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The Role of Brand Experiences in Online Brand Communities

Examining the Effect of Brand Experience on Purchase Intention
Through Brand Relationship

by

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Abstract

Title: The Role of Brand Experiences in Online Brand Communities: Examining the Effect of Brand Experience on Purchase Intention Through Brand Relationship

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Thesis Purpose: To better understand the influence that brand experience in Online Brand Communities (OBCs) has on purchase intention while clarifying the underlying mechanism of such relationship through brand relationship constructs. Moreover, to discover if there is a difference between consumer-run and company-managed OBCs in terms of brand experience.

Theoretical perspective: We combined ideas from the brand community, brand experience and brand relationship stream. Some of them are based on sociological and psychological perspectives (e.g., notion of community, attachment theory, interpersonal relationship theory, commitment-trust theory).

Methodology/Empirical Data Collection: A deductive approach and quantitative research method has been used. A non-probability sampling was used to gather responses through a web survey (n=107). We then used PLS-SEM to analyze the relationships simultaneously by running a path analysis to examine if the hypotheses showed statistically significant results.

Findings/Conclusion: Brand experience in an OBC directly and positively predicts consumers' intention to purchase from the brand related to the particular community. With this finding, we contributed to one side of the academic discussion on whether brand experience influences purchase intention. We also concluded that the context in which the relationship was studied is essential in determining whether the two concepts significantly relate to each other or not. Furthermore, we found that brand relationship, composed of brand trust, brand attachment and brand commitment, does not explain the underlying mechanism of the relationship between brand experience in OBCs and purchase intention. Such results challenge past research affirming that the brand relationship constructs closely relate to brand experience and purchase intention. Lastly, we found that brand experience in OBCs is influenced differently depending on if the community is run by consumers or by the company. In our case, an OBC managed by a company positively relate with the brand experience in the OBC while such result is negative for those run by consumers.

Practical Implications: With our findings we can advise marketers to focus on creating favorable brand experiences for their consumers through the support of OBCs to generate purchase intention. Furthermore, if marketers want to create strong relationships with their consumers, they need to build and support memorable brand experiences. They are also advised to create and manage OBCs for their company as the company-managed OBC showed to generate stronger brand experiences than those run by consumers.

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Lund, 29 May 2020

A handwritten signature in black ink, consisting of the letters 'C' and 't' in a stylized, cursive font. The 'C' is large and loops around the 't'. A horizontal line is drawn underneath the signature.

Théo Caplet

A handwritten signature in black ink, written in a cursive script. The signature appears to be 'feliciado' with a horizontal line underneath.

Felicia Do

Table of contents

1.	Introduction.....	9
1.1	Background.....	9
1.2	Problematization.....	11
1.2.1	The relationship between brand experience in OBCs and purchase intention	12
1.2.2	Comparing the brand experience between consumer-run and company-managed OBCs	14
1.3	Research Purpose and Question.....	15
1.4	Aimed Contributions	16
1.5	Outline of the Thesis.....	17
2.	Literature Review	18
2.1	Brand Experience in OBCs and Purchase Intention	18
2.1.1	Brand Experience.....	18
2.1.2	Purchase intention.....	19
2.1.3	The Relationship Between Brand Experience in OBCs and Purchase Intention	20
2.2	Brand Relationship	21
2.2.1	Consumer-brand relationship.....	21
2.2.2	Brand Trust	23
2.2.3	Brand Attachment.....	23
2.2.4	Brand Commitment.....	24
2.2.5	The relationship between the brand relationship constructs	24
2.3	Brand Community	25
2.3.1	Communities and Brand Communities	26
2.3.2	Online Brand Community (OBC).....	26
2.3.3	Consumer-run vs Company-managed.....	27
2.4	Conceptual framework	29
2.4.1	Hypothesis development.....	29
3.	Methodology.....	34
3.1	Research Philosophy.....	34
3.1.1	Ontology	34
3.1.2	Epistemology	35
3.2	Research approach.....	35
3.2.1	Deductive approach	36
3.2.2	Survey research.....	36
3.3	Research Design	37
3.3.1	Cross-sectional study	37
3.4	Measurements.....	38
3.4.1	Purchase intention.....	38

3.4.2	Brand experience	39
3.4.3	Brand relationship.....	39
3.4.4	Consumer-run vs company-managed OBCs.....	40
3.5	Choice of industry and company	40
3.6	Pre-study.....	40
3.7	Data collection method.....	41
3.7.1	Empirical data collection	41
3.7.2	Sampling process	42
3.7.3	Questionnaire design.....	44
3.8	Reliability and Validity	45
3.8.1	Reliability	45
3.8.2	Validity	46
3.9	Data analysis.....	47
3.9.1	Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modeling (PLS-SEM)	47
3.9.2	Path Analysis	48
3.9.3	Goodness of fit.....	49
4.	Analysis and Results.....	50
4.1	Preparation of Data.....	50
4.2	Validity and Reliability of the Constructs	50
4.3	Analysis of the Results	51
4.4	Hypothesis testing	52
4.4.1	The Relationship Between Brand Experience in OBCs and Purchase Intention	52
4.4.2	Brand Trust as a Mediator Between Brand Experience in OBCs and Purchase Intention	53
4.4.3	Brand Attachment as a Mediator Between Brand Experience and Purchase Intention.....	53
4.4.4	Brand Commitment as a Mediator Between Brand Experience in OBCs and Purchase Intention	53
4.4.5	Comparison of Brand Experience Between Consumer-run and Company-managed OBCs.....	54
4.4.6	The Effects Between the Brand Relationship Variables	54
4.5	Summary	54
5.	Discussion.....	56
5.1	Brand experience in OBCs and purchase intention	56
5.2	The Mediating Effect of Brand Relationship.....	57
5.2.1	Brand experience in OBCs to Brand relationship.....	58
5.2.2	Brand relationship to purchase intention	60
5.3	Comparison between consumer-run and company-managed OBCs.....	62
5.4	The relationship between the brand relationship constructs	63
6.	Conclusion	66
6.1	Research Aims.....	66
6.2	Theoretical Implications	66

6.3	Managerial Implications	68
6.4	Limitations and Future Research	68
7.	References.....	71
	Appendix A: Facebook group and subreddit posts	89
	Appendix B: Measurement model results for first- and second-order constructs	90
	Appendix C: SmartPLS screenshots	93

List of Tables

Table 1: Profile of the Participants43
Table 2: Construct Reliability and Validity51
Table 3: Collinearity Statistics (VIF).....51
Table 4: Summary of the Results.....55

List of Figures

Figure 1: Outline of the thesis..... 17
Figure 2: Conceptual framework 29
Figure 3: The model’s path coefficients and p-values (within brackets)..... 52

1. Introduction

In the following chapter, we introduce the context of Online Brand Community (OBC) that will provide the setting for this study. Furthermore, we present the concepts that this study will further examine in the problematization: brand experience, brand relationship and purchase intention. This is followed by the research purpose and questions. Lastly, the aimed contributions of this research will be presented.

1.1 Background

In our adolescence years we started to seek our identities by defining ourselves through fidelity toward certain ideas or ways of living. To fulfill that need, we joined groups of people that shared similar values, backgrounds, or habits. We tried to interact, dress, talk, and act like them. All of this, to be accepted and included in this group of like-minded people. Those sorts of groups, also called communities, do not only revolve around certain lifestyles but can also be attached to a specific brand. For instance, Harley-Davidson bikers dress similarly as well as ride together during various events. Accordingly, companies are increasingly utilizing this concept of community in branding strategies, also called brand communities to create value for themselves and their customers.

Those brand communities are perceived as the holy grail of brand loyalty by McAlexander, Shouten and Koenig (2002). As Muniz and O’Guinn (2001) described them, those type of communities are non-geographically bounded and represent a structured set of social connection between admirers of a brand. As such, they are composed of like-minded individuals and enthusiasts of a brand that are brought together under a structured set of social relations with the brand at the center of the network. However, brand communities do not form around any brands. Most of the time brands need a “strong image, a rich and lengthy history, and threatening competition” (Muniz & O’Guinn, 2001, p.415) to lead to the birth of a brand community.

In past decades, the wide use of internet platforms and social networks has enabled brand communities to be transferred online (Veloutsou & Guzman, 2017) giving birth to online brand communities (OBCs). Those important technology-led changes of the past decades led to the intensified urge to understand the emergence and implications of those OBCs. Developments such as the internet, social media, platforms, and mobile technologies have pushed modern organizations to embrace this OBC trend (Wirtz et al., 2013). These advancements previously mentioned, made it possible for brand communities to spread and develop faster with less geographical constraints while creating new interaction dynamics between the brand and its community as well as between communities themselves (Veloutsou & Guzman, 2017). Although OBCs can be seen as the latest step to the long evolution of communities, coming after offline brand communities, it can also be created and maintained before the latter. In other words, the development of today’s brand communities can be reversed with the start of an online one which eventually leads to the emergence of an offline one (Wirtz et al., 2013).

Whether those brand community are online or offline, the roles of the consumers to support their prosperity are numerous and crucial (Black & Veloutsou, 2017; Cova, Pace & Skålén, 2015; Skålén, Pace & Cova, 2015; Sung et al., 2010). In light of this, brand communities have been seen to be created by loyal groups of customers seeking to connect with each other (Pedeliento, Andreini & Veloutsou, 2020). Therefore, the initiative to begin and maintain a brand community may come from consumers themselves and not only from companies. These types of communities created by members are called consumer-run brand communities. In such cases, the brand community runs without the involvement of companies in moderating conversations, organizing events, or other active roles in the community's life (Dholakia & Vianello, 2011). Based on this, brand communities can be separated into two types: consumer-run and company-managed.

In past decades, renowned companies such as Lego, Apple, and Airbnb have been leveraging the power of brand communities to add value and meaning to their brand while transforming them. Being able to understand how to build and develop these communities can be highly interesting for all types of companies. As different scholars stated, brand communities have a significantly positive impact on purchase intention, brand loyalty, and customer engagement (Coelho, Rita & Santos, 2018; Wang, Cao & Park, 2019), which certainly lead to sustainable competitive advantages. As such, brand community fulfills multiple roles for the company and its customers. Not only does it give room for value co-creation and new social experiences for customers, but it can also grow and sustain on its own for little company expenses (Dholakia & Vianello, 2011).

All those brand communities' benefits are now even more accessible for the companies and the consumers thanks to OBCs. Such communities are extremely convenient, not only for modern consumers but also for the brands of today. OBCs gives room to easily exchange and share ideas while allowing subgroups of consumers to form within the community – leading to new and dynamic interaction opportunities for them (Wirtz et al., 2013). Members can openly exchange their opinions and experiences about the brand's products at any time (Kim et al., 2008; Kozinets, 2002) often resulting in the development of a new culture around the brand (Schembri & Latimer, 2016). Furthermore, OBCs can provide valuable information about the consumer to the brand that leverages its power. As such, OBCs can become important sources of consumer data that will guide and complement a company's market research (Kim et al., 2008; Kozinets, 2002). Thus, the OBC is an interesting tool that can overcome the geographical boundaries of offline brand communities (Sicilia & Palazón, 2008) at a lower cost, and that can benefit both the consumers and the modern brands. As Manchanda, Packard and Pattabhiramaiah (2015) pointed out, more than 50 percent of the top 100 global brands are currently using OBC to add value to their brand and their customers.

However, there are also disadvantages of brand communities. According to Muniz and O'Guinn (2001), brand communities could also turn into a possible threat for the brands. According to Muniz and O'Guinn (2001), brand communities could also turn into a possible threat for the brands. The authors mentioned that strong brand communities could be damaging to brands if the members decide to collectively reject marketing efforts and/or product changes

from the company. In these cases, they could use the communication channels in the community to spread the rejection amongst members.

This threat from brand communities can escalate if consumers have negative perceptions and experiences associated with a brand that later turns into a resistance towards the brand. In worst cases, anti-brand communities have been formed. These are the antithesis to brand communities as they are not formed around a brand but rather revolve around the common aversion towards this brand. As such, they consist of consumers that are resisting the imposed meaning and/or values that brands prescribe. Therefore, in these communities, consumers are taking a social activist stand by voicing opinions of opposition towards corporate domination (Hollenbeck & Zinkhan, 2006). With the evolution of internet, these anti-branding demonstrations have gathered more awareness in recent years and emerged as a new form of consumer activism (Dobscha, 1998; Fournier, 1998; Holt, 2002). This is because, the Internet has enabled these anti-brand communities to move online and grow in massive numbers. More specifically, the Internet has aided the formation of these communities with advantages in terms of speed, anonymity and convenience. Indeed, most of these communities solely originates and communicates online. This is because, online anti-brand communities are more flexible and durable than the physical ones (Hollenbeck & Zinkhan, 2006; McAlexander, Schouten & Koenig, 2002).

With regard to the previous paragraphs, there are both advantages and disadvantages to the phenomenon of brand community. Consequently, there are complexities to the concept that makes it an interesting topic to gather more knowledge about. Although, strong brand communities can provide many opportunities, anti-brand communities can easily turn into dangerous threats towards the brands. Despite such disadvantages, the benefits that the brand communities can provide to the companies are of high significance. Thus, modern brand managers have established the development and commercial use of brand communities and more especially OBCs as a top priority in marketing activities. In parallel, within the academic world, the brand community topic has grown rapidly in recent research, becoming one of the most influential developments in brand management practices over the past 20 years (Veloutsou & Guzman, 2017). Therefore, the proposed topic is current, highly relevant, and valuable for both companies and further studies.

1.2 Problematization

Although previous studies considered OBC as a rather new and unexplored topic, it is now quickly becoming an emerging and popular domain of research (Ind, Coates & Lerman, 2020; Kumar & Kumar, 2020; Pedeliento, Andreini & Veloutsou, 2020; Wang, Cao & Park, 2019). With important advantages, OBC quickly became an interesting topic to further examine, especially since it is relevant for both academia and managers. Such rise in interest goes hand in hand with the ever-growing use of technology and internet by consumers (Özbölük & Dursun, 2017). As a result, in recent years, researchers increasingly begun to study this concept through different lenses such as commitment (Hur, Ahn & Kim, 2011; Royo-Vela & Casamassima, 2011), consumer engagement (Chauhan & Pillai, 2013; Dessart, Veloutsou & Morgan-Thomas, 2015; Gummerus et al., 2012; Wirtz et al., 2013), and value co-creation in OBCs (Ouwensloot

& Odekerken-Schröder, 2008; Pongsakornrunsilp & Schroeder, 2011; Schau, Muñoz Jr. & Arnould, 2009).

With the rapid development of the experience economy, brand experience quickly became a concept that has been studied in the context of OBC. Several scholars have highlighted the importance of positive experiences in OBCs (McWilliam, 2000; Wang, Cao & Park, 2019). Such brand experiences are particularly relevant in this online context as the OBC generate significant interactions among customers through posts, review, comments and other sharing experiences (Kamboj et al., 2018). However, the current literature is scarce, and researchers are demanding further studies on consumers experiences in OBCs (Wang, Cao & Park, 2019).

1.2.1 The relationship between brand experience in OBCs and purchase intention

Brand experience is defined as consumers subjective internal responses that are evoked by brand-related stimuli. In turn, these brand experiences trigger responses from consumers such as certain attitudes and/or behaviors (Brakus, Schmitt & Zarantonello, 2009). In the literature, most researchers have focused on the brand experience outcomes of customer satisfaction and loyalty. These two responses have already been discussed extensively in past research (Brakus, Schmitt & Zarantonello, 2009; Iglesias, Singh & Batista-Foguet, 2011; Nysveen, Pedersen & Skard, 2013), while there is still a lack of research on other outcomes. More specifically, scholars have highlighted the need for more studies on purchase intention as a consequence of brand experience in different contexts (Khan & Rahman, 2015; Roswinanto & Strutton, 2014). This is because purchase intention has been found important as a brand experience outcome in extant literature (Gabisch, 2011; Morgan-Thomas & Veloutsou, 2013). However, the relationship between these two concepts has yet reached a consensus in the literature or been explained by researchers. More specifically, scholars have expressed a need to further investigate and explain the nature and strength of brand experience's impact on consumers' purchase intentions (Khan & Rahman, 2015; Roswinanto & Strutton, 2014).

Based on previous marketing literature, it is established that a link exists between brand experience and purchase intention (Anderson et al., 2014; Barnes, Mattsson & Sørensen, 2014; Hung et al., 2011). However, the scarce literature on the nature of this relationship shows contradicting results. Some studies showed that brand experiences can positively influence consumers' purchase intentions in some offline and online contexts (Gabisch, 2011; Morgan-Thomas & Veloutsou, 2013; Venter de Villiers, Chinomona & Chuchu, 2018). However, in the context of luxury goods, the relationship between the two concepts demonstrated negative results as pointed out by Yoo and Lee (2012). The authors found that brand experiences of genuine luxury brands (GLB) are negatively related to the purchase intention of counterfeit luxury goods (CLG). Moreover, other studies presented non-significant results (Moreira, Fortes & Santiago, 2017; Wang, Cao & Park, 2019). For instance, Moreira, Fortes and Santiago (2017) established that brand experiences do not have a direct significant effect on purchase intentions when studied in an offline context in the catering industry. Similarly, in another study conducted by Wang, Cao and Park (2019), the relationship also did not show significant results when studied in an OBC context, more specifically social media-based brand communities.

Since past literature shows contradicting results there is a need for more research on this specific relationship to get closer to a consensus. Consequently, past literature implies that the context in which the relationship is studied influence the research results.

Beyond those diverging results, the relationship between brand experience and purchase intention have also not been fully explained yet. This is because, research from previously mentioned scholars did not provide an explanation of their findings. This indicates that there is empirical evidence but a lack of theoretical arguments. Most scholars only presented their empirical results and if they were significant or not, without providing any insights to explain the underlying mechanisms of the relationship (Morgan-Thomas & Veloutsou, 2013; Wang, Cao & Park, 2019; Yoo & Lee, 2012). Moreira, Fortes and Santiago (2017) tried to provide clarification on their findings. which was that brand experience does not have a significant direct effect on purchase intention. They did it by mentioning that a possible explanation could come from their sample of young individuals with a low purchasing power. However, this explanation is solely a justification of their results and specific to their study context. Consequently, it does not include any theoretical arguments to why brand experience does not affect purchase intention nor gives insights on the underlying mechanisms of the relationship. Therefore, as previously mentioned, past studies show contrasting results and do not provide an accurate clarification on how the two concepts relate to each other. Considering this, there is a need to identify and explain the underlying mechanisms of the relationship between brand experience in OBCs and purchase intention.

To summarize, there are complexities emerging around this relationship between brand experience in OBCs and purchase intention. First, this is because no consensus has yet been reached in terms of significance of the relationship. Some studies showed a positive or negative relationship (Gabisch, 2011; Morgan-Thomas & Veloutsou, 2013; Venter de Villiers, Chinomona & Chuchu, 2018; Yoo & Lee, 2012), while others presented a non-significant relationship between brand experience and purchase intention (Moreira, Fortes & Santiago, 2017; Wang, Cao & Park, 2019). Second, the relationship lacks further theoretical explanation in terms of how the two concepts relate to each other and in terms of the underlying mechanisms of such relationship.

To unravel these complexities in this research gap, the construct of brand relationship can be utilized. This is because, within the branding literature, brand experience is an important construct that builds consumer-brand relationships (Chang & Chieng, 2006; Schembri, 2009). These relationships, that include the emotional responses with a brand, can be considered aspects of online brand experiences that are critical to its success (Rappaport, 2007). The importance of brand relationship has been recognized by practitioners but overlooked by academic research (Mollen & Wilson, 2010). Because of this, it is essential to examine the relationship between a brand and its consumers to understand brand experience in OBCs and how it affects purchase intention.

