Lisbon School of Economics & Management
Universidade de Lisboa

MASTERS IN MANAGEMENT (MIM)

MASTERS FINAL WORK

DISSERTATION

BRAND EQUITY AND CONSUMER LOYALTY IN THE SPORTSWEAR INDUSTRY: THE ROLE OF COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT AMONG GENERATION Z IN PORTUGAL

TOMÁS MIGUEL CUBA FONSECA

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RESUMO

Esta dissertação visa explorar as dinâmicas em evolução da indústria de sportswear em Portugal, com foco específico nos consumidores da Geração Z, que engloba indivíduos nascidos entre 1997 e 2012. Investiga de que forma o valor de marca (brand equity) influencia a lealdade do consumidor e a intenção de compra, examinando a interação entre determinantes tradicionais, como a qualidade percebida, e fatores contemporâneos, como o envolvimento da comunidade e o propósito da marca. A investigação aborda a lacuna na compreensão de como os nativos digitais interagem com as marcas de sportswear, não apenas como fornecedores funcionais, mas também como ferramentas de expressão de identidade e de conexão social.

Este estudo emprega uma metodologia quantitativa, recorrendo a um questionário online, disponibilizado na plataforma Qualtrics e distribuído por diversos canais de redes sociais. A recolha de dados seguiu um método de amostragem não probabilística, por conveniência e por "bola de neve", visando a indivíduos nascidos entre 1997 e 2012. Esta abordagem permitiu a avaliação de padrões comportamentais específicos e de perceções de marca característicos desta geração no mercado português.

Ao analisar os dados recolhidos, a investigação avalia um modelo conceitual que integra dimensões sociais e emocionais à estrutura tradicional do valor de marca. O estudo confirma que o apego emocional medeia integralmente a relação entre o envolvimento com a comunidade e a lealdade. Além disso, os resultados demonstram que, embora a participação ativa em comunidades digitais seja um antecedente crítico da lealdade, o propósito percebido da marca não influencia significativamente a perceção de valor destes consumidores, sugerindo um ceticismo face a promessas éticas abstratas.

Este estudo combina, de forma única, a investigação de determinantes funcionais e simbólicos para oferecer uma visão holística do consumo da Geração Z no setor de sportswear. De uma perspetiva académica, contribui para a literatura ao evidenciar a supremacia da interação comunitária sobre a notoriedade ou o propósito isolado. De uma perspetiva de gestão, os resultados oferecem perceções acionáveis para as marcas refinarem as suas estratégias, enfatizando a necessidade de fomentar conexões reais, em detrimento de narrativas corporativas distantes, para assegurar a lealdade a longo prazo.

Palavras-Chave: Valor da Marca; Lealdade à Marca; Geração Z; Vestuário Desportivo; Comportamento do Consumidor.

ABSTRACT

This dissertation aims to explore the evolving dynamics of the sportswear industry in Portugal with a specific focus on Generation Z consumers. It investigates how brand equity influences consumer loyalty and purchase intention by examining the interplay between traditional drivers, such as perceived quality, and contemporary factors, such as community engagement and brand purpose. The research addresses the existing gap in understanding how digital natives interact with sportswear brands not merely as functional providers but as tools for identity expression and social connection.

This study employs a quantitative methodology, using an online questionnaire administered via the Qualtrics platform and distributed across various social media channels. The data collection used non-probabilistic convenience and snowball sampling to target individuals born between 1997 and 2012. This approach enabled the assessment of specific behavioral patterns and brand perceptions characteristic of this generational cohort in the Portuguese market.

By analyzing the collected data, the research evaluates a conceptual model that integrates social and emotional dimensions into the traditional brand equity framework. The study confirms that emotional attachment fully mediates the relationship between community engagement and loyalty. Furthermore, the findings demonstrate that, while active participation in digital communities is a critical antecedent of loyalty, perceived brand purpose does not significantly influence value perceptions among these consumers, suggesting skepticism toward abstract ethical promises.

This study uniquely combines the investigation of functional and symbolic drivers to provide a holistic view of Generation Z consumption in the sportswear sector. From an academic perspective, it contributes to the literature by highlighting the supremacy of community interaction over mere awareness or isolated purpose. From a managerial perspective, the findings offer actionable insights for brands to refine their strategies, underscoring the need to foster tangible connections rather than distant corporate narratives to secure long-term loyalty.

Keywords: Brand Equity; Brand Loyalty; Generation Z; Sportswear; Consumer Behavior

ABBREVIATIONS

AI: Artificial Intelligence

AVE: Average Variance Extracted

BE: Brand Equity

CB-SEM: Covariance-based Structural Equation Modelling

CBBE: Customer-Based Brand Equity

FOMO: Fear of Missing Out

Gen Z: Generation Z

HTMT: Heterotrait-Monotrait Ratio

LLMs: Large Language Models

MIM: Masters in Management

PLS-SEM: Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modelling

SDG: Sustainable Development Goal

SRMR: Standardized Root Mean Square Residual

VIF: Variance Inflation Factor

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CHAPTER 1 - INTRODUCTION

The global sportswear industry has witnessed a paradigm shift in recent decades, transforming from a purely functional sector into a dominant force in the lifestyle and fashion market (Guzmán Rincón et al., 2023). This evolution is largely driven by the phenomenon of athleisure, where sportswear is no longer utilized solely for athletic activities, but serves as a daily expression of personal style and identity (Perera et al., 2024). Brands that successfully cultivate strong brand equity through awareness and associations, and perceived quality, are better positioned to secure a competitive edge and ensure long-term profitability (Aaker, 1992). Thus, brand equity encompasses the additional value a brand provides beyond its functional attributes, and it is significantly shaped by consumer perceptions and experiences (Keller, 1993).

However, the rise of Generation Z has introduced new complexities to this dynamic (Ameen et al., 2023). These consumers born in a digital era exhibit distinct consumption behaviors that challenge traditional marketing frameworks (Thangavel et al., 2022). Unlike previous generations, Generation Z consumers prioritize authenticity, social responsibility, and active participation in digital communities, underscoring the need for brands to align with these values to build trust and relevance (De Oliveira Santini et al., 2020). Consequently, the traditional drivers of brand equity must be re-evaluated to include contemporary factors such as community engagement and perceived brand purpose (Mills et al., 2022). While established models by Aaker and Keller provide a solid foundation, there is a pressing need to understand how these modern dimensions interact with traditional metrics to influence the purchase intentions of young consumers (Guzmán Rincón et al., 2023).

1.1. Sportswear Market Trends

In recent years, the sportswear market has experienced sustained growth, underpinned by the convergence of functional performance, fashion appeal, and cultural trends such as athleisure. This phenomenon, which blurs the line between sports apparel and everyday fashion, has reshaped global consumption patterns, influencing both brand strategies and consumer expectations (Guzmán Rincón et al., 2023). Athleisure is particularly relevant among younger demographics, especially Generation Z, who increasingly perceive sportswear as a lifestyle choice and a reflection of personal identity rather than just functional clothing (Perera et al., 2024). This shift demonstrates how the symbolic and expressive aspects of athleisure have reshaped fashion consumption by merging comfort, performance, and social identity within everyday life.

Regarding future trends, the global athleisure market is expected to grow from approximately USD 358 billion in 2023 to USD 662 billion by 2030, illustrating the increasing integration of sportswear into everyday lifestyles (Grand View Research, 2024).

One of the central drivers of this trend is the shift from utilitarian motives toward symbolic and emotional consumption. Consumers increasingly associate sportswear brands with personal values, status signaling, and belonging to specific social groups (Guzmán Rincón et al., 2023). This symbolic dimension of consumption reinforces the importance of brand equity components such as brand associations and loyalty, as consumers form affective bonds with brands that reflect their self-concept (Mills et al., 2022). In this context, sportswear brands strategically leverage community engagement and exclusivity to strengthen these symbolic connections and enhance perceived value (Hollebeek et al., 2014).

Another structural factor influencing the sportswear market is the accelerating digital transformation of retail and branding. The expansion of e-commerce, brand apps, and social media has created new interaction spaces between consumers and brands, increasing visibility, personalization, and co-creation opportunities (Loureiro et al., 2024). Digital platforms serve as important arenas for shaping brand awareness and loyalty by allowing real-time communication and fostering participatory communities (Dessart et al., 2015). This is particularly relevant for Gen Z consumers, who are digital natives and interact with sportswear brands through multiple online touchpoints, integrating digital experiences into their purchase decision process (De Oliveira Santini et al., 2020).

Sustainability has also become a key component of value perception in the sportswear market. Younger consumers, especially Gen Z, increasingly expect brands to demonstrate authenticity and social responsibility through environmentally conscious production, ethical sourcing, and transparent communication (Park & Lin, 2020). However, a persistent gap between attitudes and behavior persists, as consumers' intentions to purchase sustainable products do not always align with actual purchase behavior (Rausch & Kopplin, 2021). This tension highlights that while sustainability enhances brand legitimacy, it is the emotional and experiential elements, such as storytelling, exclusivity, and community, that effectively drive loyalty (Hollebeek et al., 2014).

The interplay between exclusivity, social media virality, and experiential marketing has become another key differentiator in the sportswear sector. Limited-edition releases, influencer collaborations, and interactive campaigns enhance scarcity perceptions and create excitement among younger audiences (Wang et al., 2024). These strategies are particularly effective with Gen Z consumers, who tend to interpret rarity and exclusivity as symbols of belonging and cultural relevance (De Oliveira Santini et al., 2020). Brands such as Nike and Adidas have successfully capitalized on this mechanism by combining community engagement and exclusivity-driven storytelling to strengthen emotional attachment and brand advocacy (Mills et al., 2022).

At the regional level, the European sportswear market exhibits similar dynamics, with Portugal reflecting the broader global trends of digitalization and the adoption of athleisure (Loureiro et al., 2024). Portuguese consumers, particularly Gen Z, are increasingly integrating sportswear into their daily wardrobes to express identity and foster social belonging (Loureiro et al., 2024). This alignment with global consumption patterns underscores the importance of examining how brand identity, purpose, and community engagement contribute to loyalty formation in the Portuguese context (Mills et al., 2022).

However, despite extensive research on symbolic consumption, digital engagement, and sustainability, there remains a lack of integrated studies examining how these dimensions jointly shape consumer loyalty among Gen Z in the sportswear market. Most existing research isolates these drivers rather than analyzing their combined effect on attitudinal and behavioral loyalty (Guzmán Rincón et al., 2023; Mills et al., 2022; Wang et al., 2024). Addressing this research gap is essential for understanding the evolving mechanisms of emotional branding and brand equity within contemporary sportswear markets, particularly among younger consumers who seek authenticity, exclusivity, and community connection.

1.2. Study Objectives

This study aims to explore the power of Brand Equity in driving consumer loyalty and purchase intention within the sportswear industry, with a specific focus on Generation Z consumers in Portugal. The present dissertation investigates how traditional elements of brand equity, such as perceived quality and awareness, interact with contemporary drivers, such as brand purpose and community engagement, to shape the consumer-brand relationship.

Furthermore, this research assesses the extent to which young consumers use sportswear brands not merely for functional purposes but also as tools for identity expression and social connection. It seeks to provide a deep understanding of how emotional attachment and perceived value mediate the relationship between brand associations and the final decision to remain loyal or to purchase.

Two main research questions guide this investigation:

1. How do the different dimensions of brand equity, including brand purpose, community engagement, and brand associations, influence brand loyalty and purchase intention among Generation Z consumers in the Portuguese sportswear market?
2. To what extent does emotional attachment mediate the relationship between brand equity drivers and consumer loyalty in this specific industry context?

1.3. Relevance and Contribution to SDGs

From a theoretical perspective, this research addresses a critical gap in the marketing literature by examining the nexus among digital fluency, economic context, and brand equity among Generation Z consumers. While the sportswear sector has been extensively studied globally, empirical research specifically examining the drivers of loyalty in the Portuguese market is scarce (Loureiro et al., 2024). Recent studies emphasize that for this demographic, traditional functional drivers are increasingly being superseded by symbolic and relational dimensions, such as identity expression and community belonging (Guzmán Rincón et al., 2023; Mills et al., 2022). By investigating these modern dynamics, this study contributes to a more holistic understanding of consumer behavior in the post-digital era, particularly among Portuguese Generation Z consumers who prioritize authenticity and social responsibility, thus addressing their specific contextual concerns.

