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**Exploring online brand-mediated communities and customer experience: insights and evidence from the Luxury fashion industry**

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**Abstract**

**Purpose**

Online brand community research has been directed at examining the consequences of consumer–brand relationships on various behavioural issues, with little to say about reciprocity and variants of millennials’ loyalty in the luxury fashion industry. The purpose of this paper is to advance knowledge of millennials’ participation in OBCs and reciprocity.

**Design/methodology/approach**

This qualitative study utilised an interpretive research approach and focused on the voices of millennials who had experience with OBCs. This study builds on social influence theory and extends existing understanding of millennials’ participation in OBCs by highlighting the constructs of customers’ reciprocity structures that lead to loyalty towards luxury fashion brands. Fifty semi-structured interviews were conducted, and the emergent data were qualitatively analysed using thematic analysis.

**Findings**

This paper developed an emergent theoretical framework that identifies and conceptualises four archetypical categories of millennial consumers in the luxury fashion industry: traditionalists, inspirers, self-containers and expellers. The framework illuminates varying strategies and explains how certain strategies might be more effective with different categories of consumers.

**Originality/Value**

This study builds on social influence theory and extends existing understanding of millennials' participation in OBCs by highlighting the constructs of customers' reciprocity structures that lead to loyalty towards luxury fashion brands.

Keywords: Online brand communities, customer loyalty, luxury fashion, social influence, social constructionist, interviews, millennials

## 1. Introduction

Online brand communities (OBCs) are the dominant platform for consumers to form social ties with brands and other users. A global survey conducted by Statista revealed that 6 out of 10 consumers aged 18 to 39 years were motivated to follow and engage with luxury brands through online environments (Statista, 2023a). In contrast to members of general online communities, members of OBCs display consistent positive emotions, loyalty and advocacy for a particular brand (Atallah, 2022). Managers of OBCs rely on users with previous experience of brands to enrich the functional and hedonic value of OBCs. This paper aims to understand the influence of OBCs on customers' loyalty behaviours towards luxury fashion brands. Studies have conceptualised customer loyalty through static outcome processes that focus on the purchase and repurchase of products, or repeat visits to brands (Dick & Basu, 1994; Yuan *et al.*, 2023). This transaction-focused perspective was extended to the conceptualisation of consumer engagement and, specifically, the passive or active status of individuals in online communities (Dholakia *et al.*, 2004; Meek *et al.*, 2019). More recent studies based on OBCs examined the effect of focal individuals' behaviours on other individuals within online social networks (Park *et al.*, 2018; Ozuem *et al.*, 2023a).

Meek *et al.* (2019) examined social capital in an OBC environment. Drawing on social capital theory, they identified three dimensions of social capital: structural, relational and cognitive. Meek *et al.*'s (2019) findings showed the social value of shared values and trust between

community members. Meek *et al.* (2019) underlined that consumers are socially influenced by the image of luxury brands and by social networks in OBCs. However, they focused on normative influence with little recognition of the use of other forms of social influence as strategies to change members' cognitive and behavioural processes. Meek *et al.* (2019) encouraged researchers and practitioners to reflect on the reciprocity structure exhibited by OBC members. The concept of customer–brand relationships implicitly represents ongoing reciprocity between a brand and selected valued customers who receive preferential treatment based on their level of engagement. Individuals' cognitive and behavioural responses to constructs of OBCs and other community members can influence cognitive and behavioural outcomes across multiple populations and are central to comprehending OBC engagement and loyalty.

This problematises our understanding of customers' engagement and loyalty towards OBCs. This is particularly the case given that customers' cognitive processes interconnect with their values and behaviours, which differ across generations. 32% of the global luxury goods market share comprises of millennials, with a forecast of 50% increase 2025 (Statista, 2023b). Millennials use online platforms for diverse functional and hedonic purposes (Azemi *et al.*, 2020) and are highly conscious of fashion brand choices (Helal & Ozuem, 2019, p. 142). This has motivated researchers to examine millennials' consumption behaviour in the luxury industry; in particular, researchers focused on millennials' social identity, status and response to luxury brand experiences (de Kerviler & Rodriguez, 2019).

Millennials' brand loyalty is progressively shaped within digital brand ecosystems, wherein both emotional and behavioural dimensions of loyalty are actively nurtured (Sharma & Dutta, 2025). As noted by Samala and Katkam (2020), the extent of Millennials' loyalty is closely linked to their degree of involvement in brand-related online interactions, suggesting that sustained digital engagement plays a critical role in reinforcing their allegiance to brands.

