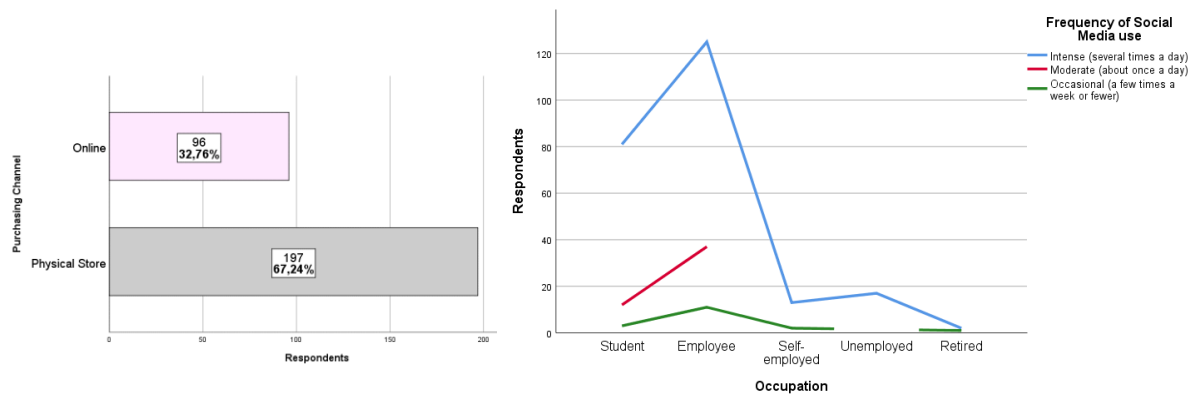
Figure 9 – Descriptive analysis of the respondents by purchasing channel, frequency of social media use and type of occupation.
Source: SPSS

The next pie chart (figure 10) represents the sports fashion brands with whom respondents felt most identified with, where is possible to distinguish Nike as the top brand elected by the participants (49%), right followed by Adidas, which achieved a brand identification share of 42%. These results are in accordance with the data collected by Statista (2020) concerning the highest revenue achieved by sports fashion brands mentioned in the secondary research previously conducted, inciting a direct relationship between the brand sales and customer-brand identification. On the other hand, some of the less mentioned brands were, as examples, Amless, Artengo, Element and Gant which were only referred once during the questionnaire, being represented in the 2% portion of the pie chart as other brands mentioned four times or less.
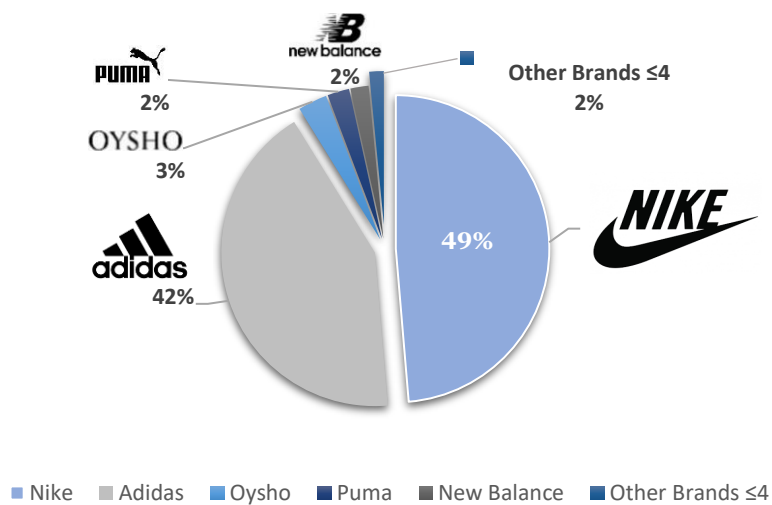
Figure 10 – Top identification with sports fashion brands elected by respondents
Source: Self-elaboration.

4 | RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The data collected during quantitative research from the online platform *Qualtrics* was imported and analysed on SmartPLS software (*Partial Least Squares*) version 3, through the use of an experimental account. From SmartPLS it was created the final model and extracted all the required outputs needed to conduct the quantitative data analysis.

The questionnaire was released on March 17th and closed on April 15th, 2021. The online survey reached 412 individuals, however after detecting repeated cases and outliers as well as unfinished surveys automatically sent and stored in by the program, the number decreased to 304 valid responses.

After reaching the number of valid cases, it followed the creation of the model. To all the questions displayed measuring each construct, it was required to generate a new latent variable by calculating the mean of each indicators' mean for every variable to improve the values of the initial model. Regarding the measurement, all items are reflexive and first order, except for the online customer engagement (OCE) dimension that had to be changed to formative and recalculated as second order. To do so, it was created four more latent variables regarding the measurement of the initial OCE variable, which are namely: Customer Purchases (CP); Customer Reference (CR); Customer Influence (CI) and Customer Knowledge (CK).

Therefore, to conduct the data analysis a descriptive statistical study is presented in this chapter regarding all the constructs that characterize the model through the assessment of the item means, standard deviation and confidence interval bias-corrected. For each variable and as mentioned before, respondents could answer in a seven-point Likert type scale of agreement from "1 – Strongly disagree" to "7 – Strongly agree". For every variable the value of beta was included inside the confidence interval, indicating the existence of the model discriminant validity, being only reported slight differences concerning the positive or negative impact on other constructs.

Additionally, in order to evaluate and interpret how the variables are related to each other in the PLS model as well as to understand the precision and validity of the model and consequent hypothesis presented in the subchapter 2.3 and 2.4, the assessment of the measurement and structural model will be carried out through the analysis of several PLS outputs.

4.1 | Assessment of Measurement Model

Considering a global model analysis of the items and its dimensions, **OBP1 – This sports fashion brand is seen as one of the best brands in the category,** was the construct registering the highest score (mean = 6,25), whereas **COBI3 – When I talk about this sports fashion brand, I usually say 'we' rather than 'they'**, was found to be the dimension with the lowest score among the remaining constructs of the model (mean = 1,64). A more detailed analysis is presented in appendix B.

A PLS model should be evaluated and interpreted in two stages, the measurement model, and the structural model. The first step comprises the measurement model, where it is described the relationship between the latent variables and its measures, which is assessed by analysing the reliability of the individual measures, the convergent validity, and the discriminant validity of the constructs (Loureiro, 2015). As a second procedure, the structural model will be further analysed in the subchapter 4.2.

Discriminant validity is the extent to which a variable is totally distinct from the remaining constructs and singularly captures the relationships that are not represented by the other variables present in the model. This criteria allows researchers to understand whether the construct measures of the model discriminate well empirically (Jr. Joseph, Hult, Ringle & Sarstedt, 2017).

The measurement of a model depends on its type of categorization, whereas it is reflexive or formative, and each one requires specific evaluation criteria. The model in study has a mixture of both types since the variable online customer engagement (OCE) is formative and all the other constructs are reflexive. Thus, the goal of this measure is to ensure about the validity and reliability of the construct measures in order to provide evidence regarding the suitability of these constructs in the path model (Jr. Joseph et al., 2017).

To access this measurement model validity, there will be conducted several analysis through the observation of cross loadings, psychometric properties of the measurement and by the examination of *Fornell-Larcker* criterion and HTMT ratio of correlations criterion.

- *Psychometric Properties of the Measurement Items*

Table 2 represents the psychometric properties regarding each construct. In order to evaluate the adequacy of the measures, item reliability is assessed through the

examination of the loadings on their corresponding construct. The item loadings of a reflexive measurement should be higher or equal to 0.707, indicating that over 50% of the observed variable variance is explained by the construct (Wetzels, Odekerken-Schroder & Oppen, 2009).

Considering the mentioned, every item with a loading lower than 0.70 were previously eliminated (see the items assuming a* on the loading column) and the model was, therefore, recalculated to improve the final path coefficients. Nonetheless, it was decided to keep six loadings (OBC4, OBC5, OBC6, COBI2, OCE4, OCE7) with a value slightly above the criteria, since it was proved to benefit the constructs coefficients of the final model. In total, 13 loadings represented in the table above by $a*$ did not fulfil the first validity condition and did not positively contribute for the ultimate coefficient. Additionally, the measures demonstrate convergent validity since the average variance extracted (AVE) of all variable's express values above 0.50, which indicates that the constructs include more than 50% (in this case, more than 59,5%) of the indicators´ variance. Thus, variance convergent criteria can be validated.

The measurement of the internal consistency was conducted through the assessment of the following three criteria: (1) rho_A all item loadings must be higher than 0.70; (2) Cronbach's Alpha and (3) Composite reliability should reach values superior to 0.60, being the last two measures a representation of the lower (2) and upper bound (3), respectively (Jr. Joseph et al, 2017; Loureiro, Guerreiro & Japutra, 2021; Loureiro, 2015). In what concerns composite reliability, it is possible to confirm through the table 2 below that all constructs are highly reliable and larger than the minimum thresh-hold value. Regarding the other two criteria, rho_A and Cronbach's Alpha are also achieved concerning all variables, apart from the construct online brand prestige. This is due to the model recalculation based on exclusively two items, given the need to eliminate the remaining ones in order to respect the loading minimum value of 0.70. Thus, when the recalculation is only rested on two items, Cronbach's Alpha and rho_A of the respective construct constitutes a non-validated measure. Therefore, it can be assumed that the significance and relevance of indicator weights and communality (AVE) are accomplished, as well as the levels of internal consistency and reliability of the constructs, which fully validates the model.

