



Master's Degree in Marketing

Major in Market Relationship & Customer Engagement

Chair of Digital Marketing

Branding through belonging: how culture and community influence authentic brand development.

Matteo De Angelis

SUPERVISOR

Paolo Peverini

CO-SUPERVISOR

Ludovica Selicato

CANDIDATE

Academic Year 2024/2025

*Ai miei genitori,
la mia casa,
ovunque io sia.*

Abstract

In an era defined by digital advancements and cultural relevance, branding has evolved beyond traditional marketing frameworks into a relational and symbolic process. With this regard, this thesis investigates how the sense of belonging to a community influences brand perception, with a particular focus on the role played by cultural identity, community engagement, and authenticity in shaping the relationships between consumers and brands. Hence, drawing from theoretical frameworks in brand development, tribal marketing, and cultural branding, the research explores the interplay between identity, participation, and consumer behavior in contemporary branding ecosystems.

The empirical section of the thesis focuses on a quantitative analysis of the topic, conducted through a concept-testing questionnaire for the emerging brand *tevojodi*, aiming to assess the impact of perceived belonging on brand perception, engagement, and purchase intention.

In this context, the outcomes highlight that a strong sense of belonging significantly enhances brand perception, increases the perceived authenticity of the brand, and positively influences consumer engagement behaviors such as Word of Mouth and social sharing. Additionally, the research demonstrates that perceived authenticity mediates the relationship between belonging and purchase intention, underscoring its strategic relevance in community-driven branding.

This thesis contributes to both academic and managerial research by providing relevant empirical evidence related to the value of belonging as a branding asset. It thus proposes a shift from transaction marketing practices to more relational branding strategies in which cultural resonance, emotional intimacy, and community participation are pivotal to brand success. Thus, findings offer interesting insights for emerging brands aiming to build culturally relevant and emotionally compelling identities in an increasingly saturated and socially fragmented marketplace.

Table of content

1.	<i>Understanding the phenomenon: community, culture, and branding</i>	6
1.1	Role of community in modern branding	6
1.1.1	Tribal marketing: definition and relevance in brand loyalty	10
1.2	Cultural identity as a branding asset	12
1.2.1	The impact of cultural identity on brand perception	13
1.2.2	The Country of Origin (COO) effect: a branding perspective	17
1.2.3	The future of cultural branding in consumer markets	20
1.3	The power of Word of Mouth (WOM) and social influence in brand growth	20
1.4	Market trends and consumer behavior	23
1.4.1	The evolution of branding strategies: authenticity, grassroots marketing, and localization	23
2.	<i>Theoretical foundation of community and cultural belonging</i>	26
2.1	Theories of brand development and identity	26
2.2	Community-driven branding: engagement, membership, and loyalty	28
2.2.1	Cultural proximity and the psychology of belonging	30
2.3	Word of Mouth and influencer marketing in brand growth	31
2.3.1	Influencer marketing as a digital evolution of WOM	32
2.4	Social media as a catalyst for branding	33
2.4.1	The influence of User Generated Content (UGC)	33
2.4.2	Social media algorithms and viral content	35
2.5	Research contribution and theoretical positioning	38
3.	<i>Tevojodi: brand identity and strategic marketing planning</i>	42
3.1	A story of belonging: the origins and values of tevojodi	42
3.1.1	Target audience	45
3.1.2	Market context and competitor analysis	48
3.2	Strategic marketing plan for brand launch	52
3.2.1	Communication strategy	55
3.2.2	Distribution and sales channels	57
3.3	Theoretical implications and development potential	59
4.	<i>Research design and data analysis</i>	61
4.2	Research objectives and theoretical constructs	61
4.3	Questionnaire structure	64
4.3.1	Descriptive analysis of the sample	66
4.4	Data analysis and interpretation	68
4.4.1	Hypothesis 1: a higher sense of belonging leads to a more positive overall perception of the brand	68
4.4.2	Hypothesis 2: belonging is positively associated with perceived authenticity of the brand	73
4.4.3	Hypothesis 3: belonging is positively correlated with engagement (WOM, sharing, following)	75
4.4.4	H4: Belonging predicts purchase intention	81
4.4.5	H5: Authenticity mediates the relationship between belonging and purchase intention	84

4.5	Research limitations and empirical conclusions	88
	<i>Conclusion</i>	90
	<i>Qualtrics Appendix</i>	92
A.1	Introduction	92
A.3	Introducing tevojodi	93
A.4	Demographic questions	95
A.5	Thank you message	95
	<i>SPSS Appendix – Supplementary Statistical Outputs</i>	96
A.1	Descriptive analysis of the sample	96
A.2	Hypothesis 3: Belonging and engagement (WOM, sharing, and following)	96
A.3	Hypothesis 4: Belonging and purchase intention	98
A.4	Hypothesis 5: Mediation analysis	98
	<i>Bibliography</i>	102
	<i>Sitography</i>	107

1. Understanding the phenomenon: community, culture, and branding

In the current dynamic landscape, branding has evolved beyond its traditional role of merely distinguishing products and services: today, consumers demand more interactive and meaningful relationships with brands, leading to the evolution of community engagement, cultural identity, and social influence as core branding strategies. Indeed, consumers no longer passively receive marketing messages but actively participate in shaping and co-creating brand identities, fostering deeper emotional connections with the brands they admire. As a result, community-driven branding, cultural branding, and the strategic use of Word of Mouth (WOM) and social influence¹ have become essential key drivers in brand growth.

This chapter explores the interplay between community, culture, and branding, analyzing how these elements shape branding strategies and consumer-brand relationships. The first section of the chapter begins by examining the role of community in branding, highlighting the transition from traditional marketing approaches to community-driven branding and discussing the impact of strategies like tribal marketing in fostering brand loyalty. The discussion then shifts to the importance of cultural identity as a branding asset, exploring its impact on consumer perception and the strategic integration of culture in global branding. The section then further analyses the power of WOM practices and social influence in brand growth, demonstrating how peer recommendations, digital connections, and social validation contribute to brand awareness and trust. Finally, the chapter underlines factual market trends and consumer behavior, focusing on authenticity, grassroots marketing, and localization as key branding strategies in response to consumers' increasing demand for transparency, engagement, and cultural relevance.

1.1 Role of community in modern branding

Over the past few decades, community branding has undergone a radical transformation. Indeed, traditionally, brands operated as distant entities that relied heavily on a one-way

¹ Meant as the process by which individuals' thoughts, feelings, or behaviors are influenced by the presence or actions of others (Cialdini et al., 2004).

marketing model², spreading messages through mass media such as television, radio and print, without direct consumer participation; this approach, known as traditional marketing, focused mainly on persuasion and message repetition to build awareness and value. However, with the rise of digital platforms, this model has become obsolete and less effective as, today, consumers are no longer satisfied with passively receiving advertising messages but demand to play an active role in shaping brand reputation and strategic decisions. Thus, this shift has led to a new approach, redefining branding as a relational process where companies are no longer only merely providers of goods but actively engage with their audience, fostering genuine connections and nurturing a sense of belonging and co-creation³ (Fournier & Lee, 2009). Thereby, community-driven branding prioritizes consumer participation, creating spaces where users can share experiences, influence brand development, and form emotional connections.

This transformation is deeply rooted in the Self-Determination Theory (SDT), a psychological framework which suggests that people seek the fulfillment of three psychological needs: autonomy, competence, and relatedness (Deci & Ryan, 1985). Particularly, autonomy refers to the individuals' need to feel in control of their own actions and decisions, therefore brands that provide consumers with tools to co-create content, share their feedback, and influence product development, they empower them with a sense of agency. On the other hand, competence involves the need to feel effective and capable in one's interactions: brands that facilitate consumer learning and skill-sharing enhance this sense of competence. Finally, competence involves the need to connect with others and feel a sense of belonging, so community-driven branding thrives on fostering emotional bonds among consumers, strengthening their identification with both the brand and equivalent users. In the context of branding, companies that successfully engage with consumers in participatory experiences by providing platforms for consumer expression, meet these core needs, fostering emotional bonds and strengthening brand loyalty.

² One-way communication refers to the process where information flows from the sender to the receiver without any feedback or dialogue, with consumers having little influence over the brand's image (Chandler & Munday, 2016).

³ Co-creation is defined as the process through which consumers actively participate in the creation of brand value, fostering collaboration, engagement, and personalization, and enabling companies to gain insights into their customers' preferences (Prahalad & Ramaswamy, 2004).

Moreover, community engagement in branding refers to a brand's ability to actively interact with its audience, fostering participation and a sense of belonging. Therefore, by positioning brands as architects of meaningful relationships rather than mere suppliers of goods and services, community engagement goes beyond traditional marketing efforts: it transforms individuals from passive buyers into co-creators of brand identity, shaping narratives through interactions, feedback, and advocacy. This shift aligns with the Social Identity Theory, which theorizes that individuals derive part of their self-esteem and identity from membership in social groups (Tajfel & Turner, 1979); therefore, brands that successfully cultivate communities allow individuals to align with groups that reflect their values and interests, strengthening their personal identity and brand attachment.

The concept of brand community refers to groups of consumers who develop a strong sense of belonging around a brand (Muniz and O'Guinn, 2001). Precisely, such communities can be classified into two main categories: consumer-led communities, that form spontaneously around a brand and often operate independently from the company; and brand-managed communities, that are created and maintained by companies to encourage consumer engagement.

A brand community is characterized by three key elements: a collective consciousness; shared rituals and traditions; and a sense of moral responsibility among members (Muniz & O'Guinn, 2001). Collective consciousness refers to the emotional connection that members of a community share with a brand, where loyalty is based not just on product preference but on a shared identity and common values. For instance, Apple's community exemplifies this, as customers often perceive themselves as part of an exclusive group that values innovation, design, and simplicity. Shared rituals and traditions, further reinforce this collective identity, creating and strengthening mutual community bonds; they can take many forms, from annual events to product launches to unofficial customs developed by the community itself. Harley Davidson, for example, has nurtured a strong community through its Harley Owners Group (HOG), where riders engage in organized rides, brand-sponsored events, and the celebration of their shared lifestyle. Similarly, a sense of moral responsibility within a brand community fosters mutual support between members and drives them to endorse the brand against any possible external criticism. This phenomenon is expressed particularly in online communities, where consumers

actively contribute to discussions, provide support to fellow users, and advocate for the brand against controversies or competitor challenges. For example, as seen in Tesla forums, users actively assist each other with troubleshooting and advocate for the company's vision of sustainability, reinforcing their commitment to both the brand and its overarching mission.

Authenticity is one of the most important elements of community-driven branding: nowadays, consumers increasingly value transparency, hence brands that embrace openness, whether through behind-the-scenes content or employee-driven storytelling, tend to resonate deeper with the target audience. A notable example of this shift is visible in the fashion and beauty industries, where luxury brands leverage employee-generated content to create a sense of authenticity and relatability; therefore, by featuring creative directors, designers, and artisans in their storytelling, brands can enhance credibility and strengthen emotional connections with their customers.

Another fundamental trait is played by User Generated Content (UGC)⁴: by encouraging consumers to create and share their own content, companies can foster a sense of ownership and belonging, empowering users to become brand advocates, sharing their personal experiences and, at the same time, enhancing the brand's credibility through organic peer-to-peer promotion⁵. However, it is important to note that community engagement extends way beyond digital interactions: it involves creating opportunities for consumers to actively participate in the brand's development and creating a sense of exclusiveness, therefore strengthening consumer-brand relationships.

Moreover, another essential driver of community-driven branding is the alignment of a brand's values with those of its target audience as, nowadays, consumers are actively looking for brands that stand for something beyond their products.

Brand communities offer numerous benefits for both companies and consumers: on the one hand, they enhance brand loyalty, reduce advertising costs due to Word of Mouth

⁴ User Generated Content (UGC) refers to any form of content created and published by users on a social media platform rather than by the organization or brand itself (Kaplan et al., 2010).

⁵ Peer-to-peer promotion refers to a communication strategy in which individuals share information, recommendations, or endorsements directly with their peers, often leveraging personal networks, social media, or WOM to influence opinions and behaviors (Kotler and Keller, 2019).

(WOM) effect, and increase the perceived brand value; on the other hand, they provide consumers with a sense of belonging and a privileged channel to interact with both the brand and like-minded individuals. Thereby, by fostering brand communities which emphasize interaction and participation, companies benefit from increased customer retention⁶, organic marketing⁷ through WOM, and reduced reliance on traditional advertising strategies. Indeed, a study conducted by Edelman (2020) highlighted that 81% of consumers need to trust a brand before making a purchase, reinforcing the importance of community engagement in brand success. Additionally, according to the Edelman Trust Barometer⁸, 63% of people trust more information coming from individuals rather than corporate messages, highlighting the effectiveness of peer-to-peer influence. In the same framework, a report directed by Nielsen has shown that 92% of consumers trust recommendations from friends and family over traditional advertising, underscoring the power of brand advocacy within communities⁹.

In this scenario, community engagement is not merely a marketing strategy but represents a pivotal shift in the relationship between brands and consumers: in an era where authenticity and trust are paramount, fostering community engagement is essential for brands aiming to build long-term loyalty and cultural relevance (Kotler and Keller, 2016). Additionally, community-driven branding fosters innovation as, by engaging with their audience, brands can gain insights into their target needs, pain points¹⁰, and preferences, enabling companies to refine their products and services in a way that directly responds to their customers' demands.

1.1.1 Tribal marketing: definition and relevance in brand loyalty

Tribal marketing is a branding strategy that focuses on leveraging collective sentiment and social connections of consumer groups, known as “tribes”, to promote products and

⁶ Customer retention refers to a company's ability to keep existing customers over time by fostering loyalty and satisfaction, often through enhanced engagement, service quality, or personalized experiences (Kotler & Keller, 2016).

⁷ Organic marketing refers to strategies aimed at attracting customers naturally, without paid advertising, relying only on content creation, Search Engine Optimization (SEO), and community engagement.

⁸ The Edelman Trust Barometer is an annual global survey conducted by the public relations firm Edelman, and it measures the trust in institutions such as government, business, media, and NGOs.

⁹ Nielsen. (2015). *Global trust in advertising: Winning strategies for an evolving media landscape*. Nielsen.

¹⁰ Pain points refer to specific problems, challenges, or frustrations that customers may experience in their buying journey (Schneider & Hall, 2011).

services. Precisely, the tribes are described as groups of individuals who share common values, passions, and consumption practices (Cova & Cova, 2002); the aim of such tribes is to engage communities by aligning with their values and fostering a sense of belonging between individuals. Unlike traditional market segmentation, which categorizes consumers based on demographics or psychographics, tribal marketing focuses on emotional bonds and shared experiences that connect consumers within a specific cultural or subcultural group, allowing brands to position themselves as part of the identity and lifestyle of their audience, leading to loyalty and advocacy.

Some key elements of tribal marketing include: community engagement, by creating platforms where members can interact, share experiences, and build relationships; shared values, by aligning the brand's values with those of the community to foster authenticity and trust; User Generated Content (UGC), encouraging users to create and share content, enhancing their sense of ownership and connection to the brand; exclusive experiences, that refer to tailored unique events or offerings that cater to specific interests, values, and identity of a brand's tribe or community, with the aim of strengthening consumers' loyalty and emotional connections. Therefore, brands that adopt tribal marketing strategies, can create a symbolic space that extends beyond the product itself, becoming an integral part of consumers' daily lives. For instance, Nike exemplifies the effectiveness of tribal marketing practices by creating a global community of runners through events, mobile apps like *Nike Run Club*, and collaborations with several athletes. Thereby, the brand goes beyond simply selling sportswear and positions itself as a partner in its customers' fitness journeys, fostering motivation and unity through shared challenges, training apps, and real-life events, reinforcing a collective identity among consumers and turning them into genuine brand ambassadors.

Despite its effectiveness, tribal marketing presents ethical challenges, and one major issue is related to the balance between exclusivity and inclusivity. In fact, while many tribal marketing strategies thrive with the creation of a niche community, exclusivity can also alienate consumers who feel as if they don't fit within the brand's identity. Therefore, it is fundamental for firms to be mindful on how they cultivate their consumer tribes to avoid unintended social divisions.

Another important concern is the potential for consumer manipulation, as critics argue that tribal marketing exploits consumers' psychological needs for belonging, leading to excessive brand loyalty and irrational purchasing behaviors. This behavior is particularly evident especially in hype-driven brands like Supreme, which have been criticized for encouraging impulsive spending, where consumers feel compelled to buy limited-edition products just to maintain their social status within the tribe (Kozinets et al., 2010).

Finally, crucial sensitivity plays another important role, as when engaging with tribal marketing, brands must be careful not to appropriate cultural symbols or traditions in ways that could be perceived as disrespectful or exploitative.

1.2 Cultural identity as a branding asset

In an increasingly globalized market, cultural identity has become a powerful tool in shaping brand perception, influencing brand authenticity, differentiation, and consumer trust; as globalization intensifies competition, the brands that successfully integrate cultural elements into their identity stand out as more relatable and meaningful to consumers.

Cultural identity in branding refers to the representation of a brand's values, traditions, and social constructs that resonate with specific cultural groups; it highlights the emotional, social, and symbolic connections between a brand and its audience, often reflecting shared cultural experiences, heritage, and community belonging (Holt, 2004). The phenomenon of cultural branding is becoming increasingly important, as brands nowadays seek to meaningfully connect with diverse consumer segments. To do so, it is essential to leverage cultural symbols, narratives, and values to foster emotional connections with the target customers, who often demand products that reflect their personal and cultural identities. Thereby, by aligning with social norms and values, brands can better enhance their relevance and appeal, especially in global markets where cultural differences are more than ever significant. In this scenario, companies that effectively integrate aspects of cultural identity into their strategy build trust and loyalty, as consumers feel that the brand understands and reflects their unique experiences and lifestyle (Bhattacharya & Elsbach, 2002). Thus, brands that integrate cultural identity by reflecting, celebrating, or challenging the cultural values, norms, and traditions of their target customers can foster deep connections with their audience, establishing themselves

as culturally relevant in a globalized and saturated market. For instance, Dove's *Real Beauty* campaign is a powerful example of how a firm can successfully leverage cultural identity to challenge traditional beauty standards: by promoting diversity in body types, skin colors, and ages, Dove has echoed with global audiences who see beauty as being inclusive rather than exclusive. With this strategy, the brand has made significant advances in aligning its branding with values of self-esteem and body positivity, both of which are extremely culturally relevant in today's society.

Another interesting concept in understanding the importance of culturally rooted brand is cultural proximity, which refers to the psychological closeness a consumer feels towards a brand that reflects their own cultural norms, language, or experiences (Straubhaar, 1991). Precisely, this phenomenon focuses on the impact that micro-identities¹¹ can have in creating emotional resonance. In branding, this proximity can translate into increased message credibility, trust, and willingness to buy, as consumers will be more inclined to support brands that "speak their language", literally and metaphorically.

For instance, brands that integrate local expressions, idioms, or visual cues, can trigger a sense of familiarity in the consumer, which further enhances perceived authenticity. This mechanism is particularly relevant in the case of *tevojodi*, a brand whose concept is built around Roman expressions and linguistic identity.

1.2.1 The impact of cultural identity on brand perception

Cultural identity significantly influences how consumers perceive and interact with the brand, as past studies highlight that brands that integrate cultural narratives into their branding strategies tend to appear more authentic, trustworthy, and relatable than those that adopt a generic and standardized approach, since they are more related to existent traditions, values, and community histories (Napoli et al., 2014).

Cultural identity has also a significant impact on emotional engagement which, in turn, influences brand loyalty. Research in consumer psychology highlights that people tend to form deeper emotional connections with brands that better reflect their own cultural background or values (Aaker et al., 2001). Therefore, when a brand embodies cultural symbols, traditions, or language that resonate with consumers, it fosters a sense of

¹¹ Micro-identities can be meant as regional dialects, local humor, or shared traditions.

belonging and identification within the target audience. A study conducted by Keller (2013) further supports this idea, demonstrating that brands that effectively integrate cultural identity into their marketing can experience higher levels of brand attachment and advocacy. Thus, Keller's research showed that when consumers associate a brand with their cultural background, they are around 40% more likely to engage in WOM recommendations, and 32% more likely to show long-term loyalty¹², thus emphasizing the impact of cultural identity on brand performance.