Extant research indicates that consumer engagement transcends mere transactional interactions, encompassing significant psychological and social investment in brands. This deeper engagement is often facilitated by active participation in online brand communities (OBCs), which promote co-creation, emotional resonance, and a shared sense of belonging (Carlson et al., 2018; Cheng et al., 2020). Such dynamics contribute to the cultivation of enduring brand loyalty. Millennials, in particular, are characterised by pronounced brand consciousness and demonstrate a strong preference for brands that align with their personal values and aspirations (Sharma & Dutta, 2025). These affinities are frequently reinforced through their interactions within OBCs, where value congruence and identity expression are nurtured. Millennials actively participate in OBCs not only as consumers but also as co-creators of brand meaning, engaging in discussions, sharing experiences, and offering feedback. This participatory behaviour is often driven by a sense of community and mutual benefit, where reciprocity plays a central role—members expect their contributions to be acknowledged and reciprocated by both peers and the brand itself. Such reciprocal exchanges foster trust, deepen emotional connections, and enhance perceived value, thereby strengthening brand attachment. Consequently, Millennials are especially responsive to brands that deliver interactive and value-oriented experiences.

Given their preference for experiential consumption that extends beyond the acquisition of physical products, Millennials are particularly drawn to luxury fashion brands that symbolise lifestyle experiences, personal identity, social status, and other intangible emotional values. These attributes are key drivers of their engagement with online brand communities (OBCs) within the luxury sector. Millennials' engagement is often motivated by a blend of hedonic and utilitarian benefits, such as identity expression, peer validation, and access to exclusive content (Lissitsa, 2025; Sharma & Dutta, 2025). This is consistent with evidence suggesting that brand loyalty in this demographic is frequently mediated by perceived reciprocity—wherein

consumers anticipate a mutual value exchange encompassing personalised content, social recognition, and active online interaction (Meek et al., 2019).

Furthermore, Millennial loyalty is reinforced when there is a perceived congruence between their personal values and the social identity projected by the brand, a relationship often co-constructed through community participation and peer influence (Ozuem et al., 2021b). Lissitsa (2025) contends that Millennials’ digital behaviour is substantially shaped by personal and social determinants, including educational background, occupational status, and individual personality traits. This suggests that their engagement with brands may be significantly influenced by a preference for OBCs that enable expressive and socially resonant interactions, thereby enhancing the positive impact of such communities on brand loyalty. Moreover, the salience of personal and social factors in Millennials’ online engagement highlights their predisposition to contribute actively to brand narratives within OBCs, ultimately strengthening their loyalty through mechanisms of social influence (Kelman, 1958).

OBCs support a higher order of the exchange of brand information among customers, and of customer–brand relationships. Theories relating to the exchange of brand-related information differ in terms of behaviours and the level of engagement. In fact, although much research has connected participation in OBCs with brand awareness (Kumar & Kaushal, 2023; Ranfagni *et al.*, 2016), increase in sales (Bagozzi & Dholakia, 2006) and increase in customer satisfaction (Hsieh *et al.*, 2022; Ozuem *et al.*, 2023a), few studies have investigated the emergent reciprocity benefits from OBCs that influence customer loyalty. In the current research, we examine the impact of reciprocity on loyalty in OBCs and provide insight into the process that underlies customers’ participation in OBCs. We show that the influence of participation is further activated by engaging and interacting with the brand and other members of the OBC.

To address this gap, this paper examines the effects of OBCs on millennial customers' loyalty to luxury fashion brands from a social influence theory perspective. This paper ultimately expands knowledge on how millennials influence other OBC members. By examining the impact of OBCs on loyalty the paper identifies the factors that influence changes in OBC members' cognitive and behavioural responses towards OBCs. The findings from this paper could be used by digital marketing managers in their marketing strategies. The paper provides a theoretical framework that draws on social influence theory, and extends existing work on customer engagement and loyalty to deepen understanding of loyalty. The theoretical insights suggest there are functional and hedonic motivations for engaging in OBCs, and these have an impact on loyalty intentions. There are key implications for millennials' loyalty to OBCs, and there are lessons for direct marketing strategies and tactics.