Beyond its academic contribution, this dissertation aligns with the United Nations' 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development by addressing key challenges related to ethical consumption and societal well-being. Specifically, the conceptual framework of this study integrates variables that directly support SDG 12 (Responsible Consumption and Production) and SDG 3 (Good Health and Well-being).

The contribution to SDG 12 is developed through the analysis of Perceived Brand Purpose. By examining whether a genuine "green image" and ethical purpose serve as significant antecedents of Perceived Value and Emotional Attachment, this research seeks to clarify the actual weight of sustainability as a competitive imperative (Rausch & Kopplin, 2021). Consequently, the findings aim to guide sportswear organizations in effectively integrating responsible practices that resonate with the values of the emerging consumer class.

Additionally, the study addresses SDG 3 through the lens of Community Engagement within the sportswear context. As noted by Mills et al. (2022), sportswear brands have evolved into platforms for social connection, where engagement in brand communities fosters a sense of belonging and psychological support. By promoting active participation in these communities, brands naturally encourage physical activity and healthier lifestyles. This research highlights how fostering deep consumer-brand relationships can extend beyond commercial transactions to create supportive social ecosystems that contribute to the mental and physical well-being of young consumers (Mills et al., 2022).

1.4. Structure of the Dissertation

This research study comprises six chapters; the first is this Introduction, which provides the context for the research topic, the objectives, and the study's academic significance.

Chapter 2 provides a comprehensive review of the literature on the theoretical framework of Brand Equity, focusing on Aaker's Brand Equity Model, Keller's Customer-Based Brand Equity Model, and Yoo and Donthu's (2001) model. It further explores the specific characteristics of Generation Z consumers and the current trends shaping the sportswear industry, including the rise of athleisure and the importance of digital community engagement. Chapter 3 outlines the conceptual framework for conducting the empirical investigation and presents the research hypotheses derived from the literature. Chapter 4 details the methodology used in the research, including the study design, sample selection, and the data collection instruments and procedures. Chapter 5 presents the data analysis and results. It includes sample characterization, evaluation of both measurement and structural models, hypothesis testing, and a discussion of the main results. Chapter 6 concludes the dissertation by presenting the study's main findings, along with theoretical and managerial implications, research limitations, and recommendations for future research.

CHAPTER 2 – LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1. Brand Equity

The concept of Brand Equity has established itself as a cornerstone of modern marketing strategy, fundamentally shifting the focus from short-term sales to long-term value creation. In a competitive marketplace, brand equity represents the incremental value that a brand name confers on a product, enabling it to generate higher margins, stronger consumer preference, and greater resilience against market volatility than unbranded equivalents. Scholarly discourse has primarily approached this construct through two distinct lenses: the financial perspective, which evaluates the brand's value to the firm, and the consumer-based perspective, which examines the brand's value to the customer. This dissertation adopts the latter approach, drawing upon the seminal frameworks developed by influential theorists who shaped the academic understanding of how brand value is built and sustained (Aaker, 1991; Keller, 1993).

2.1.1. Aaker's Contributions to Brand Equity

Aaker (1991, 1992) was a pioneer in structuring the multidimensional nature of brand value, proposing a comprehensive framework that became one of the most cited in the marketing literature (Yoo & Donthu, 2001). Aaker conceptualized brand equity as a set of brand assets and liabilities linked to a brand, its name, and symbol that added to or subtracted from the value provided by a product or service to a firm and to the firm's customers (Aaker, 1991).

This theoretical model was built on five core dimensions that collectively determined a brand strength (Aaker, 1991). Aaker defined the first dimension, brand awareness, as the strength of the brand's presence in consumers' minds, ranging from mere recognition to immediate memory recall (Aaker, 1991). It served as the anchor for other equity dimensions, as consumers must first be aware of a brand before they can form associations or develop loyalty (Yoo & Donthu, 2001). The second dimension, brand associations, encompasses anything associated with a brand in memory, ranging from functional product attributes to symbolic lifestyle traits (Aaker, 1991). Aaker emphasized that the unique configuration of these associations created a brand image, providing a reason to buy and a basis for differentiation in crowded markets (Aaker, 1991). Perceived quality constituted the third dimension and was defined as the customer perception of a product or service's overall superiority relative to alternatives (Aaker, 1996). Unlike objective quality, this construct represented an intangible judgment that directly influenced purchase decisions and supported premium pricing strategies (Yoo & Donthu, 2001). The fourth and

arguably most critical dimension was brand loyalty, as it translated into a predictable stream of future revenue and created a substantial barrier to entry for competitors (Aaker, 1991). Finally, the model included other proprietary brand assets, such as patents and trademarks, although these were generally deemed less relevant to research focused on consumer perceptions (Yoo & Donthu, 2001).

Subsequent empirical research extensively applied and validated this framework across various contexts. Notably, Yoo and Donthu (2001) operationalized Aaker's conceptualization by developing and validating a multidimensional scale across cultures. They demonstrated that brand awareness, brand associations, perceived quality, and brand loyalty were distinct but highly interrelated drivers of overall brand equity, proving that Aaker's theoretical dimensions could be reliably measured and managed through marketing efforts. In the specific context of the sportswear industry, the Aaker framework remained highly relevant. Researchers such as Guzman Rincon et al. (2023) applied these foundational dimensions to demonstrate how tangible attributes, such as perceived quality, interact with intangible assets, such as symbolic brand associations, to foster enduring consumer relationships.

2.1.2. Customer-Based Brand Equity (CBBE)

Building on Aaker's conceptual foundation, Keller introduced the Customer-Based Brand Equity (CBBE) model, which fundamentally shifted the study of brand equity from firm-oriented perspectives to the cognitive and emotional processes of consumers. Keller defines customer-based brand equity as the differential effect of brand knowledge on consumers' responses to that brand's marketing (Keller, 1993). According to this framework, the power of a brand lies not in its financial assets but in what resides in the minds of customers, implying that brand equity is built progressively through the accumulation of experiences, associations, and perceptions (Keller, 1993).

The model is structured as a sequential hierarchy often depicted as a pyramid, where each level represents a necessary step in brand building. The foundation is brand identity, which relates to brand salience and ensures that the brand is included in the consumer's consideration set during purchase decisions (Keller, 2001). Above this lies brand meaning, which is dual in nature. It encompasses brand performance, referring to the intrinsic properties of the product, such as reliability and style, and brand imagery, which captures the extrinsic properties, including social approval and psychological satisfaction (Keller, 2003). This distinction is particularly relevant for the sportswear industry, where functional performance often merges with lifestyle aspirations.

The third level, brand response, focuses on how consumers react to the brand through judgments, such as perceived quality and credibility, and feelings, which include emotions like excitement and social approval (Keller, 2001). The pinnacle of the model is brand resonance, representing the ultimate relationship level where customers demonstrate intense psychological bonding, active engagement, and behavioral loyalty (Keller, 2003). Achieving resonance implies that the consumer has moved beyond mere satisfaction to a state of active advocacy and community participation (Keller, 2003).

Empirical research has extensively validated this theoretical construct. Scholars such as Lassar et al. (1995) operationalized the concept by noting that high-equity brands command a premium because they inspire consumer confidence and attachment. Furthermore, the CBBE framework has been adapted to modern contexts by authors who emphasize that for younger generations, brand resonance is increasingly driven by authenticity and social purpose rather than traditional advertising (Keller & Brexendorf, 2019). In the specific context of the sportswear market for Generation Z, this model provides the necessary lens to understand how brands transition from being merely known (salience) to being loved (resonance), a shift that depends heavily on the successful cultivation of emotional and community-based associations (Keller, 2003).

2.1.3. Divergent Perspectives on Brand Equity

In understanding brand equity, two of the most influential frameworks originate with Aaker and Keller, representing distinct but complementary theoretical traditions (Aaker, 1991; Keller, 1993). Aaker's (1991) asset-based perspective conceptualizes BE as a set of strategic assets, such as brand loyalty, awareness, perceived quality, and associations, that firms manage to generate financial value and competitive advantage. Conversely, Keller's (1993) Customer-Based Brand Equity (CBBE) model adopts a consumer-centric approach, positing that brand value resides in consumers' minds. In this view, BE is a cognitive construct shaped by brand knowledge, specifically through strong, favorable, and unique brand associations that drive consumer responses (Christodoulides & De Chernatony, 2010; Faircloth et al., 2001).

Although this theoretical divergence historically led to different measurement approaches, contemporary literature increasingly integrates both paradigms to provide a holistic understanding of value co-creation (Gill & Dawra, 2010; Yoo et al., 2000). This convergence is highly pertinent to the sportswear sector, particularly among Generation Z (Loureiro et al., 2024). In this market, brand strength requires aligning tangible, asset-based elements (e.g., product quality) with consumer-based symbolic meanings, such as identity expression and community engagement (Akoglu & Özbek, 2022; Mills et al., 2022). Ultimately, mastering the interplay between strategic

firm management and psychological and emotional drivers enables brands to build resilient, sustainable competitive advantages (Mills et al., 2022).

2.1.4. Brand Equity Measurement and Management

Aaker (1991; 1992) and Keller (1993) laid the foundation for BE research, shaping academic discussion and practice. However, a major gap remained in creating a standardized, global-scale measure of customer-based brand equity across markets and cultures, limiting consistent theory development and practical BE measurement.

To address this issue, Yoo and Donthu (2001) made a significant contribution by developing a multidimensional scale to assess CBBE. Their approach combined Aaker's (1991; 1992) and Keller's (1993) conceptual foundations with psychometric testing and cross-cultural validation, thereby providing researchers and managers with a tool to evaluate and compare BE across contexts (Yoo & Donthu, 2001). This framework emphasizes that BE plays a crucial role in influencing consumer behavior, brand loyalty, and firm performance (Keller, 1993; Yoo & Donthu, 2001).

Yoo and Donthu's study stands out for its methodological rigor. Based on a large sample of 1,530 respondents from American, Korean American, and Korean populations, the authors conducted extensive testing to ensure the reliability and validity of their scale. The cross-cultural dimension is essential, as it reduces the cultural bias often embedded in brand equity studies and enables meaningful international comparisons (Yoo & Donthu, 2001). By doing so, the authors advanced the field of BE measurement, providing a framework applicable across industries and geographies.

The scale itself is built upon three core dimensions derived from Aaker (1991, 1992) and Keller (1993): brand loyalty, brand awareness/associations, and perceived quality. These dimensions capture the key aspects of how consumers perceive and relate to brands (Yoo & Donthu, 2001). According to the same authors, their scale provides a more accurate, consumer-centered measurement of BE than earlier approaches, which often lacked validation. The tool allows for a clearer understanding of how different elements of brand equity contribute to consumer behavior and loyalty (Yoo & Donthu, 2001).

Beyond theoretical contribution, Yoo and Donthu's (2001) scale has considerable managerial relevance. It enables firms to assess the strength of their brands, monitor changes in consumer perceptions over time, and evaluate the effectiveness of marketing strategies (Yoo & Donthu, 2001). Their findings also show that diverse cultural contexts assign various levels of importance to each dimension of brand equity. For example, perceived quality was more influential among

American and Korean American consumers, whereas brand loyalty was more central among Korean respondents (Yoo & Donthu, 2001). This demonstrates the importance of adapting brand management strategies to specific market segments and consumer groups.

By combining conceptual clarity and empirical strength, Yoo and Donthu's (2001) model provides a critical bridge between theoretical brand equity constructs and practical market applications.

2.2. Brand Equity and Consumer Loyalty

Brand Equity (BE) has long been considered a critical determinant of consumer loyalty, shaping both attitudinal and behavioral commitment to brands. High BE can strengthen consumer–brand relationships, thereby enhancing repeat-purchase behavior and resistance to competing offerings (Chaudhuri & Holbrook, 2001). This connection is particularly evident in industries where identity, emotion, and lifestyle are central to consumption, such as sportswear (Chaudhuri & Holbrook, 2001). In this segment, loyalty is not only transactional but also reflects identification with the brand's values, aesthetics, and community. As younger generations like Gen Z increasingly base their purchasing choices on both functional and symbolic considerations, understanding the link between brand equity and loyalty becomes essential for strategic brand management (Chaudhuri & Holbrook, 2001).