Construct	Internal Consistency Reliability			Convergent Validity		
	rho_A	Cronbach's Alpha	Composite Reliability	Average Variance Extracted (AVE)	Item	Loadings
Online Brand Prestige (OBP)	-	-	0.805	0.674	OBP1	a*
					OBP2	0.851
					OBP3	a*
					OBP4	0.787
Online Brand Credibility (OBC)	0.771	0.717	0.832	0.626	OBC1	a*
					OBC2	a*
					OBC3	a*
					OBC4	0.661
					OBC5	0.636
					OBC6	0.532
Lifestyle Congruency (LC)	0.933	0.909	0.942	0.843	LC1	0.918
					LC2	0.927
					LC3	0.910
Cognitive Online Brand Identification (COBI)	0.917	0.911	0.933	0.737	COBI1	0.830
					COBI2	0.648
					COBI3	0.782
					COBI4	0.897
					COBI5	0.858
					COBI6	0.863
Brand Love (BL)	0.917	0.915	0.930	0.595	BL1	0.791
					BL2	0.772
					BL3	0.729
					BL4	0.735
					BL5	0.715
					BL6	0.766
					BL7	a*
					BL8	0.761
					BL9	0.828
					BL10	a*
					BL11	a*
					BL12	0.730
					BL13	a*
Brand Advocacy (BA)	0.799	0.792	0.866	0.618	BA1	0.759
					BA2	0.830
					BA3	0.841
					BA4	0.706

Table 2 - Psychometric Properties of the Measurement Items.
Source: Self-elaboration based on PLS outputs.
a* - Item Eliminated.

Construct	Internal Consistency Reliability			Convergent Validity		
	rho_A	Cronbach's Alpha	Composite Reliability	Average Variance Extracted (AVE)	Item	Loadings
Online Customer Engagement (OCE)	0.958	0.952	0.958	0.627	CP1	a*
					CP2	a*
					CP3	a*
					CP4	0.588
					CR1	a*
					CR2	0.748
					CR3	0.633
					CR4	0.729
					CI1	0.795
					CI2	0.847
					CI3	0.842
					CI4	0.762
					CI5	0.763
					CI6	0.793
					CK1	0.776
					CK2	0.819
					CK3	0.823
					CK4	0.814

Table 2 - Psychometric Properties of the Measurement Items (continuation).

- *Inner VIF Values*

The multicollinearity degree among the indicators should be determined by the variance inflation factor (VIF) (Fornell & Bookstein, 1982). The measurement VIF suggests how much the variance of an indicator is explained by the remaining indicators of the same construct. For this criteria to be validated, VIF must be lower than 3.33 (Diamantopoulos & Siuaw, 2006). By interpreting table 3, it can be verified that every value is above this threshold, enabling inner VIF criteria validation.

	BA	BL	COBI	CI	CK	CP	CR	LC	OBC	OBP
BA										
BL	1,799									
COBI		1,000								
CI										
CK										
CP										
CR										
LC			1,130							
OBC			1,282							
OBP			1,335							

Table 3 – Inner VIF Values
 Source: Self-elaboration based on PLS outputs.

- *Cross Loadings*

Cross-loadings are typically the first approach to assess the discriminant validity of the indicators. For the discriminant validity to be accomplished, it is required that the indicator's outer loading on the associated construct presents a greater value than the remaining cross-loadings regarding the other constructs. By analysing table 16 from appendix C, it is possible to ensure that all the loadings highlighted correspond to the higher values respecting each construct, since all the loadings in the same column or row are lower. Therefore, the discriminant validity of the cross-loadings is also verified.

- *Fornell-Larcker criterion*

The next approach to assess discriminant validity is through analysis of the Fornell-Larcker criterion by comparing the square root of the AVE values with the latent variable correlations. The idea is that the construct needs to share more variance with the indicators associated than with any other construct in the model (Fornell & Larcker, 1981). In table 4 it can be verified that every construct square root fulfils this condition. Taking by example the construct COBI, its square root (0.858) is expressively higher than any other of its correlation values, which indicates that the model discriminant validity can be assumed.

It is also relevant to mention that the variables CI, CK, CP and CR are the result of the second order calculation regarding the construct Online Customer Engagement (OCE).

	BA	BL	COBI	CI	CK	CP	CR	LC	OBC	OBP
BA	0.786									
BL	0.431	0.771								
COBI	0.258	0.719	0.858							
CI	0.335	0.657	0.683	0.848						
CK	0.255	0.510	0.558	0.842	0.940					
CP	0.472	0.621	0.427	0.414	0.308	1.000				
CR	0.221	0.616	0.628	0.765	0.659	0.392	0.855			
LC	0.311	0.464	0.300	0.342	0.268	0.359	0.341	0.918		
OBC	0.391	0.153	0.019	0.099	0.054	0.183	0.051	0.251	0.791	
OBP	0.303	0.352	0.257	0.316	0.237	0.282	0.262	0.317	0.455	0.821

Table 4 - Fornell-Larcker Criterion
 Source: Self-elaboration based on PLS outputs.

- *HTMT Ratio of Correlations Criterion*

The previous criterion was proved to be insufficient to test discriminant validity effectively in isolate terms (Henseler, Ringle & Sarstedt, 2015). Therefore, HTMT criterion must be similarly conducted in order to reinsure about the results reliance. This ratio is defined by the mean of all indicators' correlations across the constructs, where it is estimated the true correlation between two constructs assuming a perfect measurement (Jr. Joseph et al, 2017).

To obtain discriminant validity based on the HTMT method, it should not be found values superior to 0.90 in the extended model, since that correlations between two constructs close to one indicates lack of discriminant validity. By interpreting table 5, all correlations match the criterion required, however regarding Customer Influence (CI), there are two values (0.897 and 0.871) that surpass the second limit of 0.85, which is also not advisable to succeed. Regardless for the proximity of the second limit, discriminant validity is fully accomplished.

	BA	BL	COBI	CI	CK	CP	CR	LC	OBC	OBP
BA										
BL	0.507									
COBI	0.296	0.777								
CI	0.395	0.714	0.744							
CK	0.295	0.543	0.600	0.897						
CP	0.528	0.649	0.441	0.433	0.315					
CR	0.278	0.713	0.721	0.871	0.736	0.440				
LC	0.365	0.503	0.319	0.372	0.285	0.373	0.393			
OBC	0.547	0.196	0.045	0.130	0.074	0.232	0.079	0.333		
OBP	0.483	0.504	0.368	0.462	0.343	0.385	0.401	0.471	0.767	

Table 5 - Heterotrait-Monotrait Ratio of Correlations Criterion
Source: Self-elaboration based on PLS outputs.

4.2 | Assessment of Structural Model

A structural model represents the path model theories or concepts, and its assessment determines the capability of the model to predict the relationships (paths) between the constructs (Hair, Ringle & Sarstedt, 2011). In other words, a structural model specifies how the variables are related to each other, estimating the precision of the PLS to whether support the hypothesis or not. A structural model comprises two type of variables: the *exogenous variables*, which are the constructs that explain other constructs in the model, namely, online brand prestige (OBP), online brand credibility (OBC) and lifestyle

congruency (LC); and the *endogenous variables* that comprises the constructs that are being explained in the model, which are represented by all the other remaining constructs - cognitive online brand identification (COBI); brand love (BL); online customer engagement (OCE) and brand advocacy (BA) (Jr. Joseph et al, 2017).

The key criteria to determine the structural model is through the calculation of the path coefficients, predictive validity through variance explained (R^2), predictive relevance (Q2) and through the analysis of the statistical significance levels.

- *Test of Hypothesis*

As previously mentioned, there were conducted seven hypotheses to test the model: H1 to H3 regarding COBI antecedents; H4 represents the central mediator; H5 to H7 concerning the outcomes of COBI. During this subchapter, all the hypotheses are analysed and, consequently, accepted or rejected (see table 6).

First, regarding the three exogenous variables, lifestyle congruency (LC) and online brand prestige (OBP) represent the strongest relationships affecting cognitive online brand identification (COBI). The findings seem to show that if a sports fashion brand assumes a similar lifestyle as their audience, it can lead to a positive cognitive online identification with that trade-name ($\beta = 0.262$, t = 6.142, p < 0,001). Likewise, if consumers perceive a brand to have a prestigious status, it can favourably influence their level of identification with that certain brand ($\beta = 0.246$, t = 4.784, p < 0,01). Online brand credibility is also a reasonable predictor of COBI. From the results obtained, and in contrast to what was expected, the construct revealed to exert a negative impact on the central model mediator, COBI ($\beta = -0.159$, t = 6.142, p < 0,001). This indicates that the higher the brand credibility perceived in an online environment, the less likely are individuals to feel any expressive identity connection with that specific fashion brand. Therefore, the hypothesized model antecedents, H1, H2 and H3, are supported.

Regarding the significant effect of cognitive online brand identification on brand love, the results of this study corroborate the findings of Palazon et al., 2018 in an online context. The central construct is found to be significant in the formation of brand love, assuming the strongest relationship in the model ($\beta = 0.719$, t = 20,779, p < 0,001), which confirms H4. Thus, the current study proves the important mediated role of COBI in stablishing passion and affection toward a company based on the overlap of consumer-brand image and lifestyle.

Third, brand love presented a positive and significant effect on both outcomes, online customer engagement (β = 0.666, t = 15.956, p < 0,001) and brand advocacy (β = 0.381, t = 5.390, p < 0,001), supporting both H5 and H6, respectively. By contrast, the significant influence of online customer engagement was not proven in the category of fashion apparel, contrary to what had been observed by Wilk et al., 2018 in digital context, but with no brand category selection. Therefore, H7 is rejected. However, despite the non-significant effect obtained, there can also be verified a slight relationship between both variables (β = 0.075, p = 0.249).

