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On the relationship between consumer-brand identification, brand community, and brand loyalty

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ABSTRACT

Recent studies have highlighted the importance of social media brand communities to brand loyalty. This paper aims to stress the role of the brand in that relationship, suggesting a conceptual model in mass-market products in which consumers' engagement in social media brand communities, brand identity, and consumer-brand identification are related to brand outcomes, such as trust and loyalty. A qualitative analysis was conducted, through in-depth interviews with experts and focus group discussions with consumers, so as to evaluate their experience with brands on social media. The findings indicated that in mass-markets, consumers engaged in social media brand communities may develop positive attitudes towards the brand, such as trust and loyalty, and that consumer-brand identification may have a fundamental role in transforming consumer-brand community interactions into consumer-brand relationships.

1. Introduction

Social media represents a new challenge for brands and consumer researchers since it presents a new form of the consumer-brand relationship (Davis et al., 2014; Fournier and Avery, 2011; Laroche et al., 2013). An increasing number of companies are investing time and money into designing strategies and managing brand communities on social media to gain consumers' attention and interact with them (de Vries et al., 2012; Munnukka et al., 2015). These communities constitute new marketing research tools, since marketers can harvest reliable information about who consumers are and gain insights on various aspects of their everyday lives including lifestyles, needs, desires and consumption expectations (Bagozzi and Dholakia, 2002; Brogi, 2014; Enginkaya and Hakan, 2014; Harris and Dennis, 2011). They can also act as relational marketing instruments, facilitating communication with consumers on a one-to-one basis (Bagozzi and Dholakia, 2002; de Vries et al., 2012; Harris and Dennis, 2011). In recent years, many scholars and practitioners have been exploring this field of research concerning the new challenges brands are facing (Davis et al., 2014; Fournier and Avery, 2011). A major question is how the interactions within the brand community on social media translate into a relationship with the brand. Studies published thus far have focused on the relationship between the brand community dynamics (practices and relationships within the community) and customer loyalty (Brodie et al., 2013; Habibi et al., 2014a; Hollebeek et al., 2014; Labrecque,

2014; Laroche et al., 2013, 2012; Park and Kim, 2014). As seminal works, these studies explored highly dynamic brand communities, choosing high involvement brands (e.g., Harley Davison, Apple, Starbucks) or products (e.g., cars, motorcycles, computers or cameras).

Today, all sorts of brands from all product categories interact with consumers on social media, even convenience goods (Habibi et al., 2014a). Moreover, different types of consumers are increasingly available to these interactions (Baldus et al., 2015). Can one expect those same results in brand communities of low-involvement products? The mass-market is highly competitive, many products are designed for the same purpose and are undifferentiated from consumers' perspectives. Brands working in this market have until now, not had, a direct communication channel with consumers. Social media offers them the opportunity to listen to and talk with consumers. For marketers, being inside 'people's media' (Fournier and Avery, 2011) will provide access to consumers and consumer data and promote brand awareness (Spaulding, 2010).

Another important issue, which has not been found in previous studies, is the role of the brand in social media. No studies have explored the importance of the brand itself in this context. Researchers have been focused on community dynamics in predicting customer loyalty. This paper overcomes this research gap in the scientific literature by explicitly considering brand identity and consumer-brand identification in fostering brand loyalty. Even the mass-market involves different types of brands in consumers' minds. Hence, it is expected that

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brands that are able to promote adequate identification with consumers may expect better results from their exposure on social media.

In summary, this paper addresses important gaps in the recent literature, exploring the mass market and the importance of consumer-brand identification in social media. This study attempts to develop a conceptual model based on literature review and empirical evidence (Davis et al., 2000). Although this study is conceptual in nature, the contribution of this study to brand communities in social media literature is threefold. The first two aspects are related to the development of a conceptual model in the context of the mass market. The study will promote discussion about the importance of social media for brands operating in the mass market, in order to understand consumers' engagement in a brand community and also explore the link between brand community engagement and firms' outcomes. The last aspect is focused on helping practitioners understand the role of different kinds of brands in the same category of products.

The study framework is described in the next section, followed by the research methods and findings. This paper ends with a discussion of the results, addressing the study's limitations and recommending future research directions.

2. Conceptual framework

The traditional perception of brand community views members as brand enthusiasts or brand lovers, which induces the appeal to participate in related brand communities (Muniz and O'Guinn, 2001). Related research on what motivates participation in brand communities found a range of intentions, from rational interests to more hedonic aspects (Hennig-Thurau et al., 2004; Schembri et al., 2010). Consumers interact with the brand, the company, and other consumers to fulfil a variety of needs, such as social interaction or for more utilitarian purposes, such as seeking information about how to use a product or to receive some types of rewards. A study by InSites Consulting (2012) revealed that in Europe, 47% of social network users are connected to brands and actively follow an average of 7 brands. Approximately 70% of consumers have reported that one of the reasons they joined Facebook was to access information regarding new products and brands.

2.1. Consumer engagement in brand communities on social media

The conceptualization and measurement of consumer engagement were one of the top research priorities of the Marketing Science Institute (MSI)[1] for 2014–2016 because marketing literature does not have a common definition for this, despite the widespread use of them. Although consumer engagement has been used as a vehicle for creating and enhancing consumer-brand relationships, researchers and practitioners still discuss the conceptual definition, and especially its operationalization (Baldus et al., 2015; Brodie et al., 2013; Dessart et al., 2015). In marketing literature, one can find engagement definitions using a diversity of foci, such as brand, organization, community, advertising or online engagement, and even different subjects, as consumer or customer (Hollebeek et al., 2014). The common point of these definitions is that engagement involves a multidimensional approach based on cognitive, emotional and behavioural aspects (Brodie et al., 2011; Hollebeek et al., 2014). A definition proposed by Brodie et al. summarizes engagement perspectives, stating that "customer engagement is a psychological state that occurs by virtue of interactive, co-creative customer experiences with a focal agent/object (brand)" (2011, p. 260).