2.2.1. Understanding Consumer Loyalty

Consumer loyalty is a multidimensional construct, encompassing both behavioral and attitudinal dimensions (Dick & Basu, 1994). Behavioral loyalty refers to repeated purchasing behavior over time, indicating a stable preference for a specific brand (Chaudhuri & Holbrook, 2001). Attitudinal loyalty, on the other hand, captures the emotional commitment, trust, and psychological attachment that a consumer develops toward a brand, often leading to advocacy, word-of-mouth, and resilience to competitor actions (Chaudhuri & Holbrook, 2001; Oliver, 1999).

The development of loyalty is typically explained through cognitive–affective–conative–action frameworks, in which consumers first form brand beliefs, then emotional attachments, and finally behavioral patterns (Oliver, 1999). From this perspective, loyalty reflects a deeply rooted relationship between consumer and brand that is sustained over time (Dick & Basu, 1994).

In the context of sportswear, loyalty emerges through a combination of functional performance, such as comfort, quality, and durability; brand symbolism, like lifestyle congruence, identity expression; and social interaction, such as community belonging or peer influence (Chaudhuri & Holbrook, 2001). Recent research has shown that sportswear consumers, particularly among younger demographics, display higher loyalty when brands effectively integrate symbolic values with product performance (Loureiro et al., 2024). This is aligned with the shift in consumption patterns, where brands are perceived not only as products but as cultural signifiers that communicate values and identity (Guzmán Rincón et al., 2023).

Additionally, digitalization and the rise of online communities have transformed loyalty formation processes (Mills et al., 2022). Social media platforms function as spaces for identity expression, enabling consumers to co-create meaning around brands and reinforcing loyalty through community engagement and peer validation (Mills et al., 2022). In these spaces, brand loyalty becomes implanted in collective experiences, making consumers more emotionally and socially invested in the brand.

Empirical studies highlight that attitudinal loyalty tends to be a stronger predictor of long-term brand performance than behavioral loyalty alone, as emotional commitment ensures stability even when market conditions or price fluctuations change (Chaudhuri & Holbrook, 2001; Mills et al., 2022). This is particularly relevant for sportswear brands targeting Gen Z consumers, who tend to be less loyal to brands in a traditional sense but show high loyalty when brands align with their personal values, offer authentic communication, and foster belonging (Guzmán Rincón et al., 2023).

2.2.2. Relationship Between Brand Equity and Loyalty

The relationship between brand equity and consumer loyalty has been extensively examined in marketing literature, with empirical evidence consistently supporting the notion that strong BE drives both attitudinal and behavioral loyalty (Chaudhuri & Holbrook, 2001; Yoo & Donthu, 2001). High BE increases consumers' willingness to stay committed to a brand over time, often leading to repeated purchase behavior, reduced price sensitivity, and higher advocacy intentions (Aaker, 1996; Keller & Brexendorf, 2019). This relationship reflects a mutually reinforcing cycle, in which BE builds loyalty, and loyalty, in turn, strengthens the brand's market position, competitive advantage, and long-term equity value (Keller & Brexendorf, 2019).

From a conceptual perspective, BE enhances loyalty through three primary mechanisms: perceived value, trust, and emotional connection (Chaudhuri & Holbrook, 2001; Keller, 1993). First, brands with high equity are perceived as offering superior quality and value, increasing the

likelihood of repeated purchase (Yoo & Donthu, 2001). Secondly, high BE cultivates trust and credibility, reducing perceived risk and reinforcing consumers' confidence in the brand (Aaker, 1996). Ultimately, BE fosters emotional attachment and identification with the brand, creating a deeper psychological bond that leads to attitudinal loyalty and long-term commitment (Oliver, 1999).

Recent research in the sportswear industry supports this relationship, showing that brand loyalty is not only based on product performance but also on symbolic and emotional value (Guzmán Rincón et al., 2023). Sportswear brands that successfully build strong BE through identity expression, cultural relevance, and community engagement achieve higher levels of loyalty among younger consumers, particularly Gen Z, who are less influenced by traditional loyalty drivers like habit or inertia (Loureiro et al., 2024). This finding is consistent with the shift from functional to experiential consumption patterns, in which brand meaning and personal identification are key drivers of loyalty.

Brand equity also plays a crucial role in resisting competitive pressures. When consumers perceive a brand as high equity, they are less likely to switch to competitors even when alternatives offer similar functional attributes or lower prices (Chaudhuri & Holbrook, 2001). This loyalty protection effect is especially relevant in the sportswear market, where brands operate in highly competitive and trend-driven environments (Mills et al., 2022). Emotional loyalty, built on strong brand associations and community ties, provides a buffer against market volatility (Mills et al., 2022).

Empirical studies have shown that loyalty itself contributes to reinforcing and expanding brand equity over time, creating a feedback loop (Keller & Brexendorf, 2019; Yoo & Donthu, 2001). Loyal customers not only repurchase but also engage in positive word-of-mouth, online community advocacy, and peer influence, thereby increasing brand visibility and perceived value (Yoo & Donthu, 2001). In the digital environment, this dynamic is expanded through social media networks and brand communities, where loyal consumers co-create and diffuse brand meaning (Mills et al., 2022).

Therefore, the relationship between BE and loyalty is both causal and cyclical: BE fosters loyalty through perceived quality, trust, and emotional identification, while loyalty reinforces BE by increasing consumer engagement, advocacy, and market power (Mills et al., 2022). For sportswear brands targeting Gen Z consumers, understanding and leveraging this cycle is critical to achieving sustainable brand success (Loureiro et al., 2024).

2.3. Community Engagement and Brand Equity

Community engagement has emerged as a central element in shaping brand strategies, particularly in industries where emotional attachment and lifestyle identity play a decisive role in consumer behavior. It refers to the interactive, sustained, and value-based relationships that brands develop with their consumer communities through multiple platforms, both online and offline (Dessart et al., 2015). This engagement transcends traditional transactional relationships, focusing instead on co-creation of value, shared identity, and collective belonging, which are crucial drivers of consumer-based brand equity (Keller & Brexendorf, 2019).

The increasing relevance of community engagement is particularly evident among younger consumer segments, such as Gen Z, who tend to prioritize authenticity, participation, and emotional connection over mere functional benefits (De Oliveira Santini et al., 2020). In the sportswear industry, community engagement is a strategic tool for fostering loyalty and reinforcing brand associations, as brands actively cultivate communities through social media interactions, exclusive product launches, and digital ecosystems that encourage participation and advocacy (Popp & Woratschek, 2017).

From a brand equity perspective, community engagement strengthens key dimensions such as brand loyalty, awareness, and associations (Keller & Brexendorf, 2019). Active participation in brand communities can increase emotional attachment, enhance perceptions of quality, and create symbolic meaning that differentiates brands in competitive markets (Mills et al., 2022). These dynamics demonstrate that engagement is not merely a marketing tactic but a strategic mechanism for building and sustaining strong brand equity over time.

2.3.1. Social Media Influence

The rise of social media has fundamentally transformed how brands and consumers interact, shifting communication from a one-way, brand-to-consumer model toward an interactive and community-driven dynamic (Dessart et al., 2015). Social media platforms offer brands the ability to create immersive experiences, foster emotional connections, and expand consumer engagement, all of which play a critical role in strengthening brand equity (Keller & Brexendorf, 2019). Through these platforms, brands can build relationships with consumers, enabling them to co-create value, share experiences, and express identity in connection with the brand (Akdevelioglu et al., 2024).

A key mechanism through which social media influences brand equity is its capacity to foster brand awareness, brand associations, and brand loyalty (Mills et al., 2022). Frequent and

meaningful interactions on platforms like Instagram or X (formerly Twitter) enhance consumers' familiarity with a brand, contributing to stronger recall and recognition (Popp & Woratschek, 2017). In parallel, user-generated content, influencer marketing, and interactive campaigns shape the symbolic meanings and emotional associations attached to the brand, reinforcing its perceived value and distinctiveness (Hajli et al., 2017). This interactive environment also facilitates loyalty-building, as engaged consumers often act as brand promoters, further increasing the brand's reach and credibility within their social networks (Mills et al., 2022).

The impact of social media is particularly pronounced among Gen Z consumers, who exhibit high levels of digital fluency and expect brands to provide authentic, participatory, and personalized interactions (De Oliveira Santini et al., 2020). In the sportswear industry, brands such as Nike, Adidas, and Puma have leveraged social media to create vibrant communities centered around lifestyle, identity, and performance (Guzmán Rincón et al., 2023). These communities function as hubs where consumers not only receive promotional messages but also actively participate in shaping the brand narrative (Akdevelioglu et al., 2024). This co-creation of meaning strengthens their emotional attachment to the brand, which in turn contributes to higher levels of brand equity (Keller & Brexendorf, 2019). Moreover, the use of exclusive campaigns, limited product drops, and interactive challenges on social media has proven to increase perceived brand prestige and foster stronger emotional bonds with consumers (Guzmán Rincón et al., 2023). This highlights social media not only as a communication channel but also as a strategic driver of engagement and long-term brand value.

2.3.2. Exclusivity and Limited Drops

Exclusivity has become an increasingly powerful branding strategy, particularly in industries where identity expression and lifestyle positioning are central to consumer decision-making. In the context of sportswear, exclusive product releases and limited drops serve as strategic tools to create scarcity, enhance perceived brand prestige, and foster deeper emotional bonds between brands and consumers (Wang et al., 2024). Limited editions signal rarity and uniqueness, increasing the symbolic value of products beyond their functional benefits (Kapferer & Bastien, 2012). This perception of exclusivity not only strengthens brand equity but also contributes to cultivating loyalty among consumers who view ownership as a marker of belonging to an aspirational group (Guzmán Rincón et al., 2023).

Exclusivity-based strategies often leverage scarcity and urgency, which can trigger strong psychological motivations among consumers, such as the fear of missing out (FOMO) and social

signaling behaviors (Park & Lin, 2020). These strategies are particularly effective among Gen Z consumers, who place a high value on individuality and self-expression (De Oliveira Santini et al., 2020). Limited drops enable consumers to identify with a specific cultural or community identity, reinforcing their connection to the brand and increasing their likelihood of repeat purchases and brand advocacy (Wang et al., 2024).

The success of exclusivity strategies is also linked with digital and social media platforms. Sportswear brands like Nike, Adidas, and Puma frequently announce exclusive collaborations, capsule collections, and product drops through Instagram, TikTok, or their own mobile apps. These initiatives are often accompanied by countdowns, campaigns, and interactive content designed to amplify excitement and demand (Mills et al., 2022). The immediacy of these platforms allows brands to create a sense of shared anticipation within their communities, fostering collective emotional engagement that strengthens consumer–brand relationships (Mills et al., 2022).

From a branding perspective, exclusivity can also function as a differentiation mechanism in an increasingly saturated sportswear market (Wang et al., 2024). By aligning limited releases with cultural moments, celebrity collaborations, or lifestyle trends, brands can elevate their perceived value and distinguish themselves from mass-market competitors (Kapferer & Bastien, 2012; Wang et al., 2024). This strategic positioning enhances brand equity by amplifying consumer perceptions of brand uniqueness, status, and symbolic identity, while also reinforcing loyalty among their most engaged segments.

2.3.3. Digital Communities and Belonging

Digital communities have emerged as one of the most influential drivers of brand–consumer relationships in contemporary marketing environments. As online spaces such as social media platforms, mobile applications, and brand-owned digital ecosystems become increasingly embedded in everyday life, they provide a powerful infrastructure for fostering a sense of belonging and shared identity among consumers (Dessart et al., 2015). Within the sportswear industry, these communities function as virtual arenas where Gen Z consumers interact, and build emotional bonds not only with the brand but also with each other (Mills et al., 2022).

Participation in digital brand communities enhances consumers' affective commitment, perceived social value, and trust toward the brand (Habibi et al., 2016). This occurs through mechanisms such as shared rituals, storytelling, and symbolic exchanges that reinforce a collective identity (Algesheimer et al., 2005). In the context of sportswear, community belonging is often strengthened through interactive events, user-generated content, and shared experiences

surrounding product launches, challenges, and collaborations with influencers or athletes (Guzmán Rincón et al., 2023). Such initiatives transform passive consumers into active participants, thereby significantly contributing to the building of brand loyalty and equity.