Direct Effect	Beta	Std Deviation	T Statistics	P Values	Test results
OBP → COBI	0.246	0.051	4.784	0.000	H1: Supported
OBC → COBI	-0.159	0.056	2.841	0.005	H2: Supported
LC → COBI	0.262	0.043	6.142	0.000	H3: Supported
COBI → BL	0.719	0.035	20.779	0.000	H4: Supported
BL → OCE	0.666	0.042	15.956	0.000	H5: Supported
BL → BA	0.381	0.071	5.390	0.000	H6: Supported
OCE → BA	0.075	0.065	1.154	0.249	H7: Not supported

Table 6 – Direct Effect
Source: Self-elaboration based on PLS outputs.

- *Predictive Validity and Model Fit*

The following table 7 displays the measures: R^2, Q^2 and model fit. R square are the values of each endogenous latent variable, ranging from 0 to 1, which provides the predictive accuracy of the structural model. This measure represents the amount of explained variance in each construct, where higher values correspond to higher predictive accuracy. Q square dictates the predictive relevance of the model and gives insights about the quality of the PLS path model estimations. Values larger than zero, provide proof of a path model predictive relevance for a particular dependent construct. (Hair et al., 2011).

All values of R^2 are higher than 0.1, demonstrating a good level of predictive power and Q^2 showed positive values, which indicates that the model also achieved predictive relevance. As it can be observed in table 7 above, online brand prestige, online brand credibility and lifestyle congruency explain 13,90% of the variance in cognitive online brand identification, presenting relevance in the model (Q^2 = 0.099). In turn, the exogenous latent variable, cognitive online brand identification is explaining 51,7% of the brand love' variance and it was also found to be relevant (Q^2 = 0.302). For the online customer engagement, the model explained 44,4% of the variance, with a predictive

relevance of 0.621. Lastly, brand love and online customer engagement were found to explain 18,90% of the variance regarding brand advocacy, with a predictive relevance of 0.113.

Regarding the model fit, it is measured by standardized root mean square residual (SRMR) and root mean square residual covariance (RMS_{theta}). SRMR is defined as the difference between the observed correlations and the expected model-implied correlations matrix, where a value of zero indicates perfect fit. From the model in study, it was obtained a SRMS of 0.079, which indicates a well-fitting model since it is lower than the threshold considered by the conservative approach for a good value fit (Jr. Joseph et al, 2017). RMS_{theta} consists of the discrepancy between the observed covariance and the expected model-implied correlations matrix that should present a value lower than 0.12. In this case, this model fit measure is $0.151 > 0.12$, which indicates a slight lack of fit (Henseler et al., 2014).

Additionally, the table 8 presents the confidence intervals and bias corrected confidence intervals, where it is possible to observe that for all the constructs, beta value is contained inside the interval.

	R Square	Q Square
BA	0.189	0.113
BL	0.517	0.302
COBI	0.139	0.099
OCE	0.444	0.621
Model Fit		
SRMR	0.079	
RMStheta	0.151	

Table 7 – R2, Q2 and Model Fit
Source: Self-elaboration based on PLS outputs.

	Beta	Confidence Intervals		CI Bias Corrected		
		2.5%	97.5%	Bias	2.5%	97.5%
OBP → COBI	0.246	0.137	0.344	-0.001	0.135	0.343
OBC → COBI	-0.159	-0.277	-0.047	0.000	-0.278	-0.051
LC → COBI	0.262	0.178	0.342	-0.003	0.189	0.348
COBI → BL	0.719	0.643	0.780	0.000	0.638	0.770
BL → OCE	0.666	0.578	0.742	-0.002	0.579	0.744
BL → BA	0.381	0.248	0.532	0.007	0.244	0.523
OCE → BA	0.075	-0.064	0.191	-0.006	-0.052	0.202

Table 8 – Confidence Intervals and Confidence Intervals Bias Corrected
Source: Self-elaboration based on PLS outputs.

Figure 11 - PLS Results

Online Brand Prestige

0.246***

Online Brand Credibility — - 0.159** →

Cognitive Online Brand Identification
$R^2 = 0.139$
$Q^2 = 0.099$

0.719*** →

Brand Love
$R^2 = 0.517$
$Q^2 = 0.302$

0.262***

Lifestyle Congruency

0.666*** →

Online Customer Engagement
$R^2 = 0.444$
$Q^2 = 0.621$

$0.075^{n.s.}$

0.381*** →

Brand Advocacy
$R^2 = 0.189$
$Q^2 = 0.113$
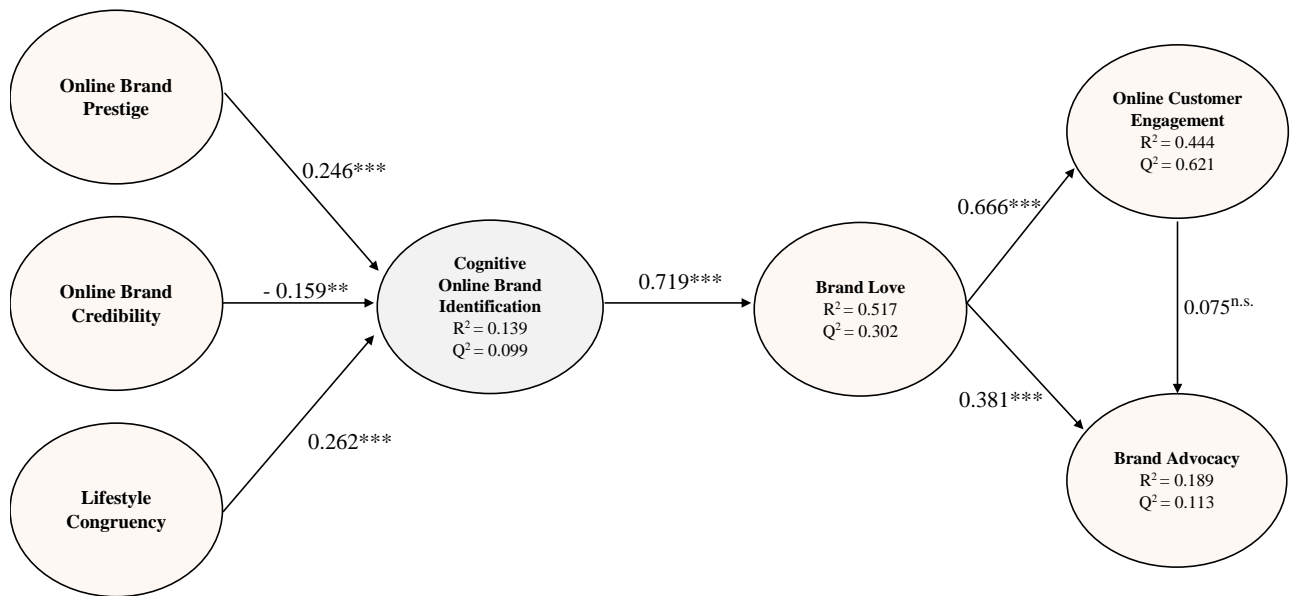
Note: **$p<0.01$, ***$p<0.001$, $^{n.s.}$= non-significant.

Source: Self-elaboration based on PLS outputs.

4.3 | Discussion

The first research question, as part of the initial study objectives, assemble on the following statement: "*Can online brand prestige, online brand credibility and lifestyle congruency act as antecedents of cognitive online brand identification in social media context?*". The hypothesis tested to help answer this question were H1, H2 and H3.

Starting by hypothesis 1, the results obtained from the quantitative PLS analysis, suggest that online brand prestige is positively associated with the central construct of the model, acting as its driver. This indicates that the higher the activewear brand status and positive assessment of the corporation, the higher the customer perceived identity congruity with that specific brand. The mentioned can be explained by the fact that individuals tend to express a common need for self-enhancement and to always see themselves in a positive light. This aspiration was proved to be achieved through the customer identification with prestigious social corporations, since the use of that brand or online interaction suggests improving customers' own image (Stokburger-Sauer et al., 2012). This also goes in line with the study conducted by Bhattacharya et al. (2003), where it was proved that for this identity connection to succeed, a brand must gather attractive and distinctive

characteristics, such as a higher reputation. Therefore, in accordance with the previous literature, H1 was supported.

Concerning online brand credibility, the results obtained seem to show that this construct might be considered a predictor of cognitive online brand identification – H2 was not rejected. However, in contrast to what was discussed in the literature, the construct revealed to exert a negative impact on cognitive online brand identification (β_{OBC} = -0.159). According to An et al. (2019), consumers are more likely to identify with a brand perceived as credible, since the use of a reliable trade-name was considered to communicate the individual self-concept, working as a social mirror or inner-representation of the self. Although the results point out for an existing relationship between both constructs, it also suggests that online brand credibility negatively affects the model mediator, which proposes that the higher the perceived sports fashion brand credibility in an online environment, the less likely are Portuguese consumers to express any identity connection with that company. Therefore, when a brand sustains a high online credibility, it might lead to a certain consumer reluctance in expressing their online brand identification or connection in a more frequent basis, since users are more conscious and aware of the brand trustworthiness as being already a generalized knowledge. Also, it is relevant to mention that being credible does not necessarily mean having a favourable brand prestige, given that the brand can deliver exactly what it promises but being positioned as a low-cost company. Thus, individuals might think that it can be a potential social-identity risk sharing content with their friends and acquaintances from a credible entity, since it might not help or be decisive to stand out and to reveal something relevant or differentiating. On the contrary, it might lead to the feeling that somehow the establishment of a connection with that company could mean denigrating their social image or reputation.

The third model antecedent is lifestyle congruency, measured by hypothesis 3. From the data analysis section, it was found evidence that respondents perceive a brand lifestyle congruent with their own as the strongest factor influencing their level of online identification with an activewear brand (β = 0.262). This supports the results from Alnawas et al. (2015) who claim that consumers develop emotions for organizations that convey a similar behaviour or lifestyle as them. Moreover, brands who follow a self-congruity principle, focusing on the match between their consumers' *modus vivendi* or self-concept, and the image provided by the company products, tend to positively affect

the consumers' level of identification with that particular brand (Buyukdag et al., 2021). Therefore, it can be concluded that the consumers' behaviour and lifestyle should be permanently measured and on top of the priority requirements of any social media tone of voice strategy, since it must be in complete consonance with the online brand personality and content shared by the brand. Thus, hypothesis 3 was supported.