Recently, some authors have begun to specifically study consumer engagement in brand communities on social media (Baldus et al., 2015; Dessart et al., 2015). The technological capabilities of this environment allow consumers to become active participants, supporting different

interaction possibilities with the community, and over time, more and more consumers interact, generating different types of participation. In line with former perspectives, but having two foci in mind (the brand and other participants in the community), Dessart et al. (2015) presented a scale of engagement in brand communities on social networks based on three dimensions: cognition (attention and absorption), affect (enthusiasm and enjoyment) and behaviour (sharing, learning and endorsing). Baldus et al. (2015) focus their perspective on consumers' motives to continue interacting with the community and presented an operationalization of online brand community engagement based on eleven dimensions: brand influence, brand passion, connecting, helping, like-minded discussion, hedonic rewards, utilitarian rewards, seeking assistance, self-expression, up-to-date information and validation. This definition supports a broader vision, better reflecting the current environment of social media: more diversity of brands, types of products and consumers available to interact, "online brand community engagement is the compelling, intrinsic motivation to continue interacting with an online brand community" (2015, p. 979).

2.2. Outcomes for firms: brand trust and brand loyalty

Consumers' participation in the community is likely to increase the consumers' knowledge about the brand, reducing uncertainty and increasing the predictability of brand behaviour (Ba, 2001). Consumers tend to consider peer opinions and recommendations more trustworthy than company-generated information (Brown et al., 2007). Thus, social interaction based on information and experience shared among individuals with long-lasting relationships is a way of cementing consumers' brand trust (Bowen and Bowen, 2015; Laroche et al., 2013, 2012).

According to Srinivasan et al. (2002), communities are very effective in promoting via word-of-mouth, exchanging information, comparing product experiences, seeking advice and especially encouraging social relationships between members. Interactions among members and between members and brands largely influence consumers' relationships with and attitudes towards the brand (McAlexander et al., 2002) and generate emotional connections with the network subject, helping to establish customer loyalty (Casaló et al., 2010). The dynamism generated within the community will create value for the brand and the consumer (Schau et al., 2009) and hence, perceived benefits coming from the community lead to customer loyalty (Park and Kim, 2014). Social bonds established within brand communities create a special environment to develop communication strategies to conquer consumers' trust and foster customers' loyalty (Algesheimer et al., 2005; Bagozzi and Dholakia, 2002; Habibi et al., 2014a; Labrecque, 2014; Laroche et al., 2013, 2012). Accordingly, the following proposition is offered:

Proposition 1: *The dynamism of the social media community, expressed by consumer engagement, acts as a mechanism of informational and experiential exchange between the consumer and the brand, through a positive attitude towards the brand, reflected in brand trust and loyalty.*

2.3. The role of brand identity and consumer-brand identification

Given that consumption is a social act, recent studies have explored a social identity perspective of the relationship between companies and customers (Ahearne et al., 2005; Bhattacharya and Sen, 2003) or between brands and consumers (He et al., 2012; He and Li, 2011; Kim et al., 2001). This social identity perspective is supported by two concepts: brand identity and consumer-brand identification (He et al., 2012). Brand identity refers to the unique characteristics of a brand, allowing consumers to distinguish it from competitors (He et al., 2012). Distinctiveness and prestige give brands strong identities, making them more attractive for consumers, and consumers have a tendency to identify with brands they perceive as having strong identities

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[1] http://www.msi.org/research/2014-2016-research-priorities/.

(Bhattacharya and Sen, 2003). In addition, brands perceived as more distinctive are likely to be seen as more trustworthy because consumers think they have more to lose when incurring costs in unclear situations, which could affect their reputation (He et al., 2012). Additionally, consumers consider that more distinctive brands have a greater capability of fulfilling consumers' expectations (Harris and Goode, 2004).

Even in low-involvement product categories, there is a broad assortment of brands, which have achieved prestige either over time or due to less rational motives, such as being local brands or because they simply awaken consumers' affective memories. Vivek et al. (2012) show that high engagement is not limited to high-involvement products. According to Social Identity Theory (Tajfel and Turner, 1986), people define their social identity based on their own categorization as members of different social groups, and brands are important components of people' social identification (Bhattacharya and Sen, 2003). In today's era of consumerism and highly competitive markets, certain brands offer attractive and meaningful social identities to consumers, helping them satisfy their self-defined needs (He and Li, 2011). Therefore, when exploring the consumer-brand relationship in a product category, one must account for brand differentiation (Dessart et al., 2015; Laroche et al., 2013).

Consumers' identification with a brand occurs from two perspectives: on a personal level, brands can help emphasize their personality and express their values and beliefs (Bhattacharya and Sen, 2003); and from a social perspective, brands can act as communication instruments of consumer aspirations and self-status (Tuškej et al., 2013). On social networks, consumers are identified by their profile, so they are socially exposed because they tend to present their actual self (Habibi et al., 2014b); thus, they tend to choose brands they perceive as having the same values. Consumers with stronger brand identification are more prone to engaging in pro-brand activities, such as supporting company goals and products, protecting its reputation and becoming loyal (He and Li, 2011). Studies on consumer-brand identification describe this phenomenon as an important driver of consumer behaviour, suggesting two types: in-role behaviour, such as loyalty, and extra-role behaviour, such as cooperative behaviours (Ahearne et al., 2005), i.e., behaviours not purely related to self-interest, such as brand advocacy (Stokburger-Sauer, 2010), recommendation (Ahearne et al., 2005) or resilience to negative information (Bhattacharya and Sen, 2003; Elbedweihy et al., 2016), which are also dimensions of loyalty, in the attitudinal sense. Studies focused on the effect of brand identification on brand loyalty have shown different results, from significant direct effects (Stokburger-Sauer et al., 2012) to indirect effects (Kim et al., 2001) or the absence of effects (Elbedweihy et al., 2016). The study by He et al. (2012) showed a direct effect of consumer-brand identification on brand trust and an indirect effect on brand loyalty via perceived brand value, satisfaction, and trust. The following propositions express this understanding:

Proposition 2: *brand identity represents what the brand is and wants to transmit to consumers; brands' distinctive characteristics enhance the development of consumers' positive attitude towards the brand, reflected in brand trust and loyalty.*

Proposition 3: *consumer-brand identification allows consumers to establish a relationship based on personal values and personality characteristics that enhance consumers' positive attitude towards the brand, reflected in brand trust and loyalty.*

3. Research method

Given that this research focuses on the mass market and that the academic literature in the field is notably sparse, especially when addressing social media issues, a search for empirical evidence was necessary. A qualitative approach was adopted due to the need for a deeper understanding of the problem and because it allows for a flexible exploration of participants' experiences (Fawcett et al., 2014).

Because this study aims to focus on the mass market, a clarification of the included product categories was deemed necessary. Categories such as fast moving consumer goods (FMCG), low-involvement products or mass-market have established definitions and characteristics, although it is sometimes difficult to classify a product as belonging to these categories or not. For example, thinking about the characteristics of FMCG, such as frequent purchase, little effort to choose, low price and short shelf life, many products not included in the category fit these conditions. Today, most apparel and accessory brands have these characteristics. Some non-specialized stores, such as hypermarkets and large supermarkets, even sell clothes, shoes, and other accessories. In an era of fast and intense consumption, products traditionally considered durable, such as clothes, shoes, purses, watches or glasses, are now being rapidly replaced. Brands such as Zara, H&M or GAP renew their collections several times every season. Specialists call them fast fashion brands (Cortez et al., 2014). The same phenomenon occurs with some electronic goods as well, such as mobile phones, MP3 players or headphones. The purchase of these products is not as frequent as clothing or footwear, and involvement is higher, but consumers today could have more than one gadget for the same purpose or have gadgets for different purposes and replace them frequently (Jones, 2015). Owing to the increase in technological innovation in the field, these products quickly become obsolete and have a reduced life cycle (Cortez et al., 2015; Simonetto et al., 2016). For that reason, this study includes traditional FMCG, such as personal care, household supplies, pet supplies, apparel and accessories (fast fashion) brands, and fast personal electronics.

3.1. Data collection

The chosen collection method consisted of two stages: in-depth interviews with experts and focus group discussion with consumers. Semi-structured interviews can generate rich and meaningful data and deliver valuable insights into the subject (Fawcett et al., 2014). Focus group discussions encourage interaction among participants, allowing them to share ideas and experiences as well as revealing attitudes and behaviours in a natural way (Krueger and Krueger, 2002). This exploratory approach is consistent with those applied by Davis et al. (2014), Daivadanam et al. (2014) and Bos et al. (2013).

Semi-structured expert interviews were carried out to obtain informed opinions (Rutitis et al., 2014) of social media and marketing specialists as well as to compare and combine information with the literature review. The interview guide comprised of only open-ended questions and its design took into account former research findings in the academic literature and published practitioner reports (InSites Consulting, 2012; Socialbakers, 2015). A purposeful sampling process was applied, seeking to select the most productive sample for answering the questions (Clark, 2003). The interviewing process stopped when data achieved saturation, i.e., when no new information emerged from data (Clark, 2003; Krueger and Krueger, 2002). Interviews were conducted face-to-face and had a duration of approximately 45–60 min. All interviews were audio recorded and transcribed for content analysis. Two groups of professionals were considered: experts from brand-owner firms and experts from communication agencies. The objective of the first group of experts was to understand the importance of a brand community on social media for a firm's goals (the relationship between consumer engagement in the community and firms' outcomes). Eight professionals, each of whom was responsible for their firms' social media strategies, from companies in five different industries: food, beverage, personal care, retail, and electronics, were interviewed. All of them had been working in digital marketing and social media for at least five years. With the second group of professionals, the aim was to understand the broader context of brands on social media in Portugal and to explore brand differentiation into a product category (the importance of brand identity and consumer-brand identification in the social media context). The nine professionals

from communication agencies who were interviewed had been working with different kinds of brands and in different industries for at least four years.

For the second stage, viz, focus group discussions, members of at least one brand community on Facebook were selected. Facebook is the most-used platform to interact with brands. The average number of fans for the top 20 brands in Portugal, for example, amounts to 700,000 on Facebook, almost 15,000 on Twitter and approximately 9000 on YouTube (Socialbakers, 2015). The consumers were required to have been connected to a community for at least six months in order to have had some community experience. Thus, researchers could gain in-depth, comprehensive, and possibly new insights into consumers' motivations to engage with mass-market brands on social media (validating the consumer engagement scale) and how this interaction would translate into brand relationships. The structure of the focus group discussion guide considered conclusions from the experts' interviews (stage one) and related academic literature and published reports in the field (Nielsen Portugal, 2014; Socialbakers, 2015). Four focus group discussions were conducted, with a total of 27 consumers involved. Each discussion was approximately 90 min long. The discussion was moderated by a specialist, and an observer (one of the authors of this paper) was present to take notes and to ensure that all items in the guide were addressed. The members of each focus group were selected by a convenience process among the authors' connections.