Past research provided evidence of the significant relationship between brand experience and brand relationships (Mollen & Wilson, 2010). More specifically Ramaseshan and Stein (2014)

researched showed that brand experience has a direct impact on brand trust, brand commitment and brand attachment. Those three concepts are considered as key brand-relationship constructs and have shown to be essential when creating consumer-brand relationships (Garbarino & Johnson, 1999; Moorman, Deshpande & Zaltman, 2021; Morgan & Hunt, 1994; Park et al., 2010; Stokburger-Sauer, Ratneshwar & Sen, 2012). In parallel, Gabisch (2011) provided evidence that the stronger the brand relationship is, the more likely consumers are to purchase from a brand. This idea is supported by separate previous studies showing that each of the key concepts; trust, attachment, and commitment can positively influence purchase intention indicating that there is an interesting relationship to study between brand relationship and purchase intention (Doney & Cannon, 1997; Kaufmann et al., 2016; Wang, 2002; Wang, Cao & Park, 2019). Therefore, to unravel those complexities, the mediating effect of brand relationship could be used to better explain the relationship between brand experience in OBCs and purchase intention. Considering the aforementioned, the first research question is:

RQ1: What is the relationship between brand experience in OBCs and purchase intention?

1.2.2 Comparing the brand experience between consumer-run and company-managed OBCs

As previously mentioned, the context in which this relationship is studied has also seen to influence the results. In light of this, to provide an explanation to this relationship, it is important to thoroughly understand the framework of this research. The context of this paper, which is OBC, can be divided into those run by the consumers and those managed by a company. Too often, the OBCs have been centered around corporate interests instead of prioritizing the interest of the community. Those OBCs, mostly called company-managed OBC, are usually tightly controlled by the brands which results in less freedom for the consumers to express themselves and to interact with their peers in a desired way. As a response to the company-managed OBCs, consumers have been known to start OBCs without the involvement of the brand, also called the consumer-run OBC.

Differences between the two types of communities have been pointed out in past research (Dholakia & Vianello, 2011; Lee, Kim & Kim, 2010). For instance, information can be perceived as less credible since it is perceived as more biased by consumers when it comes from a company-managed OBC in comparison to a consumer-run OBC (Wirtz et al., 2013). Similarly, they can lead to different sort of identifications, either consumer-brand identification for company-managed brand communities or consumer-other-consumer identification from the consumer-run ones (Confente & Kucharska, 2021).

On contrary, other studies found common points between the two. For example, both can lead to customer co-creation that brings value to the brand (Black & Veloutsou, 2017; Cova, Pace & Skålén, 2015; Skålén, Pace & Cova, 2015), and generate similar levels of satisfaction and willingness to support (Sung et al., 2010). Despite the rising interest in comparing the two types of communities, research on this matter is still scarce and quite new since most of them were

conducted in the past decade. In line with this lack of research on those two types of brand communities, a couple of authors have stressed the importance to conduct further comparison between consumer-run and company-managed brand communities (Lee, Kim & Kim, 2011; Pedeliento, Andreini & Veloutsou, 2020; Wirtz et al., 2013). This call for future research especially relates to the need to better understand the specificities of the different type of OBC, consumer-run and company-managed, and how they differ from each other in terms of how they actually work (Hook, Baxter & Kulczynski, 2018; Kumar & Kumar, 2020; Lee, Kim & Kim, 2011).

Referring back to the main relationship, scholars who studied the concept of brand experience in an OBC context, have encountered different results depending on the form of OBC (e.g. online product forums and social-network sites) they studied (Cheng, Wu & Chen, 2020; Nam-bisan & Watt, 2011; Wang, Cao & Park, 2019). Those contrasting observations indicated that different forms of OBCs can differ in terms of the brand experience felt by consumers. As Brakus, Schmitt and Zarantonello (2009) explained, brand experiences can differ in strength, valence, and duration, meaning they can be either positive or negative while varying in intensity. Based on this, it is valuable to study and compare different brand experiences perceived by consumers to explore which OBC has a more positive and intense influence on brand experience. This is especially interesting in an OBC context since brand experience is an important construct in the creation and maintenance of those brand communities. Hence, there is a need to further explore and study brand experience in the context of OBCs (Wang, Cao & Park, 2019) and to use it to compare different types of OBCs – specifically since such a research approach have received little attention in the past. Accordingly, this paper would be the first study, to our knowledge, that compares and examines the type of OBCs influence on brand experience. Thus, this led us to the second research question:

RQ2: Does the influence on brand experience differ between consumer-run and company-managed OBCs?

To conclude, we have identified two research opportunities by combining ideas from previous researchers. First the paper will clarify the relationship between brand experience in OBCs and purchase intention. Second, the paper will compare the influence on brand experience between consumer-run and company-managed OBCs. Thus, by connecting different research gaps and identifying the common needs in further studies we would contribute with novel findings to the areas of brand experience and brand community.

1.3 Research Purpose and Question

Since the current literature on the relationship between brand experience in OBCs and purchase intention is fragmented and complex, there is a need to conduct further research on this matter. To unravel those complexities and have a better understanding of this connection, concepts within brand relationship will be utilized as mediators. In parallel, scholars expressed a demand for further studies investigating brand experience in OBCs as well as comparing different types

of brand communities. Therefore, the purpose of this study is to examine the relationship between brand experience in OBCs and purchase intention. Furthermore, the aim is also to compare the influence on brand experience between consumer-run and company-managed OBCs.

This study aims to clear up complexities, provide an explanation and answer the need for future research proposed by various authors in the field of brand community. This will be conducted through a relationship research design and an analysis of the differences between two OBCs contexts (consumer-run and company managed). As such, this thesis has two distinct but inter-related aims. The first is to investigate the relationship of brand experience in OBCs influence on purchase intention that is mediated by concepts within brand relationship. The second is to examine the difference in brand experience between consumer-run and company-managed OBCs.

As a result, the following two research questions has been defined:

What is the relationship between brand experience in OBCs and purchase intention?

Does the influence on brand experience differ between consumer-run and company-managed OBCs?

1.4 Aimed Contributions

As previously mentioned, scholars highlight that the relationships this study aims to examine have been under-researched. Consequently, we will contribute to the current theoretical domain of brand community by filling several research gaps. Although the context and the concepts that this research paper aims to investigate have been studied by other authors, no past studies to our knowledge, have discussed and compared those constructs together in the context of consumer-run and company-managed OBCs. We deem this important as this would deliver a unique contribution to the existing literature. Furthermore, this paper hope to clarify the relationship between brand experience in OBCs and purchase intention. Past literature is divided between the studies that find a significant relationship and those finding a non-significant one. Thus, we would like to provide further empirical evidence in a new context to this academical discussion. Additionally, we aim to better understand the underlying mechanism for the effect of brand experience in OBCs on purchase intention. Past research claimed that there should be a direct connection between the two investigated concepts, however few tried to explain the process that create such a link. Our paper proposes to fill this gap through the use of brand relationship as a mediating concept. Finally, our last theoretical contribution is to discover if there are differences between consumer-run and company-managed OBCs in terms of brand experience. Various authors have studied if differences between the two exists, however their research shows some contradictions.

In terms of managerial implications, this research aims to provide useful insights to marketing professionals on how to better understand OBCs and their dynamics. The comparison of a consumer-run and company-managed community, in terms of their brand experiences, would be relevant and interesting from brand managers' perspectives. Firstly, this research results would

guide managers in determining whether they could use brand experience in an OBC context to increase purchase intention. Moreover, it would provide managers with arguments as to whether they should imitate consumer-run brand communities in their company-managed brand communities. If consumer-run brand communities perform better in terms of generating brand experiences, managers could consider modifying the brand experience to replicate the experience created in those consumer-run brand communities. Additionally, managers will have implications to compel the two types of communities to work together to achieve the highest brand experience possible. Lastly, the research can provide further confirmation on the usefulness of online platforms in marketing activities to potentially increase the positive consequences of brand experience. As such, managers will be able to better understand the differences and/or similarities between the two types of communities to adjust their marketing strategies.

1.5 Outline of the Thesis

This thesis consists of six chapters that are depicted in (Figure 1). In this first chapter we introduced the OBC context as well as the main relationship between brand experience in OBCs and purchase intention that is under investigation. Following this, the second chapter presents in more details the relevant concepts and theoretical foundations for this study. Those main constructs are brand experience, brand relationship and purchase intention. The second chapter is concluded with the hypothesis development and the conceptual framework for this study. In the third chapter, methodology, we present the methodological choices for this research. Here we describe the research philosophy, approach and design as well as data collection and analysis method. The fourth chapter presents the empirical findings and the hypotheses as well as the reliability and validity of the constructs. In the fifth chapter, we discuss our findings in relation to the literature. Finally, in the last chapter, we summarize the study, present theoretical and managerial implications as well as the limitations and opportunities for future research.

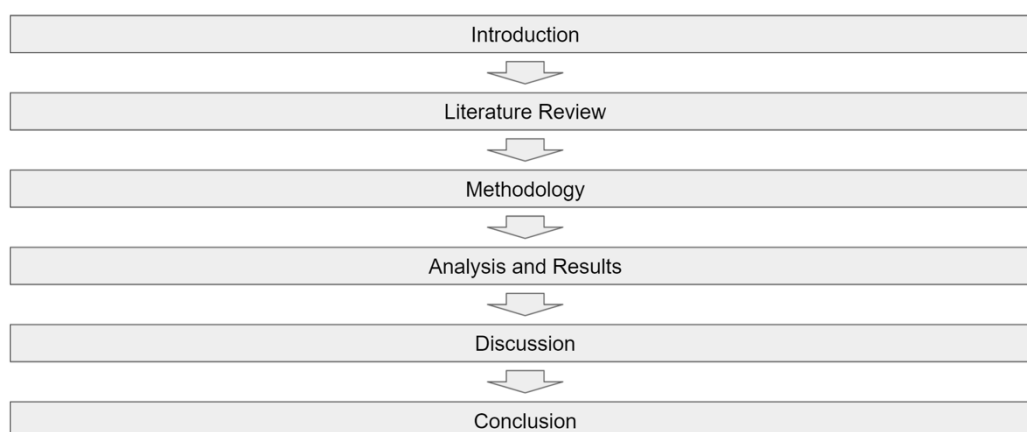


Figure 1: Outline of the thesis

2. Literature Review

Following the introduction, this chapter provides an outlook of the key concepts underlying this research. The literature review begins with presenting definitions and relevant existing literature on: Brand Experience, Purchase Intention and Brand Relationship. Following this, Brand Community, more specifically Online Brand Community, is introduced as the context of this study. Lastly, by drawing on insights from previous literature, the conceptual framework and hypothesis development is presented.

2.1 Brand Experience in OBCs and Purchase Intention

Based on the stated research problem, the main relationship between brand experience in OBCs and purchase intention will be examined in this study. This is because, increasing complexities on OBCs as well as contradicting results in previous literature are challenging prior insights on the relationship between brand experience and purchase intention. To investigate these concepts and their connection, the following subsections provides a theoretical overview of their current state of research.

2.1.1 Brand Experience

To study brand experience, it is important to begin with an understanding of the notion of experiences in general. The concept of experience in relation to a brand encapsulates every encounter that individuals have with a certain brand, ranging from pre-purchase through to post-purchase (Arnould, Price & Zinkhan, 2002; Khan & Rahman, 2015; Schmitt, 1999; Schmitt & Rogers, 2008). Previous research has demonstrated that experiences arise when consumers search, shop, and consume products and services (Arnould, Price & Zinkhan, 2002; Brakus, Schmitt & Zarantonello, 2009; Holbrook, 2000). These experiences are evoked when consumers are exposed to different brand-related stimuli (Bellizzi & Hite, 1992; Gorn et al., 1997; Keller, 1987), which in turn is referred to as brand experience.

Brand experience captures how brands elicit stimuli within consumers which they might or might not act upon (Ramaseshan & Stein, 2014). Brakus, Schmitt and Zarantonello (2009, p.53) coined the term and defines brand experience as "...subjective, internal responses and behavioral responses evoked by brand-related stimuli that are a part of a brand's design and identity, packaging, communications, and environments". Brand experiences can differ in strength, intensity, and valence meaning that some are more intense, and positive than others. Furthermore, they can also differ in length where some are spontaneous and short-lived while others occur intentionally and lasts longer (Brakus, Schmitt & Zarantonello, 2009). Conceptualized, it is a multi-dimensional construct that enables consumers to create an experiential attachment with brands leading to enhanced relationships. Furthermore, the longer-lasting brand experiences have been proven to influence customer satisfaction and loyalty (Oliver, 1980; Reicheld, 1996).

By examining the concept more in depth, Brakus, Schmitt and Zarantonello (2009) demonstrated that there are four dimensions of brand experience: sensory, affective, intellectual, and behavioral. Based on this, the authors defined a concept focusing on the level of sensory, affective, behavioral, and/or intellectual experience that consumers experience with a brand. These experience dimensions are influenced by the brand-related stimuli that trigger consumers' emotions. The *sensory* dimension relates to the excitement that arises through the five senses from mechanic clues. *Affective* experiences occur when emotions and moods are created from humanic clues. Regarding the *behavioral* dimension, physical experiences are developed from functional but also from humanic clues. Lastly, *intellectual* experiences are generated from the creative usage and thoughts of the brand. Based on this information, brands can, through brand experience, influence consumers senses, emotions and behaviors.

As previously mentioned, consumers brand experiences influence their positive or negative responses. Regarding the effect of brand experience, it has been shown to have a behavioral impact where it positively influences consumer satisfaction and loyalty (Brakus, Schmitt & Zarantonello, 2009). Additionally, it enhances and develops emotional bonds with consumers which in turn strengthens their relationship with the brand (Grace & O'Cass, 2004; O'Loughlin, Szmigin & Turnbull, 2004; Payne et al., 2009; Schembri, 2009; Zarantonello & Schmitt, 2010). It has also been proven to positively influence brand equity (Chen, 2012; Dash & Kumar, 2013; Shamim & Butt, 2013; Xu & Chan, 2010; Zarantonello & Schmitt, 2013), brand loyalty (Brakus, Schmitt & Zarantonello,; Choi, Ok & Hyun, 2017; Iglesias, Singh & Batista-Foguet, 2011; Ishida & Taylor, 2012; Morrison & Crane, 2007; Nysveen, Pedersen & Skard, 2013), and brand trust (Ha & Perks, 2005). Other outcomes such as brand attitude (Grace & O'Cass, 2004; Roswinanto & Strutton, 2014; Shamim & Butt, 2013; Zarantonello & Schmitt, 2013), brand credibility (Shamim & Butt, 2013), brand recall (Baumann, Hamin & Chong, 2015), and purchase intention (Gabisch, 2011; Morgan-Thomas & Veloutsou, 2013) have seen to be a consequence of brand experience.

2.1.2 Purchase intention

The concept of purchase intention can be defined as a certain exchange behavior that potentially appears after a consumer's general evaluation of a product (Hsu, 1987). Similarly, other authors define the concept as the attempt to purchase a product or a company's service offering (Shao, Baker & Wagner, 2004). In other words, it is the possibility that a consumer buys a product from a company (Dodds, Monroe & Grewal, 1991) in the near future (Lin & Lu, 2010). Therefore, the concept of purchase intention can cover different essential meanings: it can refer to a consumer's possible willingness to buy an offering; it can refer to what a consumer wants to buy in the future; or it can refer to the decision of a consumer to purchase an offering again from a company (Lin & Lu, 2010).

As a result, purchase intention is a major concept in the business and marketing world and is not only used and studied in academic research but also used by practitioners. Since such a concept is future-oriented, various authors have used purchase intention as a construct to predict or estimate future profits of brands throughout different product categories (Lin & Lu,

2010). As pointed out by Kim, Zhang and Ko (2008), purchase intention is of high importance for brands to understand their consumers' behaviors to develop customer acquisition and retention strategies. Moreover, purchase intention gives a great indication to understand consumers' attitudes and their preferences towards a particular brand. Since consumer-brand relationships are built on attitude toward the brand, purchase intention has an important influence on the creation and maintenance of those relationships (Lin & Lu, 2010).

2.1.3 The Relationship Between Brand Experience in OBCs and Purchase Intention

As previously mentioned, brand experience captures the subjective internal responses within consumers that are being evoked by brand-related stimuli. As such, it can be described as the overall impact a brand can have on a customer. Furthermore, brand experience has shown to influence consumer behavior (Brakus, Schmitt & Zarantonello, 2009) and more specifically purchase intentions (Khan & Rahman, 2015; Roswinanto & Strutton, 2014). Therefore, the main relationship under investigation in our study is how brand experience in OBCs influences consumers' purchase intentions.

Previous marketing literature is divided regarding the existence of a link between brand experience and purchase intention (Anderson et al., 2014; Barnes, Mattsson & Sørensen, 2014; Hung et al., 2011). Some researchers proved that there is a positive relationship between brand experience and purchase intention (Gabisch, 2011; Morgan-Thomas & Veloutsou, 2013; Venter de Villiers, Chinomona & Chuchu, 2018; Yoo & Lee, 2012). In contrast, other scholars showed non-significant results for the relationship (Moreira, Fortes & Santiago, 2017; Wang, Cao & Park, 2019; Yoo & Lee, 2012).

According to Gabisch (2011), consumers' brand experience in a virtual world positively affects their purchase intention and behavior in the real world. This is because, consumers online information search experiences can influence their decisions to purchase brands offline. Furthermore, the authors explain that the strength of this relationship is positively influenced by self-image congruence and perceived diagnosticity. When consumers' self-image congruence and perceived diagnosticity are high, brand experience has a stronger effect on purchase intention. More specifically, consumers that perceive the virtual brand experience to be consistent with their self-image are more likely to consider purchasing. This is because online brand experiences can be perceived as more meaningful when consumers are able to identify with other brand users. Regarding perceived diagnosticity, consumers that perceive the online brand experience to be helpful in evaluating the brand are also more likely to purchase.

Research from Yoo and Lee (2012) also showed that past brand experiences with genuine luxury brands influence future purchase intentions in a positive way. Furthermore, this result was also demonstrated for counterfeit luxury brands. However, the authors found that brand experiences with genuine luxury brands was negatively related to purchase intention of the counterfeit brands. Additionally, experiences with counterfeit brands were not significantly related

to the intention of buying genuine brands. The authors made an attempt to explain their findings of the relationship by including factors such as brand name, income and price. More specifically, price only mattered when consumers are purchasing genuine products. Consumers buying genuine luxury brand's products only considered that price level and not the alternative counterfeit product's price.

Other authors, has also found that online brand experiences has a positive effect on behavioral intentions such as re-purchase intentions and loyalty (Morgan-Thomas & Veloutsou, 2013). This is because, brand relationships are aspects of online brand experiences that creates emotional responses and connections between consumers and brands. Furthermore, the online environment facilitates possibilities of interactivity where consumers are empowered to engage with each other and the brand, leading to positive effects on behavioral intentions. However, Wang, Cao and Park (2019) found that the relationship was not significant when examined in social media-based brand communities. The authors explained that in order to have experiences leading to purchase intention, brand attitudes have to mediate this relationship. Consequently, experiences indirectly influence purchase intention with the mediating effect of a positive brand attitude to generate the outcome.

The study from Moreira (2017) showed that brand experiences do not have a direct significant influence on purchase intentions. The authors explained that their results could depend on their sample that consisted of young individuals that have a low purchasing power. Since their customers belonged to a segment having tight budgets, they might have developed a rational decision-making process. Because of this, their budgets could prevent them from purchasing regardless of the unique sensory-based experiences. Additionally, brands also have to focus on building brand equity to strengthen consumers purchase intention. With regards to the aforementioned ideas, there are contrasting prior insights to this relationship that needs to be unraveled.