A key factor that amplifies the impact of digital communities is co-creation, where consumers actively contribute to the brand narrative by generating content, engaging in discussions, or providing feedback on products and campaigns (Dessart et al., 2015). This interaction not only increases perceived ownership but also fosters a sense of psychological closeness with the brand, strengthening attachment and trust (Habibi et al., 2016). For Gen Z consumers, who are digital natives and highly value authenticity and community, these interactive environments play a central role in shaping their perceptions and loyalty behaviors (De Oliveira Santini et al., 2020).

Digital communities also function as amplifiers of exclusivity and symbolic consumption. When limited drops or collaborations are launched, these online spaces become hubs of anticipation, sharing, and validation, reinforcing in-group belonging and differentiating members from outsiders (Wang et al., 2024). This dual function, fostering both individual identity expression and collective belonging, makes digital brand communities a critical component of brand equity strategies for sportswear brands seeking long-term loyalty.

2.4. Gen Z Consumer Behavior in Sportswear

Generation Z typically represents one of the most influential consumer segments in the sportswear market, characterized by distinct values, digital fluency, and a preference for authenticity and community (Ameen et al., 2023). Unlike previous generations, Gen Z consumers have grown up fully immersed in digital environments, which profoundly shape their attitudes toward brands and their purchasing decisions (De Oliveira Santini et al., 2020). Their consumption behavior is not merely transactional but also identity-driven, as they often view sportswear brands as extensions of their personal image, values, and lifestyle (Thangavel et al., 2022).

One of the most distinctive features of Gen Z consumers is their high brand consciousness and value alignment (Thangavel et al., 2022). They tend to engage with brands that reflect their personal beliefs and social values, prioritizing inclusivity, sustainability, and cultural relevance over traditional status signaling (Priporas et al., 2017). Sportswear brands benefit from this behavior because they embody both functionality and symbolic value, thus offering comfort and performance while simultaneously serving as markers of identity and belonging (Guzmán Rincón et al., 2023). Therefore, Gen Z consumers are more likely than older groups to follow brands on social media, engage in co-creation activities, and participate in digital communities (De Oliveira Santini et al., 2020).

Another key behavioral characteristic is their desire for experiences rather than just ownership. Sportswear purchasing decisions are often influenced by emotional engagement, exclusive product drops, collaborations with influencers, and brand storytelling that creates immersive experiences (Wang et al., 2024). This experiential orientation reinforces loyalty formation through affective attachment rather than price or utilitarian benefits alone (Wang et al., 2024). In fact, limited releases and exclusive collaborations often create a perception of rarity and community membership, motivating higher willingness to pay and strengthening brand attachment (Wang et al., 2024).

Gen Z consumers also demonstrate a dual focus on individuality and collective identity. While they seek brands that allow them to express uniqueness, they also value shared experiences within communities that share their interests (Dessart et al., 2015). This balance is particularly visible in the sportswear sector, where participation in online challenges, user-generated campaigns, and influencer-led initiatives creates strong social bonds that amplify brand loyalty (Habibi et al., 2016). Consequently, brand equity among Gen Z consumers is heavily influenced by how well a brand cultivates emotional resonance and community belonging (Mills et al., 2022).

Lastly, Gen Z's purchase decision-making process is highly informed by peer recommendations, digital influencers, and transparent brand narratives rather than traditional advertising (Djafarova & Bowes, 2021). They display lower trust in conventional promotional strategies and higher reliance on authenticity and perceived brand purpose (Djafarova & Bowes, 2021). In the sportswear market, this translates into greater engagement with brands that align with their lifestyles and social values, fostering deeper loyalty and advocacy (Ameen et al., 2023; De Oliveira Santini et al., 2020).

CHAPTER 3 - CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

This study adopts a conceptual framework primarily based on Aaker's (1991) Model of Brand Equity, which established five key dimensions constituting brand equity (BE): brand awareness, brand associations, perceived quality, brand loyalty, and other proprietary assets. The latter, referring to elements such as trademarks and patents, is included in Aaker's model for completeness but is less relevant in consumer-based research. Accordingly, the present study excludes this dimension and focuses instead on the psychological and relational components of BE that influence consumer behavior in the sportswear sector.

The proposed model draws on Aaker's (1991, 1996) foundational work and extends it through Keller's (1993) concept of Consumer-Based Brand Equity (CBBE), which emphasizes that consumers' perceptions and associations underpin brand value. While adopting the validated measurement items from Yoo and Donthu (2001), this study introduces a theoretical refinement: whereas Yoo and Donthu empirically combined awareness and associations into a single factor, this framework maintains them as distinct constructs. This separation is adopted to strictly evaluate the hierarchy of effects, analyzing how mere recognition (Awareness) converts into meaningful symbolic connections (Associations) specifically for Generation Z. These dimensions are particularly relevant in the context of sportswear, where consumers' purchasing decisions are driven not only by functional quality but also by symbolic meaning and self-expression. Consequently, brand identity is conceptualized within brand associations, reflecting how consumers use brands to express their individuality (Guzmán Rincón et al., 2023).

Furthermore, the present framework incorporates emotional attachment and perceived value as mediating variables. Following the work of Thomson et al. (2005) and Loureiro et al. (2024), emotional attachment captures the affective connection consumers develop toward brands, extending beyond satisfaction to include identification and a sense of belonging. Simultaneously, perceived value is included to assess the trade-off between benefits and costs, acting as a rational driver alongside the emotional drivers.

Community engagement has been integrated into the model to reflect the evolving nature of consumer–brand interactions. Drawing on Mills et al. (2022), this variable represents consumers' participation within brand communities, which reinforces both emotional and behavioral loyalty. This addition is particularly relevant to Generation Z, a group that actively seeks connection and shared experiences with brands.

Another distinctive component of the present framework is perceived brand purpose, which accounts for the growing importance of ethical and sustainable practices in sportswear consumption. As highlighted by Rausch and Kopplin (2021), Gen Z consumers increasingly evaluate brands based on their alignment with social and environmental causes. By incorporating

this construct, the model aims to capture how perceived corporate responsibility influences both value perception and emotional attachment.

Thus, the model retains brand loyalty and purchase intention as central outcome variables. Consistent with Aaker (1991) and Oliver (1999), loyalty represents both attitudinal and behavioral commitment. Purchase intention serves as a measurable indicator of these behavioral outcomes and is considered one of the most reliable reflections of brand equity performance (Yoo & Donthu, 2001).

In summary, this conceptual model integrates emotional, social, and ethical dimensions of brand equity, adapting traditional frameworks to the contemporary sportswear context. By extending Aaker's model with the constructs of emotional attachment, community engagement, and brand purpose, this study provides a holistic understanding of how rational and emotional drivers jointly influence loyalty and purchase intention.

The conceptual model guiding this research is depicted in Figure 1 below.

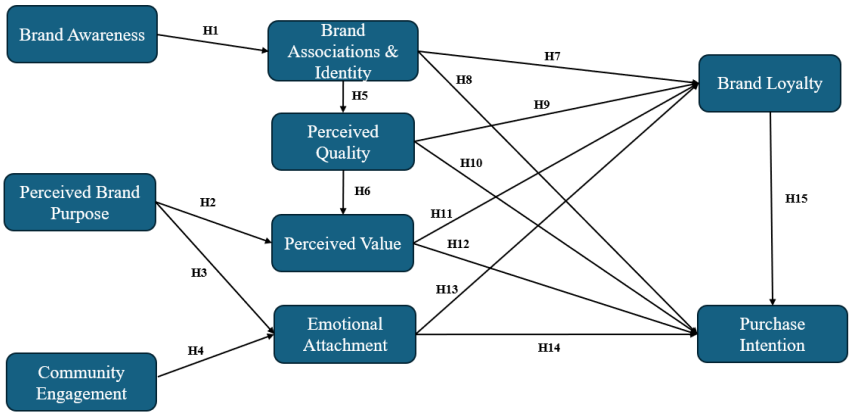

Figure 1 - Conceptual Framework

Source: Own elaboration based on Aaker (1991), Yoo and Donthu (2001), Mills et al. (2022), and Guzmán Rincón et al. (2023).

Aaker (1991) established that brand awareness represents the strength of the brand's presence in the consumer's memory. According to the Associative Network Memory Model, awareness serves as the 'anchor node' to which other associations are linked (Keller, 1993). Without initial recognition, consumers cannot process the brand's identity or personality traits. In the context of sportswear, Guzmán Rincón et al. (2023) highlight that awareness provides the familiarity needed for consumers to decode the brand's symbolic meaning. Accordingly, the present study proposes the following hypothesis:

H1: Brand awareness has a positive influence on brand associations and identity.

Rausch and Kopplin (2021) identified that Generation Z consumers are increasingly driven by ethical considerations, critically evaluating brands based on their alignment with social and environmental causes. When this group perceives a brand as authentic in its purpose ("green image"), the product's functional and social utility increases, thereby enhancing its perceived value (Rausch & Kopplin, 2021). Furthermore, this shared value system encourages a psychological bond that transcends transactional benefits, leading to a stronger emotional attachment (Rausch & Kopplin, 2021). Based on this evidence regarding sustainable consumption behavior, the study proposes:

H2: Perceived brand purpose has a positive influence on perceived value.

H3: Perceived brand purpose has a positive influence on emotional attachment.

Mills et al. (2022) argue that for younger generations, interacting with brand communities creates a sense of belonging and social support. This interaction is not merely informational but relational; as consumers connect with other fans and the brand itself, it significantly reinforces the emotional bond (Mills et al., 2022). Given that Generation Z is the most digitally connected group and actively seeks connection through consumption, this social dimension is a critical driver of affection. Therefore, the following hypothesis is formulated regarding sportswear brands:

H4: Community engagement positively influences emotional attachment.

Brand associations provide the basis for brand differentiation (Aaker, 1991). However, for Generation Z, these associations are deeply rooted in self-concept and identity expression (Guzmán Rincón et al., 2023). When consumers hold strong, positive associations, specifically those reflecting their own personality, they create a "halo effect" that leads them to infer higher levels of product excellence (Guzmán Rincón et al., 2023). This suggests that a strong brand identity positively biases consumers' judgments of the brand’s technical quality. Thus, the study theorizes:

H5: Brand associations and identity have a positive influence on perceived quality.

Perceived quality is theoretically established as a primary antecedent of perceived value, representing the "benefits" component in the consumer's value assessment (Wang et al., 2024). Wang et al. (2024) emphasize that functional excellence remains a key driver of value in the

sportswear sector. When consumers perceive a product as well-made and durable, the utility derived from it increases relative to the cost, directly enhancing its overall perceived value (Wang et al., 2024). In accordance, H6 is constructed as follows:

H6: Perceived quality has a positive influence on perceived value.

Aaker (1991) posits that brand associations create value by providing a reason to buy and by establishing a basis for differentiation. When consumers hold strong, unique, and favorable associations with a brand, they develop a resistance to competitors' offers (Aaker, 1991). Cheung et al. (2020) reinforce this in the digital context, demonstrating that strong brand knowledge directly fosters loyalty and engagement. For Generation Z, when the brand's image aligns with self-concept, it triggers an immediate preference in the decision-making process (Cheung et al., 2020). Accordingly, the study proposes:

H7: Brand associations and identity have a positive influence on brand loyalty.
H8: Brand associations and identity have a positive influence on purchase intention.

Zeithaml (1988) identifies perceived quality as a critical extrinsic cue that reduces risk. Historically seen as a precursor to satisfaction, recent literature highlights its direct impact. Tandon et al. (2020) empirically confirm that quality attributes function as primary signals that validate the decision to buy, serving as significant antecedents of purchase intention. Based on this, the following hypotheses are proposed:

H9: Perceived quality has a positive influence on brand loyalty.
H10: Perceived quality has a positive influence on purchase intention.

Perceived value represents the consumer's assessment of utility based on perceptions of what is received versus what is given (Aaker, 1991). Tandon et al. (2020) argue that value is often the most direct determinant of the final decision, as consumers rationalize the purchase based on the benefit-cost trade-off. Simultaneously, when consumers perceive superior value, they feel they are being treated equitably, which strengthens their commitment and consequent loyalty (Tandon et al., 2020). Therefore, the study hypothesizes:

H11: Perceived value has a positive influence on brand loyalty.
H12: Perceived value has a positive influence on purchase intention.