3.2. Data analysis

This process was based on an inductive perspective, identifying ideas and concepts that emerged from participants' responses and on a deductive perspective, classifying participants' responses according to the literature (Elo and Kyngas, 2008; Fereday and Muir-Cochrane, 2006). The analysis was performed by three elements. First, the data from experts' interviews were analysed, followed by analysis of the information resulting from the focus group discussions. The analysis of the in-depth interviews began after the first interview in order to validate the information with responses from subsequent interviews. The analysis was based on an interpretive approach towards the verbatim transcripts of each interview and field notes (Fereday and Muir-Cochrane, 2006). First, following an inductive process (Elo and Kyngas, 2008), each analyst identified units in the text that could represent or be an example of the concepts under study (Davis and McGinnis, 2016); then, through an open coding process, they worked together to agree upon the identification and labelling of the categories (categorization of ideas) (Davis and McGinnis, 2016). During the interviewing procedure, data were compared across interviews transcripts. After the last interview, all resulting categories were compared and some were merged, due to their overlapping or similar representation of constructs (abstraction) (Davis and McGinnis, 2016). The next step was the comparison of findings with those in the published literature. Through a deductive content analysis process, data categories that emerged were classified according to concepts in the literature (Elo and Kyngas, 2008). This was an iterative process of identifying concepts, categorizing similar ones, and comparing them with stated beliefs in the literature, then revisiting the data to validate the information (Fawcett et al., 2014). Some new ideas emerged from the empirical evidence. The data resulting from the focus groups were analysed using the same process. The results were compared within and across groups and then compared with findings from the literature and the data from in-depth interviews. The analysis of focus group transcripts allowed for the validation of ideas expressed in in-depth interviews, including the new ideas not described in the marketing literature.

4. Research findings

Results from the two stages are described separately for a better understanding of the opinions of market specialists and consumers. At the end of the paper, the information is integrated to support the conclusions.

4.1. Results from in-depth interviews

To answer the questions, experts from communication agencies were advised to focus on brands operating in the mass market, so as to obtain information related to this research objective.

The five main questions presented to all participants and the information analysed, consisting of participants' quotes and concepts identified according to the literature review, are described in the following tables (from 1 to 5).

The reason why brands participate in social media is a consensual one: they are compelled to be there. Social media is a new environment in which everyone participates (Table 1).

Social media is a new communication tool. Brands are using it for different purposes, depending on their own objectives (Table 2).

In this new environment, firms are trying to do the same as before, establishing and maintaining lasting and profitable relationships with consumers. Using different approaches for different platforms, firms are trying to reach consumers to create proximity, listen to them and answer to their expectations. Brands expect consumers to participate in the conversation they want to establish, allowing the creation of valuable relationships for both (Table 3).

From experts' point of view, consumers participate in brand communities for different reasons, but the main interest is to be heard. They did not have this capability previously, but now they know the power they have and intend to use it. There was some disagreement among experts' ideas regarding this point. Two experts defended their view that consumers use brand communities only for entertainment and to obtain material rewards. One of the experts even mentioned that consumers do not interact with brands; rather, they just consume funny content or ask for samples and discount vouchers (Table 4).

Experts divide the next question into two parts: to keep consumers engaged in the community, firms must develop a proper strategy, but to foster a relationship outside social media, brands must show what they can be for consumers. This second point was not consensual between professionals because some of them believe that in the mass market, consumers base their consumption decisions solely on product price. For others, the strategy to use on social media must be coherent with the entire communication plan. The brand is just one reality, inside and outside social media. One specialist said, "Strategies that are just based on funny content to share or rewards, for example, are dangerous. Consumers tend to identify the community and even the brand with these elements and go there just for that reason." The strategy to engage consumers in the community must be supported by what the brand wants to be for consumers. Brand values differentiate a brand from its competitors, giving it an identity and promoting consumer identification (Table 5).

The perceptions revealed by communication professionals are aligned with findings in the literature in many aspects, namely, social networks as a new and powerful communication environment for brands, consumers' reasons to interact with brands on social media, and brands' expectations for that interaction. The issue that raised some

Table 1
Reasons for brands' presence on social media.

Question 1 Concepts identified:	Why are brands present on social media? Participants' quotes
Brands need to be where consumers are. Brands must be where their competitors are.	"They must be. The question is not that. The question is in what way?" "Talking with consumers wherever they are, has always happened and will always happen." "If competitors are there, a brand must fill its space."

Table 2
Social media usage.

Question 2 Concepts identified	How are brands using social media? Participants' quotes
Communication channel, market research tool, customer service, CRM tool	"We can do the best market research ever done." "Brands can solve consumers' problems in real time." "It can be what the brand decides if the strategy is well structured." "Brands can use different social media platforms to communicate with different types of consumers. We can have a segmentation tool."

Table 3
Brands' expectations.

Question 3 Concepts identified	What are brands expecting from their presence on social media? What benefits? Participants' quotes
Expectations: Proximity to consumers, audiences, talking with consumers, hearing consumers Benefits: brand awareness, strong relationships with consumers, consumers' confidence	Expectations: "Social media is a platform for talking." "Brands expect consumers to talk to them." "Brands want to hear what consumers are saying, especially among each other." "We have a permanent window to the public, and we can reach anyone." Benefits: "What brands are searching for is how to maintain relationships with consumers." "We know that if the content is interesting people will share it and therefore we can reach more people." "We look for a closer and more engaging relationship." "In a crisis, for example, if we manage it with sincerity, transparency, and apologies, we will gain consumers' confidence."

Table 4
Consumers' expectations.