For the second research question "***Can brand love be a direct outcome of cognitive online brand identification in social media context?***", it was found evidence that the Portuguese participants feel that experiencing an identity connection with a sports fashion brand, can positively influence and trigger the development of a future strong emotional attachment defined by a higher arousal emotion. The link between cognitive online brand identification and brand love revealed to be the strongest relationship in the model, accomplishing the highest betta effect ($\beta = 0.719$). The findings seem to support the causal idea referring that as higher the brand investment on developing strategies to help customers relate their identity with the brand, the stronger will be the customer attachment and affection toward that company. Thus, as a result, brand love will naturally emerge (Palazon et al., 2018; Alnawas et al., 2015). Therefore, hypothesis four is supported and consistent with further literature.

To answer the third research question *"**Are online customer engagement and brand advocacy consequences of brand love and, therefore, indirect outcomes of cognitive online brand identification in social media context?**",* hypothesis five and six where tested. From the results obtained it can be assumed that both constructs seem to be associated with brand love.

To what regards online customer engagement, it was used an adapted scale from Kumar et al. (2016), in which the level of engagement was measured using four distinct dimensions. From the scores obtained through the online survey, it was possible to conclude that the most relevant dimensions affecting online customer engagement in the sports fashion industry is comprehended by customer purchases (CP) and customer reference (CR). This reveals that activewear consumers are more prone to be engaged in an online environment when: (1) they have previously had a pleasant brand experience; (2) had contact with someone who did it - which sustains the consumer intention to re-purchase / purchase in the near future (CP) and also (3) if the brand users consider that they could easily recommend the company to relatives, given its recognized superior

qualities (CR). The mentioned goes in line with the Batra et al. (2012) definition of brand engagement which comprises a combination of emotive and cognitive senses. From the results obtained, it was possible to ensure that brand love is a valid predictor of online customer engagement, revealing to be the second most significant relationship in the model ($\beta = 0.666$). This supports Sashi (2012) findings, who claimed that a strong emotional bond, aside with delight and brand commitment are fundamental requirements for the development of brand engagement. Therefore, based on the results obtained, hypothesis five was accepted.

The construct brand advocacy was also found to be a relevant and significant outcome of brand love ($\beta = 0.381$). The data collected showed that, in order to become a brand advocate, predisposed to try new products, recommend the brand to others and be willing to forgive and support the corporation in any less favourable circumstance, implies the existence of a prior passionate connection. This results support the findings achieved by several researchers such as Wallace et al. (2014), Harrigan et al. (2021), Junaid et al. (2020) and Algesheimer et al. (2005), who claim that a customer must love and be engaged with a brand in order to express advocacy behaviours and become part of the company' value creation (Wallace et al., 2012). Therefore, hypothesis six is also supported.

Hypothesis seven answers to the final research question of the present investigation, which leans on the following understanding: "***Can online customer engagement be a predictor of brand advocacy in social media context?***". Studies such as Harrigan et al. (2021), Wilk et al. (2018) and Wallace et al. (2012), suggested that online customer engagement can be positively related with brand advocacy. However, after a further quantitative research through a PLS analysis, it was possible to conclude that the construct online customer engagement is not a significant predictor of brand advocacy, since p-value = 0.249, which is considerably higher than 0.05. These findings diverge from other studies which had detected a direct relationship between both constructs, assuming that engaged consumers are likely advocates of the brand and that, especially in a digital context, brand evangelists tend to be more engaged with the organization than regular customers do (Wilk et al., 2018). Additionally, Harrigan et al. (2021) also contradict the results obtained in this investigation by finding evidence that indicated customer engagement as a potential driver of evangelical brand-related behaviours. This contradictory results might support the sequence of the customer engagement process in

which brand advocacy is described as part of the penultimate stage, therefore considered a pre-existing requirement or antecedent of customer engagement, instead of a potential outcome (Sashi et al., 2019). Additionally, it might also indicate that Portuguese consumers' online engagement with sports fashion brands do not seem to induce, in an isolate form, advocacy behaviours. Although hypothesis seven was not supported, it was still observed a slight correlation between both constructs ($\beta = 0.075$, $p = 0.249$). This indicates that although brand advocacy is not a direct outcome of customer engagement, both constructs seem to be related.

4.4 | Theoretical Contributions

From a theoretical perspective, this study gives an important contribution to the activewear industry and customer-brand identification literature from a digital context. Since relationship marketing has demarcated an increasing importance over the years, some other concepts, such as online brand identification has recently become more relevant to explore. Therefore, a gap on the literature was identified, since there is limited research on how sports fashion brands should develop their strategies to enhance Portuguese customers' virtual level of connectiveness and engagement with corporations, taking advantage of the recent expressive growth of social network users. Thus, it was created a new structural model to test the potential antecedents and outcomes of the mentioned construct.

The present study has allowed to the conclusion that the cognitive online identification felt by Portuguese consumers toward a sports fashion brand is positively influenced by the online brand prestige and the lifestyle congruency between the brand and its audience. However, contrary to what was supported in previous studies (An et al., 2019), online brand credibility negatively influences the consumers' level of identification with this specific section of the fashion industry. Regarding the model consequences, it was proved to be in accordance with the literature review. Thus, the level of identification felt by Portuguese consumers on social media, positively induces higher levels of brand love, a strong online customer engagement and tends to generate brand advocacy behaviours. On the other hand, it was not found evidence that online customer engagement can directly potentiate the rise of brand evangelists.

Additionally, through the data collected from both primary and secondary studies, it was possible to take some other relevant conclusions. Europe is the second largest consumption region in the market segment of activewear, with Portugal being one of the top eleven European countries revealing the highest apparel expenditure and the seventh country in the world in 2020 with the highest social penetration rate. This shows the importance of the chosen industry given the online context for the theme under study. Additionally, this provides evidence that Portuguese consumers are getting more digitally evolved and increasing their presence and time spent on social network sites, thus, becoming more prone to stablish stronger and long-lasting online interactions with organizations and potentially more predisposed to a higher level of brand involvement.

From the secondary study it was also found that Nike and Adidas have the highest sales revenue, which goes in line with the results obtained from the quantitative research since they were the most elected activewear brands with whom Portuguese consumers felt most identified with. Also, it was identified that the majority of global inquired (65%) use sportswear in their regular daily lives (Statista, 2020), which can represent a great opportunity for sportive brands to promote a strong and favourable lifestyle congruency and therefore, reinforce their cognitive online brand identification with their target audience.

4.5 | Managerial Implications

This investigation reveals significant implications that should be taken into consideration by activewear brands and also other apparel subcategories in general. It is a matter of fact that the way consumers present themselves to the world through their appearance and apparel choices, hugely manifests their personality and reflects their lifestyle. In the online environment, also the way users expose themselves and interact with others, including brands, can be seen as a social mirror or representation of who they are. From this point of view, individuals tend to use brands as a form of self-expression in which these trade-names exert a great influence on the way consumers perceive themselves and the others around them. In order to access this identity connection, marketers should focus their efforts on deeply understanding their consumers' character, needs and preferences thought their interests, habits, beliefs, and attitude aspiration toward life, in order to adopt social media communication strategies accordingly. In line with this perspective, corporations must also analyse their consumers' actual and desired image/ personality to

assemble as close as possible to their ideal self, building and assuming an accurate representation of their idealized social self-expression. In a digital context, this identity process is significantly facilitated by the ease of contact between both parties and through the immediate interaction and direct feedback obtention that can continuously work as a mechanism of permanent, updated, and accurate customer data collection.

Also, to reinforce this online brand identification, companies should take into consideration if their customers' assessment of brand prestige is in permanent consonance with the image consumers have associated with the brand, adopting procedures to regularly measure and analyse its conformity. Also, companies should use these social platforms as a more broaden and intensified way of co-creation and revalidation before launching new products or introducing bolder campaigns. This will not just enhance the audience-brand connection and identification levels, given the consumer appreciation and sense of inclusion on brand decisions, but would also considerably improve the value provided by the company. In addition, to strengthen this online identification, marketers should adjust their communication strategies not only to transmit a credible image, but to reinsure that their prestige is positive and strongly enough for their online credibility to represent a favourable factor, leading consumers to assume any brand interaction as a social identity boost. If a brand happens to be credible but not having notoriety, it might portray negative levels of online brand identification.

As verified during the research, by inducing the Portuguese online customer identification with sports fashion brands, companies can benefit from the development of a brand love connection, the possibility to improve their consumers online engagement ranks and also from the conversion of regular consumers into brand advocates. These enthusiastic customers are considered the most cost-effective tool and profitable asset in a company, driving sales, and increasing positive awareness, able to provide loyalty behaviours, support the brand, recommend it to relatives, forgive any mistake and ultimately, work as the most sustainable and powerful working force (Fuggetta, 2012).

5 | CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The aim of the present investigation was to uncover the possible antecedents and outcomes of cognitive online brand identification (COBI) concerning the sportswear industry brands. To do so, it was developed a structural model based on three possible drivers, namely, online brand prestige (OBP), online brand credibility (OBC) and lifestyle congruency (LC), and three potential outcomes portrayed through the latent variables brand love (BL), online customer engagement (OCE) and brand advocacy (BA).