The following section presents a review of existing literature to identify the variables that will inform the theoretical framework. These are: OBCs, customer loyalty and the role of social influence in behavioural change. Section 3 presents the methodology based on an interpretive approach, which is followed by data analysis and findings in Section 4. The theoretical framework is discussed in Section 5. Section 6 and 7 presents a discussion of theoretical and practical implications. The paper culminates in a discussion of further research directions to promote further exploration of the topic.

## 2. Theoretical context

### 2.1 OBCs

The marketing literature suggests that OBCs act as an intermediary between customers and brands, and can generate positive marketing outcomes, such as increased brand-related consumer behaviour and purchasing, brand loyalty, positive word of mouth (WOM) and brand recognition (Cheng, Wu, & Chen, 2020; Meek *et al.*, 2019). Muñiz and O'Guinn (2001) referred to an OBC as a specialised community structured by social relationships between

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brand admirers. Mousavi and Roper (2023) further conceptualise OBCs as platforms for firms to create and publish brand-related content to their customers, to initiate interactions and exchanges of resources between customers and brands to create reciprocity value (Hollebeek & Macky, 2019). In literature, two classifications are offered to distinguish OBCs, namely consumer-initiated and firm hosted OBCs (Mousavi & Roper, 2023; Gruner, Homburg, & Lukas, 2014). However, the majority of authors have generally investigated OBC without classifying them into distinct types, in favour of examining moderating variables impacting OBC structures and reciprocity exchanges between users and brands, as summarised by three main research streams.

One of the main streams of extant OBC research embeds service-dominant logic as the theoretical foundation of most studies that examine customer contributions to internalised branding in online communities for hedonic returns (Bubphapant & Brandão, 2024; Dong *et al.*, 2024). Carlson *et al.* (2018) explored the effects of OBCs on brand relationships, and recognised the importance of facilitating brand experiences that are customer-centric. Brand experiences allow customers to co-create their experience with providers and this engagement with OBCs elicited emotional, relational and entitativity value. Building on these findings, Cheng *et al.* (2020) argued that customers connect with OBCs to build social relationships with other people, and indicated the importance of information quality in creating customer satisfaction and relationship commitment within an OBC.

A second stream of OBC research explores the direct consumer–brand relationship and its influence on individuals’ cognitive responses through OBC activity (Algesheimer *et al.*, 2005; Brandão & Popoli, 2022; Ozuem *et al.*, 2021b). Dholakia *et al.* (2004) concluded that some members of communities do not seek out interactivity and relationship building with other OBC members. Likewise, Algesheimer *et al.* (2005) and Muñiz and O’Guinn (2001) argued that a customer’s pre-existing relationship with a brand is a stronger motive for becoming a



member of an OBC than relationship building with OBC members. Arvidsson and Caliandro (2016) presented an additional motivation for consumer–brand relationships through OBCs; they found that some consumers establish online relationships with brands, through digital mediators like hashtags, to enhance their own publicity. However, this stream of research rarely distinguishes different groups of customers; thus, it concludes that customers are homogenous in their OBC engagement and loyalty behaviours (i.e., Cheng *et al.*, 2020; Meek *et al.*, 2019). Millennials' traits differ from those of other cohorts; therefore, a homogeneous description of OBC customers is unlikely. This suggests that the brand relationships of some customers are susceptible to normative influence, whereas the brand relationships of other customers might be susceptible to other types of influence. Relevant here is the practice of reciprocity that occurs between consumers and luxury fashion brands (Scuotto *et al.*, 2017; Koivisto & Mattila, 2018), and the desire of consumers to obtain social approval from peers.

A third dominant stream of OBC research examines the functional and hedonic incentives that influence consumers' purchase behaviours and perceptions towards brands (Veg-Sala & Geerts, 2024; Kang, 2023; Park *et al.*, 2018). The contrasting findings across these studies contradicted previously defined categories of customers' online behaviours towards and perceptions of OBCs, and their motivations for establishing membership of OBCs. For example, Fang and Zhang (2019) associated motivational antecedents with community members' attitudes towards continued participation and the perceived value they attributed to OBCs. In contrast, Bagozzi and Dholakia (2002) identified a tendency for users to temporarily participate in OBCs for short-term gain rather than seek long-term OBC membership that commonly reflects altruistic and social motives. We argue that these studies provide diverse findings across online communities in particular industries. In addition, these findings serve as indicators of customer heterogeneity and of the need to capture the complex characteristics of

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customers in OBCs, and the associated variance among cohorts of varying demographic backgrounds (Helal *et al.*, 2018).