Question 4 Concepts identified	What are consumers expecting from brands on social media? Participants' quotes
Information, to be heard, entertainment, problem-solving, brand connection, material rewards, relevant content, sincerity	"Consumers think: here I will be heard." "For brands such as Nike, for example, consumers just want to show that they are there." "On some brands' pages, consumers know if they "like" a post, they will receive a reward, and that is what moves them." "We never invested in likes, so if people go to our page, it is because they see some value in it." "People expect sincerity from brands."

Table 5
The role of the brand.

Question 5 Concepts identified	Which is the role of the brand in the relationship between the engagement in a brand community and brands' outcomes? What kind of outcomes? Participants' quotes
The important factor is the strategy to attract consumers to the community - no effective outcomes for brands Brand identity, brand values, consumer-brand identification strengthen the relationship Outcomes: brand awareness, brand trust, brand connection, brand loyalty	"People are just looking for the best deal." "Consumers' purchasing decisions are based on prices in the mass market." "The brand on supermarket shelves wins by shouting out: promotion!" "Consumers say: this is the brand that understands me, that talks the same language as me." "The strategy is important, but must be supported by really good insights." "The strategy could keep consumers in the community, but may not push them into a true relationship with the brand. They must also feel a fruitful relationship outside of social media." "Brand values are critical to maintaining the relationship." "Loyalty is an increasingly relative concept. We believe that the more developed the relationship, the more often consumers remember us." Outcomes: "We expect the same as ever: loyal customers." "Brands work to maintain their effective customers. Customers that are worth the effort." "We work to gain consumers' trust and consumers' recognition as a confidence partner."

discussion is the same issue that could not achieve a clear consensus among academic researchers: what is the influence of the brand on the process of transforming engaged consumers in brand communities on social media into loyal customers? Two perspectives were found: the professionals that say that what is important is the strategy of attracting consumers to the community, and those that say that there is no message if it is not rooted in the brand. The first group argued that brands cannot expect to create effective relationships with consumers in mass

markets because they are just looking for 'the best deal'. That vision could be supported by research about current consumers, defining them as informed, available to spend time searching product information, and sharing their knowledge and preferences with peers (Pehlivan et al., 2011). They have become more alert and demanding about their consumption activity. As they are more exposed to promotions than ever, they make rational choices based on product value for them (Lazarevic, 2012). One professional from the personal care industry said the following: "We know that our brand has a high reputation in the market and that consumers engage in community activities, but at the deciding moment, they choose the best price". Marketing professionals of mass-market brands are aware that, despite brands' efforts, the price is the key to consumer purchasing decisions. The lower the consumers' involvement with the product category, the more difficult it is for them to develop loyalty for the brand (VonRiesen and Herndon, 2011).

Based on almost the same arguments provided by the first group, exposure to promotions in a highly competitive market and consumers' rational purchase decisions, the other group of professionals argued that brands' associations are the factors that could make the difference. As one participant said, "From an instrumental point of view, the product is the same. Brand values are the ones allowing brand differentiation and inducing brands to find their own target". Research about the Millennial generation has revealed that these consumers see brands as an extension of themselves, using them to support their self-image (Gurău, 2012). As a consequence, they search for brands that reflect their personality and lifestyle. Their concern about what others think about them determines their consumption choices, encouraging them to choose the brands more aligned with the image they want to portray in their social groups (Gurău, 2012; Lazarevic, 2012). Practitioners are convinced that brands must create the opportunity of being present in every moment of consumers' day. The connection brands want to create with consumers must be based on their needs, aspirations, and lifestyles, not on commercial messages. Consumers must understand the benefits of these relationships beyond the consumption aspect. As an example, a haircare brand can tell consumers how they should care for their hair without telling them "we have the right product for you". In the same way, a food brand can inform sports practitioners about nutritional needs, instead of telling them to buy its products. As another participant said, "We must fill a space in the consumer's mind, not as a seller, but as a partner". The interaction between consumers and brands on social networks have the power to humanize the brands (Park and Kim, 2014) and make consumers feel that they are connecting with other people, not with a company (Labrecque, 2014).

4.2. Results from focus group discussions

Participants in two of the focus groups belonged to Generation Y, and the other two were from Generation X. Women showed more willingness to participate than men. The younger participants were full-time students or working students, and the older participants varied in employment statuses, such as full-time mothers, teachers, IT specialists, sales-people, and bank and administrative employees (Table 6).

The first set of questions was introduced at the beginning of the discussion to understand participants' behaviour relative to brand interaction on social media and to guide them towards the topic. Most

Table 6
Focus group discussion participants' demographics.

Demographics	Group 1	Group 2	Group 3	Group 4
Number of participants	7	7	7	6
Gender	Female: 4	Female: 4	Female: 5	Female: 4
	Male: 3	Male: 3	Male: 2	Male: 2
Age	23 to 29	22 to 32	46 to 55	37 to 51

Table 7
Participants' experience in social media brand communities.

How long?	More than a year: 15
	More than two years: 12
How many brands?	3 – 5: 8 participants
	5 – 10: 5 participants
	10 – 20: 6 participants
	More than 20: 8 participants
Which social networks?	Facebook: 27 (all) participants
	Instagram: 17 participants
	LinkedIn: 11 participants
	Twitter: 1 participant
Interaction with the same brand on different social networks?	No: 7 participants
	For some brands: 14 participants
	For all brands: 6 participants
Brands identified	<u>Food and beverage</u>: Olá®, Coca-Cola®, Super Bock®, Dolce Gusto®, Delta®, Oreo®, Magnum®, A Marmita®, Milka®, Danone®, Sumol®, Knorr®, Vaqueiro®,
	<u>Retail</u>: Continente®, Ikea®, Pingo Doce®
	<u>Household supplies</u>: Skip®, Fairy®, Vileda®
	<u>Personal care</u>: Yves Rocher®, Sephora®, Too Faced®, Essence®, Dermatológica®, Dove®, Roche®, Gillette®, Axe®
	<u>Pet care</u>: Proplan®, Purina®
	<u>Electronics</u>: Samsung®, Apple®, Fender Portugal®
	<u>Apparel and accessory</u>: Zara®, Stradivarius®, Nike®, Swatch®, Adidas®, Cantê ®, Parfois®, Mango®

consumers interacted with several brands on different social networks (Table 7).