One of the key psychological mechanisms behind cultural branding is self-congruence theory, which posits that consumers tend to engage more with brands that resonate with their cultural backgrounds and value system (Sirgy, 1982). This theory distinguishes between two main aspects: actual self-congruence, which is the match between the brand image and how consumers perceive themselves; and ideal-self congruence, which is where the brand reflects how it aspires to be. In both cases, the emotional connection originates from a perceived alignment between personal identity and the symbolic meanings that the brand represents.

From this perspective, brands become more than just commercial entities and cultural branding doesn't merely reflect individual preferences but also resonates with collective ideas, social norms, and cultural values. In this regard, when consumers perceive a brand as expressing the same values or struggles that define their own group and community, they are more likely to engage with it, not only as customers but as participants in a shared cultural project (Holt, 2004). This alignment fosters trust, recognition, and emotional investments; all aspects that are crucial especially for new emerging brands, for which the awareness is still very low, and offerings are limited. Therefore, rather than relying merely on product attributes or visibility, emerging brands can focus their efforts in fostering a sense of belonging by positioning themselves as cultural allies, reinforcing the emotional and symbolic bonds that bring people together.

Cultural identity is pivotal in reinforcing brand authenticity, which represents a key determinant of consumer trust and loyalty, particularly in times of growing skepticism

¹² Keller, K. L. (2013). *Strategic Brand Management: Building, Measuring, and Managing Brand Equity*. Pearson Education.

towards corporate motives. Indeed, as consumers become increasingly aware of marketing strategies and demand greater transparency from brands, authenticity has become a defining factor that differentiates credible brands from those perceived as opportunistic or insincere. Therefore, brand authenticity is not merely a marketing strategy, but a deeply rooted perception shaped by a brand's ability to remain consistent, credible, ethically aligned, and symbolically meaningful (Morhart et al., 2015).

The first dimension of authenticity is continuity, which refers to a brand's aptitude to maintain a consistent identity and values over time; consumers are more inclined to trust marques that exhibit historical longevity, heritage and an established narrative, as these elements signal reliability and a strong foundational ethos. For instance, luxury brands such as Burberry have successfully reinforced authenticity through a balance between heritage and modernity, always maintaining its British identity, craftsmanship, and association with classic elegance. This strategic consistency reassures consumers that the brand will stay committed to its origins while adapting to ever-changing expectations.

Another dimension of authenticity is credibility which, other than being closely linked to continuity, reflects a brand's ability to demonstrate honesty, reliability, and transparency. In today's digital age, where social media exposes corporate actions to instant public scrutiny, credibility is no longer just about messaging but also about tangible proof of brand values. Moreover, brands that consistently align their actions with their stated values are more likely to retain long-term customer loyalty, as consumers increasingly reward transparency and ethical commitments over superficial advertising claims (Morhart et al., 2015).

The third dimension that further reinforces authenticity is integrity, which ensures that the brand's ethical and moral commitments are aligned with its business practices. Precisely, nowadays consumers expect brands to uphold ethical standards not just in their messaging but also in their operational decisions. According to a recent study, while 73% of consumers believe that brands should take a stand on social issues, only 37% trust them to follow through on their commitments (Edelman, 2021); this discrepancy underscores the importance of integrity as a pivotal element in brand authenticity, distinguishing brands that genuinely uphold their values from those engaging in performative activism. Finally, symbolism reflects a brand's ability to evoke cultural, social, or personal significance. Thus, symbolic branding allows consumers to connect with a brand beyond

its functional attributes, associating it with values, heritage, or aspirational lifestyles. This dimension is particularly important in luxury branding, where cultural narratives and national identity play a crucial role in shaping brand perception. Additionally, research indicated that brands with strong symbolic narratives command higher consumer loyalty and willingness to pay a premium price, as they are perceived as more than just commercial entities, becoming real cultural icons (Kapferer & Bastien, 2017). The Country of Origin (COO) effect further enhances symbolism, with brands like Ferrari capitalizing on Italy's association with speed, passion, and craftsmanship, or Rolex leveraging Swiss precision and heritage to reinforce perceptions of exclusivity and technical proficiency.

In today's highly competitive markets, where multiple brands offer similar products and services, cultural identity emerges as a powerful tool for brand differentiation, enabling brands that highlight cultural uniqueness to stand out. Thereby, by integrating cultural elements into their branding strategies, companies can create a distinct identity that resonates more deeply with the target audience, establishing stronger emotional connections. This approach, focused on cultural branding tactics, enhances brand distinctiveness, making it easier for consumers to recall and develop a preference for brands that embed cultural uniqueness in their identity rather than adopting neutral or generic positioning (Torelli & Stoner, 2018).

In this context, a recent consumer insight report from Nielsen (2021) highlights that 68% of global consumers tend to prefer brands that reflect their cultural values; such trend is especially obvious among younger demographics, such as Millennials and Gen Z consumers, who actively seek brands that represent values like diversity, inclusion, and authenticity. The study further emphasizes that brands with strong cultural positioning are perceived as more premium and higher quality compared to those with more generic branding. Therefore, the data collected from the analysis (Table 1) illustrates that brands with a strong cultural identity consistently score higher in critical brand perception metrics, reinforcing the importance of cultural branding as a strategic advantage.

Table 1: The impact of cultural identity on different aspects of brand perception

Brand perception factor	Brands with strong cultural identity	Brands with weak cultural identity
Perceived authenticity	89%	52%
Emotional connection	84%	47%
Consumer trust	82%	56%
Brand loyalty	76%	41%
Willingness to pay a premium price	65%	38%

Source: Author elaboration, 2025.

The data presented in Table 1 highlights the strong correlation between cultural identity and positive brand perception: brands that integrate cultural identity into their strategy consistently score higher across key metrics, including perceived authenticity, emotional connection, and consumer trust. These results align with the existing research, which suggests that cultural branding enhances credibility and strengthens consumer relationships. Conspicuously, the willingness to pay a premium price is significantly higher for culturally strong brands, reinforcing the idea that cultural differentiation can drive brand equity and justify premium positioning. Overall, the findings confirm that cultural branding is a key tool when it comes to fostering loyalty and increasing brand value in competitive markets.

1.2.2 The Country of Origin (COO) effect: a branding perspective

The Country of Origin (COO) effect refers to the influence that the country where a product is manufactured or a brand originates from has on consumer perceptions, attitudes, and purchasing decisions (Johansson et al., 1985). This effect stems from stereotypes, cultural associations, and historical reputation, which collectively shape brand perception: for instance, consumers may associate German cars like Porsche with engineering excellence, Swiss watches like Longines with precision, or Italian fashion brands like Gucci with luxury and style. Thereby, this phenomenon is based on the idea that consumers often associate specific attributes, such as quality, craftsmanship, prestige, or innovation, with products from a specific country, influencing the perceived quality and prestige, as well as their willingness to pay a premium price. The COO

effect can thus significantly impact the brand image and can either enhance or hinder a product's success in international markets.

The COO effect can be explained through the Halo Effect, a cognitive bias which postulates that the overall impression of a person, brand, or product influences specific judgements about individual traits or qualities. In the context of branding, the Halo Effect assumes that if consumers have a positive perception of a brand, they are more likely to undertake that all products from that brand are made of high quality, even if they haven't directly experienced them (Thorndike, 1920). In the same way, the Halo Effect validates that an individual's overall impression of a country influences their evaluation of specific products from that country (Nagashima, 1970); consequently, when consumers perceive a country as advanced or superior in certain fields, they will extend that perception also to brands originating from that country.

Table 2: Empirical evidence on the COO effect

COO effect on consumer perceptions	Percentage of influence
Product quality perception	60%
Brand preference and loyalty	45%
Purchase decision	50%
Premium pricing ¹³	35%

Source: Author elaboration, 2025.

The data shown in Table 2 provides empirical evidence on the influence of the Country-of-Origin effect on consumer perceptions. Particularly, the strongest impact is detected on product quality perception which, aligning with the Halo Effect theory, suggests that a positive impression of a country extends to the evaluation of its products (Nagashima, 1970). Likewise, the COO effect plays a critical role in influencing purchase decisions as well as brand preference and loyalty, demonstrating that consumers are more likely to trust and repeatedly purchase brands from countries with a strong reputation. Particularly, the ability to grasp premium pricing further demonstrates that the Country-

¹³ Meant as the willingness to pay for a higher price.

of-Origin effect can enhance the perceived value, allowing brands from highly regarded nations to justify higher price points. Overall, the findings illustrated in Table 2 reinforce the idea that leveraging a country's image in branding can function as a tactical advantage in competitive markets.

Successful global brands strategically integrate their Country of Origin into the brand positioning to enhance consumer perceptions, highlighting their national heritage, expertise, and production standards to differentiate themselves from competitors. Bvlgari, the iconic Italian luxury brand, offers a prime example of how a brand can successfully leverage cultural identity in its branding. Indeed, the company has deeply rooted its distinctiveness in the rich Italian heritage and craftsmanship, integrating these cultural elements into its designs and marketing strategies, and positioning Bvlgari as a symbol of "Made in Italy" luxury. In this context, Bvlgari capitalizes on the Italian concept of *La Dolce Vita*, portraying its products as part of a refined luxurious lifestyle. Bvlgari embraces the Italian heritage not only in its design but also in its commitment to craftsmanship: thereby, each piece is meticulously crafted by skilled artisans, a practice that resonates with consumers who value Italian tradition, quality, and attention to detail. Additionally, the brand embraces these assets also in its marketing strategies, emphasizing the narrative of craftsmanship and aligning with Italy's long-standing reputation for producing high-quality, artisanal luxury goods.

In addition to its focus on craftsmanship, Bvlgari also connects its product offering with Italy's cultural identity through its branding campaigns. For instance, the brand's visual storytelling often features iconic Italian landmarks, such as the Colosseum and the Vatican, as well as highlighting the Mediterranean lifestyle. This approach is further reinforced through limited-edition collections inspired by Italian culture, with collections reflecting the art and landscapes of different parts of the country.

Therefore, by intertwining Italian culture, luxury, and craftsmanship, into its brand narrative, Bvlgari successfully appeals to consumers who desire not only high-quality products but also a connection to Italy's timeless elegance and rich heritage.

1.2.3 The future of cultural branding in consumer markets

As consumers keep on prioritizing aspects like authenticity, inclusivity, and local relevance, cultural branding will become an increasingly important component of branding strategies. In this scenario, brands that successfully integrate cultural identity into their storytelling, will benefit from stronger brand perception, greater consumer trust, and long-term loyalty.

Moreover, emerging trends suggest that hyper-local branding will be a key focus in the coming years, and companies are already shifting towards more regionalized marketing strategies, creating products and campaigns tailored to specific cultural groups rather than adopting a one-size-fits-all approach. In this scenario, technology and social media will play a crucial role in enabling brands to engage with cultural communities in more interactive and engaging ways.

Ultimately, cultural identity must not be seen as mere marketing tool: it is a fundamental aspect of how brands connect with society. In fact, the most successful brands of the future will be those that effectively recognize, respect, and celebrate cultural narratives, converting branding into a means of nurturing genuine and deep human connections.

1.3 The power of Word of Mouth (WOM) and social influence in brand growth

When it comes to today's digital age, in which consumers' trust in traditional advertising is in steady decline, Word of Mouth (WOM) and social influence have emerged as powerful tools in fostering brand growth.

Word of Mouth (WOM) refers to the informal exchange of opinions, experiences, and recommendations between individuals regarding products, services, brands, or businesses (Arndt, 1967). This practice is widely considered as one of the most beneficial forms of communication in consumer behavior, primarily because it is perceived to be as more credible than traditional advertising; indeed, when people share their personal experiences with a specific product or service, their recommendations are usually considered more trustworthy than corporate marketing messages (Brown & Reingen, 1987).

The influence of WOM on consumer behavior is crucial, as it plays a pivotal role in shaping perceptions, reducing uncertainty, and ultimately driving purchasing decisions. In fact, individuals often rely on WOM to gain valuable insights about a product's quality, functionality, and overall value, especially when they are unfamiliar with a brand (Sweeney et al., 2012); this reliance on peer recommendations is due to the credibility and authenticity associated with personal experiences. Moreover, studies have shown that WOM can lead to increased brand trust and loyalty, as consumers are more likely to believe in the reliability of fellow customers, who are perceived to be "closer" to them, rather than traditional advertising promoted by companies (Trusov et al., 2009).

In this context and given its effectiveness, enterprises actively aim to leverage WOM to enhance their marketing strategies. One of the most popular ways to foster Word of Mouth is by delivering unique customer experiences, as satisfied clients will be more motivated to share their positive encounters with others. Additionally, many companies tend to implement referral programs¹⁴, offering incentives to existing customers for recommending their products or services to others (Ryu & Feick, 2007), or influencer marketing strategies, collaborating with social media influencers to generate excitement and credibility around their products (De Veirman et al., 2017). Furthermore, companies often encourage UGC, inviting customers to share reviews, testimonials, or social media posts related to their brand (Berger & Milkman, 2012).

Word Of Mouth can be classified into two main categories: organic and amplified. On the one hand, organic WOM refers to situations where consumers naturally and voluntarily share experiences, often as a result of satisfaction or dissatisfaction with a product or service (Berger, 2014). On the other hand, amplified WOM occurs when enterprises deliberately encourage discussions about their brands through marketing strategies such as referral programs, influencer partnerships, or user-generated content (UGC) (Kozinets et al., 2010).

Social media has completely changed the way brands engage with customers, transforming passive audiences into active participants in the brand narratives: today, cultural branding is heavily influenced by digital platforms, where trends develop, and

¹⁴ A referral program is a marketing strategy where businesses incentivize existing customers to recommend their products or services to friends, family and close ones, often through rewards such as discounts or cash.

stories are shared across global audiences. Thus, with the evolution of digital platforms, traditional WOM has advanced into electronic Word of Mouth (eWOM), which encompasses the sharing of opinions through online channels such as social media, review platforms, and discussion forums (Hennig-Thurau et al., 2004). In today's digitalized environment, the impact of eWOM is particularly significant since it extends beyond personal groups, reaching to a potentially global audience and influencing consumer decisions on a larger scale. Consequently, unlike traditional Word of Mouth, eWOM gives space to a more permanent and visible record of consumer opinions, making it easier for potential buyers to access a broad range of perspectives before making purchasing decisions (Godes & Mayzlin, 2004).

In this scenario, social media platforms act as a WOM amplifier, enabling users to freely share their opinions, experiences, and endorsements instantly and from any place. Therefore, unlike traditional WOM, limited to personal and smaller networks, eWOM reaches millions of users across different geographies and demographics, creating an exponential brand exposure especially when content goes viral.

In the context of social media platforms, hashtags and viral challenges have become powerful tools for cultural branding as allow brands to tap into current social trends and movements, gaining exposure and building connections with the target audience. For instance, the #ShareACoke campaign launched by Coca Cola is a clear example of how brands can successfully use social media to leverage cultural identity. In fact, the campaign, which encouraged consumers to share pictures of their personalized Coke bottles, created a massive global impact as it generated over 500.000 social media posts and increased the company's sales by 2% only in the US market (Coca Cola Company, 2015).

Despite its many advantages, WOM and eWOM also present different challenges. In fact, online reviews and social media discussions can spread rapidly, amplifying eventual dissatisfaction on a larger scale; thus, a single negative experience shared widely can significantly damage a brand's reputation, making it fundamental for companies to maintain high-quality products and responsive customer service (Hennig-Thurau et al., 2004).

1.4 Market trends and consumer behavior

In today's dynamic marketplace, understanding market trends and consumer behavior is pivotal for brands striving to establish long-lasting relationships with their audience. In particular, an important change has occurred towards community- and culture-based branding, for which brands tend to align with specific cultural narratives and community values to foster deeper consumer relationships. In this scenario, several studies demonstrated that consumers are increasingly moving towards brands that resonate with their cultural identity and community values, with 64% of individuals that consider shared beliefs as the primary reason for their relationship with a brand (Harvard Business Review, 2012).

1.4.1. The evolution of branding strategies: authenticity, grassroots marketing, and localization

Branding strategies have undergone an intense transformation in response to evolving consumer expectations: today, consumers no longer passively accept brand narratives but strive for deeper connections with brands that align with their values, culture, and community. This shift has consequently led to the development of three key branding strategies: authenticity, grassroots marketing, and localization.

Firstly, as previously discussed, authenticity has become one of the most important assets a brand can acquire, as nowadays consumers demand transparency and honesty, preferring brands that manage to stay true to their core values rather than those that merely embrace trends only for commercial purposes.

Brand authenticity refers to the extent to which consumers perceive a brand as genuine, consistent, and true to its identity over time (Beverland, 2005). Particularly, studies reveal that globally, approximately 91% of consumers are willing to reward a brand for its authenticity (Cohn & Wolfe, 2017); this emphasis is particularly significant among younger demographics, like Millennials and Gen Z, who give greater importance to ethical business practices and corporate social responsibility (CSR).

A compelling example of authenticity in branding is Chanel, which has remained true to its heritage and craftsmanship while adapting to modern fashion trends. In fact, the brand

consistently honors the legacy of Coco Chanel by maintaining its signature styles, such as the iconic tweed jacket, while embracing contemporary innovations in sustainable fashion. Therefore, by preserving its identity while evolving with societal shifts, Chanel has been able to both maintain customer trust and reinforce its authentic brand narrative.

Secondly, in contrast to traditional top-down advertising approaches, grassroots marketing focuses on the direct engagement of consumers, building brand awareness organically by leveraging personal interactions, community involvement, and WOM recommendations (Keller, 2007). Therefore, grassroots marketing is particularly effective because it fosters a deep sense of belonging and advocacy among individuals, transforming them into active participants in the brand's narrative. Moreover, this strategy often involves influencer partnerships, local events, and consumer-driven storytelling that amplifies brand engagement.

A remarkable example of grassroots marketing is Gucci's digital community-building strategy under Alessandro Michele's creative direction. Precisely, rather than relying solely on traditional advertising, Gucci embraced a grassroots approach by engaging young consumers through digital campaigns, collaborations, and with underground artists, and leveraging UGC on social media platforms like Instagram and TikTok. Thus, by doing so, Gucci successfully refined a passionate community of advocates who actively contributed to the evolving cultural narrative of the brand.

Lastly, localization has become another essential strategy for global brands: while globalization enables companies to reach international markets, localization ensures that their offerings resonate with diverse consumer bases. This phenomenon, often referred to as *glocalization*, is the process of adapting global products and marketing strategies to fit local tastes, cultural norms, and consumer preferences (Levitt, 1983), allowing brands to remain competitive in foreign markets by respecting cultural distinctions and specific consumer behaviors.

An interesting example of effective localization is McDonald's, which has tailored its menu offering to suit regional tastes in different markets. For instance, in India, where a notable portion of the population adheres to vegetarian diets due to religious and cultural beliefs, McDonald's introduced an extensive vegetarian menu, featuring items that

incorporate locally preferred spices and ingredients. Consequently, this strategy has enabled McDonald's to strengthen its foothold in India, while maintaining its global brand identity and, by demonstrating cultural sensitivity and adapting its product offerings accordingly, it has successfully bridged the gap between a global brand and local consumer expectations (Kotabe & Helsen, 2022).

In conclusion, in an era where consumers seek deeper connections with brands, authenticity fosters trust, grassroots marketing builds community-driven engagement, and localization ensures cultural relevance. Today, successful brands are those that not only acknowledge these shifts but actively implement strategies that resonate with their audiences on a meaningful level.

2. Theoretical foundation of community and cultural belonging

Following the reflections discussed in the first section of the thesis, the second chapter shifts the emphasis towards the dynamics of branding in the context of digital environments, with specific focus on the role that community and collective belonging have in the early stages of brand development.

Therefore, moving beyond traditional understanding of branding as a purely economic or visual construct, the following section explores how aspects such as identity formation, emotional resonance¹⁵, and participatory relationships between the brand and its target audience can foster a deeper sense of connection. Precisely, the research analyses the interrelation between User Generated Content (UGC), social media platforms, and the emotional dimension of brand perception. Thus, by analyzing how communities engage and shape brand narratives, the chapter highlights the ways in which belonging becomes not only a communicative tool for brands but also a strategic and symbolic asset. This theoretical framework paves the way for the experimental dimension of the thesis, offering a lens through which interpret audience behaviors, expectations, and desires in relation to a brand that positions itself not only as a product seller, but as a shared cultural experience.

2.1 Theories of brand development and identity

Brand development is deeply rooted in the relationship between consumer perception, cultural relevance, and identity formation.