Researchers have extensively investigated OBCs and customer loyalty through multiple theoretical lenses, such as social influence theory (Algesheimer *et al.*, 2005; Dholakia *et al.*, 2004; Ozuem *et al.*, 2021b), social capital theory (Cheng *et al.*, 2020; Meek *et al.*, 2019) and self-congruity theory (Michel *et al.*, 2022; Ranfagni *et al.*, 2016). Drawing on arguments from social influence theory, Ozuem *et al.* (2021a) proposed that different levels of customer involvement and engagement can actively determine consumer influence on social media platforms. Relatedly, Ozuem *et al.* (2021b) argued that customers' loyalty intentions in OBCs depend on the individuals and context. There is no unified study on the underlying mechanism of reciprocity and millennials' loyalty in the literature that links social influence and consumer–brand relationships (e.g., behavioural issues; see Table 1). Although previous studies have investigated OBCs and customer loyalty (Algesheimer *et al.*, 2005; Cheng *et al.*, 2020; Carlson *et al.*, 2018), none of these studies have integrated the likely mechanism. Our study aims to investigate the association between OBCs and the mechanism of reciprocity in the luxury fashion industry.

Table 1: Summary of key findings and customer loyalty attributes from online brand community literature

Authors	Aim of the study	Context	Key findings	Pre-/Post-purchase context	Customer loyalty and mechanism of reciprocity as a construct
Muñiz & O'Guinn (2001)	Examine the characteristics and social processes that influence the formation of brand communities	Automobile industry	Community memberships, sharing and relationship building are cultivated by the sharing of consciousness of kind, rituals and traditions between members, along with a sense of a moral obligation to build relationships and share knowledge with other brand community members	Post-purchase	Identifies the role of oppositional brand loyalty between customer groups in forming brand communities and strengthening relationships among community members.  Focuses on the norms of reciprocity between online community members with established membership and brand admiration. Limited attention towards the reciprocity mechanisms between established and novice or prospective members, and role members role in influencing brand admiration and membership intentions beyond the community network.
Algesheimer <i>et al.</i> (2005)	Conceptualise how customers' relationships with brand communities influence their motivations and behaviours towards brand engagement	European automobile industry	Customers with a positive affirmative brand relationship derive a sense of belonging, personal growth and positive emotions from engaging with other community members	Post-purchase	Examines the central role of brand loyalty in consumer engagement. Community members who develop long-term customer loyalty are perceived as more effective than new or novice community members in developing sustainable brand communities and engagement.

					Addresses the impact of brand identification and communities extrinsic demands on community members behavioural reciprocity which maintains continued membership. Identifies members brand identification and relationship as significant mechanisms of members reciprocity behaviours including willingness to recommend brands to non-members. No distinction is explicitly made on the type or level of engagement members they are willing to communicate to non-members.
Bagozzi & Dholakia (2006)	Investigate the antecedents of social intentions and brand-related behaviours in small-group brand communities	Small-group brand communities	Consumers' prior involvement with branded products has a congruent effect on community behavioural and engagement intentions	Post-purchase	Affirms that commitment to a brand can positively enhance cognitive motivations for community engagement.  Examines the reciprocity predominantly between established community members on retaining brand-related engagement loyalty, taking into account emotional processes that influence group-behaviours.
Carlson <i>et al.</i> (2018)	Examine how retail customers generate	Retail Facebook brand pages	From a service-dominant logic perspective, customers' level of participation effects the perceived	Pre- and post-purchase	Brand loyalty is classified as the general outcome derived from the value customers obtain from OBC

	value from customer participation in OBCs		quality of their brand experience. With co-developed behaviours, customers can draw functional, emotional, relational and entitativity value from online participation and engagement, which enhances brand relationships		<p>participation. A loyalty category is unspecified.</p> <p>Empirically tests the value predictors of value co-creation resource reciprocity through a customer production perspective with a holistic framework of customer value. Confirms functional, emotional, relational, and entitativity value is established through customer participation. The study identifies a distinction of co-creation behaviours and perceived values by male and female customers, without distinguishing the sample by different brand relationships.</p>
Meek <i>et al.</i> (2019)	Empirically test social capital's effect on OBC environments and members	Various OBCs	OBC environments are multidimensional; they are composed of social capital values and resources, particularly shared language, shared vision, social trust and reciprocity	Post-purchase	Exclusive to customers with prior brand loyalty and, empirically confirms the role of reciprocity through OBC interactions that influence customers to evolve from being passive engagers (information seekers) to active participants (socialisers).
Cheng <i>et al.</i> (2020)	Examine significant social capital constructs predictors that influence customer satisfaction and relationship	Facebook brand fan page	Information completeness, social capital bridging between new and long-term OBC members, pleasurable experiences and perceived critical mass of the community are positive influences	Pre-purchase	Loyalty intentions are classified as the general outcome derived from customer satisfaction with, and relationship commitment to, OBCs. A loyalty category is unspecified. Reciprocity aspects such as social