Emotional attachment entails a deep psychological bond, like interpersonal relationships (Loureiro et al., 2024). Safeer et al. (2021) emphasize that this affective connection is a strong predictor of loyalty, as consumers are less willing to abandon brands to which they feel emotionally tied. Moreover, deep attachment can trigger desire-driven behaviors, leading directly to the intention to purchase (Loureiro et al., 2024). Thus, it is proposed:

H13: Emotional attachment has a positive influence on brand loyalty.

H14: Emotional attachment has a positive influence on purchase intention.

Brand loyalty is traditionally conceptualized as a deep-held commitment to rebuy (Aaker, 1991). Cheung et al. (2020) and Chaudhuri and Holbrook (2001) demonstrate that this commitment translates into behavioral outcomes, specifically the intent to purchase. In the sportswear context, loyal consumers exhibit a higher willingness to buy compared to non-loyal consumers (Loureiro et al., 2024). Accordingly:

H15: Brand loyalty positively influences purchase intention.

CHAPTER 4 - METHODOLOGY

4.1. Type of Study

To establish a rigorous methodological framework, this study adopts the "research onion model" developed by Saunders, Lewis, and Thornhill. The research onion comprises six main layers that guide the investigator from the philosophical worldview to the specific data-collection techniques. The first layer is the research philosophy, which refers to the set of principles concerning the stance from which the research is conducted and is usually studied in terms of ontology and epistemology (Saunders et al., 2023). Ontology refers to the authenticity of the information and how one understands its existence, whereas epistemology refers to the valid information required for the research and how one can obtain it (Saunders et al., 2023). Consequently, this dissertation adopts a positivist philosophy. Positivism assumes that knowledge is independent of the subject under study and is highly scientific, leading to rigorous testing of phenomena rather than subjective interpretation (Saunders et al., 2023).

In line with this philosophical stance, the second layer dictates the research approach. The current study utilizes a deductive approach, characterized by the development of specific hypotheses based on the literature review and their gradual testing to assess whether they hold for the determined target.

After establishing the approach, the researcher must devise the study's strategy. The third layer of the research onion suggests various strategies, and, for this dissertation, a survey strategy was chosen based on the data required and the research's objective (Saunders et al., 2023).

Moving to the fourth layer regarding methodological choices, this study adopts a monomethod. The monomethod comprises a single study design, in this case, a purely quantitative methodology used to statistically evaluate the relationships between brand equity variables and consumer loyalty (Saunders et al., 2023).

The fifth layer refers to the research's time horizons. This study employs a cross-sectional time horizon, which is frequently used when all observations are gathered at a single point in time, aligns well with the execution of most survey strategies (Saunders et al., 2023).

The final layer of the research onion consists of the data collection and analysis techniques and procedures. Data is considered the central piece in the research onion framework (Saunders et al., 2023). At this stage, the study relies on primary quantitative data collected directly from respondents. The specific procedure involved designing a structured online questionnaire administered via the Qualtrics platform to explain the research methods and purposes clearly.

For the data analysis component, the study utilized statistical software to perform Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modeling. This analytical technique allows a robust statistical

evaluation of the conceptual model, completing the methodological path from the outer philosophical layer to the inner core of data extraction and analysis.

4.2. Study Population and Sample Selection

The target population of this study comprises Generation Z consumers born between 1997 and 2012 who actively purchase sportswear products. This specific demographic was selected due to its significant influence and digital engagement within the global sportswear market (Guzmán Rincón et al., 2023).

A non-probability sampling technique was adopted because it is not feasible to obtain a complete sampling frame for the entire target population (Saunders et al., 2023). Specifically, the study employed a convenience sampling method based on respondents' accessibility and availability. This method was complemented by snowball sampling to increase both sample size and diversity (Nunan et al., 2021). Participants were encouraged to share the electronic questionnaire with their contacts via social media platforms such as Instagram and WhatsApp, or by word of mouth. As a result, using a non-probability sampling approach means the findings cannot be fully generalized to the entire population with certainty (Saunders et al., 2023).

4.3. Research Instrument

The primary instrument selected for data collection in this study was a structured online questionnaire. The survey was designed and administered using the Qualtrics platform to ensure a professional interface and efficient data extraction (Nunan et al., 2021).

The research instrument is organized into distinct logical blocks to ensure a coherent progression for the respondent. The initial section functions as a screening phase and collects profile data regarding sportswear consumption habits. A specific question asks participants to select their favorite sportswear brand as the exclusive reference point for all subsequent evaluation items. The subsequent sections contain the measurement items for the constructs of the conceptual model, including brand equity drivers and consumer outcomes. The preliminary section gathers sociodemographic information, enabling characterization of the sample.

4.4. Measurement Scales

The measurement scales employed in this study were grounded in prior academic research and established literature. To ensure consistency and allow measurement of respondents' agreement intensity, all construct items were assessed using a seven-point Likert scale ranging from

"strongly disagree" (1) to "strongly agree" (7). Table 1 displays the detailed measurement scales utilized in this dissertation.

To measure brand awareness and brand associations, this study used the measurement scales developed by Yoo and Donthu (2001). However, consistent with the theoretical framework defined in Chapter 3, these dimensions were operationalized as distinct constructs rather than a combined factor. This adaptation allows for a more granular analysis of the hierarchy of effects, separating brand recognition from brand meaning. Regarding brand identity, specifically focusing on personality and self-expression, the items were adapted from Guzmán Rincón et al. (2023).

For the evaluation of perceived quality and perceived value, this research relied on the scales developed by Wang, Sung, and Phau (2024). These scales were selected for their relevance to assessing both the products' functional standards and their social value.

Perceived brand purpose, covering ethical and environmental dimensions, was measured using a scale derived from Rausch and Kopplin (2021), who also provided the basis for the purchase intention construct. To capture the social dimension of the consumer-brand relationship, community engagement was assessed using items from Mills et al. (2022).

Consequently, emotional attachment was measured using the scale proposed by Loureiro et al. (2024) for brand loyalty. A combined approach was taken, with the intention to recommend, adapted from Guzmán Rincón et al. (2023), and the intention to remain loyal, adapted from Mills et al. (2022).

All selected scales were rigorously tailored to the specific context of this research to ensure that they accurately measure the intended dimensions while maintaining methodological validity. The measurement scales used are listed in Table I, presented below.

Table I - Measurement Scales

Dimensions	**References**
Brand Awareness	Yoo & Donthu (2001)
Brand Associations & Identity	Yoo & Donthu (2001); Guzmán Rincón et al. (2023)
Perceived Quality	Wang et al. (2024)
Perceived Value	Wang et al. (2024)
Perceived Brand Purpose	Rausch & Kopplin (2021)
Community Engagement	Mills et al. (2022)
Emotional Attachment	Loureiro et al. (2024)
Brand Loyalty	Guzmán Rincón et al. (2023); Mills et al. (2022)
Purchase Intention	Rausch & Kopplin (2021)

Source: Own Elaboration

CHAPTER 5 - DATA ANALYSIS AND RESULTS

This chapter discusses sample characterization, research on the conceptual model, evaluation of measurement and structural models, and hypothesis testing through bootstrapping. The concluding section presents and discusses the results.

5.1. Sample Characterization

The data collection process granted a total of 172 responses. However, a screening process was conducted to ensure data quality. Some responses were excluded due to incompleteness, while others were discarded for failing to meet the eligibility criteria for the target population. Specifically, respondents who did not fall within the Generation Z age range (born between 1997 and 2012), whose country of origin was outside of Portugal, or who indicated no interaction with sportswear brands, were removed from the dataset. After disregarding the invalid entries, the final sample consisted of 118 valid responses. IBM SPSS Statistics was utilized to process and analyze the data.

Regarding the demographic profile, the sample is distributed as 47.5% male and 44.9% female. Additionally, 4.2% answered "neither," while 3.4% preferred not to disclose this information.

Concerning the educational background of the participants, 30.5% hold a master's degree, and 33.1% own a bachelor's degree. Likewise, 31.4% have completed secondary education, while the remaining participants reported other levels of education, including doctorates (3.4%) and basic education (1.7%).

Regarding current occupation, the sample consists mostly of students (28.0%), followed by "employed" (27.1%). Student workers account for 25.4% of the participants, while 19.5% are unemployed. This analysis is covered in detail in Appendix B.

In addition to the sociodemographic profile, the sample was characterized regarding specific sportswear consumption habits. When asked to identify their favorite sportswear brand, which served as the focal object for evaluating brand equity, most respondents selected Nike (33.9%), followed by Adidas (28.0%). Consequently, 22.0% of the sample selected New Balance as their favorite brand, while 14.4% chose Puma. Additionally, 1.7% of the sample selected other brands not presented in the original list, including "Prozis" and "Gymshark". This distribution confirms the dominance of key market players within the analyzed sample.

In addition to sociodemographic characterization, the sample was analyzed with respect to specific consumption behaviors and brand relationship patterns.

Regarding loyalty and purchasing patterns, the sample exhibits a remarkably balanced fragmentation. The results show a near-perfect three-way split: 33.1% of respondents identify

with a single specific brand, 33.9% maintain a small portfolio of 2 or 3 favorite brands, and 33.1% adopt a purely functional approach, stating that brand names matter less than specific product features. This suggests that while brand loyalty exists, it is highly competitive among this demographic.

When examining the drivers of consumer choice, "Price & Value for Money" emerged as the primary decision-making factor (26.7%), followed by "Product Quality & Performance" (17.8%). Interestingly, despite the frequent association of Generation Z with environmental activism, "Sustainability & Ethical Purpose" was selected as the top priority by only 2.2% of the sample, suggesting that functional and economic factors still outweigh ethical concerns in actual purchasing decisions.

However, a deeper analysis of price sensitivity reveals a discrepancy between the stated importance of price and the brand's actual resilience. When asked about their willingness to pay, only 15.3% of respondents would switch to a cheaper, unknown brand. Conversely, a combined total of 49.2% demonstrate high brand equity: 28.0% would buy their favorite brand even if significantly more expensive, and 21.2% consider the brand essential regardless of price. The remaining 35.6% are moderately sensitive and remain loyal only if the price difference is small.

Regarding digital engagement, the data confirms the highly interactive nature of this generation. A significant portion of the sample (30.5%) are active participants who comment, participate in challenges, or post content wearing the brand's products. Another 21.2% engage moderately (likes/shares), while 21.2% are passive observers. Only 27.1% reported no social media interactions. This prominent level of interactional behavior (over 50% of users interacting or creating content) underscores the critical role of digital communities in the sportswear sector. This analysis is presented in more detail in Appendix C.

5.2. Data Analysis Tool

To assess the proposed conceptual model and research hypotheses, the Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modelling (PLS-SEM) method was employed using SmartPLS 4.

PLS-SEM was selected as the most appropriate statistical technique for this study due to three methodological reasons. Firstly, it is a variance-based approach primarily designed for predictive purposes, making it ideal for exploratory research where the goal is to maximize the explained variance of the dependent constructs (Hair et al., 2019; Sarstedt et al., 2022)

Secondly, PLS-SEM is highly robust to non-normally distributed data. As is common in social science research using Likert scales, the data in this study did not follow a strict normal distribution, which limits the use of covariance-based SEM (CB-SEM) tools. PLS-SEM provides reliable results without assuming normality (Hair et al., 2022).

This method is also particularly effective for studies with smaller sample sizes while maintaining high statistical power. According to the "10-times rule", the current sample size is sufficient for the complexity of the proposed model, ensuring the stability and reliability of the estimated coefficients (Hair et al., 2011).

5.3. Evaluation of the Measurement Model

The assessment of the reflective measurement model followed the guidelines established by Hair et al. (2019), focusing on three key criteria: indicator reliability, internal consistency reliability, and convergent validity. The complete results of this evaluation are detailed in Appendix D.

First, indicator reliability was assessed by examining the outer loadings. Ideally, loadings should exceed 0.708 to ensure that the construct explains more than 50% of the indicator's variance (Hair et al., 2022). In the initial analysis, the indicator BA1 (Brand Associations) presented a low loading of 0.517 and was subsequently removed. Following this refinement, all retained indicators exhibited loadings above or close to the recommended threshold, confirming adequate indicator reliability.

Second, internal consistency reliability was evaluated using Composite Reliability (Rho_C). While Cronbach's alpha is also reported in Appendix D, Composite Reliability is considered a more appropriate measure for PLS-SEM, as it does not assume equal reliability among indicators (Hair et al., 2019). All constructs demonstrated Composite Reliability values exceeding the 0.700 threshold, ranging from 0.830 to 1.000, thereby confirming strong internal consistency.