The concept of brand identity refers to the unique set of brand associations that a company strives to create and maintain in the consumer's mind (Aaker, 2012), differentiating the brand from its competitors while establishing emotional and symbolic connections with the target audience. These associations can be both tangible and intangible, ranging from product-specific attributes to emotional and symbolic meanings, and can be categorized into several types, including: functional attributes, such as product quality, reliability, and performance; emotional associations, such as nostalgia, happiness, or excitement; and self-expressive benefits, referring to the way a brand aligns with a consumer's identity.

¹⁵ Emotional resonance is the capacity of a message, a brand, or experience to evoke a strong emotional response and create lasting impressions.

The evolution of branding strategies highlights the variation from a functional and product-centered approach to a more consumer-centric perspective, where cultural and social dimensions play a crucial role in shaping brand narratives (Kapferer, 2012). Traditionally, brands used to focus majorly on product features and tangible benefits, often emphasizing aspects such as durability, performance, and technical specifications (Levitt, 1960); this approach supposed that consumers make rational decisions based primarily on objective product attributes. However, with saturated market and intensified competition, brands started to realize that consumers are not merely rational decision-makers, but are instead influenced by traits like emotions, personal identity, and social factors (Holbrook & Hirschman, 1982).

On the other hand, consumer-centric perspective shifted the attention from the product itself to the consumer's experiences, emotions, and cultural context. Thus, rather than simply selling a product, brands now aim to create a compelling narrative that better resonates with their target audience. This shift is particularly evident with aspects like experiential marketing¹⁶, storytelling, and lifestyle branding¹⁷. For instance, Starbucks has always distinguished itself not just by merely marketing coffee based on taste or quality, but by crafting a whole experience around it, promoting the idea of a “third place” between home and work, where people can connect and unwind. This idea goes beyond the quality of the coffee itself; in fact, while Starbucks certainly emphasizes the premium quality of its ingredients, its greater value proposition lies in the atmosphere and emotional resonance of its stores: the furniture, music, lightning, and even the baristas' interactions with customers are all carefully curated to reinforce this concept of the “third place”. At Starbucks' locations, customers are encouraged and always welcomed to linger, use Wi-Fi, conduct informal meetings, or simply enjoy a moment of break. Therefore, this strategic positioning has allowed the company to build a loyal customer base built not just around a product, but around a whole lifestyle and a shared set of values.

¹⁶ Experiential marketing is a strategy that directly engages consumers through live and immersive experiences, transforming passive audiences into active participants and fostering emotional connections with brands.

¹⁷ Lifestyle branding refers to a marketing approach that aims to create a brand identity that resonates with consumers' values, interests, and lifestyles, encouraging them to adopt the brand as a part of their self-image.

Starbucks is just an example that represents how, as markets have become more fragmented and globalized, the emphasis on cultural relevance in brand identity has become increasingly important. In particular, the concept of cultural branding suggests that brands succeed when they become cultural icons and embody collective desires and ideologies, transforming brands into social constructs that shape and reflect consumer values. Thereby, rather than focusing merely on product attributes or functional benefits, cultural branding seeks to impact brands within broader cultural discourses, transforming them into powerful symbols of collective identity, values, and aspirations (Holt, 2004). Moreover, in the digital era, cultural branding has become even more influential as nowadays consumers actively engage with brands through social media and UGC.

2.2 Community-driven branding: engagement, membership, and loyalty

Community-driven branding is entrenched to the idea that consumers no longer passively consume brand messages but actively participate in shaping brand narratives, often within consumer communities that provide a sense of belonging, emotional attachment, and identity reinforcement (Muniz & O’Guinn, 2001). These communities often develop organically but can also be strategically cultivated by companies, and are defined by three key elements: consciousness of kind, meant as the shared understanding among members that they are connected to each other and distinct from non-members; rituals and traditions, representing all those symbolic activities that reinforce the meaning of the brand¹⁸; and moral responsibility, conveying a sense of duty among community members to support and uphold the values of the brand.

To be successfully nurtured, community-driven branding requires a multifaceted strategic approach which blends emotional engagement, exclusivity, and shared values. In fact, unlike traditional branding strategies, focusing mainly on product attributes or promotional efforts, community-driven branding fosters deeper connections between consumers and the brand by creating a sense of belonging. This approach has been widely adopted especially in sectors such as luxury fashion, automotive, and hospitality, since in

¹⁸ For example, the *Shot On The House* ritual at Kilian Paris echoes the brand’s signature blend between perfumery and nightlife, inspired by the atmosphere of a luxury bar.

such marketplaces brand identity is more than ever intrinsically linked to consumer lifestyle and cultural significance.

In this context, one of the most effective ways to establish a strong brand community is through co-creation, which allows consumers to directly participate in shaping the brand's identity, products, and marketing strategies. An interesting example is *Gucci Vault* initiative, an experimental digital platform introduced by Gucci in 2021 under the creative direction of Alessandro Michele, which can be imagined as a digital laboratory of co-creation where fashion heritage meets artistic innovation. Precisely, through collaborations with emerging independent designers, the platform becomes a space for creative dialogue, where Gucci doesn't merely showcase its own heritage, but actively supports and amplifies new talents in the fashion industry. Thereby, these partnerships reflect the Maison's spirit of openness and shared invention, allowing the brand to evolve while also nurturing and encouraging the next generation of talents.

Another key strategy to foster brand communities is linked to the development of exclusive membership and loyalty programs that reward committed customers. For instance, the *Sephora Beauty Insider* program by Sephora creates a tiered system where customers unlock increasingly valuable rewards based on their annual spending, encouraging repeat purchases but also making buyers feel recognized and valued for their loyalty. Therefore, by offering such exclusive benefits, the brand transforms ordinary shopping into a more engaging and rewarding experience, subtly inviting people to come back not only for the incentives but also for the sense of belonging and prestige that comes with being a loyal Sephora customer.

Additionally, brand communities thrive on interaction, which is why events, which can be both digital and physical, play a pivotal role in reinforcing consumer engagement. Thereby, events enable members to connect with individuals from the same community, participating in brand rituals and experiencing the brand's identity in a more immersive and engaging way. For example, over the years, LEGO has cultivated a passionate community of fans, identified as both children and adults, successfully leveraging together digital and physical events to maintain and grow such community. Through such events, the company keeps on fostering a shared culture, becoming a medium for creative expression and social connection, consequently turning customers into loyal, life-longing members. This phenomenon aligns with the experience economy concept, which

highlights that modern consumers seek experiences that are “memorable, transformative, and emotionally engaging”, rather than simply purchasing products (Pine & Gilmore, 2011). Thus, in today’s world where consumers are overwhelmed with choices, experiences become a key differentiator for businesses, offering emotional value that traditional products or services alone cannot provide.

A concept that closely intersects with community-driven branding is participatory marketing, which refers to the strategic involvement of consumers in the creation, development, and dissemination of brand-related content and experiences (Prahalad & Ramaswamy, 2004). In fact, unlike traditional top-down marketing models, participatory marketing encourages consumers to actively contribute to brand narratives through actions such as feedback, creative collaboration, or User Generated Content, therefore transforming them into co-creators of value. Thereby, in environments where authenticity and community are pivotal topics, participatory strategies allow for deeper emotional connections, as consumers feel heard, empowered, and represented. Additionally, these dynamics are particularly evident in digital ecosystems where brands and audiences interact in real time with each other, highlighting how marketing is increasingly becoming a shared cultural process, rather than a unidirectional corporate message (Füller, 2010).

2.2.1 Cultural proximity and the psychology of belonging

While community-driven branding focuses on the structural and symbolic mechanisms through which consumers relate to brands, an additional psychological element worth considering is cultural proximity. This concept refers to the perceived closeness or familiarity that consumers experience when exposed to culturally resonant symbols, language, or narratives (Straubhaar, 1991). Thereby, unlike traditional segmentation criteria based mainly on demographic and psychographic aspects, cultural proximity emphasizes emotional and symbolic alignment which is, most of the times, built on shared language, humor, geographic identity, or local traditions.

In branding contexts, cultural proximity plays a pivotal role in fostering brand intimacy and emotional relevance. For instance, consumers who engage with a brand that uses familiar slang, dialect, or culturally rooted expressions may perceive that brand as more

authentic, approachable, and aligned with their own identity. This feeling of “being seen” by the brand can be extremely powerful especially in hyper-local or grassroots branding, such as those labels that address to specific cities or communities; for such realities, this proximity is not only a narrative tool but also a strategic asset that deepens consumer engagement before a direct interaction even arises.

2.3 Word of Mouth and influencer marketing in brand growth

Word of Mouth refers to the informal communication between individuals regarding products or services and, unlike traditional advertising, is considered highly credible as it originates from trusted sources such as family, friends, or peers. There are two main types of WOM: organic WOM, which occurs naturally when consumers share their experiences without any brand intervention; and amplified WOM, which is generated by brands through campaigns, referral programs, or incentives.

One of the most significant theories explaining the influence of WOM is the STEPPS model (Berger, 2013), which identifies the following six key principles used to make content shareable:

- 1) Social currency: based on the idea that people care about what others think about them, it assumes that individuals tend to share content that makes them look good, smart, and in-the-know.
- 2) Triggers: are stimuli and mental cues that prompt people to think about related things; the more often people are reminded of a product or idea, the more likely they are to mention it.
- 3) Emotion: when people care, they share! Therefore, content that evokes strong emotions, whether positive or negative, is more likely to be shared, consequently pushing people to action.
- 4) Public: if people can see others using or talking about a product, they will be more likely to imitate such behavior. This concept is rooted in the idea of social proof, for which individuals tend to look to others to determine how to behave.
- 5) Practical value: individuals like to share useful information, so if content provides real value, it is more likely to be passed along.

- 6) Stories: users don't admire only useful information, but also great stories; thereby, when content is characterized by a captivating narrative, it is easier to be remembered and to be shared.

Understanding the STEPP model is crucial for companies, as it provides a strategic approach to craft messages and campaigns that are more likely to be shared organically.

2.3.1 Influencer marketing as a digital evolution of WOM

In today's digital landscape, traditional WOM practices have undertaken significant changes, evolving into what is now commonly known as influencer marketing. Precisely, while traditional WOM relied on organic and face-to-face recommendations among small circles composed by family members and friends, the spread of social media aided this type of communication to scale in unprecedented ways. Thereby, social platforms such as Instagram, TikTok, YouTube, and Threads, have given power to a new class of opinion leaders, the so-called influencers, who have the power to shape consumer behavior and brand perceptions even with one single post.

Influencer marketing leverages the trust and authority that these types of communicators hold over their audience: most of the times, influencers are perceived as authentic and relatable, making them more persuasive than traditional advertising initiatives or celebrity endorsements. In this context, influencers act as opinion leaders, guiding and shaping consumer decisions through curated and often personal content.

Specifically, influencers can be classified based on the dimension of their online following, and each category serves different strategic purposes for brands. We can therefore identify:

- a) Mega-influencers (more than 1 million followers): are usually celebrities or well-known public figures who can deliver messages to massive audiences. However, their content often registers lower engagement rates, probably due to a lack of perceived personal connection with their followers. In fact, endorsements coming from mega-influencer may be perceived as financially motivated.
- b) Macro-influencers (between 100,000 and 1 million followers): are typically industry experts or people who have built their followings around specific topics or lifestyle.

This category of influencers can balance between reach and engagement, often delivering high-quality content with a good level of trust from their audience.

- c) Micro-influencers (between 10,000 and 100,000 followers): these influencers are known for their strong presence within specific communities; they often have more personal and straight-forward interaction with their audience, generating higher engagement rates and greater perceived authenticity.
- d) Nano-influencers (fewer than 10,000 followers): are the everyday social media users with less influence, which is mainly local or based on specific interests. However, though their reach is limited, their recommendations are often perceived as more genuine and trustworthy, consequently driving more action among the follower base¹⁹.

2.4 Social media as a catalyst for branding

The rise of social media has deeply transformed interactions between brands and their customers, shifting from a one-way communication to a more dynamic and real-time engagement (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010).

2.4.1 The influence of User Generated Content (UGC)

User Generated Content (UGC) refers to any brand-related content²⁰ created directly and voluntarily by consumers, rather than by brands themselves; this type of content is typically motivated by positive brand experiences or a desire to participate in a community. Additionally, UGC can highly enhance trust and credibility, and what distinguishes it and makes it so persuasive is its authenticity, with 79% of users stating that their purchase decisions are deeply influenced by this type of content (Stackla, 2019). Furthermore, Millennials and Gen Z audiences are nowadays more and more drawn to brands that showcase real people using and enjoying products.

Moreover, other than to content authenticity, another pivotal element for UGC and brand storytelling is related to the narrative structure, especially to its emotional and cultural

¹⁹ Recent research has increasingly supported the effectiveness of micro- and nano- influencers, especially in terms of engagement and return on investment (ROI) (De Veirman et al., 2017).

²⁰ Including text, images, reviews, or testimonials.

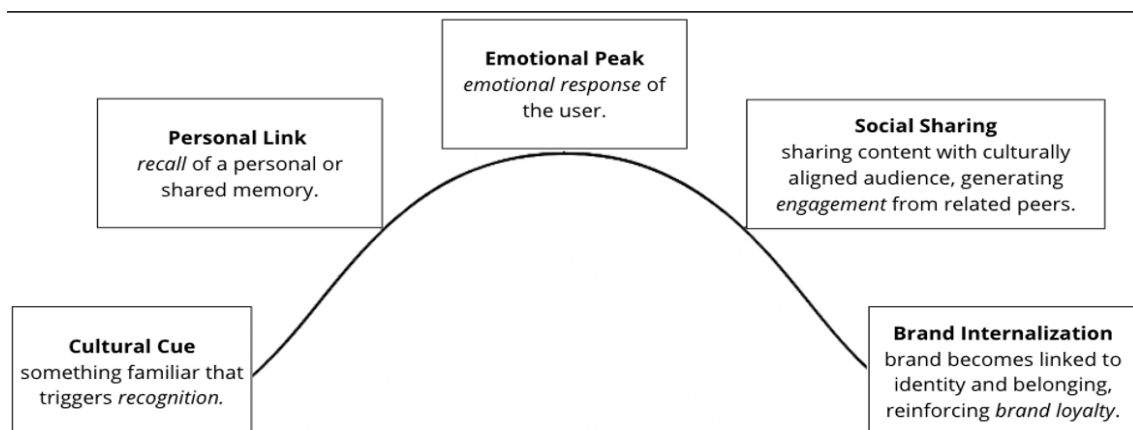
components. In fact, existing research in branding and cognitive psychology has demonstrated that story-driven communication fosters emotional engagement and memory retention, especially when narratives follow a familiar pattern such as conflict-resolution, transformation, or shared ritual (Escalas, 2004). Therefore, when brands build their messages around culturally familiar story structures, they can enhance not only emotional connection but also cultural legitimacy.

This storytelling approach is particularly powerful in branding contexts that deal with aspects like identity, community, and nostalgia. Thereby, when integrated into brand communication, these micro-narratives serve as cultural anchors that reinforce both emotional intimacy and social validation.

Beyond the trustworthiness related to User Generated Content, one of the most influential dimensions of UGC lies in its narrative potential, as brand that successfully integrate storytelling can foster higher levels of emotional engagement. This aspect is particularly relevant for community-oriented and identity-driven brands as, in such context, UGC becomes a narrative tool that enables users to link their personal experiences within the symbolic space of the brand.

However, such storytelling function is not incidental, and often follows a predictable emotional structure, which can be represented and visualized as an “emotional arc”. This model, which is introduced and further analyzed below, illustrates the typical journey a consumer undergoes when is emotionally engaged with culturally grounded brand storytelling on social media platforms.

Figure 1: The emotional arc of cultural storytelling in branding



Source: Author elaboration, 2025.

The emotional arc, as represented in Figure 1, begins with a cultural cue: this can be a phrase, an image, or even a reference that feels instantly familiar to the user. Such recognition can consequently spark a personal link, as the consumer recalls a memory, or an emotional association related to the cue. Then, the interaction reaches its emotional peak when the user feels emotions like nostalgia, humor, or pride, which further motivates them to engage with the brand. This leads to the fourth phase of the emotional arc, which is related to social sharing; in this stage, the story related to the brand is shared with other users within the same community that, thus, get the reference. Finally, when this cycle repeats or is reinforced by feedback, the consumer begins to internalize the brand as part of their identity. In this way, social media and UGC act not only as tools to post brand-related content, but also as platforms for emotional co-creation, thus helping transform consumers into brand narrators.

2.4.2 Social media algorithms and viral content

Social media algorithms are automated computational processes used by platforms like Instagram, TikTok, Facebook, and YouTube, to curate, prioritize, and display content to users based on their behavior, preferences, and engagement patterns (Kumar et al., 2021). Precisely, the aim of such algorithms is to maximize user experience and increase engagement by predicting and showing the most relevant content on the user's feed or search results. In simple terms, algorithms decide *what content* gets seen, *by whom*, and *how often*.

Each social media platform has its own algorithm logic, but there are some factors and metrics common to all of them: engagement, such as likes, comments, shares, saves, and clicks; recency, related to when the content was posted; relevance, linked to how closely the content matches the user's interests and behaviors; relationship, related to user's interactions with the content creator; content type and format, that can be, for example, reel, carousel, story, and so on.

Understanding how algorithms work and being able to strategically influence them is essential for brands that want their content to reach broader audiences. Virality is a key concept in this scenario, and it refers to the fast and widespread dissemination of content across digital platforms, providing brands massive visibility with minimal investments,

thereby generating buzz, social proof, and even cultural capital. Specifically, a content “goes viral” when it receives exponentially increasing attention through shares, likes, and comments. It is important to note that virality is not merely a random occurrence but is the result of the strategic alignment between the content shared and specific psychological prompts, social dynamics, and cultural timing.

Hence, the fundamental question is: what drives virality? Academic and marketing research suggests that there are several factors that can significantly influence the viral potential of the content shared. Firstly, social media platforms highlight content that feels organic and evokes high-arousal emotions²¹, something that moves people, whether by inspiring, shocking, entertaining, or provoking them (Berger & Milkman, 2012). Another relevant component linked to virality is the one of social currency, which refers to the value people derive from sharing content that enhances their identity or makes them appear trendy (Berger, 2013). This is particularly true because of social proof; therefore, when people see content that could potentially make them look good in the eyes of their peers, they will be more likely to share it. Additionally, storytelling is another relevant cause for virality, as a content that is structured as a story tends to be more engaging and memorable than static and merely informative one. Hence, virality increases when content connects to broader cultural or personal narratives that people find relatable or aspirational. For instance, brands within the luxury industry, often build their narratives around key aspects like craftsmanship and heritage, thus allowing consumers to emotionally connect with the brand’s story and identity. Finally, the relevance of the content to current events, trends, or viral moments, further amplifies its potential spread across social platforms, creating more attention around a specific topic.

Algorithms are very important when it comes to building communities as, by boosting content’s visibility, they can help brands to organically attract like-minded individuals. In social media platforms, content is not equally presented to all users; rather, it is secretively shown only to those whose behavior, interests, and engagement patterns are considered similar to the content posted. This means that when users interact within the platform, the algorithm starts to curate their feed accordingly to show them relevant and

²¹ Such as excitement, amusement, anger, or anxiety.

personalized content. Consequently, users that share common values or interests are funneled towards the same type of content and, by extension, the same brands.

For brands, this algorithmic mechanism represents a powerful tool for cultivating communities that are not just demographically alike, but also similar on a psychological perspective. In fact, when content resonates with a specific audience segment, the platform's algorithm identifies it as valuable and starts sharing it with users who have previously interacted with similar content. Consequently, the more users engage by liking, saving, sharing or commenting under a post, the stronger this signal becomes, thus resulting in exponential reach within a targeted community. This specific reach is qualitatively relevant for the brand, ensuring that the content shared connects with users who are more likely to become not only consumers but also participants in the brand's cultural narrative. Such algorithmic mechanism fosters the organic tribalism: a naturally emerging segmentation of users into affinity-based micro-communities defined by shared perceptions, cultural affiliations, and identity symbols (Arvidsson & Caliandro, 2016). Precisely, through algorithmic curation, content can be naturally shared to users whose digital behaviors align with the brand attributes, therefore enabling the development of coherent and loyal communities, without the need for aggressive advertising or large-scale campaigns (Gillespie, 2018).