	commitment (information quality, need for social capital, emotion and perceived critical mass) and result in long-term customer loyalty		on customer satisfaction and relationship commitment, which result in higher loyalty intentions		capital (community bonding and bridging) are empirically supported as a predictor of customer satisfaction and relationship commitment. No distinctions are made on the emotional processes of OBC members.
Ozuem <i>et al.</i> (2021b)	Explore how millennial consumers' perceptions of brands influence their participation in OBCs	Fashion industry and millennials	Millennials become involved or engaged in OBCs at varying levels, and will convey different brand perceptions through their online participation. Involvement and engagement are influenced by millennials' existing brand sentiment, their identification with sources of information, prior affirmative and supporting brand experience, and conspicuous effect of published content	Pre and post-purchase	Categorises customers' loyalty from their active OBC participation, but provides limited exploration of the reciprocity effect of OBC participants on other customers' loyalty
Ozuem <i>et al.</i> (2021c)	Conceptualise millennial customers' loyalty intentions activated by OBCs	Fashion and luxury industry	Millennials' brand perceptions are influenced by OBC dimensions, information quality, believability of information, interactive valence and loyalty intentions, which affect the level of brand loyalty to varying degrees	Pre and post-purchase	Applies attitudinal and behavioural loyalty towards the brand to comprehend the monetary and emotional reciprocity value distinct customer groups obtain from OBC activities. The study does not examine the influence of reciprocal structures between established and new or novice OBC members, and its influence on brand loyalty.

Current study	Examine the mechanism and impact of reciprocity on millennials' loyalty in OBCs and the processes that underlies customers' participation in OBCs	Luxury fashion industry	Customer loyalty can be significantly influenced by the reciprocity structures between consumers and OBCs, which are influenced by four fundamental factors: relationship with luxury brands, the influence of content valence, socially aligned identity, and collective community intentions. The presence of social influence, can prompt different reciprocity exchanges and responses across OBC customer segments	Pre and post-purchase	Examines various individual millennial customer groups emotional and behavioural processes that signal different types of brand loyalty following OBC engagement. Additionally, the study explores the reciprocity structures between OBC members, including the mediating role of customers emotional stances towards their motivation to actively and collectively engage within OBCs, and influence other OBC members loyalty with reference to theoretical constructs of the social influence theory (compliance, identification, and internalisation).
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OBC, online brand community

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**2.2 Customer loyalty**

Customer loyalty is a pivotal indicator of the marketing success of firms in various industries, including the luxury fashion industry. OBC literature is directed towards understanding the factors that motivate consumers to engage in online environments and develop loyalty intentions towards brands (Cheng, Wu, & Chen, 2020; Ozuem 2021c; Wang, Tai, & Hu, 2023). Extant studies have examined customer satisfaction and service quality (Ozuem et al., 2023b; Otterbring et al. 2023) and consumer trust (Mousavi & Roper, 2023 Ozuem et al., 2023a), arguing their positive mediating influences on customer loyalty through OBCs. Researchers have also explored a range of purchasing activities, including the effects of online visiting and browsing behaviours and repeat visits on customer loyalty (Chatterjee *et al.*, 2003; Singh et al., 2023). These studies reflect the characteristics of behavioural loyalty that determine customers' purchase behaviour in relation to specific brands. In contrast, other studies have explored the engagement of customers within OBCs (Cheng *et al.*, 2020; Carlson *et al.*, 2018). Customer engagement within OBCs is related to attitudinal loyalty, which is associated with the level of emotional affiliation with a brand. These studies indicate there are some common approaches to studying both attitudinal and behavioural loyalty within OBCs and in other online environments.