From the PLS analysis, it was concluded that all the constructs are related with the model mediator, validating the first six hypothesis of the model. However, it was not verified a significant impact of online customer engagement (OCE) on brand advocacy (BA), rejecting H7. Concerning the model antecedents, lifestyle congruency (LC) was proved to be the strongest component influencing cognitive online brand identification (COBI), whereas brand love (BL) registered the higher beta value among the remaining outcomes ($\beta = 0.719$). Given the results obtained, it can be argued that corporations should give special importance to their online reputation and continually monitor their consumers' level of brand identification, ensuring the brands maximum overlapping with their consumers' self- identity. When such goals are accomplished, stronger and long-lasting connections emerge, the virtual brand engagement increases and the possibility to form a large advocates "army" becomes a more conspicuous reality.

This final section of the dissertation will introduce the limitations and future research recommendations of this study. The goal is to provide a better understanding of what was not covered throughout the present research and suggest the incorporation of new relevant and understudied approaches to be further explored in future investigations concerning the theme online brand identification.

5.1 | Limitations of the Investigation and Contributes for Future Research

As any investigation, this dissertation faced some limitations that can be understood as possible future research opportunities. First it was identified a lack of research on brand identification in Portugal, which means that the literature was based on studies conducted in other countries, rather than Portugal.

Additionally, it was also found a limitation concerning the size of the sample collected on the quantitative research, since the number of participants was reduced to study the proposed model. From the online survey it was collected 304 valid answers, which have a low representativity to clearly understand how cognitive brand identification and its outcomes are influenced in the digital context. Also, the sample was not equally distributed because the survey was published online and there are essentially young adults who have an easier access to digital media, resulting in a sample majorly composed by this generation. Therefore, to avoid biased results, future research should gather an increased sample size, equally distributed by age group and the data should preferably be collected by more diversified means rather than just from the online survey instrument.

The fact that the study was conducted based on a specific industry - activewear - the results might change accordingly to other non-related categories. Also, the investigation was directed to a digital context, what might derail the considerations regarding a more presential approach on physical stores. Thus, a research on brand identification that considers the antecedents and consequences on both channels, without restricting to a specific category, would be also interesting to explore.

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7 | APPENDIX

Appendix A | Online Survey

Caro(a) participante,

O meu nome é Catarina Martins e estou a realizar um estudo no âmbito da minha dissertação de mestrado, a decorrer no ISCTE Business School.

O **objetivo** deste questionário reside no estudo da relação entre o consumidor e a marca num contexto digital, mais concretamente sobre a influência que determinados comportamentos e interações humanas exercem na intenção de compra online.

O questionário é **anónimo e confidencial**. Os dados destinam-se apenas a tratamento estatístico com fins académicos, pelo que todas as respostas serão analisadas coletivamente como um todo. Por favor, considere que **não há respostas certas nem erradas.** Desta forma, apelo a que responda com a máxima honestidade a todas as questões.

Este questionário tem a **duração média de 7 minutos**. Desde já, agradeço a sua disponibilidade para colaborar neste projeto, será muito valorizada!

Em caso de dúvidas, poderá contactar-me através do endereço eletrónico: cicms1@iscte-iul.pt.

Se pretender participar, por favor, clique na opção **"Aceito"** e avance para a página seguinte. Ao aceitar, compreende-se que está de acordo com as condições do presente estudo.

Aceito.

Não aceito.

→

1.1. Refira, por favor, uma marca de roupa desportiva com a qual se identifique.

[   ]
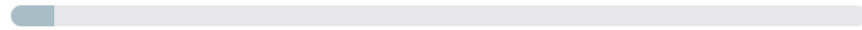
1.2.
Alguma vez comprou esta marca?

Sim, já.

Nunca.

1.3. Se sim, de que forma a adquiriu da última vez?

Loja física.

Online.

→

Numa escala de 1-7, sendo 1 - "Discordo totalmente" e 7 - "Concordo totalmente", **selecione a opção que melhor o(a) descreve** relativamente a cada uma das questões que se seguem.
NOTA: Tenha em consideração a marca que mencionou na pergunta de resposta aberta.

2/9. Prestígio Online da Marca

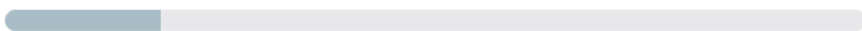|	Discordo totalmente (1)	2	3	4	5	6	Concordo totalmente (7)
1. Esta marca de roupa desportiva é reconhecida como uma das melhores marcas dentro da sua categoria.	○	○	○	○	○	○	○
2. Ser consumidor desta marca de roupa desportiva é considerado prestigiante.	○	○	○	○	○	○	○
3. Na sua generalidade, os consumidores apreciam esta marca de roupa desportiva.	○	○	○	○	○	○	○
4. O conteúdo que esta marca de roupa desportiva publica nas suas redes sociais reforça a imagem diferenciadora que tenho dela.	○	○	○	○	○	○	○

3/9. Credibilidade Online da Marca

	Discordo totalmente (1)	2	3	4	5	6	Concordo totalmente (7)
1. Esta marca de roupa desportiva cumpre com o que promete.	○	○	○	○	○	○	○
2. Considero que a descrição dos produtos por parte desta marca é credível e corresponde à realidade.	○	○	○	○	○	○	○
3. A minha experiência com esta marca tem me levado a pensar que esta cumpre com aquilo que promete.	○	○	○	○	○	○	○
4. Esta marca de roupa desportiva está comprometida em cumprir o que defende.	○	○	○	○	○	○	○
5. O nome desta marca de roupa desportiva transmite-me confiança.	○	○	○	○	○	○	○
6. As suas plataformas digitais (website, social media, community blogs) apresentam informação fidedigna.	○	○	○	○	○	○	○

4/9. Congruência com o Estilo de Vida

	Discordo totalmente (1)	2	3	4	5	6	Concordo totalmente (7)
1. Esta marca de roupa desportiva reflete o meu estilo de vida.	○	○	○	○	○	○	○
2. Esta marca de roupa desportiva está em total consonância com o meu estilo de vida.	○	○	○	○	○	○	○
3. Utilizar esta marca de roupa desportiva reforça o meu estilo de vida.	○	○	○	○	○	○	○

5/9. Identificação Cognitiva com a Marca Online

	Discordo totalmente (1)	2	3	4	5	6	Concordo totalmente (7)
1. Quando alguém critica esta marca de roupa, sinto como se fosse um insulto pessoal.	○	○	○	○	○	○	○
2. A opinião de outras pessoas acerca desta marca de roupa desportiva interessa-me.	○	○	○	○	○	○	○
3. Quando falo sobre esta marca de roupa desportiva, por regra, refiro "nos" em vez de "eles".	○	○	○	○	○	○	○
4. Considero os sucessos e conquistas desta marca de roupa desportiva também como sendo meus.	○	○	○	○	○	○	○
5. Quando alguém tece alguma consideração positiva acerca desta marca de roupa desportiva, sinto como se fosse um elogio pessoal.	○	○	○	○	○	○	○
6. Se fosse partilhada uma história nas redes sociais ou divulgada através dos media a criticar ou	○	○	○	○	○	○	○

→

6/9. "Amor à Marca"

	Clique para escrever a coluna 1						
	Discordo totalmente (1)	2	3	4	5	6	Concordo totalmente (7)
1. Quando utilizo esta marca de roupa desportiva expresso algo "verdadeiro" e "profundo" sobre aquilo que considero ser enquanto pessoa.	○	○	○	○	○	○	○
2. Esta marca de roupa desportiva contribui para que transpareça a imagem que pretendo transparecer aos outros de mim próprio(a).	○	○	○	○	○	○	○
3. Esta marca de roupa desportiva poderia fazer algo que tornasse a minha vida mais significativa.	○	○	○	○	○	○	○
4. Por vezes dou por mim a pensar nesta marca de roupa desportiva.	○	○	○	○	○	○	○
7. Já interagi várias vezes com esta marca de roupa desportiva no passado.	○	○	○	○	○	○	○
8. Sinto que existe um "fit" natural entre mim e esta marca de roupa desportiva.	○	○	○	○	○	○	○
9. Sinto-me emocionalmente conectado a esta marca de roupa desportiva.	○	○	○	○	○	○	○
10. Considero esta marca de roupa desportiva divertida.	○	○	○	○	○	○	○
11. Considero que irei vestir esta marca de roupa desportiva por um longo período de tempo.	○	○	○	○	○	○	○
12. Se esta marca anunciasse que iria encerrar definitivamente todas as suas lojas, sentir-me-ia bastante ansioso(a).	○	○	○	○	○	○	○
13. Se tivesse de atribuir uma classificação global a esta marca, dar-lhe-ia a cotação máxima.	○	○	○	○	○	○	○