Furthermore, algorithms are pivotal not only in building but also in sustaining communities as, by delivering relevant brand content to users who are already part of the brand's digital ecosystem, social platforms can help maintaining engagement and visibility. Additionally, algorithms allow communities to grow from within, as engaged users tend to share content they find interesting with peers, inviting other people with similar tastes to join the conversation. In this scenario, community-driven branding benefits from a double positive effect, where visibility leads to engagement, engagement consequently signals value, and finally value triggers further visibility.

While algorithmics visibility is essential when it comes to content virality, another important aspect to take into account is the role of algorithms as gatekeepers of community foundation. Precisely, algorithms not only decide which type of content is seen but also shape the boundaries of brand communities by clustering users based on behavioral similarities, shared values, and recurring interactions. By doing so, this

filtering effect leads to the development of digital micro-tribes where users are exposed predominantly to content that aligns with their specific preferences, reinforcing community cohesion and perceived cultural affinity.

From a branding perspective, this dynamic has both advantages and restrictions. On the one hand, it allows emerging brand to build extremely targeted and engaged audiences without the need of large-scale advertising investments. On the other hand, content might not always organically reach outside of its niche, thus questioning aspects like brand inclusivity²² and echo chambers²³. Therefore, it is very important for brands that aim to grow through digital community-building to understand such algorithmic dynamics, as they emphasize the need for not only content strategy but also for algorithm-conscious distribution procedures.

2.5 Research contribution and theoretical positioning

The research aims at contributing to contemporary discussions on branding by offering an experimental and consumer-centered approach to analyze how dynamics such as community, cultural identity, and Word of Mouth contribute to brand development in today's digital ecosystem. In fact, while an important part of the existing literature has already studied branding through theoretical models and case studies, there is still a gap in the empirical research focusing on small-scale, culturally rooted, and community-driven brand narratives, especially those developing naturally through social media platforms. In this regard, the thesis acknowledges that traditional branding strategies are being transformed by new paradigms of consumer engagement, especially in contexts influenced by digital culture and networked communities. In fact, social media platforms give the power to users to play a key role not only in circulating brand content but also in giving it meaning, shaping narratives, and attaching symbolic value. These interactions are therefore not purely transactional: they are emotionally and culturally charged, and are often rooted in a desire for connection, identity, and belonging.

²² Brand inclusivity is a branding approach that seeks to actively represent and engage diverse identities, backgrounds, and communities in brand messaging, design, and values (Raj et al., 2024).

²³ Echo chambers are environments where individuals are exposed mainly to opinions that align with their own, reinforcing existing beliefs and limiting exposure to differing perspectives and ideas (Jamieson et al., 2008).

The uniqueness of this research lies in its use of a culturally embedded brand as a basis for testing consumer alignment with values like community, shared identity, and local authenticity. Through a targeted questionnaire, it analyzes how individuals relate to symbolic expressions of belonging, dialect-based communication, and emotionally charged narratives; aspects that are pivotal in cultural differentiation. Therefore, rather than approaching branding as a top-down and market-driven process, the thesis embraces a cultural and relational perspective for which brands develop through interactions, affective bonds, and shared identities among users. In this context, branding is meant not merely as a communicative practice, but as a social process of collective meaning-making, often anchored in emotional belonging and community ties (Cova & Pace, 2006).

Within this framework, the present thesis aims at offering both a theoretical and an empirical contribution: theoretically, it builds on and bridges insights from existing branding models by highlighting the pivotal role of community-based engagement in brand development; empirically, it suggests a new way of observing brand development as a shared and evolving process rooted in social relationships and collective identification.

Precisely, the theoretical positioning of this thesis aligns with existing branding literature that highlights brand meaning as co-constructed through social, cultural, and emotional processes. Specifically, while the study references academic concepts such as, for instance, cultural branding (Holt, 2004), brand communities (Muniz & O'Guinn, 2001), and brand authenticity (Mohart et al., 2015), its contribution extends way beyond theory-building: it provides empirical data on how individuals respond to hypothetical but realistic branding stimuli, examining how narrative, symbolism, and cultural markers can all influence brand perception and emotional engagement. Finally, the given thesis aims at bringing practical relevance to marketers, entrepreneurs, and academics seeking to understand how to build strong, value based-brand identities in ever more saturated markets. In this context, the findings collected from the questionnaire will not only consider theoretical assumptions, but also guide decisions around brand communication, tone of voice, and cultural symbols.

Finally, to conclude this chapter and bridge the topic towards the experimental phase of the research, it is pivotal to highlight how the theoretical insights previously discussed far inform the construction of the primary research tool, the questionnaire. As the brand *tevojodi* has not yet been launched, the experimental element of the present thesis is carried out through a concept-testing approach, in which consumers' attitudes, emotional responses, and perceived value are measured in relation to hypothetical branding elements inspired by the brand's identity. Consequently, to ensure methodological rigor and theoretical relevance, the design of the questionnaire is directly founded in the key academic constructs explored in the preceding chapters.

The table below (Table 3) summarizes the core theoretical pillars of the thesis and maps each of them to operational themes tested through the questionnaire. By doing so, the research ensures that the survey doesn't merely collect superficial opinions but instead provides deeply rooted psychological and sociocultural mechanisms that drive relationships between consumers and the brand. This approach strengthens the experimental design of the thesis by ensuring that each construct is not only theoretical but also measurable, thus making the questionnaire an extension of the theoretical framework rather than a separate tool. In doing so, the research methodology can provide practical insights into how branding strategies rooted in aspects such as culture and community resonate with consumers, even before a brand's official market entry.

Table 3: Theoretical constructs and related hypotheses to be tested

Theoretical Construct	Operational Theme	Example Topic
Cultural Branding	Perceived cultural relevance of brand elements.	Relevance of dialect expressions in brand communication.
Social Identity Theory	Identification with brand-based communities.	Sense of belonging when exposed to brand values.
Brand Authenticity	Perception of honesty, consistency, and symbolism.	Trustworthiness of the brand based on its tone of voice.

Word of Mouth	Willingness to recommend the brand.	Likelihood of sharing the brand on social media.
Participatory Marketing	Desire for involvement in brand creation.	Interest in co-designing slogans or product-related content.

Source: Author elaboration, 2025.

Following these premises, the thesis analyzes how feeling of belonging and share values can influence and contribute to the perception of a brand as authentic, trustworthy, and culturally relevant. Thus, in this context, the central research question that the study aims at responding is: *how does the sense of belonging to a community influence the perception of a brand?*

The research question aims to uncover the ways in which relational and symbolic dynamics influence the development of brand meaning in participatory and bottom-down contexts, focusing on aspects like affective attachment, identity, and collective narratives. Moreover, it anchors the experimental part of the thesis, which aims to evaluate user responses to brand narratives explicitly structured around community-based values. Thus, by investigating how individuals reach to such narratives, the research analyses the processes through which community-centric branding can generate deeper engagement and long-term relationships.

3. Tevojodi: brand identity and strategic marketing planning

This chapter deep dives into the world of tevojodi, a brand that embodies many of the theoretical, cultural, and methodological considerations addressed in the first section of the thesis. As previously discussed, nowadays brands are increasingly called upon to create emotional and cultural resonance, particularly in how they engage with notions such as belonging, self-expression, and shared values. In this context, tevojodi offers a unique and interesting lens through which to examine such dynamics, functioning as a brand that is both personal and culturally rooted, while also striving to foster authentic connections within its community of origin.

What makes tevojodi particularly relevant for the analysis is its story and the way it conceptualizes branding: not merely as a market-driven activity, but as an agent of storytelling and emotional communication. Rooted in the culture and origins of Rome, tevojodi finds inspiration in the small and often unnoticed moments that characterize casual conversations, inside jokes, and collective memories. In this sense, the brand doesn't aim to impose an identity onto its customers but to reflect and celebrate the characteristics that already exist within its audience, thus aligning with the theoretical frameworks of community-driven branding, cultural resonance, and emotional attachment explored earlier in this thesis.

Therefore, by examining the creation, structure, and development of tevojodi, the research aims to gain relevant insights into how contemporary digital narratives can be used as strategic tools to foster visibility. This analysis also allows to consider the multiple registers in which language operates: not only as a tool for expression, but also as an establishment of recollection and belonging.

3.1 A story of belonging: the origins and values of tevojodi

Tevojodi is not just a brand: it is a story, a bond, and a true expression of authenticity. Conceptualized and born in Rome, tevojodi draws its inspiration from casual conversations, often humorous or nostalgic, with the aim to represent local culture and the beauty of everyday life, making each piece a reflection of shared experiences, personal memories, and the rich array of emotions that define human connections. In fact, from its

very first conception, tevojodi has been driven by the desire to bring a fresh and unique perspective in the apparel industry by blending creativity with a sense of belonging.

The brand name itself is a colloquial expression derived from the roman dialect phrase “te vojo di”, meaning “I want to tell you”, evoking a sense of warmth, recognition, and informal connection, perfectly reflecting the brand’s essence. With this regard, the name doesn’t merely label the brand, but it introduces its entire narrative philosophy: it evokes the friendliness of informal exchanges, the feeling of being part of something familiar, the spark of recognition when someone just “gets the reference”. On a linguistic level, the name aims to reflect an expressive and relational form of communication, as well as the desire to share something, to speak directly and sincerely, often in a familiar and intimate tone. This concept mirrors the brand’s core idea, for which each product becomes a form of dialogue; this is why the phrases and expressions that characterize tevojodi’s designs all represent stories, inside jokes, and cultural snapshots. In this context, wearing a t-shirt labelled tevojodi means saying something aloud, transmitting a thought, a mood, or a shared memory in a subtle yet emotionally charged way.

Moreover, the choice to use roman sayings and everyday expressions adds a layer of authenticity and territorial identity, rooting the brand in the local culture while simultaneously speaking to a universal human experience, which is the need to express, to connect, and to be understood. Hence, tevojodi’s emotional resonance lies in its ability to transform language into visual and wearable messages, where each garment becomes a tribute not only to a place but to a feeling: the joy of recognition, the warmth of belonging, and the beauty of a simple life, the iconic feeling of the “dolce vita”.

Figure 2: Prototype design of a tevojodi t-shirt.



Source: Author elaboration, 2024.

The inspiration behind each product comes from daily experiences and the nuanced, often humorous and sometimes nostalgic nature of Rome and its people. Through minimalist designs and sharp typography, tevojodi celebrates the spirit of the Eternal City while maintaining a clean and contemporary aesthetic; this balance between tradition and modernity, allows the brand to position itself as both culturally grounded and stylistically versatile.

Even though tevojodi has not yet been launched in the market, its vision extends far beyond clothing, aspiring to become a symbol of emotional connection and cultural storytelling, thus proving that the most impactful designs are often those rooted in lived and shareable experiences. In this context, with a potential marketing strategy that leverages both social media and community engagement, tevojodi seeks to create an inclusive space where identity, emotion, and humor overlap.

At the heart of tevojodi's activity lie three essential values: authenticity, creativity, and community. These morals represent the guiding principles entrenched into every stage of the brand's creative process, and specifically: authenticity ensures that every design feels

genuine and remains true to tevojodi's emotional and cultural origins; creativity brings new life to daily expressions, making sure that every item reflects a unique message, allowing them to travel from the streets of Rome to wardrobes around the world; finally, community is the overarching *fil rouge* of the brand, which exists to give voice to collective narratives as well as to connect people through mutual appreciation for the beauty of everyday life moments. Hence, the goal is to provide products that speak to individual identities while also fostering shared feelings, thereby creating a sense of belonging and recognition; whether it is a phrase that sparks laughter or a memory that stirs a sense of nostalgia, each design is poured with definite intention and significance. Therefore, tevojodi's mission is to produce products that are perceived as both personal and universal, reflecting one's individual identity while also building connections through shared stories.

3.1.1 Target audience

Tevojodi targets a well-defined and niche audience that values authenticity, belonging, and cultural connection in their purchasing choices: it is primarily appealing to younger demographics, particularly Millennials and Gen Z²⁴, known for their strong preference for personalized and meaningful products; these generations are highly active on social media platforms, where they tend to engage with brands that promote cultural authenticity and emotional resonance. Quantitatively, approximately 65% of Millennials and 72% of Gen Z prefer brands that connect them to a shared culture or community (Deloitte, 2023). Therefore, these demographics are very significant drivers of e-commerce growth, spending more time shopping online, either on websites or directly on social media platforms, and seeking brands that align with their own specific set of values and desires²⁵.

In this context, tevojodi's target audience can be segmented into three primary groups:

- 1) Cultural enthusiasts: are mainly travelers and expatriates who appreciate the cultural heritage of tevojodi's products. For instance, a traveler visiting Rome might purchase

²⁴ These generations target individuals aged between 16 and 30 years old.

²⁵ According to recent studies, around 55% of Millennials and 61% of Gen Z consumers actively seek brands that provide them unique and personalized experiences (Statista, 2024).

a t-shirt to connect with the city’s culture, while locals might perceive the brand as a reflection and celebration of their own roots.

- 2) Everyday trendsetters: are mainly young individuals seeking unique, statement-making fashion garments that resonate with their personal values and social identities; they are extremely active on social media platforms and love the humorous phrases on tevojodi’s products as they make them stand out while feeling grounded to a community.
- 3) Casual collectors: are those customers that particularly appreciate tevojodi’s cultural depth and authenticity, and value hyper-local branding where the label becomes a medium for storytelling. These individuals tend to prefer timeless and minimalistic designs, not wanting to chase the latest fashion trends, and may purchase from tevojodi either for personal use or as gifts for friends and family who appreciate the brand’s originality.

The table below (Table 4) provides a comparative overview of the shopping behaviors across the three customer segments previously identified for tevojodi²⁶. Specifically, these segments, while banded together by a shared appreciation for the brand’s emotional and cultural identity, display different patterns in how they discover, interact with, and ultimately purchase from the brand.

Table 4: Shopping behaviors of different customer segments

Metric	Cultural enthusiasts	Everyday trendsetters	Casual collectors
Interest in products tied to local culture	85%	50%	60%
Use of social medias (Instagram and TikTok) for brand discovery	65%	88%	40%

²⁶ The data reported was collected and gathered from Statista.

Likelihood to share purchases online	55%	90%	30%
Preference for limited edition items	60%	75%	45%

Source: Author elaboration, 2025.

Starting with the first category, cultural enthusiasts, the data shows that 85% of the group demonstrates interest in products tied to local culture; by far the highest across all three customer segments. Therefore, the evidence confirms that for this specific group tevojodi's use of roman dialect, cultural references, and narrative-driven designs are incredibly influential in customers' decision making-process. Consequently, their motivation to purchase is stimulated by the desire to connect with a place or identity, in this case the one related to Rome, often driven by nostalgia, travel experiences, or a personal relationship with the city. However, only 65% use platforms like Instagram or TikTok for brand discovery, indicating that this segment might rely more on organic channels such as WOM, in-person experiences, or culturally focused content than algorithm-driven feeds. Additionally, 55% of this segment is likely to share their purchases online, suggesting that these customers may not be as digitally expressive or trend driven as other groups.

In contrast, the category of everyday trendsetters reveals a strong digital orientation, with 88% using social media for brand discovery and a 90% likelihood to share their purchases online. For these customers, the brand represents a real statement: engaging with tevojodi helps the everyday trendsetters to express their identity, humor, and individuality in ways that are instantly recognizable. Moreover, their preference for limited edition items (75%) also suggests that this audience segment responds well to short-time offerings and capsules, which could be strategically leveraged in the brand's campaigns. Given their digital behavior, this second target group is also most likely to strengthen tevojodi's presence via UGC on social media platforms, acting as informal brand ambassadors through their online activity.

Lastly, casual collectors represent a more reserved but not less valuable consumer segment. While only 60% of these individuals express their interest in products tied to

local culture, this data still represents a significant share percentage, especially considering that the casual collectors are drawn more to the brand's minimalism and storytelling rather than to its cultural messaging. Moreover, the engagement of this segment with social media platforms is considerably lower (40%) than for the other two targets, and only 30% of the cluster is likely to share their purchases online, thus reflecting a more private consumption pattern. However, this group displays a notable appreciation for thoughtful design and may be extremely receptive to campaigns centered on limited runs and gifting. It is important to note that the relatively lower numbers related to the third customer segment do not necessarily reflect disinterest, but rather a different purchasing psychology, focused on emotional depth and long-term value rather than trend-based immediacy.

From a strategic perspective, the behavioral patterns analyzed suggest that tevojodi should adopt a multi-channel and segment-specific approach: for cultural enthusiasts, storytelling and experiential branding will be key, possibly through pop-up stores in culturally symbolic locations or campaigns tied to local activities; meanwhile, for everyday trendsetters digital virality and influencer partnerships will drive awareness and social proof; finally, casual collectors might be best reached through carefully curated product collections that emphasize narrative consistency.

3.1.2 Market context and competitor analysis

The global fashion industry has undergone a deep transformation due to evolving consumer values, digital innovation, and the increasing focus on identity-based branding. In this context, regardless the intense changes and evolutions of the market, the streetwear and casualwear segments are experiencing exponential growth, especially among Millennials and Gen Z consumers.

One of the most significant market trends is related to the evolution and gradual importance of cultural storytelling in branding. In fact, contemporary consumers are increasingly drawn to labels that provide them not only products but also narratives, and that therefore have an emotionally resonant identity.

In this specific landscape, tevojodi's identity, that blends roman dialect with humor and nostalgia, meets the demand for authenticity and local storytelling. The name itself, which is derived from the roman expression "te vojo di", perfectly captures this spirit as each product of the brand acts as a message, recalling everyday life and shared Italian culture.

Alongside this cultural emphasis, the rise of digital-first brand discovery and engagement keeps on reshaping the fashion industry. Social media platforms like Instagram and TikTok control not only how users consume content, but also how they find, evaluate, and build relationships with brands. For tevojodi, this specific trend underscores the importance of strategic content creation that emphasizes community participation and engagement. Precisely, because the brand's tone of voice (ToV)²⁷ is informal, playful, and rooted in shared experiences, it is well-positioned to succeed in these highly social and algorithm-driven digital environments. Therefore, initiatives and campaigns that encourage users to co-create content, share stories behind their favorite roman sayings, or showcase how they wear a tevojodi's t-shirt, can nurture deeper engagement and organic growth.

Another crucial trend is related to the increasing attention individuals exhibit towards sustainable and ethical practices: compared to the past, today's consumers are way more conscious of the environmental and social impact of their purchases, demanding greater transparency regarding sourcing, materials, and production chains, and they are often willing to pay a premium price for brands that prioritize sustainable practices.

For the specific case of tevojodi, this represents both a challenge and an opportunity. Precisely, while the brand is still small and may face limitations in adopting large-scale ecofriendly solutions, it can implement initiatives focused on sustainability²⁸ to match consumers' expectations as well as to reinforce the idea that each product is well-crafted and meaningful.

²⁷ Tone of voice refers to the distinctive style in which a brand communicates with its audience and that shapes how the brand's personality is perceived.

²⁸ Some initiatives focused on sustainability may be, for example, offering a pre-order model to reduce overproduction, using recyclable or minimal packaging, and collaborating with suppliers that share a commitment to ethical practices.

Additionally, the concept of glocalization, connected to the idea of having local stories with global appeals, has become another increasingly noticeable strategy for emerging brands. In this scenario, the fashion industry consumers are no longer looking for generic and standardized products, but for specific and genuine narratives that can connect them to real places, emotions, and traditions.

This phenomenon is associated to another market trend, which focuses on the role of community over the product itself: more than most consumers belonging to Gen Z, highly value principles related to emotional authenticity, transparency, and two-way communication with brands. Therefore, rather than chasing trend cycles or high-volume releases, consumers are more prone to have a preference for brands that build a sense of belonging around them.

All these market trends represent clear opportunities for brand's expansion and consolidation. Hence, to better illustrate such scenario, the table below (Table 5) summarizes and outlines the macro tendencies reshaping the industry and highlights corresponding strategic opportunities for *tevojodi*.

Table 5: Market trends and strategic opportunities for *tevojodi*

Market trends	Strategic opportunities for <i>tevojodi</i>
Cultural storytelling	Strengthen brand narrative through deeper integration of Roman culture and dialect
Digital-first engagement	Expand social media presence and promote UGC campaigns
Sustainability and ethical practices	Implement pre-order systems and sustainable packaging options
Local-to-global appeal	Position roman identity within a minimalist design to attract global cultural consumers
Community-driven consumption	Host local events, engage in co-creation with followers, and prioritize brand transparency

Source: Author elaboration, 2025.