Some authors disagree as to which type of loyalty is more effective; however, some authors suggest that examining both attitudinal and behavioural loyalty is more efficient than purely focusing on one type of loyalty. The most notable study that applied this perspective was carried out by Dick and Basu (1994) who suggested that customer loyalty consists of attitudinal and behavioural elements. They provided four categories of brand loyalty that determine the extent to which customer loyalty is profitable and effective: true loyalty, no loyalty, spurious loyalty and latent loyalty. Yuan *et al.* (2023) contended the importance of brand love and advocacy to elicit the long-term relational and transactional benefits of customers, thus



extending customers supportive behaviours towards brands beyond product purchases. These perspectives can be arguably associated with online environments that evoke multidimensional experiences that go beyond a basic search for, or exchange of, information (Deng *et al.*, 2023). There is a higher level of interaction within OBCs compared to product search platforms; OBCs enable customer participation and customers exhibit attitudinal as well as behavioural loyalty, whereas product search platforms are limited to providing specific information.

### **2.3 Social influence theory**

Social influence theory provides a context that outlines individuals' social behaviour through their communicated identities (Kelman, 1958) and it considers how social networks empower individuals to imitate principal community behaviours (Venkatesh & Brown, 2001). An early study on social influence was conducted by Kelman (1958) who identified three levels of influence that impact individuals' attitudes and behaviours: compliance, identification and internalisation. Compliance involves adapting behaviour in order to gain rewards or avoid negative consequences, such as community disapproval. Identification refers to individuals' acceptance of sources of influence to maintain a desired relationship (Kelman, 1958, p. 53). Internalisation reflects an individual's adoption and eventual acceptance of behaviours and values within a community (Kelman, 1958).

Individuals who have an existing association with a brand often seek community membership within OBCs (Algesheimer *et al.*, 2005), but some consumers and customers seek community membership not solely for the brand but to develop a harmonious connection with community members and collectively socialise and interact. This can be considered the starting point of social influence within OBCs. Some studies have focused on the connection between community members, identifying a we culture in which there is a shared feeling of belonging among users of specific brand communities that separates them from users of other brand communities (Fournier, 1998; Bubphapant, & Brandão, 2024; Wei, 2024). Algesheimer *et al.*

(2005) indicated that consumers’ relationships with a brand is a key source of influence for online community behaviours and attitudes. Wilkins *et al.* (2019) focused on the ways in which individuals feel they can contribute to a community, and are influenced by the perceived usefulness of the online community. Given the diverse perspectives of factors of social influence, a universal process of social influence will not result in consistent engagement and loyalty behaviours across multiple populations. Social influence theory offers a robust framework for understanding how individuals’ attitudes, beliefs, and behaviours are shaped through their interactions within social networks (Kelman, 1958; Venkatesh & Brown, 2001). This theoretical lens is particularly useful for analysing mechanisms of reciprocity within online brand communities (OBCs) in the luxury fashion industry, where consumer behaviour is profoundly influenced by social dynamics and peer engagement (Algesheimer, Dholakia, & Herrmann, 2005; Fournier, 1998). This is especially relevant for the Millennial cohort, who place high value on collaborative support within social communities, often relying on these interactions to inform their consumption decisions (Lissitsa, 2025). We therefore argue that relevant actors and processes of social influence within OBCs should be explored to understand their impact on millennials’ loyalty.

**3. Methodology**

**3.1 Interpretive research approach**

The current qualitative study utilised an interpretive research approach and privileged the voices of millennials who had experience of OBCs (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000; Gioia *et al.*, 2013). Given the limited insights from prior studies, participants’ views were the foundation and focus of the analysis (Eisenhardt, 1989; Cuomo *et al.*, 2020). The aim of the study was to enhance theoretical understanding of millennials’ participation in OBCs and the community reciprocity structure. The tasks of the researchers were to identify and develop theoretical constructs based on participants’ experiential accounts (Patten *et al.*, 2020).

This approach facilitated an exploration (rather than explanation) of real-life examples of dynamic OBC environments, and the emerging processes of OBCs and their influence on loyalty. Social influence is fundamentally linked to OBCs and how they motivate online participants to engage with the luxury fashion industry and remain loyal. Humans create reality through participation, experience and action (Ozuem *et al.*, 2021a) and develop their own unique socially constructed realities. Furthermore, Habermas (1987) characterised value-laden studies as historical-hermeneutic, which challenges the notion that a controlled observation occurs between the reporting subject and the confronted subject. Thus, dialogue is the central position of the paradigm.