The two main questions for discussion were related to measurement scales of constructs involved and benefits for brands. Based on the interest in mass-market products, all comments about other kinds of products or luxury brands mentioned by participants were excluded.

Consumers' motives to participate in brand communities on social media cover almost all the categories presented in the literature. We can identify functional and experiential motives (Park and Kim, 2014). Compared with the measurement scale developed by Baldus et al. (2015), evidence of nine of the eleven categories was found (except self-expression and validation) (Table 8). The work of Baldus et al. (2015) was developed for products and brands in general and did not consider product category differentiation. That could be one of the reasons the motives identified in this paper do not cover all reasons mentioned.

Information expressed by participants about the outcomes for firms revealed the following:

- Six participants ought that their interaction with brands on social media has no effect on their relationship with the brand. This is because they already had a good opinion about those brands before interacting with them on social media (Samsung®, Vaqueiro®, Gillette®, Dove®) or because they interact with brands they cannot afford, just to follow them to know the latest market trends.
- Consequences described by the other 21 participants revealed the following:

– trust, confidence, and safety (components included in measurement scale of trust construct);
– recommendation, willingness to pay more for the products, and emotional connection (components included in measurement scales of brand loyalty);
– importance of brand success and importance of other people's thoughts about the brand (components included in measurement scale of consumer-brand identification).

The first two ideas clearly identify brand trust and brand loyalty as consequences of consumers' participation in brand communities on social media, as described in the literature (Habibi et al., 2014a, 2014b;

Table 8
Participants' reasons to interact with social media brand communities.

Question 1 Concepts identified (number of participants)	Reasons to interact with brands on social media Participants' quotes
Like products (all participants)	"For different brands, I have different purposes."
Consume products (22)	"I only participate in brand communities from which I consume their products, so I go there to see the updates and to read other consumers comments."
Searching information about brands/products (21)	"I love Sephora®, and in the community, I can update my knowledge about makeup and I even help other women."
Like participating in the community (12)	"I participate in A Marmitas®' community because I want to help develop new menus and tell them which ingredients I would like to have in my meals."
Receiving rewards (12)	"I only interact with apparel or accessory brands, ones for which I use the products and for some other brands' pages I just look for trends."
Entertainment (11)	"For example, I like media technology, so I follow brands to be updated and to be informed about mobile technology trends, for example, Samsung®. I also follow brands of telecom services, such as WTF®, because I use the service."
Brand passion (10)	"I am a fan of Apple® and I know that many people do not like the brand and its products. People say very bad things about it. In Apple®'s community, I can talk with people that think like me."
Helping other consumers (9)	"I could spend hours on Purina®'s page, watching videos of cute pets."
Brands or products' influence (8)	

Labrecque, 2014; Laroche et al., 2013, 2012; Luo et al., 2015; Munnukka et al., 2015; Park and Kim, 2014; Pöyry et al., 2013). Consumers who mentioned ideas such as the importance of other people's thoughts about the brand and the importance of the brand's success also mentioned an emotional connection. The combination of these described items strengthens the consumer-brand connection (Table 9).

Comparing the results of focus groups 1 and 2 (Generation Y), with those of focus groups 3 and 4 (Generation X), some differences were noticed. Older participants mentioned a wider range of categories, for example, household supplies were only mentioned by these participants. Except for this category, the brands mentioned were the same in all groups. The older participant groups focused their motives for participating in brand communities on liking products, using products, searching for information, experiencing feelings of community, and asking for rewards, showing less diversity than the younger participant groups. With regard to the consequences of participation in brand communities, the 'trust concept' was discussed much more in the older groups than in the younger participant ones. Ideas such as trust, security, and safety, were mentioned many times when consumers talked about personal care, household supplies or food categories. Additionally, feelings of brand proximity or closeness were identified in these categories in the older participant groups, whereas younger participants expressed these feelings about apparel and accessory brands or personal care brands.

5. Discussion

The objective of the present study was to develop a set of propositions grounded in the literature review about brand benefits and practitioners' experiences of managing brands on social media. Given that the objective of the study was to support the conceptual framework in the mass market, an area little explored by previous academic research, practical evidence was necessary to complement existing scientific literature (Davis et al., 2000).

Understanding consumers' engagement in a brand community on social media for low-involvement products is a major issue in the social media context, considering the extent of this market. Information gathered in focus group discussions showed that even for these kinds of products, consumers interact with brands because they like the products, think highly of the brand and its products and have feelings of community connection, revealing social and hedonic motives (Park and Kim, 2014). Consumers also revealed expected utilitarian motives, such as information needs and material rewards (Davis et al., 2014).

Practitioners need to know if the return on the investment firms are making on social media is worth the effort and risk of exposure. Studies demonstrate the relationship between consumers' participation in a brand community and brand trust and loyalty, although authors measured participation using different perspectives, such as a sense of community markers (Fueller et al., 2011; Laroche et al., 2012),

Table 9
Consequences of participants' interaction in social media brand communities.