→

	Clique para escrever a coluna 1						
	Discordo totalmente (1)	2	3	4	5	6	Concordo totalmente (7)
1. Tenho intenção de continuar a comprar produtos desta marca de roupa desportiva num futuro próximo.	○	○	○	○	○	○	○
2. Comprar produtos desta marca de roupa deixa-me satisfeito.	○	○	○	○	○	○	○
3. Não sinto que o meu dinheiro seja bem empregue quando compro algo desta marca de roupa desportiva.	○	○	○	○	○	○	○
4. Ter produtos desta marca de roupa desportiva faz-me sentir feliz.	○	○	○	○	○	○	○
5. Recomendo esta marca de roupa desportiva a amigos e conhecidos porque reconheço valor nos produtos que comercializa e/ ou considero que a qualidade que esta oferece é superior à concorrência.	○	○	○	○	○	○	○
7. Para além do valor proveniente do produto, incentivos monetários também se caracterizam como factores de peso para que recomende esta marca de roupa deportiva a amigos e conhecidos.	○	○	○	○	○	○	○
8. O meu objetivo em promover esta marca de roupa desportiva sustenta-se exclusivamente na possibilidade de futura obtenção de benefícios monetários.	○	○	○	○	○	○	○
9. Adoro falar sobre a minha experiência com esta marca de roupa desportiva e/ ou discutir os benefícios que obtenho por parte desta com outras pessoas.	○	○	○	○	○	○	○
10. Partilho informação relacionada com esta marca de roupa desportiva com a minha rede social através de publicações de auto-recriação (exemplo: partilhar a sua experiência com a compra de algum produto).	○	○	○	○	○	○	○
11. Partilho conteúdos relacionados com esta marca de roupa desportiva através de partilhas diretas da página ou perfil da marca com a minha rede social.	○	○	○	○	○	○	○
12. Partilho ofertas desta marca de roupa desportiva que considere vantajosas com a minha rede social.	○	○	○	○	○	○	○
13. Partilho iniciativas e/ ou apoio causas defendidas por esta marca de roupa desportiva com a minha rede social.	○	○	○	○	○	○	○
14. Interajo com grande frequência a publicações desta marca de roupa desportiva (através de comentários, gostos ou partilhas).	○	○	○	○	○	○	○
15. Dou feedback sobre a minha experiência com esta marca de roupa desportiva diretamente à empresa.	○	○	○	○	○	○	○
16. Apresento sugestões para melhorar o desempenho desta marca de roupa desportiva.	○	○	○	○	○	○	○
17. Apresento sugestões e/ou feedback sobre novos produtos desta marca de roupa desportiva.	○	○	○	○	○	○	○
18. Apresento sugestões e/ ou feedback para o desenvolvimento de novos produtos para esta marca de roupa desportiva.	○	○	○	○	○	○	○

→
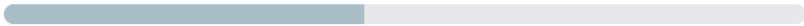
8/9. Sentimento de Gratificação à Marca

	Discordo totalmente (1)	2	3	4	5	6	Concordo totalmente (7)
1. Tenho interesse em experimentar novos produtos apresentados por esta marca de roupa desportiva.	○	○	○	○	○	○	○
2. Refiro-me favoravelmente a esta marca de roupa desportiva a amigos e familiares.	○	○	○	○	○	○	○
3. Recomendo esta marca de roupa desportiva a amigos e familiares.	○	○	○	○	○	○	○
4. Se, eventualmente, esta marca de roupa desportiva fizesse algo que não aprovasse, estaria disposto a dar-lhe uma nova oportunidade.	○	○	○	○	○	○	○

→

Chegou à última secção! Esta, tem por objetivo conhecer o seu **perfil demográfico**. Por favor, selecione a resposta que melhor o descreve.

9.1/9. Género

Feminino

Masculino

Outro

9.2/9. Idade

18-24

25-34

35-44

45-54

55-64

+ 65

9.3/9. Nacionalidade

[   ]

9.4/9. Nível Académico

Secundário ou inferior

Licenciatura

Mestrado

Pós-graduação

Doutoramento

9.5/9. Ocupação atual

Estudante

Empregado

Trabalhador independente

Desempregado

Reformado

9.6/9. Estado civil

Solteiro

Casado

Divorciado

Viúvo

9.7/9. Região de residência

Norte

Centro

Área Metropolitana de Lisboa

Alentejo

Algarve

9.8/9. Rendimento anual do agregado familiar

Menos de 25.000€

25.000 - 100.000€

100.000 - 200.000€

Mais de 200.000€

9.9/9. Frequência de utilização de redes sociais

Intensa (várias vezes por dia)

Moderada (cerca de 1 vez por dia)

Ocasional (algumas vezes por semana ou menos)

→

O questionário foi submetido. Muito obrigada pela sua colaboração!

Appendix B | Descriptive analysis of the items and global dimensions

B.1 | Antecedents of Cognitive Online Brand Identification

- *Online Brand Prestige*

Considering the presented model in study, the first driver to be analysed is the online brand prestige (OBP). As it is possible to verify on table 9, this dimension is composed by four items (OBP1, OBP2, OBP3 and OBP4), where **OBP1 - This sports fashion brand is seen as one of the best brands in the category** (mean = 6.25) and **OBP3 - I think that consumers generally appreciate this sports fashion brand** (mean = 6.13), score the highest means among the other items. However, all statements related to this construct show relatively high mean scores, since the scale goes from 1 to 7, leading to a global dimension mean of 5.57. This value illustrates that, from the sample collected, the Portuguese consumers consider that to develop an identification for a brand, the brand has to express a certain online prestigious status.

In terms of standard deviation, there are two items with very similar scores assuming the maximum values, which are **OBP2 - It is considered prestigious to be a customer of this sports fashion brand** (α = 1.595) and **OBP4 - The content published by this spots fashion brand on their social media reinforces its distinctive image** (α =1.589). For presenting the higher scores, it is possible to conclude that there were more consensual answers regarding the two statements abovementioned. Additionally, from the confidence intervals it is possible to ensure that the beta value is contained inside the interval, since lower and upper bounds assume values different from one.

	Mean	Standard Deviation	Bias-Corrected CI	
			2,5%	97,5%
OBP1 - This sports fashion brand is seen as one of the best brands in the category.	6.25	1.128		
OBP2 - It is considered prestigious to be a customer of this sports fashion brand.	4.83	1.595		
OBP3 - I think that consumers generally appreciate this sports fashion brand.	6.13	1.029	0.135	0.343
OBP4 - The content published by this spots fashion brand on their social media reinforces its distinctive image.	5.08	1.589		
OBP Mean	5.57			

Table 9 – Descriptive Statistics of Online Brand Prestige
Source: Self-elaboration based on PLS outputs.

-   *Online Brand Credibility*

In table 10 is shown the descriptive statistics of the online brand credibility (OBC), as the second antecedent of COBI, displaying the mean scores and the standard deviation of the six items (OBC1, OBC2, OBC3, OBC4, OBC5, OBC6) that constitute the scale.

By interpreting the table below, it is possible to identify that all the items reached very high means, from 5.74 to 6.1, with **OBC5 - This sports fashion brand has a name I can trust** (mean = 6.10) and **OBC3 - Over time, my experiences with this brand have led me to expect it to keep its promises** (mean = 5.99) registering the maximum mean scores.

Regarding standard deviation, Portuguese consumers tend to have more dissimilar opinions in what concerns the item **OBC2 - This brand's product claims are believable** (α =0.97). Contrarily, in the last item **OBC6 - The brand's overall online platforms (website, social media, community blogs) are believable**, the standard deviation reaches the higher score (α = 1.22), indicating that consumers are more likely to feel identified with a brand if they could trust on the content provided by the company' online platforms. From the confidence intervals assuming values different from one [-0278, -0.051], it can be confirmed that OBC exerts a significant and negative effect on the relationship with the central model construct, COBI.

	Mean	Standard Deviation	Bias-Corrected CI	
			2,5%	97,5%
OBC1 - This sports fashion brand delivers what it promises.	5.86	1.095		
OBC2 - This brand's product claims are believable.	5.98	0.970		
OBC3 - Over time, my experiences with this brand have led me to expect it to keep its promises.	5.99	1.005		
OBC4 - This sports fashion brand is committed to delivering on its claims, no more and no less.	5.74	1.150	-0.278	-0.051
OBC5 - This sports fashion brand has a name I can trust.	6.10	1.051		
OBC6 - The brand's overall online platforms (website, social media, community blogs) are believable.	5.88	1.215		
OBC Mean	5.93			

Table 10 – Descriptive Statistics of Online Brand Credibility
Source: Self-elaboration based on PLS outputs.

- *Lifestyle Congruency*

The third driver of COBI is lifestyle congruency (LC) and is composed by three items (LC1, LC2, LC3), where **LC1 - This sports fashion brand reflects my personal lifestyle** scores the highest value (mean = 4.39) among the other items. The mean of the global dimension assumes a satisfactory value of 4.26, which indicates that the sample population considerably feels identified with a brand when they recognize a connection between that brand and their own way of living.

In what concerns the standard deviation, the item **LC3 - Using this sports fashion brand supports my lifestyle** represents the maximum score obtained (α = 1.721), indicating that the individuals inquired revealed more homogeneous considerations regarding the last construct dimension. Furthermore, from the table 11, it can be extracted additional information regarding the confidence interval. This indicator is comprehended between [0.189, 0.348], which suggests that the beta is contained inside the interval and that the construct under study exerts a positive effect on COBI.

	Mean	Standard Deviation	Bias-Corrected CI	
			2,5%	97,5%
LC1 - This sports fashion brand reflects my personal lifestyle.	4.39	1.653		
LC2 - This sports fashion brand is totally in line with my lifestyle.	4.35	1.553	0.189	0.348
LC3 - Using this sports fashion brand supports my lifestyle.	4.04	1.721		
LC Mean	4.26			

Table 11 – Descriptive Statistics of Lifestyle Congruency
Source: Self-elaboration based on PLS outputs.

B.2 | Cognitive Online Brand Identification Construct

Cognitive online brand identification (COBI) is composed by six items mentioned in the table 12 below (COBI1 to COBI6), where the mean of the global dimension assumes a significantly low value of 1.96, considering a scale from 1 to 7. Although the general non-satisfactory results obtained, the item with the highest mean value obtained is **COBI2 - I am very interested in what others think about this sports fashion brand** (mean = 2.84), followed by **COBI5 - When someone praises this sports fashion brand, it feels**

like a personal compliment (mean = 1.96). Both statements induce the importance that Portuguese consumers assign to the perceptiveness and consideration of other consumers regarding a certain trade name, in order to develop their own level of connectiveness and identification with that specific corporation.