2.2 Brand Relationship

Brand experience is seen as an important construct to grow consumer-brand relationships (Chang & Chieng, 2006; Schembri, 2009). Because of this, to understand how brand experience affects purchase intentions it is essential to examine the relationship between a brand and its customers. This is because past research provided evidence of the significant relationship between brand experience and brand relationships and how the stronger this relationship is, the more likely consumers are to purchase. Accordingly, the following subsection presents brand relationships which are the constructs this paper will use to unravel the process through which brand experience influence purchase intention.

2.2.1 Consumer-brand relationship

In the early years of research on the concept of customer relationship marketing, brands were primarily considered as transactional facilitators (Coviello et al., 2002; Grönroos, 1997). With more studies conducted on the topic, brands as a construct then transitioned toward being seen

as an important facilitator for building and maintaining lasting customer-brand relationships (Pinto et al., 2019; Thomson, MacInnis & Park, 2005). Such evolution of the field of customer relationship marketing goes in line with the growing concept of brand relationships which started with original work by Fajer and Schouten (1995), Aaker (1996), and Fournier (1998). While gaining more and more importance in the area of brand management, other authors began to incorporate relationship-based ideas such as trust of bonds to the concept of brand relationships (Esch et al., 2006). In the past decade, the topic has gained significant attention from academics but also practitioners (Fetscherin et al., 2019; Keller, 2012) becoming an essential concept in the area of brand management.

Although some consumers might reject the idea of forming a relationship with a brand as explained by Bengtsson (2003), different literature suggested that brands can be considered as an active contributing partner in the two-way relationship that exists between a consumer and a brand (Fajer & Schouten, 1995; Fournier, 1998; Veloutsou, 2015). Such theory of consumer-brand relationship is grounded in the premises that an individual can develop different kinds of relationships with the brand he/she interact with (Keller, 2012). Those particular consumer-brand relationships can then possibly turn into a passionate emotional attachment to the brand, characterized as brand love by Carroll and Ahuvia (2006). In line with this concept of brand love, brands can be portrayed as love marks that consumers can respect, be committed to, and passionate for (Pawle & Cooper, 2006). To grow those favorable impressions previously mentioned, Ramaseshan and Stein (2014) explain that brand experience can play an important role in establishing those relationships between the consumers and resulting in benefits for both parties such as a reputation for the brand and a reduced perceived risk for the consumers (Kumar, 2020).

Morgan and Hunt (1994) defined commitment and trust as the 'key variables' in the exchange process between the brand and the consumers which encourage the brand to invest more in creating long-term consumer-brand relationships. Similar past studies have also examined the concept of commitment and trust in the brand relationship context and how they can benefit both parties (Garbarino & Johnson, 1999). Some authors view brand relationships as a combination of satisfaction, trust, and attachment as key concepts (Esch et al., 2006), while others characterize it based on satisfaction, commitment, immediacy, and self-commitment (Aaker, Fournier & Brasel, 2004). In parallel, previous research has emphasized key concepts such as brand experience (Chang & Chieng, 2006) to develop and maintain consumer-brand relationships. In past research, scholars have conceptualized consumer-brand relationships through commitment, self-commitment, and satisfaction (Aaker, Fournier & Brasel, 2004); brand satisfaction and brand trust (Esch et al., 2006); relationship satisfaction, relationship commitment, and trust (Valta, 2013); intimacy, self-connection, love, trust, interdependence, and commitment (Francisco-Maffezzolli, Semprebon & Muller Prado, 2014); or brand trust, brand commitment and brand attachment (Ramaseshan & Stein, 2014). In the context of this paper, the key concepts of brand relationship defined by Ramaseshan and Stein (2014) will be chosen to conduct our research as it can be combined with the concept of brand experience which we

also will examine. As the authors explained it, these concepts are viewed as key ‘brand relationship variables’ that “summarize a consumer’s knowledge and experience with a particular brand and guide his/her subsequent actions” (Ramaseshan & Stein, 2014, p.668).

2.2.2 Brand Trust

Trust can be defined as “a willingness to rely on an exchange partner in whom one has confidence” (Moorman, Deshpandé & Zaltman, 1993, p.82). Such a concept of trust results from reliability, intentionality, and the capacity to perform (Moorman, Deshpandé & Zaltman, 1993). Later on, trust began to be studied not only from an individual-to-individual point of view but also from a customer-to-company point of view. The concept of trust has then been adapted to the field of brand management to be characterized as ‘brand trust’ which can be defined as consumers’ willingness to rely on brands to execute their declared function (Chaudhuri & Holbrook, 2001) Such type of trust, is produced through the consumers’ confidence in the quality and the reliability of a brand’s services and products (Garbarino & Johnson, 1999). Since the concept of brand trust is still in the early stages of understanding, within the field of marketing, it has been conceptualized in various forms through past research (Han, Kwortnik & Wang, 2008; Yannopoulou, Koronis & Elliott, 2011).

However, literature has converged toward the idea that trust is a beneficial concept for brands to work on. As explained by Chiu, Hsu, Lai and Chang (2012), brand trust can strengthen long-term relationships between consumers and brands since it implies that the brand keeps its promises, often resulting in brand loyalty. Similarly, Huan and Cai (2015) offer a better understanding of the benefit of building brand trust between a brand and the consumers. The authors also propose that when a customer trusts the product or service of a brand, the image of the brand is improved, and brand loyalty increases. As such, those recent studies are in line with research from Morgan and Hunt (1994) which have primarily conceptualized brand loyalty as a consequence of brand trust.

2.2.3 Brand Attachment

Although attachment has previously been extensively examined in interpersonal contexts, research in the field of marketing pointed out how consumers can also feel attached to a product or a brand (Fournier, 1998; Schouten & McAlexander, 1995). This type of attachment can also be called brand attachment and is defined as the strength of the connection between a brand and ones’ self (Park et al., 2010). By viewing the brand as a part of the self, consumers can potentially experience a sense of oneness with the brand (Park et al., 2010). Such definition goes in line with earlier research on the same topic. As Mittal (2006) stated, consumers, tend to connect to a brand because it resonates and represents who they are or simply because the brand and the consumers share the same meaningful goals and type of life projects. As such, brand attachment can be considered as a strong predictor of a consumer’s loyalty, commitment, and purchase behavior (Park et al., 2010; Park, Eisingerich & Park, 2013). However, other streams of research proposed that the development of a strong connection between consumers and the brand, under the form of brand attachment, can potentially have negative effects for

both parties (Alvarez & Fournier, 2016). Mattila (2004) showed, for instance, that an emotionally attached consumer can feel betrayed in case the brand fails to live up to its promise.

2.2.4 Brand Commitment

In a similar fashion to trust, commitment has also been recognized as an important element for maintaining long and lasting relationships (Garbarino & Johnson, 1999). Moorman, Deshpandé and Zaltman (1993) defined commitment as a continuous desire to maintain a relationship that is seen as valuable for the two parties. In even earlier studies, social psychologists suggested that commitment was a crucial driver for the creation of relationships (Rusbult, 1983; Rusbult & Buunk, 1993). The creation of relationships through commitment is not only applicable to a person-to-person context but can be applied to a customer-brand context also. As such, comparably to trust, commitment as a concept is also relevant in the world of brand management which led to the birth of brand commitment. This new concept of commitment could be defined as the desire to pursue and maintain the relationship with a brand (Jahn, Kiessling & Gaus, 2012) or as a consumer's long-term behavioral and attitudinal tendency to form a relationship with a brand (Chaudhuri & Holbrook, 2001).

Although close to the definition of brand loyalty, brand commitment is distinct from this latter concept. As explained by Warrington and Shim (2000), brand loyalty is only characterized by behaviors (e.g. repeated purchase) whereas, brand commitment also includes attitudes (e.g. psychological or emotional attachment) in its conceptualization. For instance, the authors suggested that brand loyal consumers with a tendency to repeat purchases for a brand, although the consumer has no particular preference for this brand, might be likely to switch to another brand. However, such a situation would not happen for a brand-committed consumer. Thus, this differentiation between brand loyalty and brand commitment is considered as one of the main reasons why researchers are increasingly studying the concept of commitment in the field of brand management (Dholakia, 1997).

2.2.5 The relationship between the brand relationship constructs

Previous studies have showed that trust is a major antecedent to attachment, which then leads to a consumer being committed to the brand, product or company (Chaudhuri & Holbrook, 2001; Garbarino & Johnson, 1999; Morgan & Hunt, 1994; Ramaseshan & Stein, 2014). Consequently, consumers will only tie relationship with brands they trust, but also feel attached and committed to (Morgan & Hunt, 1994).

Past studies have been able to examine such relationship between those different brand relationship constructs. Some authors such as Morgan and Hunt (1994), conducted research on the relationship between trust and commitment only. The authors explained that, since relations based on trust are highly valued, parties will want to stay committed to the relationship. This is because, the concept of commitment involves parties showing vulnerability and only those that seek for partners that they can trust. Such notion is based on the social exchange theory which explain the relationship. As presented by McDonald (1981, p.834), "mistrust breeds

mistrust and as such would also serve to decrease commitment in the relationship and shift the transaction to one of more direct short-term exchanges". Thus, Morgan and Hunt (1994) argued that commitment is a major consequence of trust in a marketing and business contexts.

In the later years, other authors started to find a significant connection between attachment and the two previously mentioned concepts while incorporating the brands as context. For instance, Huaman-Ramirez and Merunka (2019) argued that brand trust can lead to the development of emotional bonds between a consumer and a brand. Such statement is based on the ideas coming from the field of psychology explaining that a trustworthy party would be perceived as signaling care, concern and connection. As Burke and Stets (1999) explained, trust in a partner is crucial for the emergence of a deep emotional interpersonal connection. In parallel, attachment require satisfaction of one's needs to be developed (Hazan & Shaver, 1994) which need the existence of trust (Huaman-Ramirez & Merunka, 2019). Thus, some scholars inferred and confirmed that the emergence of brand attachment need the presence of brand trust (Esch et al., 2006; Huaman-Ramirez & Merunka, 2019; Ramaseshan & Stein, 2014).

Similarly, other authors dived into the relationship between attachment and commitment to find a connection between the two constructs. According to Gundlach, Achrol and Mentzer (1995), commitment directly derive from psychological attachment. As they explained, when two parties share values and affective attachment, they tend to stay committed to each other by seeking to keep acting for the benefit of one another. This idea has also been confirmed and describe by Fedorikhin, Park and Thomason (2008). The authors advance that individuals that are attached to something in particular are more tempted to be committed to it and willing to maintain, protect and develop the already existing interactions. Furthermore, they add that attachment to a brand can lead to a higher desire from the consumer to maintain exclusive associations and relationship with the brand which can be seen as commitment to the brand. Accordingly, brand attachment found to be connected to brand commitment through previous studies (Fedorikhina, Park & Thomson, 2008; Ramaseshan & Stein, 2014; Zhou et al., 2012).

2.3 Brand Community

As previously mentioned, the context in which the main relationship between brand experience and purchase intention is studied can influence the research results. Considering the complexity of the online world, with the emergence of new brand community platforms where brands can connect with their consumers, it is of interest to study if this relationship upholds in this context. Furthermore, unraveling the relationship between brand experience in OBCs and purchase intention would provide valuable insights for future researchers and managers. This is because both academics and marketers are asking for research on how online brand experiences are impacting consumers' purchase intentions (Gabisch, 2011). In parallel, other past researchers have stressed the need for more studies on how consumer-run and company-managed brand communities could differ (Lee, Kim & Kim, 2010; Pedeliento, Andreini & Veloutsou, 2020; Wirtz et al., 2013).

2.3.1 Communities and Brand Communities

Communities are classified as “groups of people that share social interactions, bonds and common space” (Kozinets, 1999, p.253). Community as a concept has long been a staple amongst many different streams of research (Hummon, 1990). With digitalization, the concept of communities has widened even further to grow beyond a certain place or size. Communication technology has enabled individuals all over the world to unite in communities through a commonality of identity and purpose. Today communities are no longer restricted by geography and they have a broader field of meaning in which it is about shared identity and understanding (Muniz & O’Guinn, 2001).

Within the area of traditional communities, a new type called brand community has emerged and gained attention in the research field (Bagozzi & Dholakia, 2006; Muniz & O’Guinn, 2001). According to Muniz & O’Guinn (2001) who coined the term, a brand community is a “specialized, non-geographically bound community, based on a structured set of social relations among admirers of a brand” (2001, p.412). A brand community is ‘specialized’ compared to other types of communities because it is centered around a brand. Brand communities can be created for any brand. However, they are more likely to form around brands that have a strong image, long history, and tough competition in the market (Muniz & O’Guinn, 2001). Additionally, the members in the community share a common interest in this particular brand and create a social world revolving around it (Cova & Pace, 2006). There are two different kinds of relationships that can be created in brand communities: between the brand and the community members as well as between the community members themselves (Muniz & O’Guinn, 2001).

From the consumers' point of view, there are many advantages of brand communities and especially three positive aspects have been highlighted. Firstly, consumers have a stronger voice and brand communities represent forms of consumer agencies (France & Muller, 1999). Secondly, these communities act as an essential source of information for their members. Thirdly, the community provides social benefits to its members through their interactions with each other (Muniz & O’Guinn, 2001). From the brand's perspective, the benefits of brand communities are increased brand equity, perceived quality, brand loyalty, brand commitment, brand associations, and brand awareness (Jacoby & Chestnut, 1978; McAlexander & Schouten, 1998; Muniz & O’Guinn, 2001). Furthermore, it lays a good foundation to build a strong relationship between the brand and its consumers (Muniz & O’Guinn, 2001).

2.3.2 Online Brand Community (OBC)

Brand communities can be formed either offline, online, or on social media (Brogi, 2014; Martínez-López et al., 2016). Online brand communities (OBCs), compared to offline, are supported by a technological platform enabling the community to be free from geographical restrictions (Martínez-López et al., 2016). These communities are fostered in a virtual setting where members' interactions are mediated by the Internet (Füller, Jawecki & Mühlbacher, 2007). What distinguishes OBCs is that their virtual environment facilitates functions such as

chat rooms and forums where members can continuously interact and connect in real-time as well as share information and emotions with each other (Brogi, 2014; Sung et al., 2010). Additionally, through the evolution of technology, users can nowadays share videos, blogs, and social networks. OBCs has made it easier for members to build relationships as well as share content and interests relating to the brand (Fournier & Avery, 2011). This in turn increases the connectivity and participation within the community and strengthens the social aspect of an OBC (Wu & Fang, 2010). Additionally, another benefit is the access to a much wider number of consumers at a low cost and high speed (Zaglia, 2013). In OBCs, consumers are encouraged to participate in decisions about the products and brands making them more involved (Kozinets, 2002). Furthermore, these communities are highly powerful since conversations amongst the members in OBCs affect the reputation and positioning that brands have (Weber, 2007).

Offline and online brand communities can work in harmony to aid and complement each other (Näsi, Räsänen & Lehdonvirta, 2011; Whitty, 2008). Additionally, offline communities can move to an online platform as well as OBCs can develop into an offline community. As such, the different forms can work together to maintain and strengthen the relationships between brands and consumers in both a physical and virtual setting. Additionally, the emergence of OBCs has been seen to strengthen offline brand communities (Martínez-López et al., 2016). This is because before virtual communities were developed, communities inherited three main characteristics: they were local, involved social interactions, and bonds amongst members (Hillery Jr., 1955). However, with the rise of the Internet, they are today not bound by a place (Bagozzi & Dholakia, 2002) which makes them more flexible and durable than offline versions (Kane et al., 2009). The new channel of open communication that OBCs has enabled makes it possible for consumers to continuously connect and identify with each other, leading to stronger brand loyalty (Ewing, Wagstaff & Powell, 2013; Houman Andersen, 2005).

2.3.3 Consumer-run vs Company-managed

Brand communities can be formed either by the company itself or by a group of consumers that are loyal to the brand (Dholakia & Vianello, 2011; Martínez-López et al., 2016; Pedeliento, Andreini & Veloutsou, 2020). Consumers can create a brand community when their shared interest in the specific brand is so strong that a community is created without any help from the company itself (Wiegandt, 2009). These two types of communities are called company-managed and consumer-run brand communities (Pedeliento, Andreini & Veloutsou, 2020), and they may inherit certain differences in terms of, for example, vision and usefulness (Wirtz et al., 2013). Furthermore, several strong brands have both types of communities (Antorini, Muñoz & Askildsen, 2012; Dholakia & Vianello, 2011).

Porter (2004) classifies communities based on a criterium of whether they are initiated by members or managed by the brand promoted. The *member-initiated*, consumer-run, communities emerge because users wish to connect with other people sharing similar opinions, interests, and/or objectives. Therefore, it is the members who create, maintain, control, and organize the brand community. *Organization-sponsored*, company-managed, communities are created by

the company itself with a focus on its brand or product. These communities do not have to be created with the intention to increase profit or benefits from the community.

Consumer-run brand communities come to life and thrive as a result of the members' work and care for the users and its community (Jang et al., 2008; Shang, Chen & Liao, 2006). They are created by highly enthusiastic consumers that want to share information and experiences as well as establish relationships with other consumers of the brand (Jang et al., 2008; Lee, Kim & Kim, 2012; Martínez-López et al., 2016). These brand communities are advantageous for its members when it comes to providing information that is useful to the users as well as to share both positive and negative past experiences and opinions (Martínez-López et al., 2016). On the other hand, company-managed brand communities are built by the brand's marketers and run by managers to enhance relationships with consumers (Bonnemaizon, Cova & Louyot, 2007; Sung et al., 2010). Thus, company-managed communities are constructed with the aim to build the company's brand (Gruner, Homburg & Lukas, 2014) and motivated with the purpose of making a profit (Manchanda, Packard & Pattabhiramaiah, 2015). Other reasons behind companies wanting to create online brand communities are the possibilities to build relationships with their consumers and to gather feedback for the company (Jang et al., 2008; McWilliam, 2000; Sung et al., 2010).

Previous research has come across similarities and differences between the two types of community (Dholakia & Vianello, 2011; Lee, Kim & Kim, 2012). Similarities among these two types of communities are that both are built and center around a specific brand (De Almeida et al., 2013). Additionally, members of the communities are active contributors that co-create value with the brands (Black & Veloutsou, 2017; Cova, Pace & Skålén, 2015; Skålén, Pace & Cova, 2015). However, De Almeida et al. (2013) highlights that they differ in terms of the goals of the community. The company-managed brand communities usually have business and marketing-related goals whereas the consumer-run are more based on relationship and consumption experiences. Furthermore, the characteristics of the communities' administrators differ. The ones managed by the company are administered by a marketing professional that controls the conversations, thus reducing the freedom of speech, as well as organizes messages and activities. Communities initiated by consumers provide freedom to members to express themselves leading to them identifying more with the community. Additionally, they have more trust for the administrator and have been seen to participate more frequently (De Almeida et al., 2013). Another difference that is highlighted in the literature is that the two types of communities develop different experiences for their members. More specifically, members in the consumer-run communities encounter a significantly more intense experience than those that belong to the company-managed ones (Pedeliento, Andreini & Veloutsou, 2020). Lastly, previous scholars have also shown that they differ in terms of the engagement that they can generate (Jang et al., 2008; Lee, Kim & Kim, 2012) and the trustworthiness felt in the community (Jung, Kim & Kim, 2014).

2.4 Conceptual framework

The conceptual framework illustrated in Figure 2 will be tested in this study to answer our research questions. Since we have two research questions (RQ1 and RQ2), the conceptual framework consists of two parts. First, the figure depicts a relationship-based part: how brand experience in OBCs is hypothesized to have an impact on consumers' purchase intention. Here we will test the relationship with and without the mediating brand relationships variables: trust, attachment, and commitment. This is examined with the hypotheses H1 to H4. Second, the figure portrays the comparative part: how the brand community type is hypothesized to influence brand experience. Thus, the comparison between a consumer-run and company-managed brand community is investigated with the hypotheses H5.