Question 2 Concepts identified (number of participants)	Consequences of interaction with brands on social media Participants' quotes
Brand trust (17)	"If we often talk with a brand, we know it better, we know what to expect."
Security (buying products) (16)	"The relationship I have with the brands I follow on social networks is just one part of my connection with those brands. I have a connection with a brand! Facebook helps me to feel closer."
Closer connection (14)	"I like that the brand always answers my comments. Even if it's just to say: good! I feel they are there for me, that we have a connection."
Emotional connection (13)	"Social networks help us to know a brand better. Today, I have a better understanding of what brands are and I can better choose the ones that are for me. The ones that have the same values as me, the ones that understand my lifestyle."
Recommendation (13)	"Me and my friends, we often talk about the brands we like and follow on social networks. There are some brands that are almost like another friend for us."
Interest in what others say/think about brand and products (9)	"To make an actual connection, for me, the brand must have personality. That is, what makes me feel passionate about the brand or not. Discounts are good, but only that is not enough."
Feeling good about brands' success (8)	"I have a group of friends on Vaqueiro's® page, whom I do not know (personally), but we help each other, sharing recipes and food tips."
Feelings of belonging to brand community (6)	"Through their Facebook pages, I am aware of brands' actions in the field of social solidarity, for example, and that is important for me. I prefer to pay more for a product of that brand than to buy the cheapest product."

community interactivity (Habibi et al., 2014a; Labrecque, 2014; Laroche et al., 2013), community usage motivations (Pöyry et al., 2013), or benefits received from participation (Park and Kim, 2014). The information gathered from in-depth interviews and focus group discussions showed some evidence of this relationship even in mass markets, revealing the formation of different components of brand loyalty identified in the literature, such as affective and cognitive (He et al., 2012). However, from these discussions, a strong evidence of a direct relationship did not emerge. According to practitioners, in mass markets instrumental factors, such as price and promotions, have a crucial influence on consumers' decisions. Thus, the interaction within the brand community may not be sufficient to create the effective relationship that brands are seeking, undermining Proposition 1 of this study. In mass markets the interaction between consumers and brands in social media brand communities could not be enough to effectively create that positive attitude that generates brand loyalty. For example, the presence of private-label brands, generally basing their communication strategies on price and promotions is a very disturbing factor for manufacturer brands. For practitioners, in highly competitive markets brands need to create a protective net to face competitors' threats, based on brand values, personality, prestige, and distinctiveness. Social media is a means to be always present in consumers' lives and constant interaction creates mindshare. Information collected in focus-group discussions showed that consumers are looking for experiences, not consumption situations. Brands are important for them, but as partners, not as commercial entities, as some experts noted. If the brand has the power to play a role in these experiences, it will create emotional ties with the consumer (Popp and Woratschek, 2017), mitigating the effects

of less favourable factors compared with competitors (Davvetas and Diamantopoulos, 2017). Professionals believe that brand loyalty occurs through the creation of closer connections with consumers, thus on social media a brand must support its strategy on its offline heritage, upholding the connection with consumers on stimuli that provide meaning for people's lives (Alvarez and Fournier, 2016; Fournier and Alvarez, 2012). Strong relationships develop when partners support each other's lives (Fournier, 1998; Fournier and Alvarez, 2012), and the nature and strength of the relationship are affected by the characteristics of both entities involved (Aaker, 1997; Ahearne et al., 2005; Alvarez and Fournier, 2016). Brands enjoying strong identification with consumers are more immune to unfavourable comparisons and at shopping moment will be chosen more often. Consumer-brand identification reinforces the possibility of transforming social media engaged consumers into effective brand engaged consumers, by creating a favourable environment to develop consumers' positive attitudes towards the brand. Proposition 4 reflects these arguments:

Proposition 4: *Consumer-brand identification creates a favourable environment that facilitates the mechanisms of transforming consumer-brand interactions into consumer positive attitudes towards the brand.*

Table 10 shows the 4 propositions derived from both the literature review and empirical evidence.

The conceptual model presented is based on the literature review and empirical evidence (Fig. 1). Propositions 1 to 3 are based on published social media marketing literature, as shown in Section 2 and supported by empirical evidence. From data collection and analysis, new information also emerged, and support was found in the

Table 10
Research propositions and their support.