The first macro-trend, cultural storytelling, reflects the broader consumer desire to engage with brands that go beyond mere aesthetics and instead communicate narratives deeply rooted in a place or a memory. Even though for tevojodi this trend is already integrated into its DNA, the brand could develop limited-edition capsule collections to further highlight the stories, neighborhoods, and characters unique to Rome; such collections could enhance emotional engagement and deepen the value proposition, as well as create a sense of exclusivity around the products.

The second trend, digital-first engagement, refers to the increasingly central role of social platforms in shaping relationships between the brand and its target audience. For the specific case of tevojodi, launching interactive and participatory campaigns, especially on Instagram and TikTok, would represent a strategic initiative. In this scenario, interactive formats such as challenges, polls, or behind-the-scenes content, can help transforming passive followers into active brand participants. Hence, this strategy not only boosts the brand's visibility through algorithmic amplification but also reinforces the feeling of community built around tevojodi, since the use of roman expressions or phrases can have the potential of becoming shareable cultural references.

Then, the third trend addresses a critical shift in consumer consciousness, related to the higher demand for transparency, sustainability, and ethical production practices. In this scenario, tevojodi, which is still in its growing phase, can leverage sustainable principles not as an add-on to the business, but as a core operational philosophy; this could be done, for instance, through the adoption of eco-friendly packaging options, as well as a pre-order model to reduce overproduction and waste of products. Additionally, a pre-order system also aligns with the artisanal nature of the brand, allowing for more controlled production and creating a perception of exclusivity and craftsmanship.

The fourth trend is related to the tension between local identity and a global target, as today's consumers are drawn to products that express a distinct local character while also fitting seamlessly into global aesthetics and standards. For tevojodi, this ambition can be reached through the internationalization of roman culture via curated drops aimed at international markets.

The final trend, community-driven consumption, even though is already particularly aligned with tevojodi's identity, could be further amplified through physical and digital

co-creation activities; these could include, for instance, local pop-up events where customers meet the founder or customize their own pieces, or through digital initiatives where followers can vote on new expressions or design ideas.

Since each of the five trends is already compatible with tevojodi's values and vision, rather than requiring a drastic change, these opportunities suggest organic extensions of what the brand already represents, offering ways to scale impact, deepen connections, and succeed in an increasingly competitive and value-driven market.

3.2 Strategic marketing plan for brand launch

The initial goal of the brand is to establish a strong brand awareness in the local market, positioning tevojodi as a cultural insider, as something that belong to the city and to those who truly admire it and appreciate its history. This strategy involves creating a recognizable tone of voice and visual identity across digital platforms, developing community-driven engagement, and setting the basis for long-term brand loyalty. Thereby, more than visibility, the marketing strategy seeks to foster authenticity, making the brand become relevant, relatable, and emotionally resonant for its target customers. Through storytelling, social interaction, and clever cultural references, tevojodi aims to transform everyday Roman expressions into symbols of belonging and urban pride.

To build initial awareness, tevojodi embraces a grassroots and community-first strategy as, rather than investing in partnerships with macro-influencers or traditional advertising practices, the brand's marketing strategy calls for collaborations with micro-influencers based in Rome. These individuals, due to the genuine relationship that they maintain with their followers, often speak the same language of the brand's target audiences and their content is typically considered more relatable, sincere, and localized. Thereby, the narratives used by this category of influencers, is consistent with the rhythms of Roman lifestyle and aligns naturally with the brand's storytelling. This strategic decision stems from a broader understanding of shifting dynamics within the influencer marketing landscape: in contrast to macro-influencers, whose communications may feel increasingly curated and revenue-driven, micro-influencers tend to enjoy higher levels of engagement and trust precisely because of their perceived authenticity. Consequently, for a reality like tevojodi, where the brand identity is built upon genuine everyday experiences rooted in

a specific cultural environment, the ability to communicate from “within” the community, rather than from outside of it, is essential. In this context, micro-influencers, who live in the same environment, speak the same dialect, and share the same sense of irony, are naturally positioned to serve as authentic and genuine narrators of the brand’s story. Thus, collaborations with them could take the form of casual product placements, behind-the-scenes previews, or lifestyle content that shows the t-shirts in real Roman scenario like local bars, in traffic, or during a night out, contributing to the co-creation of a narrative that feels lived, not staged.

The marketing strategy also relies heavily on WOM promotion, especially during the pre-launch and launch phases. In this scenario, family members, friends, and early supporters become the first brand ambassadors for *tevojodi*, spreading the concept organically within their own networks. Consequently, this informal communication, enhanced by shared values and social proof, contributes to building buzz in a way that feels natural and spontaneous rather than constructed. This approach mirrors the way ideas and culture often circulate in urban communities: through WOM, casual encounters, and trusted social circles. Thereby, by activating these smaller, interconnected networks first, *tevojodi* can seed its identity and values with greater depth and resonance. Moreover, encouraging early adopters to share their impressions and personal experiences, whether through unboxing content or impressions, can further foster a sense of collective involvement and co-ownership. In doing so, the brand doesn’t merely market *to* its community but rather *with* it, transforming customers into active participants in the diffusion of the brand’s spirit.

Another crucial element in the expansion of brand awareness is related to the development of a teasing campaign that precedes the official launch of the brand. Precisely, inspired by guerilla marketing techniques, this campaign aims to generate curiosity and anticipation without immediately revealing the product or the brand’s full concept. To do so, visually impactful posters or flyers with iconic roman expressions could be spread across the city in strategic locations, such as university campuses, metro stations, and nightlife districts while, at the same time, posts and stories on social media platforms can contribute to build a sense of mystery and expectation among the audience.

Figure 3: Teasing campaign posters in Roman districts



Source: Author elaboration, 2025.

The visual design of these offline materials could further reflect the same minimalist and ironic tone of voice that characterizes the brand's identity, using typographic choices,

colors, and phrasing that suggests familiarity without revealing everything. This kind of campaign is aimed at inviting people to wonder, planting a question in their minds and creating buzz; importantly, the teaser content serves as a cultural signal, suggesting that something new is arriving, it is only a matter of time. On digital platforms, this approach can be mirrored through cryptic posts, countdowns, or short videos that reinforce a sense of cohesion between the online and offline worlds. Thereby, the mystery around the pre-launch phase is meant to become a strength, encouraging users to talk, guess, and share. Ultimately, these multifaceted awareness-building tactics not only reflect tevojodi's values of authenticity, cultural connection, and everyday storytelling and experiences, but also builds momentum through emotional relevance. Thus, by genuinely and naturally reaching people, the brand lays the foundation for a strong, engaged, and organically growing community that sees itself reflected in the product before the product is even fully revealed to the market.

3.2.1 Communication strategy

A key component of the brand's strategic launch is strongly related to the successful development of a coherent and culturally resonant communication strategy. Rooted in the brand's values of authenticity, community, and humor, tevojodi's communication style is designed to establish an emotional connection with its audience while remaining playful, minimal, and hyper-local. Hence, the brand's chosen tone of voice (ToV) reflects linguistic identities typical of Rome, favoring colloquial expressions and familiar language structures that invite users to recognize themselves in what they read and wear; this stylistic choice is not accidental but serves as a vehicle for emotional proximity, cultural recognition, and shared meaning. Therefore, rather than promoting the product directly, the brand seeks to narrate a lifestyle and a true way of being: the small rituals, the frustrations, and the conversations that shape everyday life in Rome.

In this scenario, social media platforms, particularly Instagram and TikTok, become the main stage for the brand's narrative, characterized by a tone of voice that is ironic yet affectionate, minimalist yet expressive, thus reflecting the typical roman attitude of combining sarcasm with warmth. This way of communicating is also reflected in the way

tevojodi addresses its community, always speaking “from the inside” and never looking at the city from a distance.

A central element of the content plan foresees the production of short and humorous video sketches that show the scenes from a “typical roman day”. Particularly, these scenes not idealized representations of the Rome, but rather a close, sincere portrait of everyday roman experiences: being stuck in traffic, chatting with friends over a coffee, exchanging jokes in the streets, or simply reacting to the chaos and beauty of the Eternal City. In this context, each scene calls for a roman expression that not only delivers humor but also becomes the main visual printed on a *tevojodi* t-shirt. These expressions, drawn from local slang and infused with meaning, thus act as linguistic symbols of a shared identity and emotionality; in this way, language becomes material, and words becomes wearable.

The main idea behind this communication strategy is to let the target audience identify in those moments and, eventually, to want to wear that specific moment as a badge of identity. Therefore, these videos are meant to be not just commercial tools: they seek to represent micro-narratives and fragments of collective urban experience that turn common language into fashion.

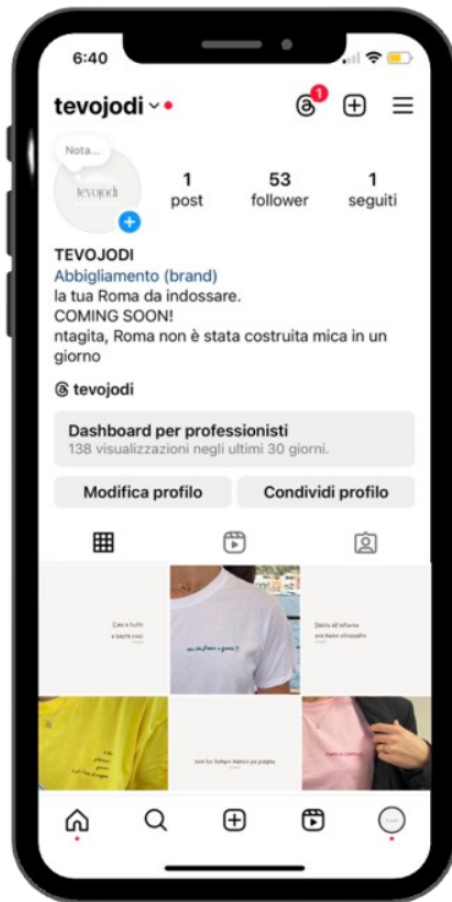
In terms of Instagram aesthetics, the feed strategy is designed to balance visual coherence with emotional variety. Specifically, three content types alternate in a structured grid:

- 1) Typographic posts featuring roman phrases in a clean and bold font with a minimalist background: this type of content helps reinforce the brand’s linguistic focus and provide instant recognition.
- 2) Lifestyle pictures of people wearing *tevojodi*’s t-shirts. These pictures are meant to be candid and spontaneous, and not posed, to represent the brand’s authenticity.
- 3) Narrative captions or micro-stories²⁹ that expand on the meaning behind each expression, thus offering the audience cultural context, personal anecdotes, or a touch of poetic realism.

By structuring its Instagram feed with these three types of content, *tevojodi* can create a visually rhythmic yet emotionally layered page that invites scrolling, exploring, and engaging.

²⁹ Like the video sketches representing a typical day in roman life.

Figure 4: Instagram page mockup for tevojodi



Source: Author elaboration, 2025.

Additionally, tevojodi plans to establish strategic collaborations with Instagram pages and content creators that already operate within the roman cultural space, that interview locals and celebrate the city's nuances. These collaborations can take the form of co-created content, sponsored posts, or interviews in which the brand is subtly integrated into emotionally relevant narratives.

3.2.2 Distribution and sales channels

In the first phase of its market entry, tevojodi will adopt a highly focused and accessible sales strategy, primarily leveraging Instagram as its principal distribution and sales channel. Given that the brand is still in the pre-launch phase, the decision to start selling directly through Instagram is not only pragmatic but also deeply coherent with tevojodi's identity: the social media platform, with its built-in shopping functionalities, offers an

ideal environment for emerging brands to begin their commercial activity, allowing for a seamless showcase of products and direct interaction with customers.

Nowadays, Instagram Shopping is widely used especially among small and medium-sized direct-to-consumer (DTC) brands, allowing customers to explore and purchase products without leaving the app. For the specific case of tevojodi this means that each story or post published can become a potential point of sale, offering a frictionless path from brand engagement to purchase.

This strategy is meant to reflect the broader trend among Gen Z and Millennials, representing tevojodi's main target audience, who increasingly use social media platforms not just to discover new brands and trends but also to make purchases. Moreover, using Instagram as the main sales channel highly reduces operational complexity and financial risks, eliminating the need for large investments in web development, payment gateways, and inventory management systems associated with full-scale e-commerce websites.

Additionally, beyond its technical and practical functionality, Instagram also allows tevojodi to maintain an intimate tone of voice, reinforcing its community-driven identity. Thereby, the social media platform helps the brand in the development of a loyal following through comments, direct messages, and feedback.

To complement its online presence, tevojodi may organize temporary offline activations, such as pop-up events, urban markets, or launch parties in selected neighborhoods. These physical moments allow direct interaction with the brand, offering visibility in real-world environments and fostering community building.

The goal of such initiatives is not mass exposure, but depth of connection: meeting people, telling the brand's narrative and story face-to-face, and letting customers try on the product while engaging with the mood of the brand.

Once the business gains momentum and tevojodi has successfully established a clear identity and customer base, the brand can consider expanding to a dedicated e-commerce website, allowing for greater control over the user experience as well as broader customization and the ability to integrate deeper storytelling components.

Additionally, in the longer term, if the brand gains traction, it could consider establishing selective partnerships with local concept stores or cultural hubs that resonate with its same values and audience. However, in the early stage, maintaining a lean, DTC (direct-to-consumer) model³⁰ can better help *tevojodi* to contain costs and preserve the uniqueness of its experiences.

3.3 Theoretical implications and development potential

Tevojodi represents an example of how branding can evolve from a product-centered process into a cultural and community-driven narrative. Additionally, the brand's conceptual foundation, rooted in local dialect, shared identity, and emotional resonance, mirrors many of the theoretical constructs explored in the previous chapters of this thesis, thus transforming such concepts from abstract ideas into applied branding strategies.

From a theoretical standpoint, *tevojodi* endorses the growing relevance of cultural branding as a competitive differentiator. Precisely, as already seen in the brand's use of roman dialect and references of everyday local expressions, *tevojodi* embodies the concept of cultural proximity (Straubhaar, 1991), establishing emotional familiarity through language and shared humor. Therefore, by leveraging culturally specific cues, *tevojodi* positions itself not just as a product but as a symbolic bridge between individual identity and collective recall. This approach shows how brands can successfully build trust and emotional engagement not by inventing narratives, but by amplifying existing ones that already live within a specific environment.

Additionally, *tevojodi* embodies a model that brings to life the dynamics of community-driven branding: its foundation lies in the idea of shared values and co-created meaning, rather than top-down marketing tactics. This aspect reflects the principles of participatory marketing and the Social Identity Theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1979), for which consumers see themselves as active members of a group that shares their same voice, humor, and values. Moreover, this represents a great potential for *tevojodi*, as the brand can turn customers into brand ambassadors.

³⁰ Direct-to-consumer (DTC) model is a business strategy where the brand sells its products directly to consumers, bypassing traditional intermediaries such as distributors or retailers. This model thus enables the company to have greater control over branding, customer experience, pricing, and data collection.

Furthermore, tevojodi's model aligns closely with theories related to brand authenticity: exactly, the brand doesn't seek to appear perfect or well-polished; rather, it aims to appear and be real and genuine. Thereby, the use of informal language, humor, and emotional expressions align with the theoretical idea of symbolic branding (Kapferer & Bastien, 2017), that highlight consumers' tendency to not only buy the product itself but the whole message that it embodies. This aspect reinforces the notion that in today's market, values like authenticity are not just a bonus point to succeed within the industry but represent a concrete baseline requirement for brand relevance.

From a development perspective, tevojodi holds notable potential to evolve into a cultural brand with strong regional roots and scalable storytelling. If the brand can successfully expand into new markets or audiences, it needs to find a way to translate its core identity without offsetting its cultural essence.

This brings into consideration the theoretical concept of glocalization (Levitt, 1983). Based on this notion, expanding a business is not merely about adapting products to specific local tastes, but it is about preserving the core values of the brand while, contemporary, achieving a broader reach. For tevojodi, this could mean exploring other expressions or cultural snapshots or even developing new strategies while maintain its distinctive tone of voice and emotional style.

4. Research design and data analysis

To answer the research question³¹ with a quantitative approach, a questionnaire was developed with the aim to test how specific elements shape perceptions of authenticity, trust, emotional connection, and willingness to engage with a brand. Moreover, the survey was built to examine the reception of tevojodi's symbolic identity, which is highly influenced by the use of local dialect and expressions as well as emotionally resonant storytelling.

However, it is important to note that, as tevojodi has not yet been launched in the market, the research adopts a concept-testing approach that simulates the brand's exposure through descriptive prompts as well as visual content and evaluates participants' responses on psychological and emotional dimensions. Therefore, by exposing respondents to tevojodi's visual identity and conceptual positioning, the research gathers empirical insights useful for the development of an efficient brand strategy.

Consequently, the study aims to better understand whether and how elements such as cultural relevance, perceived authenticity, and emotional resonance influence the consumer's relationship with a brand. More specifically, the research analyzes whether familiarity with linguistic and cultural references can influence stronger association with the brand, and whether perceived cultural alignment can increase consumers' trust and willingness to engage, both in terms of brand advocacy and emotional connection. Additionally, the thesis explores the extent to which participatory and co-creative dynamics, such as the motivation to contribute to aspects like product design or brand storytelling, can enhance consumers' engagement and perceived ownership.

4.2 Research objectives and theoretical constructs

The research is built upon a causal model that investigates how the sense of belonging to a community influences brand perception. This conceptual framework reflects a directional relationship³² in which belonging represents the independent variable³³, while brand perception consists of a set of dependent variables³⁴ that collectively describe

³¹ *How does the sense of belonging to a community influence the perception of a brand?*

³² Meant as a relationship in which one variable is expected to influence another variable, showing a specific direction of effect.

³³ An independent variable is one that predicts or influences changes in another variable.

³⁴ A dependent variable is the outcome or effect that is measured, and it changes in response to the independent variable.

how consumers cognitively and emotionally experience, interpret and potentially act with a brand.

The sense of belonging is the key construct of the model and, for this reason, represents the independent variable. In the research, the sense of belonging is operationalized through indicators that measure the consumer's emotional connection with a brand, the influence of being part of a community on brand choice, and the willingness to engage in participatory practices³⁵ within the brand's ecosystem.

On the other side, brand perception denotes a multidimensional construct characterized by a set of dependent variables; these dimensions represent different outcomes of consumer-brand interaction and range from immediate emotional responses to other behavioral intentions. Thus, rather than being treated as a singular evaluative score, brand perception is broken down into four main dimensions:

- 1) Brand evaluation, which includes the consumer's first impression of the brand and the degree of emotional appeal it generates. Thus, this dimension captures the initial affective reaction, which is often influenced by how culturally relevant or personally resonant the brand appears to its target audience.
- 2) Perceived authenticity, meant as the extent to which the brand is perceived as genuine, credible, and consistent with its core value and communication style.
- 3) Engagement and WOM, which include the likelihood of following the brand on social media, sharing its content, or discussing it with peers. These behavioral manifestations of perception reflect how strongly and deeply individuals identify with the brand's message and community, thus feeling encouraged to act as a supporter or promoter.
- 4) Purchase intention, referring to the willingness to financially support the brand and convert positive perception into concrete consumer behavior. Thus, purchase intention represents the most direct behavioral outcome of brand perception and is often mediated by trust and emotional connection.

Following these premises, five hypotheses are proposed to capture the different dimensions through which belonging may influence brand perception.

³⁵ Such as co-creating content or contributing with personal ideas.

The first hypothesis (H1) assumes a direct relationship between sense of belonging and brand perception, suggesting that a stronger sense of belonging to a community may lead to a more positive brand perception. Precisely, H1 investigates whether emotional and symbolic inclusion within a brand's ecosystem influence how individuals form their initial impressions of the brand and how favorably they evaluate it. The underlying assumption is that when consumers feel represented or included in a brand's identity, whether through its language, values, or visual imagery, they tend to respond to it more emotionally and positively.

The second hypothesis (H2) suggests that a sense of belonging is positively associated with how authentic the brand is perceived to be. Indeed, when consumers feel part of a community, they are more likely to witness the brand as genuine, sincere, and culturally consistent. This perception of authenticity is not merely the result of an effective storytelling or coherent branding strategies but emerges from a deeper sense of cultural belonging and trust between the brand and its target audience.

The third hypothesis (H3) shifts the focus from internal perception to outward behavior, proposing that a strong sense of belonging can increase a consumer's willingness to engage with the brand. Specifically, it suggests that people who identify with a brand's community are more inclined to follow it on social media, share its content, and talk about it with other peers. In this sense, belonging stimulates advocacy and WOM, helping to transform passive appreciation for the brand into active support.