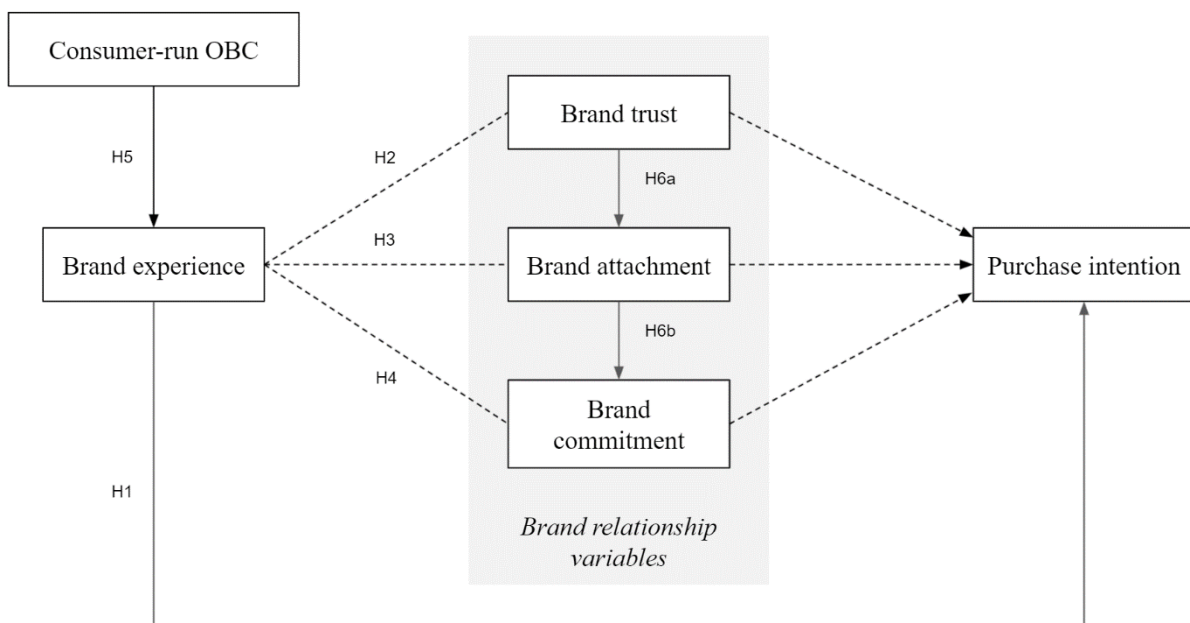


Figure 2: Conceptual framework

2.4.1 Hypothesis development

In the following section, theoretical support will be gathered from current literature for the hypothesized relationship and comparison that will be examined in this research. To study our relationship-based question (RQ1), we have drawn inspiration from past research that studied the direct relationship between brand experience in OBCs and purchase intention to create H1 (Morgan-Thomas & Veloutsou, 2013; Venter de Villiers, Chinomona & Chuchu, 2018). Additionally we have also used other studies that connected brand relationship to brand experience and purchase intention to create H2, H3 and H4 (Demiray & Burnaz, 2019; Harrigan et al., 2021; Kaufmann et al., 2016; Liu et al., 2018; Ramaseshan & Stein, 2014; Wang, Cao & Park, 2019). Regarding the comparative nature of the research questions, literature from mainly Pedeliento, Andreini and Veloutsou (2020) as well as Martínez-López et al. (2016) is used to

hypothesize H5 which represent the difference in brand experience between consumer-run and company-managed OBCs.

To summarize, H1-H4, which compose the main relationship under investigation, have been formulated through the following logic. For H1, we searched for studies providing evidence that brand experience has a direct effect on purchase intention. Regarding H2-H4, we examined research providing evidence that brand experience has an effect on brand relationship. Thereafter, we used studies showing a significant influence of brand relationship on purchase intention. By combining those literature, we could connect the concept of brand experience to purchase intention through brand relationships. This was done to identify the possible mechanisms underlying this relationship and provide an explanation to it. On the other side, H5, which represent our comparative analysis between consumer-run and company-managed OBC has been constructed by using past research indicating differences between the two.

2.4.1.1 The Relationship Between Brand Experience in OBCs and Purchase Intention

The influence of brand experience on purchase intention have sparked the interest of some researchers in the past. As described by Brakus, Schmitt & Zarantonello (2009), brand experience have an effect on consumer behavior and more specifically purchase intentions (Khan & Rahman, 2015; Roswinanto & Strutton, 2014). Since brand experience provide value to the customers, the more a brand evoke these experiences, the more satisfied the customer will be about the brand. As a result, the customer will have the intention of purchasing the brand's product or services to renew the valuable experience it received from the brand (Brakus, Schmitt & Zarantonello, 2009). Such direct relationship between brand experience and purchase intention has previously been verified in some specific contexts such as the offline luxury brand experience. In their research, Yoo and Lee (2012) showed past brand experiences of genuine luxury brands have a positive significant relationship with the purchase intention for such brands.

Therefore, the following, H1, hypothesis have been crafted.

H1: Brand experience in OBCs has a direct effect on purchase intention.

2.4.1.2 Brand Trust as a Mediator Between Brand Experience in OBCs and Purchase Intention

Ramaseshan and Stein (2014) state that experiences work as a valuable source of personal input and brand experiences can therefore develop notions of trust in consumers. Trust as a concept derives from personal relationship theories in social psychology since it is considered a deep-rooted characteristic of valuable social interactions (Morgan & Hunt, 1994). These theories state that trust evolves from past experiences and prior interactions. Therefore, individuals' trust in a brand is based on their experiences with that brand. Consumers' interactions with brands enhance brand trust as they become more familiar and gain knowledge about the brand (Garbarino & Johnson, 1999). This is supported in the literature where customers who have positive experiences from a brand display strong brand trust (Ha & Perks, 2005).

Regarding the consequences of brand trust, purchase intention can be seen as one of them. According to Ganesan (1994), the concept of brand trust is an essential ingredient to build long-term relationships between a selling firm and a buyer. If the buyer trusts the seller, the buyer is more likely to have the intention to continue the exchange relationship with the seller. In parallel, Morgan and Hunt (1994) highlighted a negative relationship between brand trust and the likelihood that a partner will terminate the exchange relationship in the near future. In other words, trust prevents the stop of purchase intention as the authors explained. In more recent years, such a positive effect of brand trust on purchase intention has also been confirmed by different other authors (Harrigan et al., 2021; Liu et al., 2018).

Therefore, the following, H2, hypothesis have been crafted.

H2: Brand trust mediates the relationship between brand experience in OBCs and purchase intention.

2.4.1.3 Brand Attachment as a Mediator Between Brand Experience in OBCs and Purchase Intention

Theory within interpersonal relationship highlight that consumers can develop an attachment to brands (Fournier, 1998). This attachment can arises from consumers' brand experience (Huaman-Ramirez & Merunka, 2019). As a result, positive brand experiences grow bonds and attachments between brands and consumers. This is supported by attachment theory that presents how multiple interactions and experiences with brands result in consumers growing emotional attachments to brands (Bowlby, 1998).

Such brand attachment reflects consumers' behavioral intentions (Fedorikhina, Park & Thomson, 2008; Whan Park & Macinnis, 2006) and is, therefore, a strong predictor of current and future purchase intentions as described by various authors (Esch et al., 2006; Ilicic & Webster, 2011; Tiruwa, Yadav & Suri, 2016). As confirmed by Kaufmann, Petrovici, Filho and Ayres (2016) in their recent study, brand attachment has a systematic positive impact on purchase intention.

Hence, hypothesis H3 is presented.

H3: Brand attachment mediates the relationship between brand experience in OBCs and purchase intention.

2.4.1.4 Brand Commitment as a Mediator Between Brand Experience in OBCs and Purchase Intention

According to the interpersonal relationship theory, the level of commitment a person has toward someone else is based on the prior experiences that the two individuals share (Clark & Reis, 1988). With clear similarities between consumer-brand and human relationship, as Fournier (1998) pointed out, it can be inferred that consumers' commitment toward brands increase as they encounter positive experiences with such brands. Those positive experiences then lead to a growing want from the consumers to repeat similar experiences with the same brand which evolves into further commitment (Brakus, Schmitt & Zarantonello, 2009).

Brand commitment, as a result, can then produce purchase intention. For instance, a study from Demiray and Burnaz (2019) provided evidence that brand commitment in the context of a Facebook brand community could convert into marketing effects, such as purchase intention and word-of-mouth. Similarly, Wang, Cao and Park (2019) found the same result in a similar research context by investigating Facebook fan pages too.

As a result, hypothesis H4 have been defined.

H4: Brand commitment mediates the relationship between brand experience in OBCs and purchase intention.

2.4.1.5 Comparison of Brand Experience Between Consumer-run and Company-managed OBC

To investigate the second part of our research question, literature primarily from Pedeliento, Andreini and Veloutsou (2020) as well as Martínez-López et al. (2016) has been utilized. This was done to answer the comparative nature of our research which is to study if the type of OBC influences the brand experience.

As previously mentioned, brand communities can be created, developed, coordinated, and managed by consumers of the brand or by marketers (Dholakia & Vianello, 2011; Martínez-López et al., 2016; Pedeliento, Andreini & Veloutsou, 2020). Consumer-run brand communities are often built by passionate consumers that are looking for people with similar interest to form a group (Wiegandt, 2009). Company-managed communities on the other hand are crafted by marketers looking to develop relationships with their consumers and followers (Bonnemaizon, Cova & Louyot, 2007; Sung et al., 2010). Little research has studied the differences between the two types of communities and whether they work differently. However, scholars have suggested that they differ in terms of the experience produced and perceived by consumers (Martínez-López et al., 2016; Pedeliento, Andreini & Veloutsou, 2020). For instance, Pedeliento, Andreinin and Veloutsou (2020) suggested that the experiences felt by individuals in consumer-run brand communities are stronger and more intense than those felt in company-managed brand communities.

Following this idea, the last hypothesis was created.

H5: Consumer-run OBC has a positive effect on brand experience.

2.4.1.6 The Effects Between the Brand Relationship Variables

The following hypothesis have been created as we partially based our model on the one used by Ramaseshan and Stein (2014). Thus, we wanted to examine whether the brand relationship constructs were also connected in the OBC context.

Based on the commitment-trust theory (Morgan & Hunt, 1994), trust is a fundamental component to build strong and valued relationships. Regarding consumer-brand relationships, trust emerge from consumers' feeling of security toward the brand. For them, they trust that the

brand will meet their expectation (Chaudhuri & Holbrook, 2001). Consequently, the consumers start to develop a relationship with it. In that process, emotional attachment is felt by the consumers toward the brand (Park et al., 2010). Therefore, brand trust is an important source for brand attachment. Such notion has previously been confirmed through different studies that showed a positive effect between brand trust and brand attachment (Esch et al., 2006; Ramaseshan & Stein, 2014).

Based on this past literature, we created hypothesis H6a:

H6a: Brand trust has a positive effect on brand attachment.

By using the interpersonal relationship theory in the consumer-brand relationship context, Fournier (1998) explained that consumers, when attached to a brand and uses its product or services on a regular basis, can become committed to it. Such idea has previously been studied and confirmed by other authors, where each advanced that a consumer's level of attachment toward a brand can be the source of their commitment to it (Bansal, Irving & Taylor, 2004; Fullerton, 2003; Gruen, Summers & Acito, 2000; Ramaseshan & Stein, 2014). Therefore, it can be said that consumers that are emotionally attached to a brand do not only receive benefits from it, but also gives back in return through their commitment to the brand which maintains the relationship.

As a result, we hypothesize H6b:

H6b: Brand attachment has a positive effect on brand commitment.

3. Methodology

In this chapter, the methodological aspects of this research will be presented and discussed. First, we present our philosophical standpoint and research approach. This is followed up the research design and measurements. After this, we present the pre-study and lastly the data collection and analysis method.

3.1 Research Philosophy

Different philosophical assumptions can be used by management and business researcher to lay the foundation of their studies. As such, there is no definitive way to conduct research (Bryman & Bell, 2011). This part of the paper will address different ontological and epistemological assumptions while explaining the philosophical viewpoint we take to answer the research questions previously defined. Those assumptions provide direction on how the research should be carried out by guiding the research design. As a result, being able to understand those philosophical concepts contributes to the overall quality and creativity of the research (Easterby-Smith, Thorpe & Jackson, 2015).

3.1.1 Ontology

Ontology refers to the basic assumption that researchers make regarding the nature of reality. In other words, it is the researcher's viewpoint on the world, defining what is real and what exist (Easterby-Smith, Thorpe & Jackson, 2015). Ontological assumptions can be divided into four categories that need to be considered while conducting research: realism, internal realism, relativism and nominalism. Realism presumes that only a single truth exists about our world which is revealed through existing facts. Similarly, internal realism propose that such a single truth or unique reality will never be revealed to scientists directly and part of it will remain obscure. From such internal realism viewpoint, it is never possible to fully acquire objective information on the studied phenomenon, and only indirect evidence of what is going on can be gathered. However once discovered, scientific laws can be considered as absolute and independent of any further observations from an internal realism viewpoint (Easterby-Smith, Thorpe & Jackson, 2015). In contrast to the realism and internal realism philosophy, relativism assumes that many truths exists as it is all subjective. Such ontological approach presumes that those different truths about the world and the facts related to them depend on the perception of the various observers. In other words, there is not one absolute reality that can be observable but there are many observable realities depending on which perspectives it is viewed from. Nominalism goes further by believing that the names and labels we give to phenomenon are of high importance to create their different truths. In a sense, there is no truth from a nominalism viewpoint, just an establishment of different versions of truth from different groups of people (Easterby-Smith, Thorpe & Jackson, 2015).

Regarding this paper, internal realism as an ontological philosophy lays the foundation of the study. With branding being an established concept in the business landscape, it is possible to

measure brand experience and its relationship to purchase intention quantitatively. This provided the paper with more objective information on the studied phenomenon, which will get researcher closer to a single truth. As a result, the paper acknowledges that there is only one truth regarding the impact of brand experience in OBCs on purchase intention. In that sense, such relationship follows a single reality by being either positive, negative or non-significant. However, this reality has yet been fully discovered or clarified and thus remain obscure as the previous paragraphs explained.

3.1.2 Epistemology

Epistemology can be referred to as the study of theories of knowledge. In other words, it is about understanding “how we know what we know” (Easterby-Smith, Thorpe & Jackson, 2015, p.51). Some authors defined it as the researcher’s view point on what can and cannot be considered as acceptable knowledge in a specific field of studies (Bryman & Bell, 2011; Saunders, Lewis & Thornhill, 2009). As such, epistemological assumptions can be divided between positivism and social constructivism. Since this paper base its foundation on internal realism, it will embrace positivist epistemology as it is linked to the internal realist perspective. Such positivist epistemology means that the nature of knowledge need to be measured through objective and non-subjective methods which can also refer to quantitative research methods (Easterby-Smith, Thorpe & Jackson, 2015). This positivist epistemology approach goes in contradiction with the constructionist epistemology that is associated with the nominalist ontological perspective. This is because the constructionist epistemology propose that reality is understood through the way people make sense of it, usually resulting in qualitative research method (Easterby-Smith, Thorpe & Jackson, 2015).

The positivist epistemology needs to follow several principles. First, the observer or research, in the context of this paper, has to be independent of the observed phenomenon (Bryman & Bell, 2011; Burns & Burns, 2008; Easterby-Smith, Thorpe & Jackson, 2015). Additionally, the research needs to be carried out in a way that is value-free, objective and the knowledge has to be gathered from facts providing the basis for laws formulation (Bryman & Bell, 2011). In parallel, concepts used in the research need to be operationalized to be measured quantitatively (Easterby-Smith, Thorpe & Jackson, 2015). Regarding the chosen ontological belief, this paper takes a positivist epistemological perspective, as the impact of brand experience in OBCs on purchase intention should be measured objectively to highlight a relationship between the two concepts. Furthermore, the different concepts in this study have been operationalized to be measured quantitatively and we, as observers, are independent from what is being observed.

3.2 Research approach

The following subsection present the research approach of this study. As the aim of this paper is to analyze the relationship between brand experience in OBCs and purchase intention we have used a quantitative approach. The reason behind this is based on our ontological and epistemological stance. Consequently, a deductive approach was adopted and more specifically an

online survey. Furthermore, our study has a multiple cross-sectional design in line with our purpose to study a relationship and compare between groups.

3.2.1 Deductive approach

Considering our chosen positivist approach and quantitative research method, a deductive process to theory was adopted. This was supported by researchers who state that the nature of a positivist position tends to lead to a deductive approach to confirm already existing theory. Furthermore, quantitative studies are often associated with a deductive strategy (Bryman & Bell, 2011; Burns & Burns, 2008). A deductive process refers to when the researchers' work starts from the general and move towards the specific (Burns & Burns, 2008). This means that they start with an existing theory and deduces one or several hypotheses that later are subject to empirical scrutiny. More specifically, the researchers begin with basing their hypotheses on what is already known in the field and theoretical domain. Afterwards, they must translate those hypotheses into researchable entities and operational terms. Following this, they need to collect data and test their hypotheses empirically to later be able to draw conclusions (Bryman & Bell, 2011; Burns & Burns, 2008). Based on this, we deduced hypotheses based on current literature to then test these empirically to draw conclusions that can aid the generalization of the studied relationship. The chosen approach is also supported by previous researchers within the field, which further supports our chosen philosophical decisions. As previously mentioned, this study derived from three lines of research within the fields of brand experience, brand relationship and purchase intention, all of which have used quantitative methods and a positivist nature. Lastly, a deductive approach is also the typical orientation when using a quantitative survey method and cross-sectional designs (Bryman & Bell, 2011), which we aim to do.

3.2.2 Survey research

Positivism, which is our chosen stance, is the dominant epistemology that is underlying the quantitative survey research method (Easterby-Smith, Thorpe & Jackson, 2015). A survey method refers to when "a structured questionnaire is given to a sample of a population and designed to elicit specific information from respondents" (Malhotra, 2010, p.179). As such, it is the process of obtaining information from questioning respondents. These questions can be asked either in a verbal or written way and via a computer. Furthermore, those are typically structured questions since a standardized questionnaire is used to ask these questions in a pre-arranged order (Malhotra, 2010). Additionally, this quantitative data is collected at a single point in time and later examined to detect patterns of association (Bryman & Bell, 2011). According to Easterby-Smith, Thorpe and Jackson (2015), there are three main types of surveys: factual, inferential and exploratory. We have chosen to employ an inferential survey since this is aimed at "establishing relationships between variables and concepts, whether there are prior assumptions and hypotheses regarding the nature of these relationships" (Easterby-Smith, Thorpe & Jackson, 2015, p.75). This is in line with our purpose to unravel the complexities in the relationship between brand experience in OBCs and purchase intention. Additionally, inferential surveys are the dominant strategies in academic management research, especially in the fields of marketing (Easterby-Smith, Thorpe & Jackson, 2015).

Malhotra (2010) mentions the many advantages to a survey research. Firstly, a questionnaire is simple, quick and cheap to administer. Furthermore, it enables a diversity of questions and flexibility to the researcher. Secondly, the collected data is reliable since respondents are limited to the stated alternatives. This in turn, reduces the variability in the results that can occur in interviews. Thirdly, the coding, analysis and interpretation of the collected data is simple compared to other methods. Lastly, the perceived anonymity of the respondents is high which makes it easy to obtain sensitive information. In parallel, the so-called Hawthorne effect, which corresponds to respondents being influenced by the presence of the interviewer leading to socially desired answers in the research, is reduced. On the other hand, the authors also mention some disadvantages to consider. The respondents may be unwilling or unable to provide the researchers with the desired information. More specifically, they can deny answering sensitive or personal questions and provide inaccurate answers when questioned about their motives. Other challenges are to reach a high response rate and to word the questions properly so that the respondents understand them correctly. Despite these disadvantages mentioned, the authors highlights that a survey approach is the dominating method of primary data collection when it comes to marketing research. Additionally, we think that the advantages outweigh the disadvantages in our case.