Third, convergent validity was assessed through the Average Variance Extracted (AVE). As shown in Appendix D, all constructs surpassed the minimum acceptable value of 0.50, indicating that, on average, each construct explains significantly more than half of the variance of its items (Sarstedt et al., 2022).

Discriminant validity was examined to ensure that each construct is empirically distinct. This study relied primarily on the Heterotrait-Monotrait Ratio (HTMT), which is preferred over the traditional Fornell-Larcker criterion due to its superior sensitivity (Henseler et al., 2015). Initially, the construct Perceived Value exhibited discriminant validity issues because indicator PV2 exhibited high cross-loadings with other constructs (see Appendix F). Consequently, PV2 was removed, resulting in a single-item construct for Perceived Value. Following this adjustment, all HTMT ratios fell below the conservative threshold of 0.85 (or the 0.90 upper limit), as detailed in Appendix E, confirming that all constructs are statistically distinct.

5.4. Assessment of the Structural Model

Having confirmed the reliability and validity of the measurement model, the structural model was assessed to evaluate the hypothesized relationships among the constructs. The evaluation followed the standard procedure recommended by Hair et al. (2022), starting with assessing collinearity issues, and then evaluating the model's explanatory power and predictive relevance.

5.4.1. Collinearity Assessment

Before evaluating the structural relationships, it is crucial to verify that the independent variables are not highly correlated with each other, as this would bias the regression results. Collinearity was assessed using the Variance Inflation Factor (VIF). According to Hair et al. (2019), VIF values should ideally be below 3 to avoid collinearity negatively affecting model estimation.

As detailed in Appendix G, all VIF values in the inner model were well below this threshold, with the maximum observed value of 1.528 (Community Engagement → Emotional Attachment). Consequently, collinearity is not a concern in this study, allowing for a robust assessment of the structural path coefficients.

5.4.2. Explanatory Power and Model Fit

Following the collinearity assessment, the structural model was evaluated based on its explanatory power, measured by the coefficient of determination (R^2), and the overall model fit.

The R^2 value represents the proportion of variance in the endogenous constructs explained by the exogenous constructs linked to them. According to Hair et al. (2019), R^2 values of 0.75, 0.50, and 0.25 are considered substantial, moderate, and weak, respectively, although these thresholds vary across research disciplines.

As presented in Table II, the model demonstrates a strong explanatory power for Emotional Attachment (R^2 = 0.549), indicating that the predictors account for approximately 55% of its variance, a substantial result that underscores the effectiveness of the model in capturing the drivers of emotional bonding. Notably, Brand Loyalty exhibits strong explanatory power (R^2 = 0.471). Nearing the moderate threshold of 0.50, this value indicates that the combined effects of the cognitive and emotional dimensions in the framework are highly effective at predicting consumer retention and loyalty.

Regarding Purchase Intention, the model explains 24.0% of the variance (R^2 = 0.240). While this value sits just below the 0.25 moderate threshold, it is considered statistically relevant in consumer behavior research, where the decision to purchase is often influenced by a multitude of external situational factors (e.g., price availability, specific needs) that go beyond brand perceptions. Thus, the model successfully identifies the key brand-related drivers of the intent to buy. Other constructs, such as Perceived Value (R^2 = 0.167) and Perceived Quality (R^2 = 0.138), show weaker but statistically relevant determination coefficients.

The overall model fit was assessed using the Standardized Root Mean Square Residual (SRMR), which measures the divergence between the observed and the model-implied correlation matrices (Henseler et al., 2015). The obtained SRMR value for this model was 0.085. While values less than 0.08 are generally considered good, values up to 0.10 are considered acceptable and indicate a satisfactory model fit (Hu & Bentler, 1999; Schermelleh-Engel et al., 2003). Therefore, the structural model is considered to have an adequate fit for the empirical data.

***Table II** - Explanatory Power (R^2) and Model Fit Indices*

Constructs	**R-square**
Brand Associations & Identity	0.052
Brand Loyalty	0.471
Emotional Attachment	0.549
Perceived Quality	0.138
Perceived Value	0.167
Purchase Intention	0.240
Model Fit Indices	**Correspondent Values**
SRMR	0.085
d_ULS	0.977
d_G	0.456
Chi-square	343.816
NFI	0.657

Source: Own elaboration based on SmartPLS

To visually summarize the assessment of the structural model, including the evaluated path coefficients, significance levels, and the explanatory power (R^2) of the endogenous variables, the final structural model is shown in Figure 2.

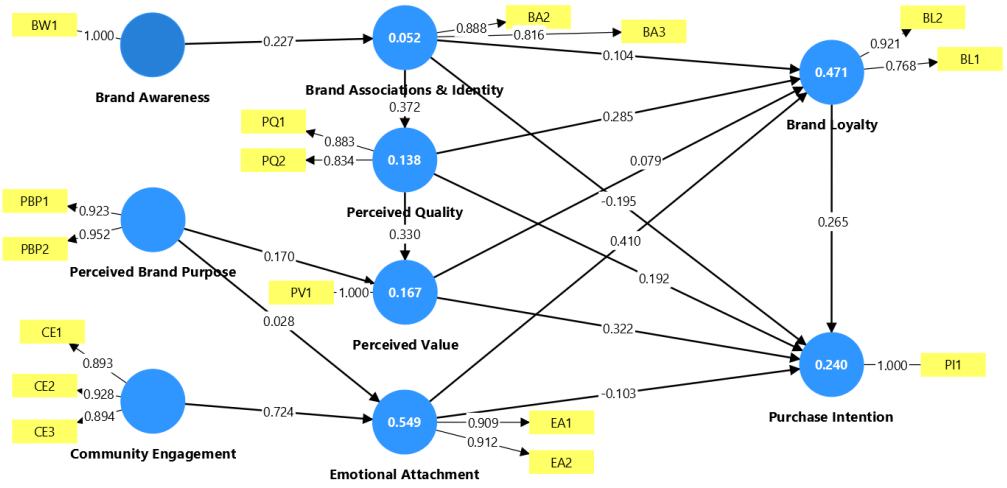

Figure 2 - Structural Model

Source: SmartPLS

5.4.3. Hypothesis Testing

To assess the significance of the path coefficients and evaluate the proposed hypotheses, a bootstrapping procedure with 5,000 subsamples was performed, consistent with the guidelines by Hair et al. (2022). Significance was determined using a two-tailed test with a critical confidence level of 5% (p-value < 0.05). Hypotheses are considered supported if the path coefficients are statistically significant and align with the predicted direction.

The results, detailed in Table III, indicate that seven of the fifteen proposed relationships were statistically supported, while four others were marginally significant, falling just outside the defined threshold.

The structural analysis indicates that Community Engagement is the dominant driver within the model, exerting the strongest observed influence (β = 0.724, p-value < 0.001) on Emotional Attachment, thereby strongly validating H4. This confirms that, for Generation Z, active participation in brand communities is the primary mechanism for generating emotional bonds. On the cognitive spectrum, Brand Associations significantly influenced Perceived Quality (β = 0.372, p-value < 0.001), supporting H5; in turn, Perceived Quality served as a strong antecedent of Perceived Value (β = 0.330, p-value < 0.001), supporting H6.

However, the hypothesized antecedents of these cognitive variables showed weaker results. The impact of Brand Awareness on Brand Associations & Identity (β = 0.227, p-value = 0.057) and Perceived Brand Purpose on Perceived Value (β = 0.170, p-value = 0.065) was marginally

significant. Although technically not supported (H1 and H2), these p-values suggest a trend that might be confirmed in larger samples. Conversely, Perceived Brand Purpose showed no meaningful relationship with Emotional Attachment (p-value = 0.754), thereby rejecting H3.

Regarding Brand Loyalty, the results reveal a dual influence of emotional and quality-based factors. Emotional Attachment emerged as the most powerful direct predictor of loyalty (β = 0.410, p-value < 0.001), supporting H13, while Perceived Quality also employed a significant direct impact (β = 0.285, p-value = 0.002), supporting H9. It is noteworthy that neither Brand Associations (H7) nor Perceived Value (H11) showed a significant direct effect on loyalty (p-value > 0.05). This lack of direct significance implies that the influence of associations and value on loyalty is fully mediated by the intervening variables of quality and emotional attachment, rather than being a direct outcome.

Concerning Purchase Intention, the drivers shift from emotional to transactional. Perceived Value proved to be a critical determinant (β = 0.322, p-value = 0.003), supporting H12, which indicates that while emotion builds retention, the specific intent to buy is heavily dependent on the perception of cost-benefit. Brand Loyalty also significantly predicted purchase intention (β = 0.265, p-value = 0.015), validating H15. In contrast, Emotional Attachment did not directly influence purchase intention (p-value = 0.358; H14 rejected), reinforcing the theoretical distinction that emotional bonds foster commitment and loyalty but do not automatically trigger a transaction in the absence of a perceived value proposition. The direct paths from Brand Associations (H8, p-value = 0.063) and Perceived Quality (H10, p-value = 0.074) to purchase intention were marginally significant, further suggesting that their primary impact on behavior is channeled through the establishment of value and loyalty.

Table III *- Structural Model Path Coefficients and Hypothesis Testing Results*

Hypothesis	Structural Path	Path Coefficient (β)	T Statistics	P Values	Result
H1	Brand Awareness → Brand Associations & Identity	0.227	0.119	0.057	Not supported
H2	Perceived Brand Purpose → Perceived Value	0.170	1.845	0.065	Not supported
H3	Perceived Brand Purpose → Emotional Attachment	0.028	0.313	0.754	Not supported
H4	Community Engagement → Emotional Attachment	0.724	10.029	0.000	Supported
H5	Brand Associations & Identity → Perceived Quality	0.372	5.045	0.000	Supported
H6	Perceived Quality → Perceived Value	0.330	3.568	0.000	Supported

H7	Brand Associations & Identity → Brand Loyalty	0.104	0.998	0.318	Not supported
H8	Brand Associations & Identity → Purchase Intention	- 0.195	1.857	0.063	Not supported
H9	Perceived Quality → Brand Loyalty	0.285	3.070	0.002	Supported
H10	Perceived Quality → Purchase Intention	0.192	1.786	0.074	Not supported
H11	Perceived Value → Brand Loyalty	0.079	0.994	0.320	Not supported
H12	Perceived Value → Purchase Intention	0.332	2.988	0.003	Supported
H13	Emotional Attachment → Brand Loyalty	0.410	4.087	0.000	Supported
H14	Emotional Attachment → Purchase Intention	- 0.103	0.920	0.358	Not supported
H15	Brand Loyalty → Purchase Intention	0.265	2.431	0.015	Supported

Source: Own elaboration based on SmartPLS

5.4.4. Mediation Analysis

In addition to the direct relationships, the specific indirect effects were analyzed to understand the mediating mechanisms within the structural model. Mediation analysis clarifies how an independent variable influences a dependent variable through an intervening construct.

The results, presented in Table IV, reveal that the influence of the core predictors on the outcomes is mediated, reinforcing the model's dual structure of emotional and cognitive processing.

The analysis confirms a robust indirect path from Community Engagement to Brand Loyalty via Emotional Attachment ($\beta = 0.297$, p-value < 0.001). This finding is pivotal, as it suggests that community engagement does not automatically generate loyalty. Rather, it first builds a deep emotional bond, which then translates into commitment. Since the direct path from Community to Loyalty was not hypothesized, this mediation highlights Emotional Attachment as the essential "bridge" in the relationship.

The sequential path from Emotional Attachment to Purchase Intention via Brand Loyalty was also significant ($\beta = 0.109$, p-value = 0.047), confirming that emotional bonds drive sales by first establishing brand loyalty.

On the rational side, the results demonstrate a sequential chain of effects where Brand Associations significantly influence Perceived Value indirectly through Perceived Quality (β = 0.123, p-value = 0.009).

Additionally, the mediation analysis explains the lack of direct significance for H7 and H10, suggesting full mediation effects. Specifically, while the direct link from Brand Associations to Loyalty was not supported, the indirect path via Perceived Quality is statistically significant (β = 0.106, p-value = 0.012). This indicates that brand identity fosters loyalty only when it effectively signals superior quality to consumers. Similarly, Perceived Quality influences Purchase Intention indirectly through Perceived Value (β = 0.106, p-value = 0.035). This confirms that quality is a foundational attribute that must be translated into a perception of economic value to trigger the final decision to buy effectively.