The fourth hypothesis (H4) examines whether belonging has an impact in shaping purchase intentions, assuming that when consumers feel emotionally connected to a brand, they are more likely to consider buying from it. The emotional bond created by belonging can strengthen the motivation to support the brand not just ideologically, but also economically as buying a product represents a form of participation or expression.

Lastly, the fifth hypothesis (H5), introduces a mediated causal relationship, suggesting that authenticity functions as an intermediary factor between belonging and purchase intention. Hence, it implies that belonging strengthens the perception of authenticity which, in turn, increases the likelihood of purchase. Thus, this model points out that identity-driven connection with a brand can evolve into trust and, ultimately, into consumer action.

Table 6: Research hypotheses and related variables

Code	Hypothesis	Variables
H1	A higher sense of belonging leads to a more positive overall perception of the brand	IV: Belonging DV: First impression, emotional appeal
H2	Belonging is positively associated with perceived authenticity of the brand	IV: Belonging DV: Authenticity score
H3	Belonging is positively correlated with engagement (WOM, sharing, following)	IV: Belonging DV: Share/follow behaviors
H4	Belonging predicts purchase intention	IV: Belonging DV: Would you buy from tevojodi?
H5	Authenticity mediates the relationship between belonging and purchase intention	IV: Belonging → Mediator: Authenticity → DV: Purchase intention

Source: Author elaboration, 2025.

4.3 Questionnaire structure

The empirical part of the thesis seeks to study how symbolic, cultural, and emotional dynamics contribute to shape brand perception, with a particular focus on community-based branding strategies and cultural authenticity. Thereby, drawing from the theoretical frameworks examined in the previous chapters, the research aims to understand how people relate to branding elements that evoke a sense of belonging, familiarity, and identity.

The design of the questionnaire is directly inspired by the theoretical constructs outlined in the previous chapters and seeks to translate them into a structured and measurable system. Thereby, coherently with the research question, focused in understanding how a sense of belonging to a community can influence brand perception, the survey's structure allows to explore different cognitive and affective dimensions that impact on the development of consumer-brand relationships, particularly in relation to tevojodi.

The questionnaire is structured in two main parts: the first section aims to measure respondents' emotional and cultural alignment with key branding elements such as cultural identity, brand authenticity, and brand community; the second section investigates the effects of the concrete employment of such elements, through a strategic analysis of tevojodi.

More accurately, the first part of the questionnaire draws mainly on the theoretical constructs of self-congruence and cultural branding, emphasizing the importance of authenticity, storytelling, and cultural identity in consumers' behaviors; the underlying premise is that individuals tend to be more favorably inclined to engage with brands that better reflect or amplify specific aspects of their own cultural and emotional identity. This orientation strongly aligns with the academic literature that has been discussed in the previous chapters of the thesis, which emphasize how modern consumers, predominantly within younger demographics, seek out brands that they perceive as honest, emotionally sincere, and culturally rooted.

On the other hand, the second part of the questionnaire introduces participants to tevojodi, presenting them with a brief description of the brand's concept, its values, and some visual examples of the products' designs. This section is essential for evaluating how the theoretical constructs explored in the first part of the survey translate into a real-world brand case. Hence, participants are here asked to evaluate tevojodi across the same dimensions examined in the first section, thus conducting a comparative interpretation of general attitudes and brand-specific perceptions. Precisely, this section is structured around a series of targeted questions to assess individuals' reactions to the brand idea; these include queries regarding their likelihood to purchase a product, their perception of the brand's unique mix of humor and cultural awareness, as well as their willingness to engage with tevojodi on social media platforms. Additionally, to let respondents visually connect with the aesthetics and concept of the brand, this section of the survey includes several images of real products.

The whole questionnaire is characterized by a combination of Likert-scale items³⁶ and multiple-choice questions, as to provide a balanced methodological framework.

Moreover, the survey was distributed digitally, leveraging academic networks as well as social media platforms to reach a predominantly young and potentially culturally engaged audience³⁷.

Overall, the questionnaire is built to be not merely a data collection tool, but a structured extension of the theoretical framework analyzed throughout the whole thesis: it examines key concepts such as authenticity, emotional resonance, and community connection, translating them into measurable prompts. In doing so, the research ensures a conceptual coherence between theory and empirical assessments, while also laying the foundation for a valuable investigation on how culturally resonant and community-driven brands are perceived by potential target customers.

4.3.1 Descriptive analysis of the sample

The questionnaire was distributed online over a two-week period through academic channels, social networks, and personal contacts, seeking to reach a culturally aware, socially and digitally active audience.

The sample gathers 172 valid responses and reflects a strong presence of young adults as most respondents are aged between 18 and 24 years old (61,6%), followed by those aged between 25 and 34 years old (32%). The remaining group includes individuals between 35 and 44 years old (3,5%), 45+ (1,7%) and only one respondent under 18 years old (0,6%).

³⁶ The Likert scale questions ask respondents to rate their opinion on specific statements using a scale ranging from 0 to 7, where 0 indicates “Strongly Disagree” and 7 implies “Strongly Agree”.

³⁷ Such decision is consistent with tevojodi’s brand positioning, which targets mainly Millennials and Gen Z consumers.

Table 7: Age distribution of respondents

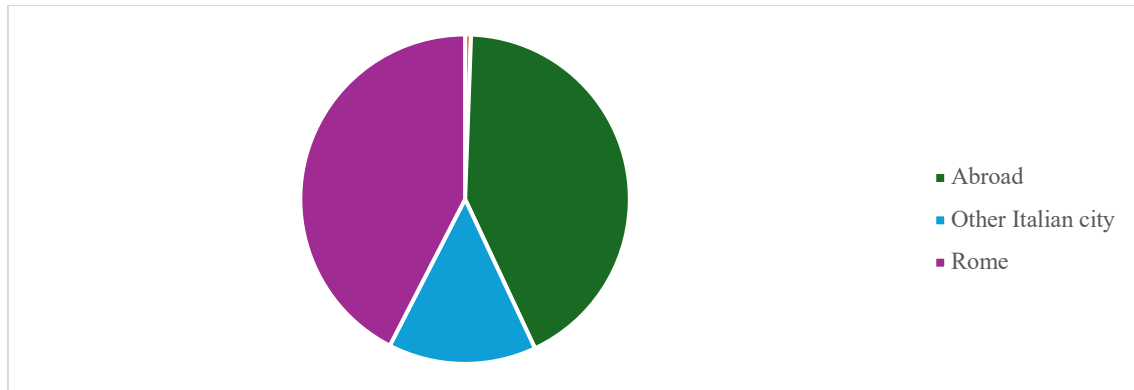
	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	1	.6	.6	.6
18 - 24	106	61.6	61.6	62.2
25 - 34	55	32.0	32.0	94.2
35 - 44	6	3.5	3.5	97.7
45 +	3	1.7	1.7	99.4
Under 18	1	.6	.6	100.0
Total	172	100.0	100.0	

Source: SPSS Statistics, 2025.

The graph (Table 7) visually illustrates the youth-oriented nature of the sample, which is extremely relevant for assessing tevojodi's appeal to its desired target audience. Additionally, the predominance of Gen Z and Millennials also enhances the relevance of the findings in the context of digitally driven and culturally rooted brand narratives.

Another demographic variable carefully monitored is the one related to the geographic composition of the sample, as participants are asked both whether they are originally from Rome and where they currently live. Interestingly, the responses are almost uniformly divided, with 87 of respondents being originally from Rome (50,6%) while the remaining 84 coming either from other Italian cities or different countries (48,8%). Moreover, another interesting insight is related to the current residence of the respondents: 73 of them report living in Rome (42,4%), another 73 remark to live abroad (42,4%), while 25 to live in another Italian city (14,5%).

Table 8: Respondents' geographic distribution



Source: SPSS Statistics, 2025.

The chart (Table 8) well illustrates the geographic diversity of the sample, allowing to better compare between responses from participants living inside and outside Rome. This insight is particularly relevant for the research, as it supports the aim to analyze the perception of culturally rooted brands both from within and beyond individuals' geographical origin.

4.4 Data analysis and interpretation

The theoretical implications discussed throughout the previous chapters highlight the importance of authenticity, emotional connection, and participatory behavior in the development and growth of culturally rooted brands. Thus, drawing from literature on brand authenticity, relationships between consumers and the brand, and community-based branding, the research proposes that users seek products that carry symbolic meanings resonating with their identity, values, and social associations. Consequently, the survey empirically examines these dimensions using a quantitative approach to validate the qualitative insights already analyzed, offering an understanding of how they interrelate and influence consumers' attitudes and behaviors.

4.4.1 Hypothesis 1: a higher sense of belonging leads to a more positive overall perception of the brand

The first hypothesis (H1) examines the relationship between consumers' sense of belonging and their overall perception of the brand. Specifically, it assumes that a stronger sense of belonging towards a brand community leads to a more positive brand evaluation.

Before testing this hypothesis with correlation and regression analysis, it is fundamental to examine the internal consistency of the items used to measure the belonging construct. To do so, Cronbach's Alpha analysis, a statistical coefficient used to assess the reliability or internal consistency of a set of scale items that measure the same construct, is conducted. From a practical standpoint, Cronbach's Alpha evaluates the extent to which items are interrelated, producing a value ranging from 0 to 1³⁸.

Table (9): Internal consistency of "belonging" scale

Cronbach's Alpha	N of Items
.787	2

Source: SPSS Statistics, 2025.

The results, as shown in Table 9, indicate that the items used to measure the belonging dimension, specifically emotional appeal and first impression, are sufficiently correlated (0.787); this suggests that the two variables are statistically reliable and measure the same construct (belonging). Thus, the variable related to belonging can be considered statistically robust and suitable for use in the subsequent analyses designed to test the relationship with brand perception indicators.

Following the validation of internal consistency, the following step involved in the analysis of the relationship between the sense of belonging and the key brand perception indicators is related to the Pearson correlation analysis³⁹.

Specifically, as shown in Table 10, the Pearson correlation analysis underlines a moderate and statistically significant positive correlation between belonging and emotional appeal ($r = 0.472$ and $p < 0.001$), as well as between belonging and first impression ($r = 0.499$ and $p < 0.001$). Therefore, the outcomes denote that individuals reporting a higher

³⁸ A coefficient equal or greater than 0.70 is considered acceptable, indicating that the items are sufficiently correlated and thus can be treated as a unified scale.

³⁹ The Pearson correlation analysis is a statistical method used to estimate the strength and direction of linear associations between continuous variables.

sense of belonging tend to evaluate the brand more favorably, both in terms of emotional appeal and first perception. Additionally, the significance levels, being below the conventional threshold of 0.01, confirm that these relationships are unlikely to be due to random variation.

Moreover, there is a strong correlation between emotional appeal and first impression ($r = 0.775$ and $p < 0.001$), suggesting that these two dimensions of brand perception are closely interrelated. This result underpins the conceptual coherence of the “perception” indicators, since both reflect affective and evaluative dimensions of how the brand is initially processed and emotionally accepted by the target audience.

Table 10: Pearson correlation coefficients between belonging and brand perception indicators

		Belonging	Emotional Appeal	First Impression
Belonging	Pearson Correlation	1	.472**	.499**
	Sig. (2-tailed)		<.001	<.001
	N	171	170	171
Emotional Appeal	Pearson Correlation	.472**	1	.775**
	Sig. (2-tailed)	<.001		<.001
	N	170	170	170
First Impression	Pearson Correlation	.499**	.775**	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	<.001	<.001	
	N	171	170	171

** . Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

Source: SPSS Statistics, 2025.

Taken together, these findings provide preliminary empirical support for Hypothesis 1, advancing that a higher sense of belonging is positively associated with a more favorable perception of the brand. Hence, the evidence highlights the relevance of belonging as a key psychological driver that can shape how consumers evaluate and emotionally related to a brand.

To further examine this relationship and evaluate the predictive influence of belonging on brand perception, simple linear regression analyses were conducted. Thus, the first model used tests whether belonging can significantly predict first impression.

Table 11: Linear regression model summary (DV: First Impression)

Model	R	R Square	Adjusted R Square	Std. Error of the Estimate	Change Statistics				
					R Square Change	F Change	df1	df2	Sig. F Change
1	.499 ^a	.249	.245	.95381	.249	56.174	1	169	<.001

a. Predictors: (Constant), Belonging

Source: SPSS Statistics, 2025.

As reported in Table 11, the regression model establishes a moderate positive relationship between the variables considered, with an R-value of 0.499 and an R^2 value of 0.249, meaning that approximately 24,9% of the variance in the scores related to first impression can be explained by participants' reported sense of belonging. However, while this output confirms the relevance of belonging in shaping brand perception, it also suggests that other factors, accounting for the remaining 75,1%, contribute to the development of first impression.

Further validation of the model's significance is provided by the ANOVA test⁴⁰ (Table 12), which underlines that the regression equation is statistically significant ($F(1,169) =$

⁴⁰ The ANOVA (Analysis of Variance) is a statistical test used to determine whether the variation between group means is greater than would be expected by chance, indicating that at least one group mean is significantly different from the others.

56.174 and $p < 0.001$), confirming that belonging significantly contributes to explaining variations in first impression.

Table 12: ANOVA analysis for regression model (DV: First Impression)

ANOVA ^a						
Model		Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
1	Regression	51.105	1	51.105	56.174	<.001 ^b
	Residual	153.749	169	.910		
	Total	204.854	170			

a. Dependent Variable: First Impression

b. Predictors: (Constant), Belonging

Source: SPSS Statistics, 2025.

Finally, the coefficients table (Table 13), provides relevant insights into the specific contribution of belonging within the model. Specifically, the unstandardized coefficient ($\beta = 0.463$) reveals that for each unit increase in the sense of belonging, the first impression score increases by approximately 0.4 points in the measurement scale. Moreover, the standardized coefficient ($\beta = 0.499$) further mirrors the moderate effect size, while the t-value (7.495) and p-value (< 0.001) confirm the statistical significance of the predictor.

Table 13: Regression coefficients (DV: First impression; IV: Belonging)

Coefficients ^a						
		Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients	t	Sig.
Model		B	Std. Error	Beta		
1	(Constant)	2.312	.247		9.358	<.001
	Belonging	.463	.062	.499	7.495	<.001

a. Dependent Variable: First Impression

Source: SPSS Statistics, 2025.

Overall, the findings offer strong empirical support for Hypothesis 1, estimating belonging as a statistically significant and meaningful predictor of brand perception. Consequently, strategies aimed at fostering community and psychological inclusion may enhance how brands are initially perceived by consumers, both rationally and emotionally.

4.4.2 Hypothesis 2: belonging is positively associated with perceived authenticity of the brand

The second hypothesis investigates whether participants who report a stronger sense of belonging also tend to perceive the brand as more authentic. This assumption is grounded in branding and consumer identity literature, which suggests that emotional connection and alignment with brand's values can significantly enhance the perception of its authenticity, trustworthiness, and sincerity.

Before examining the data, it is important to note that, unlike other constructs measured through multiple survey items, perceived authenticity was studied using a single Likert-scale item. Hence, for this variable it is not possible to perform a Cronbach's Alpha test, as the coefficient requires at least two items to test the internal consistency of the model. Consequently, the study of H2 starts directly from the correlation and regression models.

The first model used to test the association between belonging and perceived authenticity is the Pearson correlation analysis, which underscores a moderate to strong positive correlation between the variables examined ($r = 0.594$ and $p < 0.001$). Statistically, this outcome suggests that respondents who feel a stronger sense of belonging are also significantly more likely to support the importance of authenticity when evaluating a brand. Consequently, as consumers feel more included and connected to the brand identity or its relative community, they are also more inclined to perceive authenticity as a pivotal dimension of the brand.

Table 14: Pearson correlation between belonging and perceived authenticity

		Belonging	Perceived Authenticity
Belonging	Pearson Correlation	1	.594**
	Sig. (2-tailed)		<.001
	N	171	170
Perceived Authenticity	Pearson Correlation	.594**	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	<.001	
	N	170	170

** . Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

Source: SPSS Statistics, 2025.

However, the Pearson correlation analysis doesn't provide information on the direction or strength of the predictive relationship. Hence, to assess this dimension, it is necessary to conduct a simple linear regression analysis, with belonging as the independent variable and perceived authenticity as the dependent variable.

Table 15: Linear regression model summary (DV: perceived authenticity)

Model	R	Change Statistics							
		R Square	Adjusted R Square	Std. Error of the Estimate	R Square Change	F Change	df1	df2	Sig. F Change
1	.594 ^a	.353	.349	1.099	.353	91.464	1	168	<.001

a. Predictors: (Constant), Belonging

Source: SPSS Statistics, 2025.

The regression model, as summarized in Table 15, exhibits an R-value of 0.594 and an R² of 0.353, meaning that approximately 35,3% of the variance in perceived authenticity can be explained by individuals' reported sense of belonging.

Additionally, the ANOVA test further confirms the statistical significance of the whole regression model ($F(1,168) = 91.464$ and $p < 0.001$), validating the robustness of the linear relationship between belonging and perceived authenticity.

Table 16: ANOVA regression model (DV: perceived authenticity)

ANOVA ^a						
Model		Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
1	Regression	110.407	1	110.407	91.464	<.001 ^b
	Residual	202.793	168	1.207		
	Total	313.200	169			

a. Dependent Variable: Please indicate your level of agreement with the following statements using a scale from 0 to 7 (0 = Strongly Disagree / 7 = Strongly Agree) - Authenticity is an important factor when choosing a brand

b. Predictors: (Constant), Belonging

Source: SPSS Statistics, 2025.

Taken together, the results offer a strong empirical support for Hypothesis 2, demonstrating that belonging is not only associated with, but also a statistically significant predictor of authenticity; thus, as the sense of belonging increases, so does the likelihood that the individuals will consider the brand as authentic, considering its actions and messages as coherent and trustworthy.

This outcome therefore aligns with the theoretical framework in branding and consumer psychology, which emphasize the interplay between identity, emotional connection, and perceived brand authenticity. Additionally, it reinforces the strategic importance of fostering community affiliation and emotional closeness within the brand ecosystem, especially when aiming to build credibility and long-term consumer trust.

4.4.3 Hypothesis 3: belonging is positively correlated with engagement (WOM, sharing, following)

The third hypothesis examined in the thesis addresses the relationship between individuals' sense of belonging and their engagement behaviors towards the brand. In this

context, engagement is conceptualized as a multi-layered behavioral construct that encompasses different forms of interaction and advocacy. Precisely, three specific behaviors are considered as key indicators of engagement: the likelihood of following the brand on social media platforms, the interest shown in staying updated with the brand’s activities, and the tendency to share brand content when feeling emotionally connected to it.

Before testing the hypothesis through inferential statistics, it is necessary to evaluate the internal consistency of the engagement scale; this preliminary step is crucial for testing whether the three behavioral indicators reflect a coherent and unified construct.

Precisely, the Cronbach’s Alpha coefficient (0.779) indicates a satisfactory level of internal consistency, suggesting that the items involved are sufficiently interrelated and can thus be combined into a single engagement construct for subsequent analysis.

Table 17: Internal consistency of the engagement scale

Cronbach's Alpha	N of Items
.779	3

Source: SPSS Statistics, 2025.

Additional insights about the reliability structure are reported in the SPSS Appendix of the thesis, which includes detailed statistics on item means, corrected item-total correlations, and scale variance if items were deleted. Overall, these tables confirm that each individual item contributes meaningfully to the overall scale and that no item reduces the internal consistency of the model to a critical degree.

Subsequently, having confirmed the reliability of the engagement measure, the analysis proceeds with the Pearson correlation model to test the strength and direction of the relationship between sense of belonging and each engagement behavior. Precisely, as shown in the table (Table 18), the data highlights a significant positive correlation between belonging and each of the three engagement variables.

Table 18: Pearson correlation between belonging and engagement indicators

		Belonging	Follow	Interest	Tendency to share
Belonging	Pearson Correlation	1	.588**	.433**	.686**
	Sig. (2-tailed)		<.001	<.001	<.001
	N	171	171	171	171
Follow	Pearson Correlation	.588**	1	.735**	.542**
	Sig. (2-tailed)	<.001		<.001	<.001
	N	171	171	171	171
Interest	Pearson Correlation	.433**	.735**	1	.478**
	Sig. (2-tailed)	<.001	<.001		<.001
	N	171	171	171	171
Tendency to share	Pearson Correlation	.686**	.542**	.478**	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	<.001	<.001	<.001	
	N	171	171	171	171

** . Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

Source: SPSS Statistics, 2025.