Survey research often use cross-sectional designs where they have large samples that can enable multiple factors to be examined simultaneously. This in turn, facilitates the possibilities to investigate underlying relationships (Easterby-Smith, Thorpe & Jackson, 2015). In the following section, we will go more in depth on cross-sectional studies.

3.3 Research Design

As explained by Bryman & Bell (2011), the research design's purpose is to guide the collection of data in the right direction while taking in consideration the research question. Here the choice of the research design has an influence on the research process which include the causal connections between the variables, the generalization of the study, the comprehension of the studied behavior in the research's social context and also the relevance of the phenomena investigated (Bryman & Bell, 2011). As such, research design can be divided into five different approaches: experimental, cross-sectional, longitudinal, case study and comparative. Since survey research often use cross-sectional designs, this paper has also adopted this approach.

3.3.1 Cross-sectional study

We have chosen a cross-sectional design because of our positivist stance and survey method. Additionally, it a suitable approach when the study is descriptive and predictive in nature (Burns & Burns, 2008), which it is in our case. A cross-sectional design is defined as "a type of research design involving the collection of information from any given sample of population elements only once" (Malhotra, 2010, p.76). More specifically, a cross-sectional survey involve "selecting different organizations, or units, in different contexts, and investigating the

relationships between a number of variables across these units” (Easterby-Smith, Thorpe & Jackson, 2015, p.334). Based on this, the chosen method enables the fulfilment of our purpose which is to both study a relationship and compare between groups. According to Malhotra (2010), there are two types of cross-sectional designs: single and multiple. The difference lies in how many samples that are drawn from the target population, where a multiple cross-sectional design entails two or more samples. We will adopt this sampling method since we aim to do a comparison between consumer-run and company-managed OBCs.

According to Easterby-Smith, Thorpe and Jackson (2015), the external validity in a cross-sectional study is strong when the sample is randomly selected. They also mention that these studies are economically favourable when describing features of a large number of people. However, a limitation to the cross-sectional study, compared to a longitudinal, is the difficulty to describe processes over time and to explain these observed patterns. Despite this, Malhotra (2010) highlights that cross-sectional studies are better at collecting representative samples. Lastly, Bryman and Bell (2011) also emphasize advantages in terms of replicability.

3.4 Measurements

The measurement scales we have chosen to measure brand experience, brand trust, brand attachment, brand commitment and purchase intention are all empirically validated scales that we collected from past marketing and brand management studies (Brakus, Schmitt & Zarantonello, 2009; Chaudhuri & Holbrook, 2001; De Wulf, Odekerken-Schröder & Iacobucci, 2001; Gabisch, 2011; Park et al., 2010). In our questionnaire, all items were measured on a 7-point Likert scale (Burns & Burns, 2008) ranging from ‘strongly disagree’ (1) to ‘strongly agree’ (7). A Likert scale is a measurement scale indicating respondents’ level of agreement or disagreement with a series of statements that are related to the stimulus objects (Bryman & Bell, 2011; Burns & Burns, 2008; Malhotra, 2010). Accordingly, a high overall score on this scale can be interpreted as the respondent having a positive attitude while a low overall score represents a negative attitude (Burns & Burns, 2008). We chose to use a Likert scale since it is one of the most widely used scaling procedures to measure attitudes (Bryman & Bell, 2011; Burns & Burns, 2008; Malhotra, 2010), which is the purpose of our research. Furthermore, we aim to adopt a 7-point scale, instead of the more common 5-point scale, to have a more accurate measure of the respondents’ true evaluation (Sapsford, 2007). The 7-point scale is also more suitable for electronic and unsupervised questionnaires (Malhotra, 2010).

3.4.1 Purchase intention

The dependent variable purchase intention was measured in accordance with previous research from Gabisch (2011). The concept of purchase intention was estimated through the following items: ‘I would be very interested in buying products with this brand in the real world’ and ‘I would consider buying products with this brand in the real world’. Cronbach’s alpha for these items were above the acceptable value of 0,7 and therefore chosen for this study.

3.4.2 Brand experience

For brand experience, the independent variable was measured using the brand experience scale created by Brakus, Schmitt and Zarantonello (2009). The authors measured brand experience with the four dimensions: sensory, affective, behavioral, and intellectual. The *sensory* dimension was calculated through the items: ‘This brand makes a strong impression on my visual senses or other senses’, ‘I find this brand interesting in a sensory way’ and ‘This brand appeals to my senses’. Furthermore, the *affective* dimension consisted of the following items: ‘This brand stimulates feelings and sentiments’, ‘I have strong feelings for this brand’ and ‘This brand is an emotional brand’. The *behavioral* part of brand experience was measured with the items: ‘I engage in physical actions and behaviors when I use this brand’, ‘This brand results in bodily experiences’ and ‘This brand is action-oriented’. Lastly, the *intellectual* dimension comprises of the items: ‘I engage in a lot of thinking when I encounter this brand’, ‘This brand stimulates my curiosity and problem solving’ and ‘This brand makes me think’. This scale was chosen because in past research all of the four dimensions demonstrated a Cronbach’s alpha above the acceptable limit of 0,7, showing a high internal reliability (Brakus, Schmitt & Zarantonello, 2009; Ramaseshan & Stein, 2014).

The brand experience scale was created as a second-order variable where the first order is reflective and the second order formative. Thus, in the first order, the means of all reflective items for each dimension were computed respectively. Following that, in the second order, new items were created, one for each dimension. Those were formatively connected to the construct of brand experience.

3.4.3 Brand relationship

As mentioned, the mediating brand relationship variables consists of brand trust, brand attachment and brand commitment. We used the scale modelled by Chaudhuri and Holbrook (2001) to calculate *brand trust*. This concept was measured using the following four items: ‘I trust this brand’, ‘I rely on this brand’, ‘This is an honest brand’ and ‘This brand is safe’. Furthermore, to measure the concept of brand attachment we adopted the four-item scale from Park et al. (2010). Therefore, brand attachment consisted of the items: ‘The brand is part of you and who you are’, ‘You feel personally connected to the brand’, ‘Your thoughts and feelings toward the brand come to your mind naturally and instantly’ and ‘Your thoughts and feelings toward the brand are often automatic’. Finally, *brand commitment* was measured using the scale from De Wulf, Odekerken-Schröder and Iacobucci (2001). Thus, we calculated brand commitment through the items: ‘Even if this brand was more difficult to reach, I would still keep buying this brand’ and ‘I am willing ‘to go the extra mile’ to remain a customer of this brand’. All Cronbach’s alpha for these three scales had values above the acceptable limit of 0,7 and was thus chosen for this study.

3.4.4 Consumer-run vs company-managed OBCs

Lastly, the categorical variable in this study consisted of the type of OBC either consumer-run or company-managed. To examine the comparison, we used the process of dummy variable coding to categorize our data. Therefore, the consumer-run OBC answers was coded 0, and the company-managed ones were represented by the number 1. This was done to later be able to specify which dummy variable we wanted to analyze and thus which desired reference category to be omitted in our path model. By doing this, we received the path coefficients for the chosen dummy variable, either consumer-run or company-managed, and could interpret these with respect to the reference category.

3.5 Choice of industry and company

Regarding the scope of this research, we decided to focus on the gaming industry, and more specifically on Ubisoft, which is one of the leading companies on the video game market. This is because the gaming industry is particularly interesting to examine in terms of brand communities. As explained by Ducheneaut, Yee, Nickell and Moore (2006), players tend to establish or join online gaming communities. Those communities, represent great ground for players to overcome their in-game challenges with the help of other players. This can be done, for instance, through the share of gaming knowledge and the access to valuable resources from the community such as in-game money, goods and equipment (Hsiao & Chiou, 2012). Consequently, the gaming industry is propitious for the creation and maintenance of brand communities run by both, the companies and the consumers.

Ubisoft is one of those brands that have those two types of communities. On one side there is the Official Ubisoft Forums community that is managed by the company, and on the other side there is the community associated to the Subreddits related to Ubisoft and its games which is run by the consumers. Although the two communities use different online platforms, they both give space for the players to interact with each other and to discuss Ubisoft news and games. The difference lies in who controls the platform and the community's way of interaction.

3.6 Pre-study

By conducting a pre-study, researchers can reduce measurement errors, identify possible problem areas in the survey and detect if the respondents are having troubles interpreting the questions (Bryman & Bell, 2011). Because of these opportunities, we performed a pre-study of our questionnaire where we distributed it to respondents from the target population. It was done by sending out the survey to members of the Reddit subcommunity r/Ubisoft to end with at least 10 feedback from those members. Additionally, we contacted a loyal Ubisoft fan that administers an online Facebook group dedicated to Ubisoft to receive opinions from a person with much knowledge and long experience of Ubisoft's communities.

Based on the comments that we received, we made some minor modifications to our survey. First, we modified the brand experience section that originally contained of four dimensions in accordance with the scale created by Brakus, Schmitt and Zarantonello (2009). This is because, several participants mentioned that the questions about the behavioral dimension created confusion in an online context. Some participants commented that they are not engaging in physical actions when being on an online forum. Consequently, the behavioral items of brand experience were removed to adapt it to the virtual setting of an OBC. Second, two comments mentioned that examples of the different emotional reactions would be appreciated to better understand the questions. Therefore, we clarified the questions by adding examples of emotions that the participants could experience when being in an OBC. Lastly, one participant highlighted those definitions to brand experience, brand relationship and purchase intention could be helpful for respondents who have not heard about these concepts before. To address these concerns, we added definitions for each of concepts in the survey. In the end, the questionnaire was approved by a university professor before we published it.

3.7 Data collection method

In this section, the collection of data will be discussed. At first, this entails the method used for the data collection which consists of primary data collection. In a second time, the sampling process that this paper follows will be presented, including the sampling strategy, the method applied and the sample size. Lastly, this section describes the design of the questionnaire and ethical considerations linked to this step.

3.7.1 Empirical data collection

To conduct our research, primary data was collected using an online survey as previously mentioned in the research approach section (3.2). The survey was posted on Subreddits and Facebook groups related to Ubisoft and its games to gather answers from players using the Reddit platform (consumer-run brand community) and the Official Ubisoft forums (company-managed community). Additionally, to reach more respondents from the target group, we also distributed the survey on different discord groups related to Ubisoft. The different groups and forums were chosen based on either the number of members or on the frequency of the members' interactions. To increase the number of people clicking on the survey link, a funny meme picture related to the master thesis was accompanying the post (Appendix A). By using a meme, we expected to copy the communication style of our target group to enhance our credibility and our acceptance into the various groups and forums. Hence, this data collection strategy was chosen for its effectiveness as it allowed us to post the survey on various digital spaces with highly active members to reach a large number of respondents (Bryman & Bell, 2011). In parallel, it allowed the data to be free of the interviewer effect which tends to affect the answers that respondents give based on the characteristics of the interviewers. Lastly, the self-completion survey approach gave freedom to the respondents to decided when, at what pace and where they wanted to give their answer (Bryman & Bell, 2011).

Despite having advantages, the chosen approach for primary data collection also has some disadvantages. With a self-completion questionnaire there is no way to further assist respondents in case they encounter any difficulties to understand or answer the survey. Moreover, the survey could potentially have been perceived as too long leading to respondent fatigue or perceived as not interesting enough for those respondents to give their answer (Bryman & Bell, 2011). Finally, the chosen data collection method could have led to cognitive biases as the online groups and forums have been chosen partially based on their popularity and our own intuition (Tversky & Kahneman, 1974). Although, those digital spaces seemed suitable due to their high number of members and high level of interaction among members, better options might have existed.

3.7.2 Sampling process

This part of the paper concerns the process of selecting individuals for the survey research, in other words the sampling. As explained by Bryman and Bell (2011), researchers have to choose the kind of population to be studied according to the research's topic. As a result, the need to sample in any study is often inevitable in quantitative research. Thus, the following paragraphs of this subsection will cover the paper's sampling strategy, sampling method, sample size and type of sampling chosen for this study.

3.7.2.1 Sampling strategy

As the sample is an extraction from the population, it is crucial to determine the target population first before moving on to the next steps of the sampling process (Burns & Burns, 2008). Since every consumer can react differently to brand-related stimuli such as brand experience, individual consumers were taken as unit of analysis for this research. By choosing such a unit of analysis, this research was able to stay in line with previous brand experience studies (Brakus, Schmitt & Zarantonello, 2009; Chang & Chieng, 2006; Zarantonello & Schmitt, 2010).

Regarding the target population itself, it was narrowed down to the following: females and males that are members of either subreddits related to Ubisoft and its games (consumer-run OBC) or Official Ubisoft Forums (company-managed OBC). Those represent the two OBCs we were investigating. Additionally, we only considered individuals as part of the target population if they have joined those communities for a significant period and if they have been interacting regularly in the OBCs. As it can take time for the consumers to develop purchase intention through brand experience, it was important to ensure that the respondents had sufficient time to experience the brand in those OBCs. In other words, the respondents needed to have spent significant time within the selected communities to develop such brand outcomes. Hence, beside asking if they were part of any of the two OBC under investigation, we asked the participants to specify if they have been members of the selected communities for more than two months. As they are considered to not have enough experience with the brand and its community to be able to evaluate them properly, every participant that has been a member for

less than two months were omitted from the study. In parallel, since we were looking for participants that have an adequate experience of the brand in the selected communities, we also disregard any respondents that reported they interact infrequently with other members in the OBCs. Therefore, we also require participants to indicate the frequency at which they interact, post, or comment on the selected OBC. Consequently, all these questions served as filter questions to ensure that only individuals from our target population would be included in the sample.

3.7.2.2 Sample size

As stated by Bryman and Bell (2011), there is not an exact number for how big a sample size should be. In parallel, the authors explain that absolute size prevail on relative size which means that the total population size does not matter that much. Such sample size could be defined according to the complexity of the model that the research is using (Easterby-Smith, Thorpe & Jackson, 2015). As a useful rule of thumb, multiplying the number of measured variables by ten gives a minimum sample size (Garson, 2016). However, it is worth to note that such minimum number should be increased according to other factors (Easterby-Smith, Thorpe & Jackson, 2015) such as the use of SmartPLS (Garson, 2016). In the case of this paper, there is only five measured variables. Consequently, the minimum sample size that we used equal 50. However considering the use of PLS, a larger sample size need to be taken to have more reliable PLS estimates and stronger path coefficients (Garson, 2016). In this study, we collected 146 valid answers from the online survey. Out of these, the final sample consisted of 107 respondents that met the requirements of the target population. Further information about their descriptive statistics can be found in the following Table 1.

Age group	Percentage	Time using the platform	Percentage
18 - 24	46%	Less than 1 months	15%
25 - 34	43%	1-2 months	34%
35 - 44	9%	More than 2 months	51%
45 - 54	2%		
Platform used	Percentage	Gender	Percentage
Reddit	52%	Male	79%
Ubisoft forums	48%	Female	19%
Prefer not to say	2%	Prefer not to say	2%

Table 1: Profile of the Participants

3.7.3 Questionnaire design

The following paragraphs of this subsection will discuss the content, structure and tool used to build the paper's questionnaire. Furthermore, ethical considerations will also be presented. This is especially important in our study since we used internet as a method of data collection (Bryman & Bell, 2011).

3.7.3.1 Questionnaire structure

The questionnaire that we posted, on the two OBCs under investigation and on the different other digital spaces, was composed of five main sections. Before the respondents could start the questionnaire, they were given short paragraphs to provide them with the context of our survey. In parallel, this first page asked for the respondents' explicit consent for us to use their answer in our research. Following this, the questionnaire asked general socio-demographical background questions to the participants which compose the first section of the survey. Moreover, it asked questions to know if the respondents qualified to be part of the target group as explained in the previous paragraphs of this paper (3.5.2.1). At the same time, this section asked about the respondents most used OBC between Ubisoft Forums or Ubisoft's subreddits. In the second section of the survey, the brand experience perceived by the respondents within the examined OBCs were measured. Depending on which OBC the respondent uses the most, he/she had to answer questions on brand experience specific to their most used OBC. For the third and the fourth section it was brand relationships and purchase intention that were respectively measured. Finally, the last section of the questionnaire thanked the participants. As we did not want the participants to answer the survey partly, each of the question had to be answered to proceed to the next section. Additionally, we added concepts definitions for each of the sections three, four and five to reduce confusion for the respondents.

3.7.3.2 Survey tool

To build and distribute this questionnaire, Google Form was used. This is because this Google tool gives unlimited questions and answers at no cost compared to other tools which require payment depending on the size of the survey and number of respondents. Moreover, the tool was highly convenient to use as it only required a Google account to set a survey up while being intuitive for usage. Finally, the tool allowed to design user-friendly, device optimized and easy to complete surveys. This made the survey visually appealing thanks to the possibility to personalize the design of the questionnaire. As Burns and Burns (2008) explained, visual appearance of a survey can impact the response rate.

3.7.3.3 Ethical considerations

Ethics in research is of high importance, especially in regards to participants' consent and their information protection (Easterby-Smith, Thorpe & Jackson, 2015). To stay in line with ethical standards in research, respondents were all informed about the study's content and context

beforehand. In this regard, the paper's questionnaire started with a short description of the thesis with its purpose, our name and contact information. Such short paragraph allows the participants to have enough information about the thesis to take a decision of whether they were willing to provide us their answers. Furthermore, as explained in the previous paragraphs (3.5.3.1), all respondents were also provided with a question, in the beginning of the survey, to ask their explicit consent in participating to the study. In parallel, the issue of confidentiality was also taken in consideration for this study. The questionnaire assured the anonymity of the respondents and let them know that no gathered data would be used or shared for any other purpose than this thesis. As a result, we believe that the design of the survey tried, to its best, to not violate any ethical aspects.

3.8 Reliability and Validity

Reliability, validity and replicability are essential to assure the overall quality of a study (Burns & Burns, 2008). Although the terms seems to refer to the same concept, they differ in meaning and in measurements (Bryman & Bell, 2011). This subsection of the paper intends to discuss those research concepts, to present how they differ and to evaluate how reliable, valid and replicable this paper is.

3.8.1 Reliability

Reliability concerns the consistency of measures of concepts. In other words, it refers to having consistency in the data collected (Bryman & Bell, 2011). Such consistency of measures should be present through the three following key elements, which are used to evaluate the reliability of the paper: stability, internal reliability and inter-observer consistency (Bryman & Bell, 2011).

Stability tests aim to reveal whether or not the results of the study are the same over time when the study is reproduced using the same sample (Bryman & Bell, 2011). Regarding our paper, the perceived brand experience by the members of the examined OBCs and its impact on their purchase intention may vary over time. The two investigated OBCs can possibility change their structure, their rules and type of content which could contribute to a variation of results over time. In parallel, the brand experience of the members within the examined OBCs could also be influenced by brand experience coming from other context such as retail, events or advertisement. Those factors could, therefore, also lead to variation of results between two studies, with the same sample and the same method but conducted at different points in time. As a result, the stability of our paper is not perfect and may be affected by external factors as previously described. Unfortunately, such a reliability test could not be executed due to time limitation.

Internal reliability, which is the second key reliability element, refers to the multiple-indicator measures of the study (Bryman & Bell, 2011). Such key element can be tested using the Composite Reliability test. This value measures the internal consistency of a scale to make sure that

the different items composing it all measure the same construct (Tavakol & Dennick, 2011). This indicator varies between the value of 0 and 1 with 1 being perfect estimated reliability (Garson, 2016). In the context of a model adequate for confirmatory purpose, which is our case, the Composite Reliability test should show a value of 0.7 or above.

Inter-observer consistency, which is the last key element of reliability, concern the subjective judgement researchers can have during the data collection and analysis process. Such phenomena may lead to inconsistency in the authors decision making and therefore, can impact the overall reliability of the research (Bryman & Bell, 2011). To tackle this potential issue, we strictly aimed for closed questions in our self-completion survey while basing the questions on previous studies who all used the same scales to limit subjective judgements.