Table IV *- Specific Indirect Effects (Mediation Analysis)*

Indirect Path	Path Coefficient (β)	T Statistics	P Values	Result
Perceived Quality → Perceived Value → Purchase Intention	0.106	2.111	0.035	Significant
Brand Associations & Identity → Perceived Quality → Brand Loyalty	0.106	2.525	0.012	Significant
Brand Associations & Identity → Perceived Quality → Perceived Value	0.123	2.595	0.009	Significant
Community Engagement → Emotional Attachment → Brand Loyalty	0.297	3.947	0.000	Significant
Emotional Attachment → Brand Loyalty → Purchase Intention	0.109	1.987	0.047	Significant

Source: Own elaboration based on SmartPLS

5.5. Discussion of the Main Results

The present study aimed to examine the antecedents of brand loyalty and purchase intention in the sportswear sector, specifically focusing on the distinct roles of brand purpose and community engagement among Generation Z consumers. By analyzing the structural model, the results reveal a complex dual-path mechanism where emotional and cognitive factors operate synergistically to drive consumer behavior. The empirical evidence gathered suggests that for this demographic, tangible community interactions and perceived value significantly outweigh abstract brand promises.

A key insight from this research is the major influence of Community Engagement, which emerged as the most powerful predictor across the entire framework. The findings show that active involvement in brand communities enhances Emotional Attachment, lending strong support to Mills et al.'s (2022) perspective. This relationship indicates that, for Generation Z, brand interaction is relational rather than merely informational, as a sense of belonging to a collective group or community effectively triggers the psychological bond with the brand. Consequently, this emotional attachment proved the most decisive driver of Brand Loyalty, aligning with Loureiro et al. (2024), who argue that consumers who feel emotionally connected exhibit greater commitment and resilience in the face of competitors. The mediation analysis reinforces this dynamic by confirming that community engagement does not generate loyalty in a vacuum but rather develops an emotional lock-in effect that secures long-term retention.

In parallel with this emotional route, the study validated a rational hierarchy of effects in which functional perceptions remain critical. Brand Associations were found to positively influence Perceived Quality, corroborating Guzmán Rincón et al.'s (2023) view that a strong brand identity serves as a heuristic for technical excellence. This perception of quality subsequently enhances Perceived Value, supporting the classic means-end theory. Crucially, Perceived Quality also directly influenced Brand Loyalty, demonstrating that, while emotional bonds are powerful, Generation Z still demands functional reliability as a prerequisite for retention.

Although the direct impact of Brand Associations on Brand Loyalty was not statistically supported, its indirect effect via Perceived Quality was significant. This suggests that a brand's image fosters loyalty only when it signals superior quality to consumers, implying that image without substance is insufficient for this group.

Regarding the outcome of Purchase Intention, the results show a distinction between the drivers of retention and those of transaction. Perceived Value and Brand Loyalty emerged as the only significant direct predictors of the intent to buy. This finding supports the work of Wang et al. (2024), emphasizing that, despite the emotional nature of the category, the actual decision to transact is heavily dependent on a rational validation of the price-benefit trade-off. Notably, Emotional Attachment did not directly influence Purchase Intention; the non-significant path provides a critical insight into the consumer mindset. It suggests that, while emotional bonds are essential for maintaining the relationship, they do not automatically trigger a purchase without a perceived value proposition. Thus, while emotion keeps the consumer with the brand, it is the perception of value that triggers the purchase.

Contrary to initial theoretical expectations, Perceived Brand Purpose performed poorly within the model. Its influence on Perceived Value was marginally significant, and its link to Emotional Attachment was unsupported. This divergence from recent literature, such as Rausch and Kopplin (2021), may be attributed to a growing skepticism or saturation regarding corporate social responsibility claims among Generation Z. It suggests that, while ethical purpose might be

expected as a present factor, it is no longer a primary differentiator that drives deep emotional attachment or value perception when compared to the tangible, experiential benefits of community engagement and product quality. Therefore, brands aiming to succeed with this generation must prioritize building authentic community platforms and delivering consistent value rather than abstract, purpose-driven narratives.

CHAPTER 6 – CONCLUSIONS

6.1. Main Findings

The primary objective of this dissertation was to bridge a specific research gap regarding the interaction between rational drivers and emotional or ethical antecedents in generating loyalty among Generation Z within the sportswear sector in Portugal. Guided by two central research questions, this study sought to understand how brand equity dimensions influence consumer behavior and to what extent emotional attachment mediates these relationships. The empirical results provide a comprehensive answer to both inquiries, illustrating a distinct hierarchy of effects.

Regarding the antecedents of emotional bonding, the study uncovers a decisive shift from abstract corporate narratives to tangible peer interactions. Community Engagement was identified as the dominant driver of Emotional Attachment, outperforming Perceived Brand Purpose by a wide margin. This finding indicates that for Generation Z, the psychological sense of belonging to a community is a far more potent catalyst for affection than distant ethical promises, which demonstrated a negligible impact. Thus, the data suggest that for this generation of consumers, brand loyalty is not claimed by the company's mission statement but is co-created through the interactive experiences of its community.

The research elucidates the dual nature of consumer retention by demonstrating that, while emotional attachment is the strongest predictor of brand loyalty, it remains insufficient on its own, as perceived quality emerged as a critical direct antecedent, underscoring how functional excellence serves as an absolute foundation for loyalty. This finding debunks the myth of the purely emotional consumer by revealing that Generation Z's commitment is inherently hybrid, requiring both the emotional bond of the community and the rational assurance of superior product quality. Continuously, a fundamental dichotomy emerged between the drivers of retention and those of transactional behavior, with the study establishing perceived value and brand loyalty as the sole direct determinants of purchase intention. Although consumers may develop a deep emotional attachment to a brand, this sentiment does not automatically translate into a purchase decision without the validation of economic value, positioning perceived value as the ultimate gatekeeper of behavioral intent and leading to the overarching conclusion that while community and emotion are essential to keep the consumer in the brand orbit, it is the perception of a fair balance between price and benefits that triggers the final act of buying.

Regarding the alignment with the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals highlighted at the outset of this research, the findings offer a nuanced perspective on how Generation Z interacts with corporate initiatives by integrating variables that support Sustainable Development Goal 12, which focuses on responsible consumption, and Sustainable Development Goal 3, which

promotes good health and wellness. The empirical data revealed a stark contrast in their effectiveness, as the weak performance of perceived brand purpose indicates that broad sustainability goals do not automatically translate into consumer loyalty, suggesting that abstract commitments to responsible production are fundamentally insufficient if they remain distant corporate pledges. Conversely, the strong influence of community engagement demonstrates that sportswear brands successfully act as platforms for social connection and psychological support, directly advancing the health and wellness objectives of the youth, which ultimately proves that while abstract environmental claims fail to generate significant brand equity, fostering deep social ecosystems that encourage active lifestyles and community belonging represents a highly effective strategy for engaging this demographic.

6.2. Study Implications

The empirical results of this dissertation provide valuable insights for both academia and the sportswear sector. By analyzing the factors driving brand loyalty and purchase intent among Generation Z, this study fills important gaps in existing theory. It offers data-driven strategies for more effective brand management. These contributions are outlined in the following sections, divided into theoretical implications for marketing research and practical advice for industry professionals.

6.2.1. Theoretical Implications

The present study offers several distinct contributions to the marketing literature by empirically evaluating a modernized Brand Equity framework tailored to the specificities of Generation Z. Primarily, this research extends the classical models of Aaker (1991) and Keller (1993) by demonstrating that for this demographic, the hierarchy of effects has shifted from a purely cognitive structure to a strongly relational one.

The study provides empirical evidence that Community Engagement is not merely a peripheral outcome of brand popularity, but the paramount antecedent of Emotional Attachment. By identifying a strong, direct path from community interaction to emotional bonding, this research challenges the prevailing assumption in recent sustainable marketing literature (e.g., Rausch & Kopplin, 2021) that abstract Brand Purpose is the primary driver of affinity. Theoretically, this implies that for digital natives, brand loyalty is co-created through peer-to-peer validation and tribal belonging rather than unilaterally transmitted through corporate mission statements.

The dissertation also refines the theoretical understanding of how Brand Identity translates into consumer retention. The discovery of a full mediation effect between Brand Associations and Brand Loyalty, entirely bridged by Perceived Quality, offers a critical insight into the existing body of knowledge. It suggests that while strong brand associations (awareness and image) are necessary to capture attention, they are insufficient to generate loyalty on their own. This finding reinforces the "signaling theory" in the sportswear context, positing that Generation Z primarily uses brand image as an experimental cue to gauge product quality. Thus, the theoretical model of loyalty for this group of consumers is a dual-process mechanism that requires the simultaneous activation of the "heart" (via community-driven attachment) and the "mind" (via quality assurance).

Finally, this research contributes to the consumer behavior literature by delineating the boundary between attitudinal commitment and transactional intent. The non-significant direct relationship between Emotional Attachment and Purchase Intention challenges the "Lovemarks" theory among financially constrained consumers. It suggests that while emotional connections are potent drivers of retention (loyalty), they do not automatically bypass the rational assessment of value. This validates a theoretical distinction in which Perceived Value serves as the ultimate "gatekeeper" of the transaction. Consequently, this study proposes a revised theoretical framework for Generation Z, in which emotion serves to secure relationships. At the same time, value perception triggers behavior, enriching the academic discourse on the gap between brand affect and actual purchase behavior.

6.2.2. Managerial Implications

From a managerial perspective, the results provide actionable guidelines for sportswear brands operating in the Portuguese market. The findings suggest a necessary shift in resource allocation, moving away from unilateral brand messaging toward creating participatory environments.

Given that Community Engagement was identified as the strongest driver of emotional attachment, managers should prioritize developing interactive platforms over traditional "storytelling" advertising. The data indicates that Generation Z consumers do not passively absorb brand values. They co-create them through interaction. Therefore, strategies should focus on fostering emotionally and community-engaging connections, such as facilitating run clubs, exclusive digital groups, or offline events, where the brand serves as a facilitator of peer-to-peer interaction rather than the sole protagonist.

The study also suggests a strategic recalibration regarding Brand Purpose. The weak statistical association of this construct with consumer perceptions serves as a warning against over-reliance on sustainability or ethical claims as a primary competitive differentiator. While corporate social

responsibility remains important as a baseline expectation, the results show it is not an effective driver of distinct value or emotion for this specific market. Managers should avoid centering their value proposition solely on abstract ethical narratives, as these appear to resonate less than tangible, experiential benefits.

Thus, the results reinforce the critical role of product fundamentals. The mediation analysis confirms that Perceived Quality and Perceived Value are the ultimate gatekeepers of the purchase decision. This implies that while emotional branding and community building are essential for long-term retention (loyalty), they are insufficient to trigger sales if the price-quality ratio is not validated. Consequently, brands must ensure that their community-building efforts are backed by consistent product performance and fair pricing. The strategic takeaway is clear: use community to capture the consumer's heart but rely on functional value to close the sale.

The study advises a strategic recalibration of how brands communicate and execute their alignment with the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals, particularly because, while contributing to responsible consumption and production under Sustainable Development Goal 12 remains a corporate imperative, the weak statistical performance of brand purpose serves as a cautionary signal against abstract environmental claims. Since Generation Z exhibits a high degree of skepticism toward distant sustainability narratives, managers should avoid treating these goals merely as marketing badges. They must instead leverage their proven success in community engagement, which directly supports Sustainable Development Goal 3 by fostering social connection and physical wellness, to anchor their environmental efforts. To generate true brand equity, broad sustainability commitments must be translated into localized and tangible actions that the target community can directly verify, participate in, and benefit from, ensuring that sustainability shifts from a distant corporate pledge to an actionable community experience that synergistically promotes both ethical consumption and personal wellness.

6.3. Limitations of the Study

The findings of this dissertation should be interpreted in light of several limitations inherent to the research design and methodology.

The study employed a non-probabilistic convenience sampling method, distributed primarily through digital channels within the author’s network. While this approach effectively reached the target demographic (Generation Z), it limits the generalizability of the results to the broader Portuguese consumer population. Consequently, the findings may reflect specific psychographic characteristics of the respondents that are not fully representative of the national average.