The findings, as illustrated in the table, underscore a moderate to strong positive correlation between belonging and each dimension of engagement, and more specifically:

- Following and belonging ($r = 0.588$) – indicates that individuals who feel a stronger connection to the brand are more likely to follow it on digital platforms, supporting the idea that sense of belonging encourages ongoing digital connection.
- Interest and belonging ($r = 0.433$) – the relationship between these variables is weaker but still significant, suggesting that higher belonging corresponds to a greater inclination to stay informed about the brand.
- Sharing and belonging ($r = 0.686$) – these variables have the strongest correlation, highlighting that individuals who experience a sense of inclusion are significantly more inclined to engage in WOM behaviors and advocacy.

Overall, the results confirm that belonging is strongly associated with engagement at both passive (following and interest) and active (tendency to share) levels, providing a robust support of H3 and underscoring the behavioral relevance of emotional connection in the relationship between consumers and the brand.

To further assess the relationship between sense of belonging and the three dimensions of consumer engagement, a Multivariate Analysis of Variance (MANOVA)⁴¹ was conducted.

Precisely, as illustrated in Table 19, the MANOVA test assesses that belonging has a statistically significant overall effect on the merged set of engagement variables, indicating a strong multivariate effect.

Table 19: MANOVA test for the effect of belonging on engagement

Multivariate Tests^a								
Effect		Value	F	Hypothesis df	Error df	Sig.	Noncent. Parameter	Observed Power ^c
Intercept	Pillai's Trace	.333	27.837 ^b	3.000	167.000	<.001	83.510	1.000
	Wilks' Lambda	.667	27.837 ^b	3.000	167.000	<.001	83.510	1.000
	Hotelling's Trace	.500	27.837 ^b	3.000	167.000	<.001	83.510	1.000
	Roy's Largest Root	.500	27.837 ^b	3.000	167.000	<.001	83.510	1.000
Belonging	Pillai's Trace	.540	65.383 ^b	3.000	167.000	<.001	196.149	1.000

⁴¹ The MANOVA model is a statistical approach used when multiple correlated dependent variables are influenced by a single independent variable. Unlike simple regressions, MANOVA simultaneously examines the combined effect of the variables that, together, define the broader construct explored.

Wilks' Lambda	.460	65.383 ^b	3.000	167.000	<.001	196.149	1.000
Hotelling's Trace	1.175	65.383 ^b	3.000	167.000	<.001	196.149	1.000
Roy's Largest Root	1.175	65.383 ^b	3.000	167.000	<.001	196.149	1.000

a. Design: Intercept + Belonging

b. Exact statistic

c. Computed using alpha = .05

Source: SPSS Statistics, 2025.

The findings from the MANOVA model confirm the pivotal role played by belonging in shaping consumer engagement. Additionally, to identify the individual contribution of belonging to each specific engagement variable, a set of univariate analysis was performed, thus allowing for a more detailed interpretation of the effect of belonging on each behavioral outcome separately.

Table 20: Univariate effects of belonging on engagement dimensions – test of between-subjects effects

Source	Dependent Variable	Type III Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.	Noncent Parameter	Observed Power ^d
Corrected Model	Follow	121.980 ^a	1	121.980	89.371	<.001	89.371	1.000
	Interest	42.152 ^b	1	42.152	39.083	<.001	39.083	1.000
	Tendency to share	273.009 ^c	1	273.009	150.012	<.001	150.012	1.000
Intercept	Follow	12.643	1	12.643	9.263	.003	9.263	.857
	Interest	76.784	1	76.784	71.194	<.001	71.194	1.000

	Tendency to share	22.178	1	22.178	12.187	<.001	12.187	.935
Belonging	Follow	121.980	1	121.980	89.371	<.001	89.371	1.000
	Interest	42.152	1	42.152	39.083	<.001	39.083	1.000
	Tendency to share	273.009	1	273.009	150.012	<.001	150.012	1.000
Error	Follow	230.663	169	1.365				
	Interest	182.269	169	1.079				
	Tendency to share	307.565	169	1.820				
Total	Follow	2637.000	171					
	Interest	2795.000	171					
	Tendency to share	5402.000	171					
Corrected Total	Follow	352.643	170					
	Interest	224.421	170					
	Tendency to share	580.573	170					

a. R Squared = .346 (Adjusted R Squared = .342)

b. R Squared = .188 (Adjusted R Squared = .183)

c. R Squared = .470 (Adjusted R Squared = .467)

d. Computed using alpha = .05

Source: SPSS Statistics, 2025.

The data further reinforces the assumption that belonging strongly influences both passive and active engagement behaviors and that has the most significant effect on individuals' willingness to share brand content when feeling emotionally connected. Hence, the findings suggest that people who feel more included and aligned with a brand's

community are more likely to act as brand advocates, engaging in behaviors that foster visibility and enhance brand trust through peer influence.

Overall, the MANOVA approach and the related univariate tests provide robust evidence in support of H3, authenticating that not only belonging is positively correlated with engagement, but it also functions as a statistically significant predictor of all the behaviors that define this construct. Hence, the findings emphasize the strategic importance of fostering a sense of belonging to stimulate brand interaction, especially in digital and social environment where advocacy and sharing play a central role in brand development and circulation.

4.4.4 H4: Belonging predicts purchase intention

The fourth hypothesis analyzes the potential predictive relationship between individuals' sense of belonging and their willingness to purchase. Specifically, this assumption is theoretically linked to the assumption that emotional connection with a brand fosters trust, identification, and a greater willingness to engage in transactional behaviors.

For the analysis of H4, the internal consistency test is not applicable since the dependent variable⁴² is measured through a single item. In fact, in this case the focus is on the strength and nature of the relationship between the independent variable⁴³ and the behavioral intention related to the likelihood of making a purchase.

Therefore, to preliminarily explore this relationship, it is pivotal to run a Pearson correlation analysis. The results derived from such approach, as illustrated in the Table 21, reveal a positive correlation between belonging and purchase intention ($r = 0.495$ and $p < 0.001$), indicating that respondents who report a stronger sense of belonging are also more favorably inclined to express a higher intention to purchase from the brand.

⁴² Purchase intention (DV).

⁴³ Belonging (IV).

Table 21: Pearson correlation between belonging and purchase intention

		Belonging	Purchase Intention
Belonging	Pearson Correlation	1	.495**
	Sig. (2-tailed)		<.001
	N	171	171
Purchase Intention	Pearson Correlation	.495**	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	<.001	
	N	171	171

** . Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

Source: SPSS Statistics, 2025.

Regarding the Pearson correlation analysis, it is also important to note that, while the model doesn't establish causality, the strength and consistency of the relationship confirm the empirical acceptability of H4, thus reinforcing the theoretical assumption that connection and identity contribute to foster positive consumer behavior towards the brand.

Additionally, supportive descriptive data related to the distribution of the two variables is included in the SPSS Appendix of the present thesis. Generally, the descriptive measures confirm that participants report moderate outcomes on both dimensions, with sufficient variability to justify the correlation analysis.

To further validate the relationship between sense of belonging and purchase intention, it is necessary to run a simple linear regression, which enables to evaluate the predictive power of belonging thus allowing for a more detailed understanding of how changes in the independent variable⁴⁴ influence variations in the dependent variable⁴⁵ of H4.

⁴⁴ Belonging.

⁴⁵ Purchase intention.

Table 22: Linear regression model summary (DV: purchase intention)

Model	R	R Square	Adjusted R Square	Std. Error of the Estimate	Change Statistics				
					R Square Change	F Change	df1	df2	Sig. F Change
1	.495 ^a	.245	.240	1.05845	.245	54.725	1	169	<.001

a. Predictors: (Constant), Belonging

Source: SPSS Statistics, 2025.

The regression model, as shown in Table 22, highlights an R value of 0.495 and an R² of 0.245, meaning that belonging explains 24.5% of the variance in purchase intention. Additionally, the significance of the model is confirmed by the F-statistics outcome ($F = 54.725$ and $p < 0.001$), validating the regression as statistically meaningful. Moreover, the ANOVA model further supports the statistical significance of the regression model.

Table 23: ANOVA test for regression model (DV: purchase intention)

ANOVA ^a						
Model		Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
1	Regression	61.309	1	61.309	54.725	<.001 ^b
	Residual	189.334	169	1.120		
	Total	250.643	170			

a. Dependent Variable: Purchase Intention

b. Predictors: (Constant), Belonging

Source: SPSS Statistics, 2025.

Additionally, the coefficients table (Table 24) provides further insights into the specific impact of belonging on purchase intention. precisely, the unstandardized coefficient (0.507) demonstrates that, *ceteris paribus*, a one-point in belonging leads to an approximate 0.51-point increase in purchase intention. moreover, the standardizes

coefficient ($\beta = 0.495$) reflects a moderate effect size, while the t-statistic ($t = 7.398$ and $p < 0.001$) validates the statistical significance of the predictor.

Table 24: Coefficients of the regression model (DV: purchase intention)

		Coefficients ^a						
Model		Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients	t	Sig.	95,0% Confidence Interval for B	
		B	Std. Error	Beta			Lower Bound	Upper Bound
1	(Constant)	1.828	.274		6.666	<.001	1.287	2.369
	Belonging	.507	.069	.495	7.398	<.001	.372	.642

a. Dependent Variable: Purchase Intention

Source: SPSS Statistics, 2025.

Overall, the results provide a strong empirical support for H4, confirming that belonging is a statistically significant predictor of purchase intention. hence, individuals who experience a stronger sense of emotional connection or identification with the brand community report a greater willingness to purchase from that brand. This assumption aligns with the broader theoretical framework outlined, which emphasizes the role of emotional bonds in shaping consumer behavior and highlights the strategic value of fostering brand belonging to enhance commercial consequences.

4.4.5 H5: Authenticity mediates the relationship between belonging and purchase intention

The fifth and last hypothesis (H5) explores the mediational mechanism for which authenticity is expected to explain the relationship between belonging (IV) and purchase intention (DV). Precisely, this hypothesis assumes that the influence of belonging on an individuals' intention to purchase may be also indirectly controlled through perceived authenticity.

To empirically test H5, a mediation analysis was conducted using the PROCESS macro for SPSS (version 4.2)⁴⁶.

Precisely, the mediation model applied for the analysis corresponds to Model 4 in Hayes' PROCESS macro, which is used to test a simple mediation structure and, more specifically, the one designed as it follows: X (belonging) represents the independent variable; M (authenticity) is the mediator⁴⁷; and Y (purchase intention) is the independent variable. Precisely, the PROCESS macro estimates the following effects: the effect of X on M (path a); the effect of M on Y controlling for X (path b); the direct effect of X on Y (path c'); and the indirect effect of X on Y through M ($a \times b$), assessed through bootstrapping with 5000 samples to construct confidence intervals.

The first step in the mediation model evaluates whether belonging significantly predicts authenticity. Precisely, such relationship is confirmed by an unstandardized coefficient of $B = 0.6918$, $t = 9.56$, $p < 0.001$, and an R^2 of 0.3525; this data underscores that belonging explains approximately 35.3% of the variance in authenticity, thus suggesting that a stronger sense of belonging is significantly related to higher perceived brand authenticity.

Table 25: Regression analysis – belonging predicting authenticity (path a)

Predictor	B	SE	t	p	LLCI	ULCI
Belonging	0.6918	0.0723	9.5637	< .001	0.5490	0.8346

Source: Author elaboration, 2025.

The second regression analyzes the effect of both belonging and authenticity on purchase intention (path b and path c'). Specifically, the overall model results to be statistically significant, with an R^2 of 0.2897, $F(2,167) = 34.06$, and $p < 0.001$. Additionally, both predictors are statistically significant, with belonging retaining a direct effect on purchase

⁴⁶ PROCESS is an analytical tool used to estimate direct and indirect effects in mediation, moderation, and conditional process models using ordinary least squares (OLS) regression and bootstrapping methods.

⁴⁷ A mediator is a variable that explains how or why an independent variable influences a dependent variable.

intention ($B = 0.3246$ and $p < 0.001$) and authenticity showing a significant positive effect ($B = 0.2573$ and $p < 0.001$).

Table 26: Regression analysis – belonging and authenticity predicting purchase intention (paths b and c')

Predictor	B	SE	t	p	LLCI	ULCI
Belonging	0.3246	0.0839	3.8674	.0002	0.1589	0.4904
Authenticity	0.2573	0.0720	3.5713	.0005	0.1151	0.3995

Source: Author elaboration, 2025.

The direct effect of belonging on purchase intention (path c') is still significant even after including authenticity in the model; this outcome indicates that there is partial mediation between the variables, meaning that belonging affects purchase intention both directly and indirectly through authenticity.

Additionally, to estimate the indirect effect ($a \times b$), the PROCESS model employs the bootstrapping method⁴⁸, which highlights that the indirect effect of belonging on purchase intention through authenticity is $B = 0.1780$, with a 95% confidence interval ranging from 0.0693 to 0.2988⁴⁹.

Table 27: Indirect effect of belonging on purchase intention via authenticity (bootstrap estimates)

Mediator	Effect	BootSE	BootLLCI	BootULCI
Authenticity	0.1780	0.0585	0.0693	0.2988

Source: Author elaboration, 2025.

Overall, the mediation analysis provides strong empirical support for H5, confirming that authenticity partially mediates the relationship between belonging and purchase intention. precisely, the results suggest that participants who feel a stronger sense of belonging are

⁴⁸ Bootstrapping is a method used to estimate the uncertainty of a statistic by generating many resampled datasets for the original data.

⁴⁹ Since the interval doesn't include zero, the effect is considered statistically significant.

more likely to perceive the brand as authentic which, in turn, increases the likelihood to purchase. Moreover, even after adding authenticity to the model, the direct link between belonging and purchase intention remains significant, underlining that authenticity act as a partial but meaningful explanatory mechanism.

From a theoretical standpoint, the findings support the assumption that perceived authenticity acts as a bridge between emotional connection and consumer behavior whereas, from a strategic perspective, suggest that fostering values related to community and belonging enhance the credibility and authenticity of the brand, which ultimately drives purchasing behavior.

Table 28: Summary of hypotheses outcomes and strategic implications

Hypothesis	Empirical Outcome	Strategic and Theoretical Implications
H1. A higher sense of belonging leads to a more positive overall perception of the brand	Confirmed	Belonging enhances affective evaluations of the brand, indicating that emotional and social identification with a brand community strengthens brand equity. This confirms the relational nature of modern branding and supports community-based brand strategies.
H2. Belonging is positively associated with perceived authenticity of the brand	Confirmed	Belonging reinforces the perception that the brand is authentic and trustworthy. The emotional proximity created by community identification legitimizes the brand in the consumer's eyes. This highlights authenticity as a relational outcome rather than a fixed brand trait.
H3. Belonging is positively correlated with engagement (WOM, sharing, following)	Confirmed	Individuals with a stronger sense of belonging are more likely to become active brand advocates, engaging in spontaneous promotional behaviors. This validates community-driven branding as a catalyst for organic brand growth and virality.

Hypothesis	Empirical Outcome	Strategic and Theoretical Implications
H4. Belonging predicts purchase intention	Confirmed	Belonging does not merely influence perception—it drives concrete behavioral intention. This suggests that community identification translates into transactional potential, reinforcing the economic value of fostering belonging.
H5. Authenticity mediates the relationship between belonging and purchase intention	Confirmed	The impact of belonging on purchase intention is partly explained by perceived authenticity, suggesting that emotional attachment enhances trust, which in turn drives purchasing decisions. This identifies authenticity as a crucial psychological pathway in brand-driven consumer behavior.

Source: Author elaboration, 2025.

4.5 Research limitations and empirical conclusions

While the research offers valuable insights into the role of cultural identity, emotional resonance, and community belonging in defining consumer perceptions of emerging brands, it is essential to note that there are some limitations that restrict the applicability and interpretative extent of the findings.

The most evident limitation is related to the hypothetical nature of the brand analyzed: being a conceptual brand, *tevojodi* hasn't been launched in the market yet, hence participants' responses are based on their interpretation of simulated branding elements⁵⁰ rather than on real-world brand experiences. For this reason, the research approach lacks the depth of interaction and long-term engagement that consumers develop with established brands. As a result, the emotional and behavioral responses gathered in the second section of the questionnaire, while valuable, may not be able to fully reflect the

⁵⁰ Such as pictures displaying the products' design, the brand's ToV and slogans.

nature of actual consumer-brand relationships that evolve over time through repeated exposure, product usage, and community participation.

Conclusion

This thesis has explored the relationship between community, culture, and branding, with a specific focus on how the sense of belonging to a community influences the perception of a brand. Rooted in contemporary branding theories, and more specifically those concerning cultural branding, brand communities, and authenticity, the research aimed to empirically investigate the psychological and social mechanisms that underpin consumer-brand relationships in a hyper-connected and culturally nuanced marketplace.

The findings of the quantitative study, conducted through a concept-testing questionnaire for the emerging brand *tevojodi*, provide relevant empirical evidence to prove the central research question: the sense of belonging to a community significantly influences not only how a brand is perceived but also how consumers engage with it across behavioral and attitudinal dimensions.

Specifically, the data analysis underlined that an amplified sense of belonging is positively associated with a more favorable overall brand perception (H1), greater perceived authenticity (H2), increased engagement in terms of WOM and social sharing practices (H3), and stronger purchase intentions (H4). Additionally, the mediation analysis (H5) confirmed that perceived authenticity serves as a crucial bridge, enhancing the predictive power of belonging on purchase intention.

The theoretical implications of this research reinforce existing literature on the co-creation of brand meaning within brand communities (Muniz & O'Guinn, 2001) and the role of cultural narratives in enhancing perceived authenticity (Holt, 2004). Additionally, the thesis contributes to the ongoing academic studies by empirically demonstrating that belonging is not just a vague emotional construct but a measurable predictor of critical brand-related outcomes.

The findings have strong implications also for branding strategies as, in an environment where consumers demand more transparency, cultural relevance, and emotional resonance, belonging emerges as a very strong strategic asset. In fact, brand that successfully cultivate a sense of shared identity, symbolic co-ownership, and cultural intimacy are more likely to be perceived as authentic and trustworthy. This perception, in

turn, drives advocacy behaviors and loyalty, even before a product has officially launched, as shown in response to tevojodi's conceptual demonstration.

From a managerial perspective, the thesis advocates for a paradigm shift: marketers and brand strategists must move from transactional logic to relational branding models, wherein identity, participation, and community are the core pillars of engagement. Thereby, branding today is perceived to be less about broadcasting and more about hosting, hence providing a cultural ecosystem where consumers feel seen, heard, and represented.

In conclusion, the research question, *how does the sense of belonging to a community influence the perception of a brand?* can be answered with clarity: the sense of belonging significantly enhances brand perception by fostering authenticity, increasing emotional and behavioral engagement, and strengthening consumer loyalty and purchase intention. In this scenario, brands rooted in community not only differentiate themselves in today's saturated markets but also build enduring relationships grounded in shared meaning and cultural resonance. Hence, this study lays the foundation for future research and practices in branding, especially in the context of emerging brands seeking to craft authentic and community-anchored identities.

Qualtrics Appendix

The following appendix includes the full set of survey items provided to participants through Qualtrics.

The questionnaire was designed to measure key constructs relevant for the study, including sense of belonging, brand perception, authenticity, engagement behaviors, and purchase intention. Additionally, the survey also included demographic questions and control items.

All items are listed below in the same order in which they appeared during the actual administration of the survey.

A.1 Introduction

tevojodi

Hey there! Thank you for being here.

This quick survey is part of my thesis, and by filling it out you're actually helping me graduate (so...you're kind of a hero).

No boring stuff, promise: just a few questions...and maybe a sneak peek at something new.

Let's get the party started, shall we?

Next >

A.2 General brand perception

1. How important is brand storytelling in your purchasing decisions?
 - a. Very important
 - b. Important
 - c. Neutral
 - d. Slightly important
 - e. Not important at all
2. When choosing a brand, how much influence does a sense of belonging to a community have on your decision?