3.8.2 Validity

Validity has to do with making sure that the measure of a study's concepts really intent to measure those concepts (Bryman & Bell, 2011). Different test can be used to evaluate the validity of a study. As Bryman and Bell (2011) explained, external and internal validity test are two useful perspectives to evaluate the overall validity of a paper. In parallel, Garson (2016) suggest a convergent and divergent validity test to help researchers achieve validity. As a result, those constructs of validity have been used in this paper.

External validity concerns how generalizable the study is beyond its specific context (Bryman & Bell, 2011). As such, external validity can be divided into two types: population validity and ecological validity. On one side, population validity represent the representativeness of the sample to the population while ecological validity refers to whether the results are in line with the respondents true daily and normal social settings (Burns & Burns, 2008). To tackle treats linked to external validity, we aimed to provide a comprehensive description of demographic/biographic/behavioral characteristics of the type of respondents we were looking for as recommended by Burns and Burns (2008).

Internal validity refers to the strength of the independent variables causal relationship with the dependent variables (Bryman & Bell, 2011). Such strength can be influenced by divergent past experiences between the two examined groups as explained by Easterby-Smith, Thorpe and Jackson (2015). Indeed, different groups might have built their overall brand experience differently according to the various past encountering they had with Ubisoft – either online or offline. Consequently, we tried to reduce this threat by specifying in every single question of our survey that we only measure brand experience within the examined OBCs while excluding other type of brand experiences.

Since our paper investigated the causal relationship between brand experience within the examined OBCs and purchase intention, internal validity had to be taken in consideration. Internal validity on the other side refers to the strength of the independent variables causal relationship with the dependent variables (Bryman & Bell, 2011). Since our paper investigated the

causal relationship between brand experience and purchase intention within the examined OBCs, internal validity had to be taken in consideration.

Lastly, to evaluate the overall validity in this study, we also took into consideration the convergent and divergent validity. This can be measured with the Average Variance Extracted (AVE) test that shows the average communality for each of the latent factors in a reflective model (Garson, 2016). For the model to be considered adequate, the AVE should be above 0.5 (Hair et al., 2013), and greater than the cross-loadings. If this is the case, the factors in the model would explain at least half of the variance of their indicators (Garson, 2016).

3.9 Data analysis

Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modeling was used as a means to analyze the hypothesized relationships simultaneously. More specifically, the data was analyzed through a path analysis to examine if the hypotheses showed statistically significant results. In parallel, to examine the generated data from the questionnaire, we chose to run our path model in the statistical computer software SmartPLS. Before the data analysis could take place, we had to process the questionnaire answers. This was done by removing answers that were not complete because of the respondents being outside of the target group. As a result, answers where respondents were not a part of the specified brand communities or not active enough were taken away.

3.9.1 Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modeling (PLS-SEM)

Partial Least Squares (PLS) is a well-established multivariate method used to examine causal relationships in models with different latent variables (Fornito, Zalesky & Bullmore, 2016; Garson, 2016). This method is widely used within the fields of marketing to investigate complex models consisting of several different relationships between variables (Hair et al., 2014).

We have chosen to adopt the method of PLS-SEM and thereby a path model in SmartPLS. This is because it entails handling causal paths that are relating predictors to the response variables. In PLS-SEM, the variables in the path model can be effects of others while be the cause of other later variables in the hypothesized causal sequence (Garson, 2016). In our case, we could examine if brand experience in OBCs affects brand relationships and if this in turn influences purchase intention. In other words, we have applied PLS-SEM to calculate the relationships between the different variables: brand experience, brand relationships and purchase intention.

According to Hair et al. (2019), there are several cases in which researchers should use PLS-SEM as a method. Amongst this list, there are three main reasons, based on the nature of our research objectives, that influenced our choice of adopting this analytical method. Firstly, PLS-SEM should be used when the analysis includes testing a theoretical framework from the per-

spective of prediction. Secondly, when the objective of the research is to gain a better understanding of an increasing complexity through exploration of established theories. Lastly, when there are one or more constructs that are formatively measured in the path model.

We have chosen this method due to its efficiency in analysing several variables simultaneously with mediating effects. Indeed, the primary advantage of PLS-SEM is the ability to analyse relationships between several independent and dependent variables simultaneously (Garson, 2016; Hair et al., 2019). Furthermore, it is also very suitable to use for studying mediating effects (Carrión, Nitzl & Roldán, 2017), which this paper does. By using this approach, we also avoid the issues of multicollinearity that can cause problems in OLS regression (Garson, 2016). Another advantage of PLS-SEM is its ability to combine explanation and prediction. As such, the method provides results that can be useful for both academic research and for developing managerial implications (Hair, Sarstedt & Ringle, 2019). Because of its abilities, PLS-SEM is especially useful when the research contexts are both data-rich and theory-skeletal. Furthermore, it is also the technique that is favoured when the research is of predictive nature (Garson, 2016), which our study is.

3.9.2 Path Analysis

A path model that resembled the conceptual framework was created in SmartPLS to fulfil the purpose of this study and investigate the hypothesized relationships. SmartPLS was used because it is the primary software used for PLS-SEM analysis (Garson, 2016) while being accessible for students. The path model consisted of latent variables, indicators, path coefficients and path weights. The *latent variables* in this study were brand experience, brand trust, brand attachment, brand commitment and purchase intention. These latent variables were extracted from the measured *indicators*. The indicators in turn represent the different items that were used as questions in the questionnaire. The arrows in the model represent *path coefficients* which are standardized regression coefficients that were calculated through OLS multiple/simple regression between the estimated latent variables. As such, the path coefficients show the total effect that an independent variable has on a dependent variable (Chin, 2010). In our case, how brand experience in OBCs influences the brand relationship variables that in turn affects the purchase intention. The arrows between the indicators and the latent variables are named *path weights* (Garson, 2016). A path model consists of two models, one outer (measurement) and one inner (structural) model. The outer model determines how constructs are measured in the inner model (Garson, 2016). Additionally, it describes the indicators and the path weights. On the other side, the inner model consists of the latent variables and the path coefficients (Chin, 2010; Garson, 2016).

After creating the path model in SmartPLS, we used it to analyse the collected data. Furthermore, to see if these values were statistically significant, we performed a bootstrapping with 5000 subsamples. Bootstrapping computes the significance of the PLS coefficients by using a resampling method and thus shows the output of the significance levels (Garson, 2016). Consequently, we could later accept or reject our hypotheses, and answer our research questions with this output.

3.9.3 Goodness of fit

Goodness of fit measures are used to assess the overall model fit. In PLS-SEM there is no consensus on the indicators for goodness of fit (Garson, 2016; Henseler & Sarstedt, 2013) because the proposed criteria are not fully understood since they are in a primal stage of research (SmartPLS, n.d.). However, there are various measures and coefficients that relates to the model fit quality (Garson, 2016). According to Garson (2016), SRMR is an approximate measure of model fit. This is because it measures the average magnitude of the difference between an observed correlation matrix and a model-implied matrix. Therefore, a lower value indicates a better fit (Garson, 2016). More precisely, a value below 0,08 is considered a good fit (Hu & Bentler, 1999).

4. Analysis and Results

In the following section, we provide insights into the empirical findings of this study. Firstly, we present the collected data and discuss how it was prepared. Thereafter, the main path analysis is presented to test the hypotheses. Lastly, a summary of the hypotheses in which they are either supported or rejected is presented.

4.1 Preparation of Data

Before we could start the data analysis, we had to take a closer look and clean the data that we collected with our survey. This was because we received a sudden spike of respondents in which the answers kept coming in at a certain pace. This indicated that our survey had encountered a bot that randomly filled in answers to increase the chance of winning our 100SEK voucher that we would raffle to one lucky respondent. Because of this, we needed to exclude those answers that came from a suspected bot. We did this by taking a closer look at the time of the collected data. By doing this, we found that the bots answers showed a pattern of 30 seconds between every new respondent. Additionally, the emails that were entered by those false participants were all from a yahoo address. Those fake addresses all followed a pattern in terms of how they were written – always a first and last name with a set of four digits before '@yahoo.com'. Thus, we removed the suspected bot responses based on these criteria's and this left us with 146 valid responses. After this, we needed to remove the respondents who answered that they were not part of any of the brand communities we were investigating. Additionally, we also excluded respondents who had not been a member of these communities for a sufficient time and the ones who were not active in those OBCs. This led us to the final number of respondents $n=107$.

4.2 Validity and Reliability of the Constructs

The indicators in this research are very similar and overlapping which indicates that they reflect the constructs they measure. Additionally, previous scholars that created the scales we utilized adopted reflective approaches for the items. Hence, we also chose a reflective model in this study. A reflective model means that the indicators are a representative set of items that all reflect the measured latent variable (Garson, 2016). We used the two tests Composite Reliability and AVE to assess the reliability of our study. Furthermore, SRMR were utilized to test the model fit of our model. The following output for these measurements is presented in Table 2. The values in the table show that all Composite Reliability values are above the acceptable limit of 0,7 indicating a good internal reliability of the study. In parallel, all AVE values are above 0,5 which shows that the model is adequate and explains at least half of the variance of the indicators. Lastly, the model exhibits a good fit since the SRMR value is below 0,08. Therefore, all reliability and validity measures in this study are within the limits and criteria of the tests we performed.

Variable	Composite Reliability	Average Variance Ex-tracted (AVE)
Brand experience	0.944	0.652
Brand trust	0.890	0.670
Brand attachment	0.907	0.711
Brand commitment	0.877	0.781
Purchase intention	0.881	0.787

Table 2: Construct Reliability and Validity

To check for potential multicollinearity at the structural level, we examined the VIF inner values (Table 3). These results showed that the values are well below the threshold value of 10.0 (Burns & Burns, 2008). This indicates that there are no concerns of multicollinearity. In summary, the model is considered well-fitting, and that multicollinearity is not a problem.

Variable	Brand experience	Brand attachment	Brand trust	Brand com-mitment	Purchase intention
Brand experience		2.553	1.000	2.365	2.914
Brand trust		2.553			6.787
Brand attachment				2.365	4.735
Brand commitment					5.681

Table 3: Collinearity Statistics (VIF)

4.3 Analysis of the Results

To ensure that the results of this study fulfil statistical standards, threshold values were applied to the collected data. With regards to the study's deductive approach, hypotheses have been crafted and their statistical significance have been empirically tested. To show significant results, researchers must show values below the significance level of 5% ($p < 0.05$) to support the stated hypotheses (Burns & Burns, 2008). If the values are above this limit, researchers cannot prove that there is a difference, or a relationship and the hypothesis is rejected.

To test the significance of the results in this study, and confirm the hypotheses, a one-tailed t-test was performed. A one-tailed test was used instead of a two-tailed since this study has directional hypotheses (Burns & Burns, 2008). This test was performed in SmartPLS by running a Consistent PLS bootstrapping calculation. These results show if there were significant differences between the path coefficients (Garson, 2016). More specifically, p-values were used to evaluate if the results were significant. As such, p-value was used to assess if a path coefficient is significant or not. With a significance level of 5%, the p-value must lie below this to prove a relationship (Hair et al., 2016).

4.4 Hypothesis testing

The following Figure 3 shows the values underlying the result of the relationship between brand experience in OBCs and purchase intention. The figure shows the direct path coefficients and p-values between the independent variables and the mediators as well as paths from the mediators to the dependent variable. Additional information regarding the measurement models results for the first- and second-order constructs can be found in Appendix B as well as screenshots from SmartPLS (Appendix C).

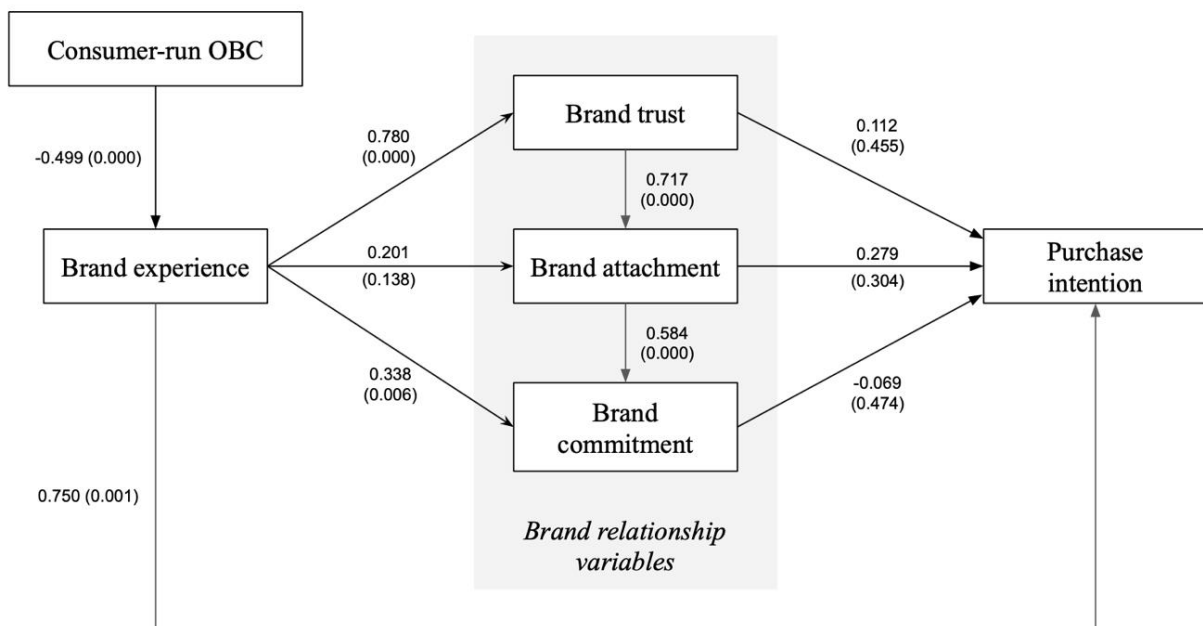


Figure 3: The model's path coefficients and p-values (within brackets)

4.4.1 The Relationship Between Brand Experience in OBCs and Purchase Intention

The values in Figure 3 were used to determine if there was a direct relationship between the concepts of brand experience in OBCs and purchase intention. The results from the PLS-SEM

analysis showed a path coefficient of $\beta=0.750$ and a p-value of 0.001. As such, the p-value was below the established significant level of $p<0.05$. Additionally, the path coefficient showed a positive value. This indicates that there was a significant direct positive effect from brand experience to purchase intention. Therefore, the first hypothesis was supported.

H1 (supported): Brand experience in OBCs has a direct effect on purchase intention.

4.4.2 Brand Trust as a Mediator Between Brand Experience in OBCs and Purchase Intention

The results from Figure 3 showed that there was a significant positive relationship between brand experience in OBCs and brand trust ($\beta=0.764$; $p=0.000$). However, the relationship between brand trust and purchase intention was not significant ($p=0.412$) since it was above the established level of significance. This indicated that our hypothesis was partially supported. As a result, there was partial support for brand trust as a mediator between brand experience in OBCs and purchase intention. This is because the first part of the relationship was significant but the last was not resulting in H2 being partially supported.

H2 (partially supported): Brand trust mediates the relationship between brand experience in OBCs and purchase intention.

4.4.3 Brand Attachment as a Mediator Between Brand Experience and Purchase Intention

The results from the third hypothesis showed that it was not supported. The findings implied that there was not a significant effect from brand experience to brand attachment ($p=0.138$) or between brand attachment and purchase intention ($p=0.304$). This is because both p-values lied above the 5% significance level. The outcome meant that we could not demonstrate a mediating effect of brand attachment on the relationship between brand experience in OBCs and purchase intention. Thus, we concluded that H3 was not supported.

H3 (not supported): Brand attachment mediates the relationship between brand experience in OBCs and purchase intention.

4.4.4 Brand Commitment as a Mediator Between Brand Experience in OBCs and Purchase Intention

With regards to the fourth hypothesis on the relationship, the results showed a statistically significant positive relationship of brand experiences influence on brand commitment ($\beta=0.767$, $p=0.000$). However, the path coefficient from brand attachment to purchase intention was not significant ($p=0.474$) since it was above the established $p<0,05$ level. This result gave partial support for brand commitment as a mediator between brand experience in OBCs and purchase intention. Consequently, since one of the paths were significant, H4 was also partially supported.

H4 (partially supported): Brand commitment mediates the relationship between brand experience in OBCs and purchase intention.

4.4.5 Comparison of Brand Experience Between Consumer-run and Company-managed OBCs

The path coefficient from the consumer-run OBC to brand experience shows a significant negative relationship ($\beta=-0.499$; $p=0.000$). Thus, the results demonstrated that, contrary to expectations, consumer-run OBCs had a negative effect on brand experience. Consequently, this meant that the company-managed ones had a positive effect on brand experience considering the type of OBC represents categorical data and was therefore created as a dummy variable. This showed that the members in consumer-run OBCs have a weaker influence on brand experience than those in the company-managed ones. These results suggested that the brand experience in OBCs was influenced by the type of community. However, since we hypothesized that the consumer-run OBC would be the type to have a positive effect, H5 was not supported.

H5 (not supported): Consumer-run OBC has a positive effect on brand experience.

4.4.6 The Effects Between the Brand Relationship Variables

Figure 3 showed that brand trust have a statistically significant effect on brand attachment ($p=0.000$). Furthermore, this relationship was positive since the beta-value is 0.717. These results implied that the brand relationship variables trust, and attachment were related to each other. Additionally, the effect of brand attachment on brand commitment was also found to be significant since the p-value (0.000) was below the established level of significance. As the previous relationship, this was also positive ($\beta=0.584$). Thus, hypotheses 6a and 6b were both supported.

H6a (supported): Brand trust has a positive effect on brand attachment.

H6b (supported): Brand attachment has a positive effect on brand commitment.

4.5 Summary

In conclusion, the path analysis was run to determine the statistically significant and non-significant relationships between the variables on their p-values. The studied relationship was between the independent variable brand experience to the dependent variable purchase intention. Furthermore, we investigated this relationship with the mediating brand relationship variables. In parallel, we examined if the brand experience was influenced by the type of community, consumer-run or company-managed. Lastly, we looked at the connections between the brand relationship variables trust, attachment, and commitment. It was found that hypothesis 1 and 6a-b was statistically significant and thus fully supported while hypotheses 2 and 4 were only partially supported. However, hypotheses 3 and 5 were showing statistically non-significant result and were thereby proven to be not supported. To summarize the results, the relationship

between brand experience and the brand relationship variables trust and commitment showed positive path coefficients and significant results. In contrary, the path coefficients between those brand relationship variables and purchase intention were non-significant. Furthermore, brand attachment as a mediator did not yield statistically significant results either. However, the effects amongst the brand relationship variables showed significant positive results. Lastly, the brand experience was not positively influenced by the consumer-run OBC. The following Table 4 summarizes this study's findings by presenting the hypotheses and if they were statistically supported or not. In the coming chapter we will further discuss our presented results.

Hypothesis	Description	Result
H1	Brand experience in OBCs has a direct effect on purchase intention.	Supported
H2	Brand trust mediates the relationship between brand experience in OBCs and purchase intention.	Partially supported
H3	Brand attachment mediates the relationship between brand experience in OBCs and purchase intention.	Not supported
H4	Brand commitment mediates the relationship between brand experience in OBCs and purchase intention.	Partially supported
H5	Consumer-run OBC has a positive effect on brand experience.	Not supported
H6a	Brand trust has a positive effect on brand attachment.	Supported
H6b	Brand attachment has a positive effect on brand commitment.	Supported

Table 4: Summary of the Results

5. Discussion

The purpose of the following chapter is to discuss the results of this quantitative study. As such, it is designated to answer this study's research questions by deliberating the results from the empirical data collection. This is done by discussing the reasons for the findings' emergence by comparing them to the existing literature. Further elaborated, we emphasize the similarities and contradictions with the literature as well as the new insights from this study. This discussion of the results is divided into three main parts, starting with the direct relationship, followed by the indirect effect and lastly the comparison between the two types of OBCs.