Regarding standard deviation, there were more consensual answers concerning the item **COBI2 - I am very interested in what others think about this sports fashion brand**, reaching a value of 1.809, whereas **COBI3 - When I talk about this sports fashion brand, I usually say 'we' rather than 'they'** (with α = 1.298), revealed to be the one with more heterogeneous considerations. In terms of the confidence interval, it is possible to ensure that the beta of COBI is contained inside the interval, exerting a positive impact on brand love.

	Mean	Standard Deviation	Bias-Corrected CI	
			2,5%	97,5%
COBI1 - When someone criticizes this sports fashion brand, it feels like a personal insult.	1.80	1.396		
COBI2 - I am very interested in what others think about this sports fashion brand.	2.84	1.809		
COBI3 - When I talk about this sports fashion brand, I usually say 'we' rather than 'they'.	1.64	1.298		
COBI4 - This sports fashion brand's successes are my successes.	1.69	1.375	0.638	0.770
COBI5 - When someone praises this sports fashion brand, it feels like a personal compliment.	1.96	1.559		
COBI6 - If I saw a story in my social network or shared in the media criticizing this sports fashion brand, I would feel embarrassed.	1.85	1.541		
COBI Mean	1.96			

Table 12 – Descriptive Statistics of Cognitive Online Brand Identification
Source: Self-elaboration based on PLS outputs.

B.3 | Consequences of Cognitive Online Brand Identification

- Brand Love

Brand Love (BL) is composed by a scale that comprises 13 items, which are represented in the table 13 above from BL1 to BL13. By interpreting this table, it is possible to identify that the statement with the highest mean score is **BL13 - If you had to give a global evaluation to this brand, would you assign the maximum rate?** (mean = 5.25),

followed by **BL11 - Please, express the extent to which you believe that you will be wearing this sports fashion brand for a long time** (mean = 5.16), succeeding a score mean of 4.41 concerning **BL10 - To what extent do you feel that this sports fashion brand is fun?**. Regarding the lowest mean scored items of brand love, **BL5 - To what extent are you willing to spend a lot of money improving and fine-tuning a product from this sports fashion brand after you buy it?** scores a mean of 2.21, next to **BL9 - Please, express the extent to which you feel emotionally connected to this sports fashion brand?** with a mean of 2.53.

Additionally, the standard deviation assuming the maximum score is **BL7 - To what extent have you interacted with this sports fashion brand in the past?** ($\alpha = 2.107$), revealing to be the statement where the answers had more expressively similar opinions. On a final note, by observing the last two columns, neither lower nor upper bound assume the value of one. Therefore, it can be assumed that beta is contained inside de interval.

	Mean	Standard Deviation	Bias-Corrected CI	
			2,5%	97,5%
BL1 - To what extent do you feel that wearing of this sports fashion brand says something "true" and "deep" about whom you are as a person?	2.75	1.742		
BL2 - To what extent is this sports fashion brand able to make you look like you want to look?	3.04	1.842		
BL3 - To what extent is this sports fashion brand able to do something that makes your life more meaningful?	2.61	1.723		
BL4 - To what extent do you find yourself thinking about this sports fashion brand?	2.36	1.711		
BL5 - To what extent are you willing to spend a lot of money improving and fine-tuning a product from this sports fashion brand after you buy it?	2.21	1.674	0.579	0.744
BL6 - Using the products: To what extent do you feel yourself desiring to wear this sports fashion brand?	3.18	1.860		
BL7 - To what extent have you interacted with this sports fashion brand in the past?	3.55	2.107		
BL8 - Please, express the extent to which you feel there is a natural "fit" between you and this sports fashion brand.	3.53	1.928		

Table 13 – Descriptive Statistics of Brand Love
Source: Self-elaboration based on PLS outputs.

	Mean	Standard Deviation	Bias-Corrected CI	
			2,5%	97,5%
BL9 - Please, express the extent to which you feel emotionally connected to this sports fashion brand?	2.53	1.840		
BL10 - To what extent do you feel that this sports fashion brand is fun?	4.41	1.722		
BL11 - Please, express the extent to which you believe that you will be wearing this sports fashion brand for a long time.	5.16	1.604	0.579	0.744
BL12 - Suppose this sports fashion brand were to go out of existence, to what extent would you feel anxiety?	2.71	1.785		
BL13 - If you had to give a global evaluation to this brand, would you assign the maximum rate?	5.25	1.465		
BL Mean	**3.33**			

Table 13 – Descriptive Statistics of Brand Love (continuation)
Source: Self-elaboration based on PLS outputs.

- *Online Customer Engagement*

As possible to verify in table 14, Online Customer Engagement (OCE), as a second order dimension, is composed by 18 items fragmented into four groups, namely Customer Purchase (CP), Customer Reference (CR), Customer Influence (CI) and Customer Knowledge (CK). From a global construct evaluation, **CP1 - I will continue buying the products of this sports fashion brand in the near future** scores the highest mean (5.74) among the other dimensions, followed by **CP2 - My purchases with this sports fashion brand make me content** (mean = 5.34) and subsequently for **CR1 - I recommend this sports fashion brand to friends and relatives because I recognize value on their products and/ or because I consider that this brand offers superior quality when compared with their competitors** with a mean of 4.91. These three higher mean scores are related to the positive satisfaction with the brand and future intention to repurchase as well as recommend to relatives.

As for the lowest mean scored items of OBE, **CK2 - I provide suggestions for improving the performance of this sports fashion brand** scores a mean of 1.78, next to **CK4 - I provide feedback/suggestions for developing new products for this sports**

fashion brand (mean = 1.80). Both statements reveal a lower influence regarding customer contribution on brand value improvements to straightening the customer affection or online engagement with the corporation.

In what concerns the standard deviation, the maximum scores were obtained by the item **CR3 - In addition to the value derived from the product, the monetary referral incentives also encourage me to refer this sports fashion brand to my friends and relatives** ($\alpha = 1.901$) followed by **CR2 - I recommend this sports fashion brand to friends and relatives with the purpose of getting social recognition** ($\alpha = 1.885$). Additionally, neither of the bounds include the value one. Thus, OCE beta is contained inside the confidence interval.

	Mean	Standard Deviation	Bias-Corrected CI	
			2,5%	97,5%
CP1 - I will continue buying the products of this sports fashion brand in the near future.	5.74	1.294		
CP2 - My purchases with this sports fashion brand make me content.	5.34	1.386		
CP3 - I do not get my money's worth when I purchase this sports fashion brand.	2.39	1.678		
CP4 - Owning the products of this brand makes me happy.	4.17	1.561		
CR1 - I recommend this sports fashion brand to friends and relatives because I recognize value on their products and/ or because I consider that this brand offers superior quality when compared with their competitors.	4.91	1.546	-0.052	0.202
CR2 - I recommend this sports fashion brand to friends and relatives with the purpose of getting social recognition.	2.43	1.885		
CR3 - In addition to the value derived from the product, the monetary referral incentives also encourage me to refer this sports fashion brand to my friends and relatives.	2.74	1.901		
CR4 - I promote this sports fashion brand because of the monetary referral benefits provided by the brand.	1.89	1.589		

Table 14 – Descriptive Statistics of Online Customer Engagement
Source: Self-elaboration based on PLS outputs.

	Mean	Standard Deviation	Bias-Corrected CI	
			2,5%	97,5%
CI1 - I love talking about my sports fashion brand experience and/ or discuss the benefits I get from this brand with others.	2.44	1.724		
CI2 - I share content related with this sports fashion brand with my social network through self-made posts (example: sharing your own product experience).	1.92	1.557		
CI3 - I share information / content related with this sports fashion brand through brand reposting with my social network.	1.90	1.567		
CI4 - I share offers related with this sports fashion brand that I consider advantageous with my social network.	1.87	1.576		
CI5 - I share initiatives or causes supported by this brand with my social network.	2.16	1.752	-0.052	0.202
CI6 - To what extent would you rate your interaction with posts from this sports fashion brand on their social media (through comments, likes or sharing)?	2.04	1.565		
CK1 - I provide feedback about my experiences with this sports fashion brand to the firm.	1.93	1.567		
CK2 - I provide suggestions for improving the performance of this sports fashion brand.	1.78	1.480		
CK3 - I provide suggestions/feedbacks about the new product of this sports fashion brand.	1.83	1.495		
CK4 - I provide feedback/suggestions for developing new products for this sports fashion brand.	1.80	1.533		
OCE Mean	2.74			

Table 14 – Descriptive Statistics of Online Customer Engagement (continuation)
Source: Self-elaboration based on PLS outputs.

- *Brand Advocacy*

The variable Brand Advocacy (BA) comprises a scale of four items presented in the table 15. The item with higher average value is **BA1 - I would like to try new products introduced by this sports fashion brand** with a mean of 5.41, followed by **BA3 - I recommend this sports fashion brand to friends and relatives** (mean = 5.11). Although the lower mean had scored 4.39 from the item **BA4 - If this sports fashion brand did something I did not like, I would be willing to give it another chance**, this construct

portrays a hight global mean score of 4.99, which is a great value considering the scale used.

In terms of standard deviation, the item that scored the higher mean was the one accomplishing less consensual answers (α = 1.313) from the statement **BA1 - I would like to try new products introduced by this sports fashion brand**, whereas by contrast the item scoring the most homogeneous considerations was **BA4 - If this sports fashion brand did something I did not like, I would be willing to give it another chance** (α = 1.571) which obtained the lower construct mean score. To what concerns the last two columns, it is safe to mention that brand advocacy beta is contained inside the confidence interval, receiving a positive impact from BL.

	Mean	Standard Deviation	Bias-Corrected CI	
			2,5%	97,5%
BA1 - I would like to try new products introduced by this sports fashion brand.	5.41	1.313		
BA2 - I talk favourably about this sports fashion brand to friends and family.	5.07	1.549		
BA3 - I recommend this sports fashion brand to friends and relatives.	5.11	1.529	0.244	0.523
BA4 - If this sports fashion brand did something I did not like, I would be willing to give it another chance.	4.39	1.571		
BA Mean	4.99			

Table 15 – Descriptive Statistics of Brand Advocacy
Source: Self-elaboration based on PLS outputs.