- a. Very strong influence
 - b. Strong influence
 - c. Moderate influence
 - d. Little influence
 - e. No influence
3. Please indicate your level of agreement with the following statements using a scale from 0 to 7 (0 = Strongly Disagree / 7 = Strongly Agree)
- a. Authenticity is an important factor when choosing a brand
 - b. I feel emotionally connected to brands that reflect my cultural background
 - c. When I feel emotionally connected to a brand, I am more likely to share its content
4. Would you wear clothing that feature roman expressions or phrases?
- a. Absolutely!
 - b. Yeah, sounds cool
 - c. Maybe, depends on the vibe
 - d. Not really my thing
 - e. No grazie, not for me

A.3 Introducing tevojodi

tevojodi

Hang on in there, you're about to get a first look at tevojodi!

It is a new brand idea that mixes roman slang, cultural vibes, and a healthy dose of irony.

In the next questions, you will also see a few exclusive previews...just to give you a taste of the vibe ;)

Are you ready? **It's time to meet tevojodi!**

< Prev

Next >

5. How much does tevojodi's mix of roman humor and everyday vibes pull you in?
- a. Love it, makes the brand feel alive

- b. It's ok, but not a game changer
 - c. Not into that kind of vibe
- 6. If a friend showed up wearing a tevojodi t-shirt, would you check it out or ask where it is from?
 - a. Definitely, I'd ask right away!
 - b. Yes, I'd probably look it up
 - c. Maybe, if it caught my eye
 - d. Not unless they mention it
 - e. Nope, wouldn't bother
- 7. Would you hit the "Follow" button on a brand like tevojodi if it popped up in your feed?
 - a. For sure!
 - b. Probably, I'd be curious to see more
 - c. Hmm...I'd have to think about it
 - d. Not really feeling it
 - e. Nah, I'd scroll right past
- 8. If tevojodi allowed customers to propose new expressions or slogans for their t-shirts, would you participate?
 - a. Sounds fun, I've got ideas ready!
 - b. Maybe, if the mood strikes
 - c. Nope, I'd pass
- 9. After seeing the concept, would you consider buying something from tevojodi?
 - a. Yes, I'd be the first in line!
 - b. I'd seriously think about it
 - c. Could go either way
 - d. Probably not, to be honest
 - e. No, not interested
- 10. Now that you've see tevojodi's visuals, what's your first impression of the concept?
 - a. Super cool, I'm into it!
 - b. Looks promising, I'd follow the launch
 - c. It's alright, not bad

- d. Not really my thing
- e. Doesn't appeal to me at all

A.4 Demographic questions

11. What is your age group?

- a. Under 18
- b. 18 – 24
- c. 25 – 34
- d. 35 – 44
- e. 45+

12. What is your gender?

- a. Male
- b. Female
- c. Non-binary
- d. Prefer not to say
- e. Other

13. Are you from Roma?

- a. Yes, romano de Roma
- b. No (but I love Roma)

14. Where are you currently living?

- a. Roma
- b. Other Italian city
- c. Abroad

A.5 Thank you message

tevojodi

That's a wrap, grazie for being part of this!

Tevojodi is still a concept, but there's a lot more coming soon. Curious? Just search **@tevojodi** on Instagram and stay tuned for what's next!

See you there?

< Prev

Next >

SPSS Appendix – Supplementary Statistical Outputs

This appendix contains the additional statistical outputs generated through SPSS for the empirical analysis of the study, explained in Chapter 4.

It includes additional tables, descriptive statistics, correlation matrices, regression analyses, and a mediation model process vis PROCESS for SPSS (Model 4).

These supplementary materials provide full transparency into the analytical procedures used to test the hypotheses and offer deeper insights into the structure and behavior of the variables examined.

A.1 Descriptive analysis of the sample

Table 29: Respondents' geographic distribution

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid		1	.6	.6	.6
	Abroad	73	42.4	42.4	43.0
	Other Italian city	25	14.5	14.5	57.6
	Rome	73	42.4	42.4	100.0
	Total	172	100.0	100.0	

Source: SPSS Statistics, 2025.

A.2 Hypothesis 3: Belonging and engagement (WOM, sharing, and following)

Table 30: Summary for engagement items

		N	%
Cases	Valid	171	99.4
	Excluded ^a	1	.6
	Total	172	100.0

a. Listwise deletion based on all variables in the procedure.

Source: SPSS Statistics, 2025.

The table reports the number of valid and excluded responses. The data is included in the thesis for transparency, but it not essential for the interpretation of the results.

Table 31: Item statistics for engagement indicators

Mean	Variance	Std. Deviation	N of Items
12.8421	14.157	3.76262	3

Source: SPSS Statistics, 2025.

The table provides descriptive statistics, such as mean and Standard Deviation (SD), for each item analyzed. This data is useful but already covered by the aggregated analysis.

Table 32: Item-total and deletion statistics for engagement scale

	Scale Mean if Item Deleted	Scale Variance if Item Deleted	Corrected Item-Total Correlation	Cronbach's Alpha if Item Deleted
Follow	9.1871	6.765	.710	.600
Interest	8.9649	8.375	.671	.689
Tendency to share	7.5322	5.827	.551	.835

Source: SPSS Statistics, 2025.

The table confirms the reliability of individual items and the non-necessity of removing any variable. The outcomes support the decision to treat the variables as a single scale.

Table 33: Descriptive statistics for belonging and engagement items

	Mean	Std. Deviation	N
Belonging	3.8246	1.18505	171
Follow	3.6550	1.44027	171
Interest	3.8772	1.14897	171
Tendency to share	5.31	1.848	171

Source: SPSS Statistics, 2025.

The table reports the mean and Standard Deviation (SD) for each item related to the engagement variable.

A.3 Hypothesis 4: Belonging and purchase intention

Table 34: Descriptive statistics for belonging and purchase intention

	Mean	Std. Deviation	N
Belonging	3.8246	1.18505	171
Purchase Intention	3.7661	1.21424	171

Source: SPSS Statistics, 2025.

The table reports the mean and SD of both variables analyzed to test H4. While useful to interpret the distribution and variability in responses, it doesn’t offer inferential value.

A.4 Hypothesis 5: Mediation analysis

Table 35: Full PROCESS output – bootstrap regression coefficients

Run MATRIX procedure:

***** PROCESS Procedure for SPSS Version 4.2 *****

Written by Andrew F. Hayes, Ph.D. www.afhayes.com

Documentation available in Hayes (2022). www.guilford.com/p/hayes3

Model: 4

Y: buyint

X: Belong

M: Auth

Sample

Size: 170

OUTCOME VARIABLE:

Auth

Model Summary

R	R-sq	MSE	F	df1	df2	p
.5937	.3525	1.2071	91.4644	1.0000	168.0000	.0000

Model

	coeff	se	t	p	LLCI	ULCI
constant	3.1428	.2903	10.8244	.0000	2.5696	3.7160
Belong	.6918	.0723	9.5637	.0000	.5490	.8346

OUTCOME VARIABLE:

buyint

Model Summary

R	R-sq	MSE	F	df1	df2	p
.5383	.2897	1.0526	34.0637	2.0000	167.0000	.0000

Model

	coeff	se	t	p	LLCI	ULCI
constant	1.0371	.3532	2.9360	.0038	.3397	1.7345
Belong	.3246	.0839	3.8674	.0002	.1589	.4904
Auth	.2573	.0720	3.5713	.0005	.1151	.3995

***** DIRECT AND INDIRECT EFFECTS OF X ON Y

Direct effect of X on Y

Effect	se	t	p	LLCI	ULCI
.3246	.0839	3.8674	.0002	.1589	.4904

Indirect effect(s) of X on Y:

	Effect	BootSE	BootLLCI	BootULCI
Auth	.1780	.0569	.0707	.2945

***** BOOTSTRAP RESULTS FOR REGRESSION MODEL PARAMETERS

OUTCOME VARIABLE:

Auth

	Coeff	BootMean	BootSE	BootLLCI	BootULCI
constant	3.1428	3.1448	.3732	2.3889	3.8508
Belong	.6918	.6914	.0854	.5293	.8613

OUTCOME VARIABLE:

buyint

	Coeff	BootMean	BootSE	BootLLCI	BootULCI
constant	1.0371	1.0311	.4042	.2385	1.8036
Belong	.3246	.3243	.0922	.1518	.5145
Auth	.2573	.2582	.0796	.1044	.4179

***** ANALYSIS NOTES AND ERRORS

Level of confidence for all confidence intervals in output:

95.0000

Number of bootstrap samples for percentile bootstrap confidence intervals:

5000

----- END MATRIX -----

The complete PROCESS output provides detailed regression and bootstrapping estimates used to validate the mediation model. Although only key coefficients are reported in the main analysis, the full output ensures replicability and transparency of the procedure.

Bibliography

- Heere, B., Walker, M., Yoshida, M., Ko, Y. J., Jordan, J. S., & James, J. D. (2011). Brand community development through associated communities: Grounding community measurement within social identity theory. *Journal of Marketing Theory and Practice*, 19(4), 407-422.
- Aaker, D. (2014). Aaker on branding: 20 principles that drive success. Morgan James Publishing.
- Aaker, D. A. (2012). *Building strong brands*. Simon and schuster.
- Abeysekera, N., Kotler, P., Kartajaya, H., & Setiawan, I. (2020). Marketing 4.0: Moving from Traditional to Digital.
- Amer, M. (2023). *Cultural Identity and Branding: An Integrated Approach to Enhance the Heritage Value* (Doctoral dissertation, Thesis for: PhD in Architecture: Innovation and Heritage. Rome: University of Rome Three, 2023. DOI: 10.13140/RG.2.2.34737.35680).
- Amer, M. (2023). *Cultural Identity and Branding: An Integrated Approach to Enhance the Heritage Value* (Doctoral dissertation, Thesis for: PhD in Architecture: Innovation and Heritage. Rome: University of Rome Three, 2023. DOI: 10.13140/RG.2.2.34737.35680).
- Arndt, J. (1967). Role of product-related conversations in the diffusion of a new product. *Journal of Marketing Research*, 4(3), 291-295.
- Arvidsson, A., & Caliandro, A. (2016). Brand public. *Journal of consumer research*, 42(5), 727-748.
- Berger, J. (2014). *Contagious: How to build word of mouth in the digital age*. Simon & Schuster.
- Berger, J. (2016). *Contagious: Why things catch on*. Simon and Schuster.
- Berger, J., & Milkman, K. L. (2012). What makes online content viral? *Journal of Marketing Research*, 49(2), 192-205.
- Berger, J., & Milkman, K. L. (2012). What makes online content viral?. *Journal of marketing research*, 49(2), 192-205.
- Beverland, M. B. (2005). Crafting brand authenticity: The case of luxury wines. *Journal of management studies*, 42(5), 1003-1029.

- Brown, J. J., & Reingen, P. H. (1987). Social ties and word-of-mouth referral behavior. *Journal of Consumer Research*, 14(3), 350-362.
- Business of Fashion & McKinsey & Company. (2024). *The State of Fashion 2025: Challenges at every turn*.
- Chandler, D., & Munday, R. (2016). *One-way communication*. In *A dictionary of media & communication* (2nd ed.). Oxford University Press.
- Cialdini, R. B., & Goldstein, N. J. (2004). Social influence: Compliance and conformity. *Annu. Rev. Psychol.*, 55(1), 591-621.
- Cova, B., & Pace, S. (2006). Brand community of convenience products: new forms of customer empowerment—the case “my Nutella The Community”. *European journal of marketing*, 40(9/10), 1087-1105.
- Cova, B., & Pace, S. (2006). Brand community of convenience products: new forms of customer empowerment—the case “my Nutella The Community”. *European journal of marketing*, 40(9/10), 1087-1105.
- Crawford, R., Brennan, L., & Khamis, S. Decoding Coca-Cola.
- De Veirman, M., Cauberghe, V., & Hudders, L. (2017). Marketing through Instagram influencers: The impact of number of followers and product divergence on brand attitude. *International Journal of Advertising*, 36(5), 798-828.
- De Veirman, M., Cauberghe, V., & Hudders, L. (2017). Marketing through Instagram influencers: the impact of number of followers and product divergence on brand attitude. *International journal of advertising*, 36(5), 798-828.
- Escalas, J. E. (2004). Narrative processing: Building consumer connections to brands. *Journal of consumer psychology*, 14(1-2), 168-180.
- Fournier, S., & Lee, L. (2009). *Getting Brand Communities Right*. Harvard Business Review.
- Freberg, K., Graham, K., McGaughey, K., & Freberg, L. A. (2011). Who are the social media influencers? A study of public perceptions of personality. *Public relations review*, 37(1), 90-92.
- Füller, J. (2010). Refining virtual co-creation from a consumer perspective. *California management review*, 52(2), 98-122.

- Füller, J., Lüdicke, M. K., & Jawecki, G. (2008). How brands enchant: Insights from observing community driven brand creation. *Advances in Consumer Research*, 35, 359-366.
- Gillespie, T. (2018). *Custodians of the Internet: Platforms, content moderation, and the hidden decisions that shape social media*. Yale University Press.
- Godes, D., & Mayzlin, D. (2004). Using online conversations to study word-of-mouth communication. *Marketing Science*, 23(4), 545-560.
- Hennig-Thurau, T., Gwinner, K. P., Walsh, G., & Gremler, D. D. (2004). Electronic word-of-mouth via consumer-opinion platforms: What motivates consumers to articulate themselves on the Internet? *Journal of Interactive Marketing*, 18(1), 38-52.
- Holbrook, M. B., & Hirschman, E. C. (1982). The experiential aspects of consumption: Consumer fantasies, feelings, and fun. *Journal of consumer research*, 9(2), 132-140.
- Holt, D. B. (2002). Why do brands cause trouble? A dialectical theory of consumer culture and branding. *Journal of consumer research*, 29(1), 70-90.
- Holt, D. B. (2004). *How Brands Become Icons: The Principles of Cultural Branding*. Harvard Business Press.
- Holt, D. B. (2004). *How brands become icons: The principles of cultural branding*. harvard business press.
- Holt, D. B. (2004). *How brands become icons: The principles of cultural branding*. harvard business press.
- Jamieson, K. H., & Cappella, J. N. (2008). *Echo chamber: Rush Limbaugh and the conservative media establishment*. Oxford University Press.
- Kapferer, J. N. (2012). *The new strategic brand management: Advanced insights and strategic thinking*. Kogan page publishers.
- Kaplan, A. M., & Haenlein, M. (2010). Users of the world, unite! The challenges and opportunities of Social Media. *Business horizons*, 53(1), 59-68.
- Kaplan, A. M., & Haenlein, M. (2010). Users of the world, unite! The challenges and opportunities of Social Media. *Business horizons*, 53(1), 59-68.
- Keller, K. L. (2013). *Strategic Brand Management: Building, Measuring, and Managing Brand Equity*. Pearson Education.
- Kotler, P., & Keller, K. L. (2016). *Marketing Management* (15th ed.). Pearson.

- Kozinets, R. V. (2001). Utopian enterprise: Articulating the meanings of Star Trek's culture of consumption. *Journal of consumer research*, 28(1), 67-88.
- Kozinets, R. V., de Valck, K., Wojnicki, A. C., & Wilner, S. J. (2010). Networked narratives: Understanding word-of-mouth marketing in online communities. *Journal of Marketing*, 74(2), 71-89.
- Kundu, S., & Rajan, C. R. (2016). Word of mouth: A literature review. *Word of Mouth: A Literature Review (Oct 24, 2016)*.
- Lane Keller, K. (2013). Strategic Brand Managment: Building, Measuring, and Managing Brand Equity.
- Lane Keller, K. (2013). Strategic Brand Managment: Building, Measuring, and Managing Brand Equity.
- Levitt, T. (1983). The globalization of markets.
- McAlexander, J. H., Schouten, J. W., & Koenig, H. F. (2002). Building brand community. *Journal of marketing*, 66(1), 38-54.
- Morhart, F., Malär, L., Guèvremont, A., Girardin, F., & Grohmann, B. (2015). Brand authenticity: An integrative framework and measurement scale. *Journal of consumer psychology*, 25(2), 200-218.
- Muniz Jr, A. M., & O'guinn, T. C. (2001). Brand community. *Journal of consumer research*, 27(4), 412-432.
- Muniz Jr, A. M., & O'guinn, T. C. (2001). Brand community. *Journal of consumer research*, 27(4), 412-432.
- Naz, F. (2014). Word of mouth and its impact on marketing. *International Journal of Scientific and Research Publications*, 4(1), 1-4.
- Pine, B. J., & Gilmore, J. H. (2011). *The experience economy*. Harvard Business Press.
- Prahalad, C. K., & Ramaswamy, V. (2004). Co-creating unique value with customers. *Strategy & leadership*, 32(3), 4-9.
- Prahalad, C. K., & Ramaswamy, V. (2004). Co-creating unique value with customers. *Strategy & leadership*, 32(3), 4-9.
- Putra, H. D., Himawati, D., Suzana, D., & Oktavilantika, D. M. (2023). The Influence of Social Media Marketing, e-WOM, Brand Awareness, and Brand Image on Brand Loyalty of Herbs Product. *Almana: Jurnal Manajemen Dan Bisnis*, 7(1), 77-83.

- Raj, K., Panakaje, N., & Parveen, R. (2024). The Evolution of Brand Inclusivity-A Systematic Review of Literature. *Library of Progress-Library Science, Information Technology & Computer*, 44(3).
- Ryu, G., & Feick, L. (2007). A penny for your thoughts: Referral reward programs and referral likelihood. *Journal of Marketing*, 71(1), 84-94.
- Schau, H. J., Muñiz Jr, A. M., & Arnould, E. J. (2009). How brand community practices create value. *Journal of marketing*, 73(5), 30-51.
- Schau, H. J., Muñiz Jr, A. M., & Arnould, E. J. (2009). How brand community practices create value. *Journal of marketing*, 73(5), 30-51.
- Schau, H. J., Muñiz Jr, A. M., & Arnould, E. J. (2009). How brand community practices create value. *Journal of marketing*, 73(5), 30-51.
- Schneider, J., & Hall, D. (2011). *The Agile Manifesto: Understanding Customer Pain Points for Business Growth*. O'Reilly Media.
- Sirgy, M. J. (1982). Self-concept in consumer behavior: A critical review. *Journal of consumer research*, 9(3), 287-300.
- Straubhaar, J. D. (1991). Beyond media imperialism: Assymetrical interdependence and cultural proximity. *Critical Studies in media communication*, 8(1), 39-59.
- Sweeney, J. C., Soutar, G. N., & Mazzarol, T. (2012). Word of mouth: Measuring the power of individual messages. *European Journal of Marketing*, 46(1/2), 237-257.
- Taylor, C. R. (2020). The urgent need for more research on influencer marketing. *International Journal of Advertising*, 39(7), 889-891.
- Trusov, M., Bucklin, R. E., & Pauwels, K. (2009). Effects of word-of-mouth versus traditional marketing: Findings from an internet social networking site. *Journal of Marketing*, 73(5), 90-102.

Sitography

<https://arena.im/marketing-growth/community-driven-branding/>
https://learn.g2.com/referral-program?utm_source=chatgpt.com
<https://legohouse.com/en-gb/what-s-on/>
<https://www.dmnews.com/community-engagement/>
https://www.entrepreneur.com/growing-a-business/the-shocking-truth-customers-dont-want-to-engage-with/234326?utm_source=chatgpt.com
https://www.gucci.com/uk/en_gb/st/what-new
<https://www.limelightplatform.com/blog/what-is-experiential-marketing>
<https://www.mckinsey.com/capabilities/growth-marketing-and-sales/our-insights/a-better-way-to-build-a-brand-the-community-flywheel>
<https://www.nosto.com/wp-content/uploads/2019/02/Data-Report-2019-FINAL-FINAL.pdf>
<https://www.searchlaboratory.com/2014/07/contagious-content-stepps-and-the-science-of-shareability/>
<https://www.sephora.com/BeautyInsider>
<https://www.social.plus/blog/driving-engagement-in-brand-communities-strategies-success-stories>
https://www.deloitte.com/us/en/industries/retail/about/retail-wholesale-distribution-deloitte-rwd-sector.html?utm_source=google&utm_medium=cpc&utm_campaign=retail-always-on&utm_content=fashion-luxury&gclid=Cj0KCQiA9667BhDoARIsANnamQaxWHgPIKTKEbQB2vktCzWC911P2vKb_m9oxTRhAP22GG0ZGQrC0caAuSxEALw_wcB
<https://www.sta3sta.com/sta3s3cs/1336485/global-types-social-media-accounts-followed-and-purchased-from-by-age/#:~:text=According%20to%20a%20global%20survey,percent%20of%20Baby%20boomers%20did.>