| Propositions	Prior research	Experts interview	Focus group discussion
P₁: the dynamism of the social media community, expressed by consumer engagement, acts as a mechanism of informational and experiential exchange between the consumer and the brand, through a positive attitude towards the brand, reflected in brand trust and loyalty.	Ba (2001), Brown et al. (2007), Bowen & Bowen (2015) McAlexander et al. (2002), Casaló et al., (2010), Park and Kim (2014); Algesheimer et al. (2005), Bagozzi and Dholakia (2002); Habibi et al. (2014b), Labrecque (2014), Laroche et al. (2013), (2012)	Brands benefits: Consumers' confidence and strong and lasting relationships with consumers	Consequences of participation: trust, confidence, safety, recommendation, willingness to pay more for the products, emotional connection
P₂: brand identity represents what the brand is and wants to transmit to consumers; brands' distinctive characteristics enhance the development of consumers' positive attitude towards the brand, reflected in brand trust and loyalty.	Chaudhuri and Holbrook (2001), Harris and Goode (2004), Zhou et al., (2012), Chaudhuri and Holbrook (2001), Reichheld and Schefter (2000), He and Li (2011), He et al. (2012), Kim et al., (2001), Bhattacharya and Sen (2003)	"In prestigious brands, consumers just want to show they are there" (participant quote) "People admire the celebrities representing the brand" (participant quote) "Reputed brands have much to lose if not performing with authenticity"(participant quote) "On social media, brands must be more transparent than ever to gain consumers' trust" (participant quote)	"Today, I have a better understanding of what brands are, and I can better choose the ones that are for me. The ones that have the same values as me, the ones that understand my lifestyle." (participant quote) "There are some brands that are almost like another friend for us." (participant quote)
P₃: consumer-brand identification allows consumers to establish a relationship based on personal values and personality characteristics that enhance consumers' positive attitude towards the brand, reflected in brand trust and loyalty.	Chaudhuri and Holbrook (2001), Harris and Goode (2004), Zhou et al., (2012), Reichheld and Schefter (2000), He and Li (2011), Stokburger-Sauer et al. (2012)	Brand values, consumer brand identification strengthen the relationship.	"Vaqueiro® is a Portuguese brand. I have observed it in my family kitchen all my life. I trust it." (participant quote) "The brand represents a healthy lifestyle. That is my lifestyle, so I want to give my contribution to the brand" (participant quote)
P₄: consumer-brand identification creates a favourable environment that facilitates the mechanisms of transforming consumer-brand interactions into consumer positive attitudes towards the brand.	Fournier (1998), Ahearne et al. (2005), Aaker (1997), Fournier and Alvarez (2012), Alvarez and Fournier (2016), Popp and Woratschek (2017), Davvetas and Diamantopoulos (2017)	"Brands find ways of connecting with their target outside of their selling perspective." (participant quote) "We need to create partnerships with consumers." (participant quote) "Consumers will remember us if we deliver relevant and meaningful insights." (participant quote)	Participants revealed different behaviours: A functional relationship based on searching for information (products, market trends, samples); and an experiential relationship based on brand association and consumer-brand identification. Consumers participate in several brand pages of the same product category with different purposes. The brand makes the difference.
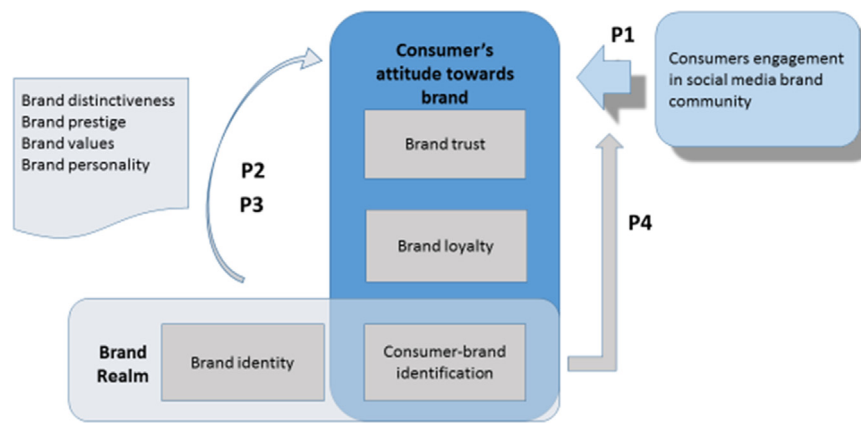
Fig. 1. Proposed conceptual framework.

psychology literature, namely, relationships and brand psychology studies. This new insight is expressed by Proposition 4.

6. Managerial implications

The challenge for marketing practitioners is how to transform the consumer-community interaction into a customer-brand relationship profitable for the firm. In a competitive landscape characterized by product proliferation and consumers' scepticism about brands and traditional advertising (Tuškej et al., 2013), social media is the adequate environment to promote and feed emotional connections with consumers and show them that the brand identity is aligned with their identity. Perceived similarities between consumers' self-concept and brand associations, such as brand values, other consumers of the brand or celebrities representing the brand, could help brands transform engaged consumers in the community into loyal customers of the brand.

In mass markets, until now, brands did not know their consumers. Today, they can talk to them on a personal basis. Moreover, all brands are doing the same, and consumers are overwhelmed with marketing messages. Firms must focus on actions that can get consumers' attention (Enginkaya and Hakan, 2014). In product categories that are highly competitive and in which the price is traditionally the key factor, the connection with the consumer, based on relevant insights, such as reliable information or affective experiences, could induce consumers' will to maintain the relationship. Brands that act as living facilitators, understanding the needs and desires of consumers as real people, are the ones that deliver results (Alvarez and Fournier, 2016).

7. Limitations of the study and further research directions

The study limitations concern the nature of qualitative studies, implying that one cannot generalize results. The information gathered represents the vision of nine professionals of communication agencies and eight professionals from company brand owners in five different industries. Although saturation of information was generally achieved, something new may have emerged from other participants. The same limitation could be applied to participants of the focus group discussion. Furthermore, this vision reflects the perspective of Portuguese professionals and consumers, which might not be directly applicable to other countries or cultures.

Furthermore, this research needs confirmation by a quantitative analysis. The future quantitative analysis should be carried out separately by industry, for example, personal care, retailing, food and beverage, apparel and accessories, and electronics. This analysis will allow researchers and practitioners to explore the drivers of consumers' engagement, within each industry, the kind of brand loyalty they can expect and the relationship between the two concepts, bringing useful insights to understanding the role of different brands in the same industry. By using brand identity and consumer-brand identification as a way of measuring consumers' perception of brands, quantitative analyses will clarify the role of these constructs in the proposed models.

Exploring the model using different consumer profiles will bring a deeper understanding of the phenomena, as consumers have different personalities and attribute different functionalities to social media in general. They expect different benefits and participate at different intensity levels, from posters (content producers) to lurkers (content consumers) (Heinonen, 2011; Park et al., 2009; Shao, 2009). Finally, the model will also allow for the exploration of different mechanisms of consumer engagement in the community and with the brand, which is an important issue for firms to understand in order to enhance consumers' brand attachment.

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