Appendix C | Cross Loadings

	BA	BL	COBI	CI	CK	CP	CR	LC	OBC	OBP
BA1	**0.756**	0.313	0.139	0.221	0.163	0.358	0.129	0.288	0.336	0.294
BA2	**0.837**	0.380	0.234	0.263	0.193	0.446	0.156	0.277	0.221	0.188
BA3	**0.839**	0.346	0.211	0.298	0.199	0.381	0.197	0.244	0.359	0.249
BA4	**0.703**	0.311	0.222	0.271	0.248	0.288	0.215	0.167	0.326	0.232
BL1	0.304	**0.814**	0.623	0.548	0.423	0.532	0.530	0.415	0.160	0.338
BL12	0.338	**0.744**	0.588	0.509	0.361	0.504	0.453	0.299	0.118	0.215
BL2	0.351	**0.789**	0.520	0.482	0.344	0.519	0.418	0.497	0.131	0.329
BL3	0.263	**0.756**	0.528	0.445	0.366	0.459	0.468	0.248	0.009	0.194
BL4	0.313	**0.749**	0.525	0.507	0.412	0.404	0.479	0.310	0.114	0.294
BL5	0.220	**0.743**	0.595	0.565	0.484	0.377	0.494	0.248	0.050	0.208
BL6	0.389	**0.764**	0.470	0.476	0.369	0.528	0.468	0.381	0.184	0.360
BL8	0.431	**0.734**	0.481	0.431	0.317	0.436	0.394	0.433	0.167	0.227
BL9	0.388	**0.843**	0.633	0.579	0.445	0.547	0.555	0.390	0.126	0.275
COBI1	0.242	0.632	**0.823**	0.557	0.414	0.394	0.498	0.301	0.032	0.196
COBI3	0.109	0.504	**0.812**	0.543	0.518	0.265	0.518	0.177	-0.014	0.159
COBI4	0.234	0.644	**0.916**	0.679	0.602	0.357	0.604	0.275	0.012	0.237
COBI5	0.263	0.692	**0.869**	0.572	0.410	0.454	0.575	0.263	0.047	0.245
COBI6	0.236	0.586	**0.868**	0.574	0.462	0.334	0.496	0.254	-0.006	0.252
OBC4	0.317	0.116	0.018	0.017	0.002	0.138	-0.004	0.214	**0.862**	0.347
OBC5	0.356	0.130	0.007	0.058	0.001	0.192	0.015	0.246	**0.679**	0.341
OBC6	0.301	0.130	0.016	0.161	0.109	0.141	0.104	0.175	**0.820**	0.409
LC1	0.248	0.398	0.244	0.277	0.204	0.290	0.283	**0.917**	0.239	0.329
LC2	0.309	0.395	0.243	0.318	0.262	0.339	0317	**0.927**	0.267	0.320
LC3	0.296	0.469	0.323	0.339	0.266	0.351	0.331	**0.911**	0.197	0.241
OCE10	0.266	0.608	0.620	**0.890**	0.766	0.356	0.732	0.271	0.084	0.280
OCE11	0.239	0.548	0.611	**0.917**	0.755	0.323	0.699	0.276	0.060	0.264
OCE12	0.245	0.505	0.593	**0.855**	0.717	0.259	0.589	0.235	0.032	0.251
OCE13	0.316	0.485	0.490	**0.807**	0.672	0.363	0.562	0.322	0.146	0.276
OCE14	0.298	0.543	0.541	**0.819**	0.716	0.373	0.613	0.337	0.076	0.244
OCE15	0.270	0.471	0.452	0.742	**0.889**	0.305	0.573	0.271	0.079	0.166
OCE16	0.222	0.483	0.542	0.800	**0.953**	0.278	0.637	0.246	0.025	0.223
OCE17	0.241	0.475	0.543	0.809	**0.971**	0.285	0.623	0.244	0.056	0.245
OCE18	0.227	0.488	0.556	0.813	**0.946**	0.292	0.642	0.249	0.044	0.252
OCE4	0.472	0.621	0.427	0.414	0.308	**1.000**	0.392	0.359	0.183	0.282
OCE6	0.191	0.585	0.635	0.717	0.590	0.353	**0.852**	0.350	0.054	0.265
OCE7	0.204	0.541	0.447	0.532	0.438	0.401	**0.826**	0.290	0.039	0.169
OCE8	0.176	0.460	0.515	0.691	0.640	0.266	**0.884**	0.235	0.038	0.229
OCE9	0.353	0.655	0.615	**0.795**	0.654	0.438	0.686	0.309	0.112	0.295
OBP2	0.235	0.342	0.226	0.241	0.148	0.279	0.200	0.265	0.257	**0.851**
OBP4	0.266	0.227	0.194	0.282	0.250	0.177	0.235	0.256	0.511	**0.789**

Table 16: Cross Loadings
Source: Self-elaboration based on PLS Outputs.

Appendix D | Online Survey: List of sports fashion brands mentioned by respondents

Please, mention a sports fashion brand with whom you feel identified with.

		Frequency	Percent
Valid	1 Adidas	111	36,5
	2 All Star	2	,7
	3 Amless	1	,3
	4 Artengo	1	,3
	5 Asics	3	1,0
	6 Berg	1	,3
	7 Bo+tee	1	,3
	8 Decathlon	4	1,3
	9 Domyos	1	,3
	10 Ekoi	1	,3
	11 Element	1	,3
	12 Fila	2	,7
	13 Fred Perry	1	,3
	14 Gant	1	,3
	15 Gymshark	1	,3
	16 Hurley	1	,3
	17 Kalenji	1	,3
	18 Lacoste	1	,3
	19 Light Years Away	1	,3
	20 Lotto	1	,3
	21 New Balance	5	1,6
	22 Nike	127	41,8
	23 Oysho	8	2,6
	24 Prozis	2	,7
	25 Pull and Bear	1	,3
	26 Puma	6	2,0
	27 Quechua	4	1,3
	28 Reebok	2	,7
	29 SikSilk	1	,3
	30 Skechers	2	,7
	31 Sport Zone	2	,7
	32 Tala	1	,3
	33 Thrasher	1	,3
	34 Under Armour	1	,3
	35 Vans	4	1,3
	Total	**304**	**100,0**

Table 17: List of sports fashion brands mentioned by respondents.
Source: Self-elaboration on SPSS.

Appendix E | Online Survey: Socio-Demographic Outputs from SPSS

Gender

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Female	177	58,2	58,2	58,2
	Male	127	41,8	41,8	100,0
	Total	**304**	**100,0**	**100,0**	

Table 18: Descriptive analysis of the respondents, by gender.
Source: Self-elaboration on SPSS.

Age Group

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	18-24	176	57,9	57,9	57,9
	25-34	90	29,6	29,6	87,5
	35-44	10	3,3	3,3	90,8
	45-54	20	6,6	6,6	97,4
	55-64	5	1,6	1,6	99,0
	+ 65	3	1,0	1,0	100,0
	Total	**304**	**100,0**	**100,0**	

Table 19: Descriptive analysis of the respondents, by age group.
Source: Self-elaboration on SPSS.

Education

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Basic Education	62	20,4	20,4	20,4
	Bachelor's degree	153	50,3	50,3	70,7
	Master's degree	74	24,3	24,3	95,1
	Post-Graduated	11	3,6	3,6	98,7
	PhD	4	1,3	1,3	100,0
	Total	**304**	**100,0**	**100,0**	

Table 20: Descriptive analysis of the respondents, by level of education.
Source: Self-elaboration on SPSS.

Occupation

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Student	96	31,6	31,6	31,6
	Employee	173	56,9	56,9	88,5
	Self-employed	15	4,9	4,9	93,4
	Unemployed	17	5,6	5,6	99,0
	Retired	3	1,0	1,0	100,0
	Total	**304**	**100,0**	**100,0**	

Table 21: Descriptive analysis of the respondents, by occupation.
Source: Self-elaboration on SPSS.

Marital Status

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Single	262	86,2	86,2	86,2
	Married	34	11,2	11,2	97,4
	Divorced	8	2,6	2,6	100,0
	Total	**304**	**100,0**	**100,0**	

Table 22: Descriptive analysis of the respondents, by marital status.
Source: Self-elaboration on SPSS.

Residence

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	North	12	3,9	3,9	3,9
	Center	67	22,0	22,0	26,0
	Lisbon Metropolitan Area	214	70,4	70,4	96,4
	Alentejo	6	2,0	2,0	98,4
	Algarve	5	1,6	1,6	100,0
	Total	**304**	**100,0**	**100,0**	

Table 23: Descriptive analysis of the respondents, by residence.
Source: Self-elaboration on SPSS.

Annual Income

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	< 25.000€	152	50,0	50,0	50,0
	25.000 - 100.000€	140	46,1	46,1	96,1
	100.000 - 200.000€	8	2,6	2,6	98,7
	> 200.000€	4	1,3	1,3	100,0
	Total	**304**	**100,0**	**100,0**	

Table 24: Descriptive analysis of the respondents, by income level.
Source: Self-elaboration on SPSS.

Frequency of SM Use

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Intense (several times a day)	238	78,3	78,3	78,3
	Moderate (about once a day)	49	16,1	16,1	94,4
	Occasional (a few times a week or fewer)	17	5,6	5,6	100,0
	Total	**304**	**100,0**	**100,0**	

Table 25: Descriptive analysis of the respondents, by frequency of social media use.
Source: Self-elaboration on SPSS.