5.1 Brand experience in OBCs and purchase intention

Brand experiences as a concept in OBCs is an emerging topic that has been attracting attention of different authors (Kamboj et al., 2018; Yasin, Porcu & Liébana-Cabanillas, 2019). Those brand experiences are particularly important in this online context as OBCs create space for consumers to interact among each other and also with the brand. However, past studies on that topic are scarce, especially in relation to purchase intention. Scholars have highlighted the need for more research on that matter in different context (Khan & Rahman, 2015; Roswinanto & Strutton, 2014). To our knowledge few studies have examined the relationship of brand experience in the OBC context with purchase intention.

From the literature review (2.1.3), it is apparent that previous studies have shown contrasting results regarding the relationship between brand experience and purchase intention. Some scholars demonstrated a positive relationship between the two concepts (Gabisch, 2011; Morgan-Thomas & Veloutsou, 2013; Venter de Villiers, Chinomona & Chuchu, 2018; Yoo & Lee, 2012). In contrary, others showed non-significant results (Moreira, Fortes & Santiago, 2017; Wang, Cao & Park, 2019; Yoo & Lee, 2012). In our study we found a significant direct positive relationship between brand experience in OBCs and purchase intention, which goes in line with the previous research that also found this (Gabisch, 2011; Morgan-Thomas & Veloutsou, 2013; Venter de Villiers, Chinomona & Chuchu, 2018; Yoo & Lee, 2012)

Gabisch (2011) provided empirical evidence that a positive relationship between brand experience in the context of a virtual world and purchase intention exists. The author highlighted that such brand experiences can be perceived as more memorable and meaningful when consumers can identify with other users of the brand. Consequently, how consumers relate to the brand and other members online may influence their perceptions of the brand and their ongoing experiences within the communities. Furthermore, those who perceive their brand experiences in the virtual world as helpful in their evaluation of the brand are more likely to purchase from the brand. In line with this, we studied brand experiences in an OBC environment which can be comparable to the virtual world. This is because in the context of OBCs, consumers interactions with other members are also an essential contributor to their perceived brand experience. Therefore, considering our significant results, we can presume that our respondents also found their brand experiences in the OBCs helpful in evaluating the brand which led to a higher

purchase intention. This may also explain why we found a significant positive relationship between brand experience in OBCs and purchase intention.

Further literature that supports our findings of a significant positive relationship comes from Morgan-Thomas and Veloutsou (2013). These authors found that brand reputation is an important precondition in the explanation of online brand experiences' effect on behavioural intentions such as purchasing. More specifically, positive online brand experiences about the brands usefulness and reputation lead to consumer's intentions to purchase. With this in mind, another potential explanation to our findings could be that Ubisoft's reputation, having multiple individual games with strong brands, affected consumer's brand experiences and thus influenced their purchase intentions. Additionally, by scanning the posts and comments in the OBCs, members in those communities used the platforms to gather information and advice about the brand and its games. This indicates that consumers use the OBCs to enhance their performance and thus it could be interpreted as they perceive those communities as useful.

However, our findings stand in contrast to some other previously mentioned authors that found non-significant results (Moreira, Fortes & Santiago, 2017; Wang, Cao & Park, 2019; Yoo & Lee, 2012).. Moreira, Fortes and Santiago (2017), for instance, established that brand experiences do not have a direct significant effect on purchase intentions when studied in the catering industry. In contrast to those authors who conducted studies in an offline context, our research was conducted in an online environment. With regards to the two previous mentioned studies who showed significant results, we noticed that the relationship seems to be significant when investigated in online but non-significant in offline contexts.

To summarize, our findings compared to previous literature shows that the significance of the results are dependent on the context in which the relationship is studied. As such, the contradictions in the literature can be explained by the fact that the relationship has been studied in different contexts which could have influenced the results. This new insight may be helpful in reaching an understanding and consensus in the literature between the two concepts. Lastly, our result of a significant effect between brand experience in OBCs and purchase intention was important to establish to further investigate and understand the underlying mechanisms to such a relationship.

5.2 The Mediating Effect of Brand Relationship

Previous literature is scarce on the indirect relationship between brand experience in OBCs and purchase intention through the mediation of brand relationship. Mostly, those past research, focused on bits and pieces of the relationship. They either studied the connection between brand experience and brand relationship or brand relationship and purchase intention. Our research combined the two which led to the investigation of the mediating effect of brand relationship between brand experience in OBCs and purchase intention. Although we expected a full and significant indirect relationship for those concepts, two of the mediating relationship were partially supported and one was not supported. The results for the mediating role of brand trust

and brand commitment indicate that the effect of brand experience in the OBCs on brand relationship was significant to a certain extent, however it was not the case for brand relationship to purchase intention. Additionally, neither of the paths for the mediating effect of brand attachment was significant.

Such finding contradict the idea that brand communities rely on strong brand experience to exist which tend to lead to the establishment of brand relationship (Demiray & Burnaz, 2019) and to a higher purchase intention (Tiruwa, Yadav & Suri, 2016). Those communities' fundamental purpose is to share information among the members. They discuss and communicate interpersonally to one another about the brand and create meaningful experiences through that process. Thereafter, long-term relationships with the other members but also with the brand is built (Demiray & Burnaz, 2019). Consequently, the will of the members to remain part of such relationship incentivise them to purchase from the brand.

When Wang, Cao and Park (2019) studied the indirect relationship between experience and purchase intention, the authors found a significant result. In contrary, they found non-significant results for the direct relationship. Their result is interesting to discuss in relation to our study since they investigated the relationship in a social media-based brand community. This is because, they found significant results when brand attitude mediated the relationship. Thus, one possible reason to our contradicting results could be the choice of mediating concepts. We chose the concept of brand relationship and not brand attitude to understand the underlying mechanism for the relationship. Furthermore, we did not find significant results for the mediation but only for the direct relationship. As a result, our findings indicated that there was no mediating effect of brand relationship. We can then presume that brand relationship does not help to explain the underlying mechanism for the effect of brand experience in OBCs on purchase intention as presented in past research. However, Wang, Cao and Park (2019) results showed full mediation when using brand attitude as a mediator. To conclude, this indicates that choice of mediating effect has an important impact on the relationship between brand experience in OBCs and purchase intention.

5.2.1 Brand experience in OBCs to Brand relationship

The idea that brand experience can positively affect brand relationship is not new to the academic world. Such relationship has previously been theoretically explained but also empirically studied by some authors (Huaman-Ramirez & Merunka, 2019; Ramaseshan & Stein, 2014). Our study partially aligns with those past research since we also found positive relationship for brand trust and brand commitment although the results were not significant for brand attachment. Here, is it interesting to differentiate between the online and offline context. This is because, the online environment entails some unique characteristics where consumers can continuously interact and connect with each other in real-time (Brogi, 2014; Sung et al., 2010). Consequently, the effect of brand experience in OBCs on brand relationship follows different dynamics in the online context compared to the offline one.

Ramaseshan and Stein (2014) produced one of those studies that dived into the relationship between brand experience and brand relationship. The authors viewed brand relationship as composed of three key relational constructs, namely brand trust, brand attachment and brand commitment - which we also used in our research. As they explained, brand experience is an instrument that intensify relationships between consumers and brands. Here the consumers build positive impression of the brands they experience which can lead to deeper connection and ties between the two parties. Our study partially goes in line with such notion because we found significant results for brand trust and brand commitment, however this was not the case for brand attachment. The members of the studied OBCs had the chance to experience the brand through the Ubisoft subreddits and the Official Ubisoft Forums. In this way, they tend to accumulate brand experience which in turn strengthen their relationship with Ubisoft. More precisely, for our research, this phenomenon translates through the particular link brand experience has with brand trust and brand commitment.

As brand trust stems from past experience and prior interaction, consumers become more familiar and knowledgeable about the brand through their experience with it (Garbarino & Johnson, 1999). Consequently, their trust for the brand increase. For this paper, a significant positive relationship has been found between brand experience and brand trust. We can presume that our result follow the same logic as explained by Garbarino and Johnson (1999). As the respondents are interacting with other members of the investigated OBCs and discussed matters related to Ubisoft, they indirectly interacted with Ubisoft itself which count as brand experience. This then led to the accumulation of knowledge about Ubisoft and to the familiarization of the OBC members with the brand. As a result, trust was created through that process.

Similarly, brand attachment can arise from brand experience. Bowlby (1998) explained that multiple interactions and experiences with brands can cause the creation of emotional attachment from the consumers to the brands. In other words, brand experience helps to cultivate bonds between a consumer and the brand as suggested by the attachment theory. However, such relationship could not be proven in the context of OBC as shown in our research since brand experience and brand attachment were not significantly related. On the other hand, there was a significant relationship between brand trust and brand attachment. This indicates that solely brand experiences cannot create brand attachment from members in OBCs but they need to trust the brand in order to create a feeling of attachment. Previous research has explained this by stating that when consumers trust brands they feel emotionally attached to it (Park et al., 2010). Therefore, brand trust is a critical factor in fostering brand attachment (Ramaseshan & Stein, 2014).

In parallel, brand commitment can also be considered a consequence of brand experience. According to the interpersonal relationship theory (Clark & Reis, 1988), the commitment that a person has for their partner is built through prior experiences they have together. Building on that, we can use Fournier's point of view (1998) to say that consumer-brand and human relationships are similar and thus the more consumers experience the brand, the more committed they will be to it. In our case, this process could be observed through the significant positive

relationship between brand experience in the investigated OBCs and brand commitment. Considering our chosen sample of members with at least two months of membership in the OBCs, one possible explanation to our results could be that the respondents had generated enough experience to build a commitment towards the brand.

Thus, our findings partially align with past research, showing that brand experience in OBCs has a positive and significant influence on brand relationships. This relationship was mainly explained through the nature of OBCs which is based on members-brand and members-members interactions and knowledge exchange. This essentially contributed to the brand experience in the OBCs that then led to the creation of brand trust and brand commitment. We challenge prior insights on the influence of brand experience on the brand relationship constructs. This is because we found that brand experience does not significantly affect all those constructs, it only does for brand trust and commitment. This may confirm that the online context has different dynamics than offline ones, especially for brand communities. In that sense, it appears to be harder to create brand attachment solely through brand experience in OBCs, however it can be done through brand trust.

5.2.2 Brand relationship to purchase intention

Studies on the connection between brand relationship and purchase intention are scarce. Most of the research on that subject mainly investigated purchase intention in relation to constructs of brand relationship without combining those constructs together – which is what we did in our study. So far, it appears that previous literature converges toward the idea that the brand relationship constructs are positively related to purchase intention. However, our study focusing on the OBC context could not provide any significant results in terms of an effect from the brand relationship constructs (brand trust, brand attachment and brand commitment) to purchase intention. Thus, our paper's outcome challenges past research on the assumption that enhancing brand relationship may lead to purchase intention.

In terms of a connection between brand trust and purchase intention, previous research pointed out a positive significant relationship. As explained by some authors, there is a negative correlation between brand trust and the chance that customers will put a stop to the exchange relationship in the near future with the brand. This may imply that trust in the brand can prevent the stop of purchase intention (Morgan & Hunt, 1994). In line with those authors' findings, other scholars confirmed the positive effect of brand trust on purchase intention (Harrigan et al., 2021; Liu et al., 2018). On the other side, Hong and Cho (2011) found positive but non-significant results in the online context. As they described it, purchase intention in online environment is heavily impacted by the consumer's trust in the intermediary that is in charge of selling the brand's product. In contrary, trust for the brand itself is not significant. In our case, an non-significant positive effect has been found between the two concepts which goes in line with research from Hong and Cho (2011). This outcome can be explained through the way gaming players nowadays buy their video games. As the years go by, people are purchasing more and more of their video games on online markets through intermediaries, with 83% of

the games sold on a digital platform in 2018 (Statista, 2021). Thus, the logic presented by Hong and Cho (2011) could explain our non-significant results for brand trust.

When looking at past research, it seems that brand attachment also tends to positively relate to purchase intention. In their study, Fedorikhina, Park and Thomson (2008) provided evidence that individuals with higher brand attachment tend to retrieve their cognitions about the brand faster than those with low attachment level. In parallel, the authors present that brand attachment led to positive emotion associations to the brand thus resulting in higher purchase intention. In another study, Vredeveld (2018) explained that nostalgic brands and those that are embedded in the lives of the daily routine of the consumers are more inclined to generate brand attachment which in turn led to purchase intention. In our case, we could not observe a significant relationship between brand attachment and purchase intention which contradict past studies - although such relation was positive. This outcome can be explained by the nature of Ubisoft as a brand. The company could be more compared to an umbrella mother brand than include many daughter brands represented by the different game franchises. Those daughter brands are the ones that are creating the nostalgia and that are impacting the daily routine of the respondents. Because of this, the emotion associations that consumers have to the individual games could be stronger than what they feel towards the mother brand. Consequently, consumers of Ubisoft may still buy their products because of their attachment to the individual franchises rather than for Ubisoft itself.

For its part, brand commitment has been previously suggested to lead to purchase intention too. Consumers in brand communities have the tendency to support products and brands that are related to the community (Muniz & O'Guinn, 2001). Consequently, the commitment that individuals have for a brand translated into purchase intention. Consumers in brand communities have the tendency to support products and brands that are related to the community (Muniz & O'Guinn, 2001). Consequently, the commitment that individuals have for a brand translated into purchase intention. As explained by some scholars, brand commitment in the context of brand community is one of the sources leading to the emergence of emotions and behaviour with regard to the brand and its products (Jang et al., 2008). Despite those past research converging toward the idea of a clear relation between brand commitment and purchase intention, our study show the opposite result. We found that the effect of brand commitment on purchase intention in the studied OBCs is non-significant and negative. Such outcome can be explained by the difference in terms of respondents' commitment for Ubisoft and their commitment for the game franchises. Regardless of their commitment to the Ubisoft brand, consumers would still consider buying the games because their commitment for the individual game franchises might be stronger and may be the main driver behind their intention to purchase the games.

Overall as we did not find any significant link between brand relationship and purchase intention, we could also justify our result with the specific industry we chose. In the recent years the gaming industry has seen some drastic changes in terms of how the games are bought. More and more companies are now moving toward creating free-to-play games based on the pay-to-win culture (Marder et al., 2019). Ubisoft itself is following that trend to compete with other

big gaming companies such as Epic Games' and Activision's with their respective games Fortnite and Call of Duty Warzone. Furthermore, a significant proportion of those players who move to free-to-play games spend nothing in games to buy for examples virtual items (Memo & Memo, 2021). In parallel, more and more gaming platforms such as PlayStation or Xbox are proposing game bundles for monthly subscription (Join Xbox Game Pass: Discover Your Next Favorite Game | Xbox, 2021; PS Now Games, 2021). We can presume that such new strategy arrivals in the gaming industry highly impact the purchase intention of the players. Although our respondents could have meaningful relationship with Ubisoft, they might not have the intention to buy any virtual items in those free-to-play games. Additionally, since they can access the Ubisoft games through the monthly game bundles subscription the main gaming platforms propose, their purchase intention is not affected by their relationship with Ubisoft anymore.

To conclude, the results we had for the relationship between brand relationship and purchase intention tended to contradict past literature. Most of previous studies seems to converge toward a confirmed significant connection between the two concepts however, we did not find any significant results. Such finding could be due to the specific gaming industry and company we used for our study, which is the gaming industry and the study of an umbrella brand.

5.3 Comparison between consumer-run and company-managed OBCs

The results showed that the type of community influences members brand experience in OBCs. More specifically, in contrast to what we expected, our findings revealed that the consumer-run OBC has a significant negative influence on brand experience while the company-managed had a positive effect. The findings we encountered challenge previous research from Pedeliento, Andreini and Veloutsou (2020) who did not find any significant differences between the two communities. An explanation to our contrasting results could be the different concepts we are investigating. We compared the brand experience between the two communities while Pedeliento, Andreini and Veloutsou (2020) examined differences in brand community integration, participation and commitment. The authors defend their non-significant results with the scarce literature that are examining the differences between those communities gives little understanding on whether they work differently or not (Pedeliento, Andreini & Veloutsou, 2020). Although, with our new findings we have demonstrated that they do work differently in influencing the brand experience in OBCs.

Interesting to note is that the findings from this study stood in contrast to what we initially expected. Based on the current literature, we hypothesized that the consumer-run OBCs would have a stronger effect on brand experience than the company-managed. However, the results showed that it was the company-managed ones that had a stronger influence on brand experience in OBCs. The reason behind this finding could be that the company-managed OBCs are created by firms with the motive to accomplish marketing objectives (Li & Bernoff, 2008; Weber, 2007). Because of this, marketers are working to actively increase participants experi-

ences, loyalty and purchasing behavior (De Almeida et al., 2013). Furthermore, they are involved in the community by monitoring discussions and/or interacting with the members (Kozinets, 2006), making the presence of the brand evident. These activities from the company's side may have a stronger influence on the brand experience perceived by consumers of the brand.

Even though we found significant differences we also encountered common aspects that the two communities share. According to De Almeida et al. (2013), the two communities consist of customers that are fans of the brand and some participants may even be members of both OBCs. Additionally, they mention that the members are interested in the same subject matter, gathering news and information about the brand, in both communities. This might be the case in our study since some respondents are likely part and active of both communities, as suggested by De Almeida et al. (2013). Furthermore, the main purpose of members using the OBCs was to receive news, advice and discuss the brand and its products. Therefore, the two OBCs could have overlapping memberships and similarities in interests and purpose. Additionally, the two OBC platforms that we investigated, Official Ubisoft Forums and Ubisoft subreddits, have similar features in which consumers can create posts, comment, and interact with each other.

To summarize, this study proved that there were significant differences between consumer-run and company-managed OBCs. Although, the results showed that it was the company-managed communities that had a positive influence on brand experience in OBC and not the consumer-run, as hypothesized. This could be explained by the marketing professionals managing those communities actively putting effort into creating favorable experiences. Lastly, our findings challenged previous literature that did not find significant differences between the two communities.

5.4 The relationship between the brand relationship constructs

As our model is partially based on the one used by Ramaseshan and Stein (2014) we wanted to investigate if the brand relationship constructs were also related in the OBC context. According to past literature, brand trust, brand attachment and brand commitment are closely related (Fedorikhina, Park & Thomson, 2008; Huaman-Ramirez & Merunka, 2019; Morgan & Hunt, 1994; Ramaseshan & Stein, 2014; Zhou et al., 2012). In our case, the results showed positive significant relationships for our two hypotheses H6a and H6b which support past research (Fedorikhina, Park & Thomson, 2008; Huaman-Ramirez & Merunka, 2019; Morgan & Hunt, 1994; Ramaseshan & Stein, 2014; Zhou et al., 2012). This means that, for our paper, brand trust has a positive effect on brand attachment and brand attachment has a positive effect on brand commitment.

In terms of the effect of brand trust on brand attachment, previous studies (Esch et al., 2006; Huaman-Ramirez & Merunka, 2019; Ramaseshan & Stein, 2014) found that the concepts positively and significantly relate to each other in the offline context. Huaman-Ramirez and

Merunka (2019) confirm such relationship while explaining that it is because people in general emotionally connect more to brands that are trustworthy. Such trustworthiness can be materialised through the consistent fulfilment of the brand promise, a benevolent corporate behaviour, and a willingness to provide security and confidence. In our case, our outcome align with previous research from Huaman-Ramirez and Merunka (2019) as we also found such positive significant relationship. Similarly, Esch et al. (2006) also support the positive and significant relationship between brand trust and brand attachment. The authors explained that brand trust is often the result of communal relationship which leads to brand attachment as the reflection of a developing consumer-brand relationship over time. We can presume that our result for H6a can be explained through those previous studies' points of view. For instance, depending on how Ubisoft and its games fulfil their brand promise of enriching players' life "by creating memorable and meaningful gaming experiences", different level of trustworthiness will be produced for the consumers. In turn, consumers will develop emotional connection with Ubisoft over time as long as the promise is kept. Furthermore, such relationship between brand trust and brand attachment holds true with the communal aspect of our research. As Esch et al. (2006) explained, brand trust comes from communal ties which produce feelings among the parties involved.