Although the sample size (n = 118) met the minimum requirements for PLS-SEM analysis, it was limited by low statistical power. This constraint is evidenced by the results of hypotheses H1,

H2, H8, and H10, which showed marginal significance with p-values slightly above the strict 0.05 threshold (ranging from 0.057 to 0.074). It is highly plausible that a larger sample size would have reduced the standard errors, potentially rendering these relationships statistically significant. Therefore, the rejection of these specific hypotheses should be interpreted with caution.

Additionally, the research adopted a cross-sectional design, measuring consumer perceptions at a single point in time. While structural equation modeling allows for the inference of relationships based on theoretical frameworks, it does not empirically confirm causality. Since constructs such as Brand Loyalty and Emotional Attachment are dynamic and evolve over repeated interactions, a cross-sectional snapshot cannot fully capture their longitudinal development.

6.4. Suggestions for Future Research

Based on the findings and limitations of this study, several avenues for future research are proposed to advance the understanding of Generation Z's consumer behavior.

To address the statistical limitations identified, future studies should replicate this structural model using a larger, probabilistic sample. Increasing the sample size would provide the necessary statistical power to clarify the marginally significant relationships (specifically H1, H2, H8, and H10). A larger dataset would determine whether these paths are indeed non-significant or whether the lack of support in this study was due to sample constraints.

Given the unexpectedly weak performance of Perceived Brand Purpose, further investigation is needed to understand the underlying drivers. Future research could employ a mixed-methods approach, incorporating qualitative techniques such as focus groups or in-depth interviews. This would allow researchers to explore whether the lack of impact stems from a general skepticism towards corporate ethics ("greenwashing fatigue"), a cultural note specific to the Portuguese market, or a misalignment in how the construct is measured.

To address the limitations of cross-sectional designs, longitudinal studies are recommended. By tracking the same consumer market over time, researchers could empirically observe the evolution of Community Engagement into Emotional Attachment and subsequently into Brand Loyalty, thereby confirming the causal directionality of the proposed model.

And, lastly, the strong dominance of the "community-emotion" path identified in this study invites testing in other high-involvement industries beyond sportswear. Future research should examine whether this behavior is specific to fashion and lifestyle categories or if it generalizes to other sectors, such as technology, gaming, or luxury goods, where community dynamics also play a pivotal role.

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I hereby acknowledge the use of Artificial Intelligence (AI) tools during the preparation of this dissertation. Specifically, “Grammarly” was used to improve written text, ensuring grammatical correctness and clarity.

Additionally, “Gemini” served as a technical assistant, interpreting SmartPLS outputs and providing guidance on the table structure.

It is important to state that no synthetic data was generated and that AI tools were not used to develop any scientific concepts, hypotheses, or conclusions in this study. All empirical data collection, statistical interpretation, critical analysis, and final content remain the responsibility of the author.

APPENDIX

Appendix A - Constructs used in Survey

Variables	Original Scale	Adapted Scale	Reference
Brand Awareness	• I can recognize X among other competing brands.	• I can easily recognize this brand among other competing brands.	Yoo, B., & Donthu, N. (2001).
Brand Associations & Identity	• Some characteristics of X come to my mind quickly.	• The specific characteristics of this brand (Logo, Slogan, Products, Prices, etc.) come to my mind quickly.	Yoo, B., & Donthu, N. (2001).
	• This brand is similar to what I am like. • For me, it is important to use products that reflect who I am.	• This brand's personality is similar to who I am. • It is important for me to use products that reflect my true self.	Guzmán Rincón et al. (2023)
Perceived Quality	• (…) has an acceptable standard of quality. • (…) is well made.	• This brand maintains a high standard of quality. • This brand's products are well-made.	Wang et al. (2024)
Perceived Brand Purpose	• I am concerned that the organization is only pretending its green image. • I am concerned that sustainable clothes are not manufactured under sustainable conditions.	• I believe this brand is genuine about its ethical and green image. • I believe this brand uses environmentally friendly materials.	Rausch & Kopplin (2021)
Community Engagement	• I see myself as a part of the NE fan community. • The friendships I have with other NE fans mean a lot to me. • Other NE fans and I share the same objectives.	• I see myself as a part of this brand's community. • The connection I have with other fans of this brand is meaningful to me. • Other fans of this brand and I share the same objectives and perspectives.	Mills et al. (2022)
Perceived Value	• (…) is one that I would enjoy. • (…) would improve the way I am perceived.	• This brand is one that I truly enjoy using. • Using this brand improves the way I am perceived by others.	Wang et al. (2024)
Emotional Attachment	• ...feel emotionally connected to this sports fashion brand? • ...feel there is a natural 'fit' between you and this sports fashion brand?	• I feel a strong emotional connection to this brand. • I feel there is a natural 'fit' between me and this brand.	Loureiro et al. (2024)
Brand Loyalty	• I would recommend this brand to my friends or others.	• I would recommend this brand to my friends or others.	Guzmán Rincón et al. (2023)
	• I intended to remain loyal to NE in the Future.	• I intend to remain loyal to this brand in the future.	Mills et al. (2022)
Purchase Intention	• It is very likely that I will purchase items from this brand in the future.	• It is highly likely that I will purchase items from this brand in the future.	Rausch & Kopplin (2021)

Source: Own elaboration

Appendix B – Sociodemographic Characterization of the Sample

Variables	Category	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)
Gender	Male	56	47.5
	Female	53	44.9
	Neither	5	4.2
	Prefer not to say	4	3.4
Age (Year Born in)	Between 1997 and 2012	118	100
Country of Residence	Portugal	118	100
Education	Bachelor's Degree or Equivalent	39	33.1
	Secondary School	37	31.4
	Master's Degree or Equivalent	36	30.5
	PhD/Doctorate or Equivalent	4	3.4
	Basic Education	2	1.7
Occupation	Student	33	28
	Employed	32	27.1
	Student-Worker	30	25.4
	Unemployed	23	19.5

Source: Own elaboration based on SPSS

Appendix C - Sportswear Consumption Habits of the Sample

Variables	Category	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)
Favorite Brand	Nike	40	33.9
	Adidas	33	28.0
	New Balance	26	22.0
	Puma	17	14.4
	Others	2	1.7
Primary Purchase Driver	Price & Value for Money	32	26.7
	Product Quality and Performance	21	17.8
	Style & Design	11	9.3
	Community & Hype	6	5.1
	Sustainability	3	2.2
	Combined Factors (Multiple)	45	38.9
Loyalty Evaluation	"I am loyal to one specific brand and rarely buy from others."	39	33.1
	"I have a small set of favorite brands (2 or 3), and I switch between them depending on the product."	40	33.9
	"The brand name matters less to me; I simply choose the product that offers the best specific features (style, comfort, price) at the moment, regardless of the brand."	39	33.1

Social Media Engagement	"I do not follow or interact with the brand on social media."	36	30.5
	"I follow the brand and view their content, but I rarely interact (no likes or comments)."	32	27.1
	"I regularly 'like', save, or share the brand's posts with friends."	25	21.2
	"I actively comment on posts, participate in challenges, or post my own photos/videos wearing the brand's products (tagging them)."	25	21.2
Willingness to Pay	"I would strictly choose the cheaper Unknown Brand. I am not willing to pay extra just for a logo."	18	15.3
	"I would buy my Favorite Brand only if the price difference is very small. If it is much more expensive, I switch to the cheaper one."	42	35.6
	"I would buy my Favorite Brand even if it is significantly more expensive. I only switch if the price difference is unreasonable."	33	28.0
	"I would always choose my Favorite Brand, regardless of the price difference. The brand is essential to me."	25	21.2

Source: Own elaboration based on SPSS

Appendix D - Measurement Model Evaluation (Loadings, Reliability, and Validity)

Construct	Item	Outer Loading	Cronbach's Alpha	Composite Reliability (rho_c)	AVE
Brand Awareness	BW1	1.000	1.000	1.000	1.000
Brand Associations & Identity	BA2 BA3	0.888 0.816	0.630	0.842	0.728
Brand Loyalty	BL1 BL2	0.768 0.921	0.627	0.835	0.719
Community Engagement	CE1 CE2 CE3	0.893 0.928 0.894	0.890	0.932	0.819
Emotional Attachment	EA1 EA2	0.909 0.912	0.794	0.906	0.829
Perceived Brand Purpose	PBP1 PBP2	0.923 0.952	0.864	0.936	0.879
Perceived Quality	PQ1 PQ2	0.883 0.834	0.646	0.849	0.737
Perceived Value	PV1	1.000	1.000	1.000	1.000
Purchase Intention	PI1	1.000	1.000	1.000	1.000

Source: Own elaboration based on Smart PLS

Appendix E - Discriminant Validity (HTMT Ratio)

	Brand Associations & Identity	Brand Awareness	Brand Loyalty	Community Engagement	Emotional Attachment	Perceived Brand Purpose	Perceived Quality	Perceived Value	Purchase Intention
Brand Associations & Identity									
Brand Awareness	0.274								
Brand Loyalty	0.716	0.219							
Community Engagement	0.701	0.209	0.656						
Emotional Attachment	0.829	0.281	0.791	0.881					
Perceived Brand Purpose	0.648	0.169	0.366	0.663	0.544				
Perceived Quality	0.575	0.197	0.760	0.420	0.444	0.349			
Perceived Value	0.555	0.282	0.528	0.494	0.553	0.268	0.463		
Purchase Intention	0.112	0.012	0.416	0.139	0.181	0.052	0.421	0.370	

Source: Own elaboration based on Smart PLS

Appendix F - Discriminant Validity (Cross-Loadings)

	Brand Associations & Identity	Brand Awareness	Brand Loyalty	Community Engagement	Emotional Attachment	Perceived Brand Purpose	Perceived Quality	Perceived Value	Purchase Intention
BA2	0.888	0.265	0.452	0.591	0.602	0.502	0.330	0.484	0.099
BA3	0.816	0.107	0.381	0.306	0.398	0.324	0.304	0.269	0.053
BL1	0.235	0.190	0.768	0.217	0.298	0.039	0.405	0.282	0.227
BL2	0.538	0.107	0.921	0.620	0.656	0.421	0.428	0.432	0.335
BW1	0.227	1.000	0.160	0.197	0.251	0.161	0.155	0.282	0.012
CE1	0.523	0.187	0.497	0.893	0.656	0.605	0.300	0.417	0.188
CE2	0.498	0.135	0.479	0.928	0.680	0.522	0.271	0.360	0.103
CE3	0.452	0.213	0.495	0.894	0.674	0.472	0.304	0.487	0.064
EA1	0.592	0.220	0.497	0.713	0.909	0.504	0.281	0.446	0.106
EA2	0.496	0.236	0.601	0.636	0.912	0.324	0.310	0.451	0.187
PBP1	0.416	0.114	0.301	0.483	0.391	0.923	0.246	0.174	-0.068
PBP2	0.502	0.182	0.301	0.607	0.453	0.952	0.243	0.293	0.022
PI1	0.092	0.012	0.341	0.130	0.162	-0.019	0.336	0.370	1.000
PQ1	0.364	0.102	0.463	0.316	0.343	0.226	0.883	0.347	0.265

PQ2	0.268	0.171	0.366	0.231	0.205	0.221	0.834	0.293	0.316
PV1	0.454	0.282	0.435	0.465	0.492	0.256	0.374	1.000	0.370

Source: Own elaboration based on Smart PLS

Appendix G - Collinearity Statistics (Inner VIF)

Structural Path	**VIF**
Brand Associations & Identity → Brand Loyalty	1.701
Brand Associations & Identity → Perceived Quality	1.000
Brand Associations & Identity → Purchase Intention	1.722
Brand Awareness → Brand Associations & Identity	1.000
Brand Loyalty → Purchase Intention	1.891
Community Engagement → Emotional Attachment	1.528
Emotional Attachment → Brand Loyalty	1.729
Emotional Attachment → Purchase Intention	2.047
Perceived Brand Purpose → Emotional Attachment	1.528
Perceived Brand Purpose → Perceived Value	1.073
Perceived Quality → Brand Loyalty	1.242
Perceived Quality → Perceived Value	1.073
Perceived Quality → Purchase Intention	1.395
Perceived Value → Brand Loyalty	1.463
Perceived Value → Purchase Intention	1.474

Source: Own elaboration based on SmartPLS