In parallel, the influence of brand attachment on brand commitment has also been found significant and positive through past studies (Fedorikhina, Park & Thomson, 2008; Ramaseshan & Stein, 2014; Zhou et al., 2012). For Zhou, Zhang, Su and Zhou (2012), this relationship has been confirmed in an OBC context that relate to ours. Based on Thomson, MacInnis and Park's work (2005), the authors explained that brand attachment occurs and emerges when consumers have the possibility to get closer and share their emotions. This in turn, builds their loyalty toward the brand and their willingness to support it, resulting in long-term oriented consumer-brand relations that can be seen as commitment (Zhou et al., 2012). Regarding our study, the result for the relationship between brand attachment and brand commitment align with such past findings and logic as we also found a significant positive influence. As OBCs are prone to create spaces where consumers can share their emotions, they are more likely to start feeling attached to the brand behind the community as explained by Zhou, Zhang, Su and Zhou (2012). In our case, the respondents share their gaming experiences and not only emotionally connect with each other but also with the games franchise and so with Ubisoft. Consequently, we can assume that they would want to prolong their relationship and interaction with the OBC, the game franchise and with Ubisoft, thus creating commitment.

In conclusion, our results for the relationship between the brand relationship constructs support the model we used from Ramaseshan and Stein (2014) and findings from other scholars (Fedorikhina, Park & Thomson, 2008; Huaman-Ramirez & Merunka, 2019; Morgan & Hunt, 1994; Zhou et al., 2012). Based on those past researches, we can first explain our findings through the communal nature of our research since we studied OBCs. Those allowed to hold the connection between brand trust and brand attachment in our study as explained by Esch et al. (2006). Moreover, regarding the effect of brand attachment on brand commitment, our OBC context could help to further explain the relationship between the two constructs, as it gave

space for consumers to share their emotions and so translate their brand attachment to a commitment to the brand.

6. Conclusion

The following chapter summarizes the study and its findings. Consequently, it presents the theoretical and managerial implications as well as this research's limitations and opportunities for the areas of future research.

6.1 Research Aims

The research aims of this study consists of two parts. First, the primary aim of this research was to further examine the relationship between brand experience in OBCs and purchase intention. More specifically, the purpose was to clarify and better explain the fragmented and complex literature between the two concepts. This was done by utilizing brand relationship theory to unravel the complexities and gather a better understanding on the underlying mechanisms of the relationship. Second, the purpose was to investigate this relationship in the context of OBC by comparing the two different types of brand communities, consumer-run and company-managed in terms of brand experience produced.

The findings show that there was a significant direct positive effect between the brand experience in OBCs and purchase intention. This result contributes to one side of the academic's discussion on whether brand experience in general influence purchase intention and in which contexts. However, we could not prove that there was a significant mediating effect of brand relationship. Such results shows that the concept of brand relationship cannot explain the underlying mechanisms of brand experience in OBCs' influence on purchase intention. However, these non-significant results are still relevant as they challenge past research who presented significant positive relationship between brand experience and brand attachment (Ramaseshan & Stein, 2014) and between the brand relationships constructs and purchase intention (Demiray & Burnaz, 2019; Harrigan et al., 2021; Kaufmann et al., 2016; Wang, Cao & Park, 2019).

Lastly, we found significant differences between the consumer-run and the company-managed OBCs. Our findings suggest that company-managed communities positively influence brand experiences in OBCs while the consumer-run negatively effects it. This prompts the notion that who creates and manages the brand community is essential for creating favorable experiences within the OBC.

6.2 Theoretical Implications

Through this research, we firstly, contributed to the existing literature on how the concepts of brand experience in OBCs and purchase intention are connected to each other. As brand experience has so far rarely been investigated in relation to purchase intention in the past, more studies are needed on such matter (Khan & Rahman, 2015; Roswinanto & Strutton, 2014) especially in the OBC context. And the few studies that have made the connection between those two concepts show some contradictions in terms of empirical findings as explained in previous sections (Gabisch, 2011; Moreira, Fortes & Santiago, 2017; Morgan-Thomas & Veloutsou,

2013; Venter de Villiers, Chinomona & Chuchu, 2018; Wang, Cao & Park, 2019; Yoo & Lee, 2012). Thus, we used OBCs as a context of reference to examine the relationship between those concepts in more detail. By drawing upon literature on the field of brand experience, we aimed to get insights on the nature of such relationship to advance one side of the academical discussion. Some provided significant results (Gabisch, 2011; Morgan-Thomas & Veloutsou, 2013; Venter de Villiers, Chinomona & Chuchu, 2018; Yoo & Lee, 2012) while on the other side, some scholars found a non-significant relationship (Moreira, Fortes & Santiago, 2017; Wang, Cao & Park, 2019; Yoo & Lee, 2012). Our study provided evidence of a significant positive direct relationship. Additionally, we presented new insights about the importance of the context for the outcome of the results in which the two concepts can relate to each other. We hereby unraveled the complexities of this relationship and contributed with empirical evidence to the existing literature that have studied such relationship. With these results, from a theoretical standpoint, we expand the current understanding within those research areas.

In addition, we investigated the underlying mechanism of the relationship between brand experience in OBCs and purchase intention. The way they relate was still unclear and needed further research. As far as we know, past research has focused on either the connection between brand experience and brand relationship (Huaman-Ramirez & Merunka, 2019; Ramaseshan & Stein, 2014) or brand relationship and purchase intention (Demiray & Burnaz, 2019; Esch et al., 2006; Harrigan et al., 2021; Kaufmann et al., 2016; Tiruwa, Yadav & Suri, 2016). Our research combined the two and thus we connected existing theories to create a new theoretical model. This led us to study brand relationship as a mediator to better understand the process through which brand experience in OBCs and purchase intention could be related. However, from our results, we can say that brand relationship does not play a role in the underlying mechanism of the relationship between brand experience in OBCs and purchase intention. Thus, we consider having advanced the state of the literature by introducing the possible indirect relationship and opened up for future possibilities to further study if there is a significant relationship. Furthermore, as we found some non-significant results between brand experience in OBCs and brand relationship and between brand relationship and purchase intention, we also challenge past research that confirm a relationship connecting those concepts (Demiray & Burnaz, 2019; Esch et al., 2006; Harrigan et al., 2021; Huaman-Ramirez & Merunka, 2019; Kaufmann et al., 2016; Liu et al., 2018; Ramaseshan & Stein, 2014). We also found that it appears be harder to create brand attachment through solely brand experience in OBCs since there were no significant result between the two concepts, however such link can be done through brand trust.

Lastly, we examined the differences between consumer-run and company-managed brand communities. Previous literature provided different and contradicting evidence on that matter. Some authors provided evidence that both communities had different dynamics and produced different outcomes (Confente & Kucharska, 2021; Dholakia & Vianello, 2009; Lee, Kim & Kim, 2011; Wirtz et al., 2013) while other scholars presented them as highly similar (Black & Veloutsou, 2017; Cova, Pace & Skålén, 2015; Skålén, Pace & Cova, 2015; Sung et al., 2010). Through our study, we found that the two types of brand communities in an online context are

different in terms of brand experience. This not only support past research explaining a difference between the two type, but it also challenges the idea that the two communities are similar. Additionally, we also challenged past research (Pedeliento, Andreini & Veloutsou, 2020) presenting consumer-run brand communities as more effective in creating stronger brand experience than company-managed ones. This is because, we found that company-managed OBC have a stronger significant influence on brand experience in OBCs than those run by consumers.

6.3 Managerial Implications

In addition to the presented theoretical implications above, our findings provide numerous benefits to managers and business practitioners. This research provides marketing professionals with useful insights on OBCs to better understand this emerging phenomenon and its dynamics. Given a key objective of marketing is to increase purchase intention, brand experience can provide the solution to achieve this goal. This is because our findings showed a significant and strong positive relationship between brand experience in OBCs and purchase intention. Therefore, marketing managers should focus on creating favorable brand experiences for their consumers to generate intentions to purchase the company's products. These experiences can be created from consumers' interactions with the brand but also through their communication amongst each other in the OBCs. Thus, this research has confirmed that OBC platforms can be a useful tool in marketing activities to create brand experiences that increases consumers purchase intention.

The results also showed that brand experiences have a strong positive effect on consumers trust and commitment. Thus, if brand managers want to create strong relationships with their consumers, they should create memorable brand experiences. Furthermore, the findings demonstrated that if a consumer-run platform inherits the same characteristics as a company-managed OBC, the former will generate stronger brand experiences. This insight is valuable for managers since it provides guidelines for how they should create their OBC platforms as well as how to manage them. More specifically, Ubisoft Forums is a great example of how a company-managed OBC platform can provide the same interactive community features as a consumer-run. On that platform consumers can create their own threads as well as interact with other members through comment and upvotes. Additionally, the company has a strong presence since it administer the community and creates their own informative posts to the members. Our results also gives managers implications to make the two types of brand communities work together since consumers have seen to have overlapping memberships. In conclusion, we recommend business practitioners to create brand experiences that influences consumers purchase intentions and OBC platforms that are similar to the consumer-run brand communities online.

6.4 Limitations and Future Research

As master students with certain constraints such as time and budget, this research cannot be flawless and is not without limitations. This following part aims to explain those limitations.

As a result, we hope to inspire and motivate future research to overcome our constraints and to replicate our research and extend our findings to the best possible.

The first limitation that this study encountered relates to its non-probability sampling approach. Since positivistic research usually aims to generalize findings, our primary objective was to gather respondents' answers through a probability sampling. However, such approach was hardly feasible due to us not having full access to the sampling frame for the two OBCs under investigation. Consequently, the data collection was based on a non-probability sampling approach which means that not all individuals of the population had an equal chance to be selected for the sample (Burns & Burns, 2008). As Burn and Burns (2008) explained, non-probability sampling is a suitable sampling technique in case researchers are under time or financial resources limitation or when probability sampling is impossible – which is our case. In parallel, such sampling approach allows the research to easily reach a big enough sample size to aim for a higher precision of the sample in terms of how representative it is to the target population (Easterby-Smith, Thorpe & Jackson, 2015). Although this approach was more convenient for the context of the paper, it includes some disadvantages. First, the research's results could not be generalized (Burns & Burns, 2008; Easterby-Smith, Thorpe & Jackson, 2015). Secondly, such approach could lead to sampling bias – which we tried to minimize by making sure that the sample included a variety of individuals, such as young and old people or males and females.

In line with our first limitation comes the second one which concern the type of sampling chosen for the study. With time and financial resources being limited, this paper took a convenience sampling as the main type of sampling method. Participants to the survey were selected based on their willingness to answer the questionnaire and their availability (Burns & Burns, 2008; Easterby-Smith, Thorpe & Jackson, 2015). This type of sampling entails different advantages. As Easterby-Smith, Thorpe and Jackson (2015) explained, the convenience sampling allows the researcher to reach a high enough samples size quickly, without many complications and for a low cost. However, there are also significant disadvantages associated with this sampling method. The availability of the respondents can be dependent on the time the survey was posted on the investigated communities and the other digital spaces. Some people are usually on the platform during the weekend for instance while others may prefer to connect at a certain time for example the mornings or evenings. Because of this, timing effect could be considered an issue related to the taken approach (Burns & Burns, 2008). To deal with this issue, we were posting our survey during high online usage peak times such as on Monday's mornings.

Furthermore, the criteria used to select our target population could also be counted as a limitation for our research. In the sampling strategy (3.6.2.1) we specified that we would only select individuals that have joined the investigated OBCs for a significant period of time. This criterion was used to make sure that the individuals selected for the study had enough time to acquire sufficient brand experience within the OBCs to be able to answer our survey accurately. As a result, we set two months as a minimum. However, this criterion was set subjectively and might not give enough time for a respondent to fully experience the brand in the OBCs. Such

limitation could impact the quality of the response and therefore the precision and outcome of our result.

Lastly, another limitation that could have affected our results is the choice of brand and community platforms. We chose the company Ubisoft and not one of their individual game franchises that has a strong brand and more loyal followers. The reason for this was that Ubisoft had one company-managed platform, Official Ubisoft Forums, that combined all their games and not one for each individual franchise. Because of this, we would not be able to only compare a specific game and their OBCs. We assume that this could have impacted our findings since the OBCs surrounding the specific games (e.g. Assassin's Creed and Far Cry) had substantially more followers and the members were seen to be more active on those communities. In parallel, we chose two OBC platforms that had similar features in that members could create their own posts/threads as well as interact with each other through comments and upvotes/likes. Additionally, the two platforms had similar purposes, to spread information and knowledge about Ubisoft and its games. Thus, the similarities on these platforms could have acted as an obstacle to finding significant differences between the two communities.

The previously mentioned limitations to this study opens up for several possibilities to conduct further research. First, to gather more representative findings and increase the generalization of the study, a probability sample instead of our convenience sampling is encouraged. Second, to find the truly loyal members in the OBCs, the criteria of how long the respondents had to be a member of the community could be increased to a more substantial time, for instance one year for instance. This could have an impact on the significance of the results and especially the mediating effects of brand relationship. Third, the relationships in this study are encouraged to be tested for a specific game franchise instead of the mother company. The reason behind this is that most of the OBCs were created around a specific game as a brand and these had more active members than the community created around Ubisoft. This indicates that members of a specific game community may be more engaged and could therefore generate stronger and significant results for the examined relationships. Fourth, to understand the underlying mechanisms to the relationship between brand experience and purchase intention other mediating concepts than brand relationship could be used. This could be examined by conducting an exploratory factor analysis with other mediating variables. Lastly, for the comparison between consumer-run and company-managed OBC, we suggest coming researchers to choose OBCs that have substantial differences between the two platforms. This may help future scholars to gather significant findings on the distinctive characteristics between the two communities.

7. References

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Appendix A: Facebook group and subreddit posts

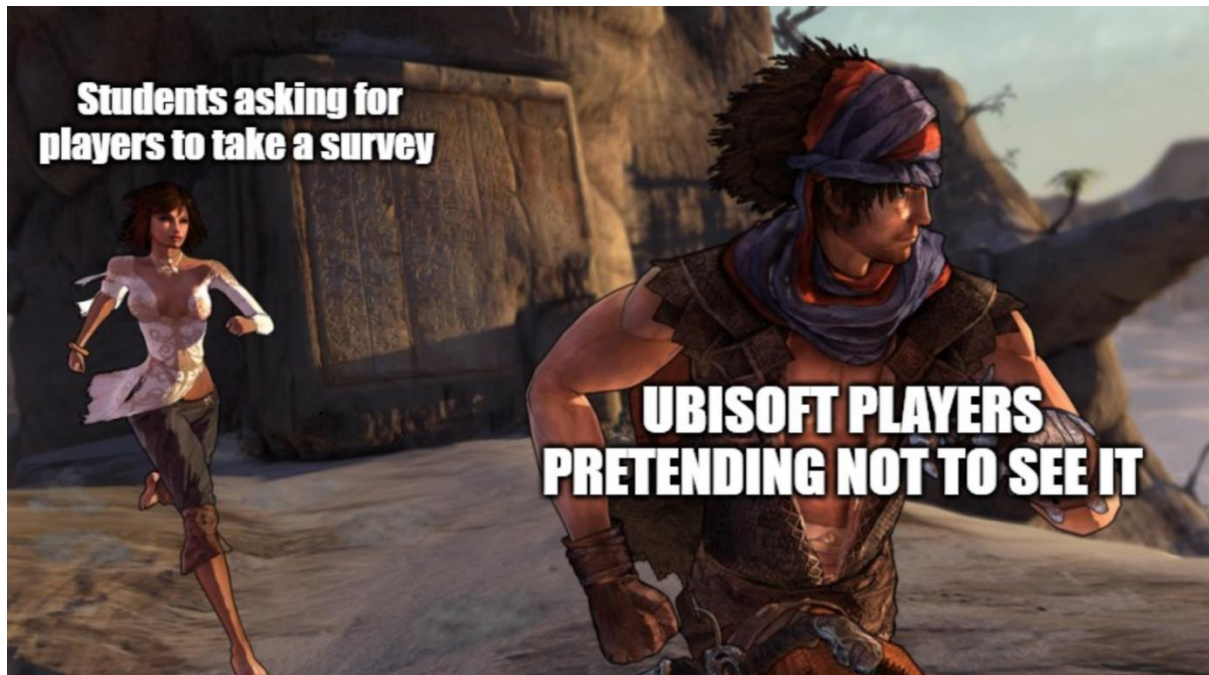
Hi everyone!

We are two students from Lund University in Sweden who need your help with our master thesis survey. We are studying online communities related to Ubisoft and its games and we want to compare **Official Ubisoft forums vs Ubisoft's subreddits** to see which of the two community platforms have the best member experience.

Here is the link to the survey: <https://forms.gle/BAmDUBXXi3EWJm5A7>

We would really appreciate your answers!

Thanks in advance 😊



Appendix B: Measurement model results for first- and second-order constructs

Constructs and items	Item wording	Outer Loadings	T-value	CR	AVE
Affective				0.898	0.747
BE_Affective1	Ubisoft stimulates my feelings when I am in the brand community	0.780	14.033		
BE_Affective2	I have strong feelings for Ubisoft when I am in the brand community	0.874	31.953		
BE_Affective3	I consider Ubisoft as an emotional brand when I am in the brand community	0.932	32.674		
Intellectual				0.909	0.769
BE_Intellectual1	Ubisoft stimulates my curiosity and problem solving when I am in the brand community	0.869	26.626		
BE_Intellectual2	Ubisoft makes me think when I am in the brand community	0.920	34.811		
BE_Intellectual3	I engage in a lot of thinking when I encounter Ubisoft in the brand community	0.839	22.190		
Sensory				0.905	0.761
BE_Sensory1	Ubisoft makes a strong impression on my visual senses when I am in the brand community	0.812	14.072		
BE_Sensory2	I find Ubisoft interesting in a sensory way when I am interacting with the brand community	0.867	24.776		
BE_Sensory3	Ubisoft appeals to my senses when I am in the brand community	0.933	40.201		
Brand experience (second-order construct, formative)				0.944	0.652

Affective_average	Calculated average of the items for the affective dimension.	0.013	0.129		
Intellectual_average	Calculated average of the items for the intellectual dimension.	0.463	5.038		
Sensory_average	Calculated average of the items for the sensory dimension.	0.608	7.255		
Trust				0.890	0.670
Trust1	I trust Ubisoft	0.900	26.277		
Trust2	I rely on Ubisoft	0.783	11.155		
Trust3	Ubisoft is an honest brand	0.846	23.653		
Trust4	Ubisoft is safe	0.735	14.092		
Attachment				0.907	0.711
Attachment1	Ubisoft is part of you and who you are	0.881	25.331		
Attachment2	You feel personally connected to Ubisoft	0.936	33.851		
Attachment3	Your thoughts and feelings toward Ubisoft come to your mind naturally and instantly	0.738	11.637		
Attachment4	Your thoughts and feelings toward Ubisoft are often automatic	0.805	17.079		
Commitment				0.877	0.781
Commitment1	Even if Ubisoft was more difficult to reach, I would still keep buying this brand	0.867	25.200		
Commitment2	I am willing 'to go the extra mile' to remain a customer of Ubisoft	0.901	27.432		
Purchase intention				0.881	0.787

Purchaseintention1	I would be very interested in buying products from Ubisoft	0.886	39.014
Purchaseintention2	I would consider buying products from Ubisoft	0.888	37.732

Appendix C: SmartPLS screenshots