Theoretical sampling was used to construct a sample of data to maximise the identification of various conceptual categories, which further directed the development of a theoretical framework through meaningful interpretations of the data (Ozuem *et al.*, 2023a; Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Strauss & Corbin, 1998). Theoretical sampling follows an interpretive process that reflects the dependence on a dialogue exchange between the researcher and researched to guide the inquiry of interest. This involves hermeneutical interpretations to allow multiple social realities to be constructed in depth (Ozuem *et al.*, 2023a).

### **3.2 Research population**

The roles held by the researchers provided them access to participants through university and professional networks enabling the recruitment of, and engagement with, participants. In line with theoretical sampling, discussions with participants concentrated on their prior experience and engagement with OBCs and their direct tangible and intangible consumption of luxury fashion brands, or their level of enthusiasm towards luxury fashion. The researchers built further sample recruitment on previous data and analysis from previously interviewed participants, allowing theory to be developed during the data collection (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). The sample therefore has theoretical meaning as it was constructed based on certain

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criteria, where social dialogue was constructed with in-depth, complex and well-rounded data to illuminate realities emerging from data (Ozuem *et al.*, 2022). Screening of the sample confirmed that the respondents were millennials. The birth year categories for millennials vary from between 1979 and 2002 (Ozuem *et al.*, 2023a) and the early 1980s and early 2000s (Helal *et al.*, 2018). Multidisciplinary research has revealed contrasting views on millennials, which has led to inconsistent characterisations of this generation (de Kerviler & Rodriguez, 2019). The current study used Helal *et al.*'s (2018) definition of millennials (age range of between 18 and 40 years), which builds on three distinct sociocultural dimensions: tech-savvy, socially conscious and active social media users (Azemi *et al.*, 2020). According to Forbes, brands that align with millennial consumers values is a critical determinant of loyalty and trust (Haan, 2024) and are more likely to engage in status-seeking consumption (Kim, Xie, & Choo, 2023). This stands in contrast to perspectives on Generation Z (Gen Z), who are generally perceived as more financially cautious and inclined towards rationalised brand consumption, often prioritising monetary value in their decision-making (Liu et al., 2023). As the most digitally native generation (Calvo-Porrall & Viejo-Fernández, 2025), Gen Z consumers tend to exhibit a marked scepticism towards online information, particularly content disseminated by brands and influencers (Lissitsa, 2025), which may adversely affect their engagement with online brand communities (OBCs). In comparison, Millennials are more likely to rely on digital platforms for product search and evaluation (Sharma & Dutta, 2025) and place significant importance on communication and collaboration within online environments as a means of processing information and making informed consumption decisions (Lissitsa, 2025). In contrast, the majority of Baby Boomer consumers demonstrate a marked preference for in-store shopping, place considerable trust in recommendations from close social circles, and tend to exhibit scepticism towards digital forms of communication (Haan, 2024).

This arguably supports that OBCs could influence emotional and behavioural engagement differently across the generation cohorts, reflecting a different reciprocity structure and exchange between luxury fashion brands and millennial consumers.

### **3.3 Data collection methods**

A total of 70 millennials, from the United Kingdom, Italy, and China, were invited to participate in semi-structured interviews. Respondents were sent pre-interview questions to determine level of consumption and engagement experience within the luxury fashion industry (Appendix 1). Following this process, a total of 50 confirmed a significant interest in luxury fashion, along with purchasing and engagement experience, and agreed to participate (their age, gender and occupation are summarised in Table 2). According to Statista, the luxury industry within these three countries were the leading markets to generate revenue from the luxury fashion industry within the European and East Asian continents, totalling £5.81 billion (UK), £6.16 billion (Italy), and £8.74 billion (China) in 2024 (Statista, 2024a, 2024b, and 2024c). The interviews were guided by 15 open-ended questions (Appendix 2), which were influenced by theoretical constructs reflected in the literature and the researchers' experience. According to Guba and Lincoln (1994). The researcher's voice is actively engaged in facilitating the reconstruction of the aim of an inquiry. We iterated between theory and data in conducting our data collection and analysis. This allowed us to collect new data based on emergent themes in accordance with theoretical sampling. During the interviews, further theoretical and empirical insights emerged, which led to the recruitment of more individuals to provide clarity to emerging themes. Audio-recorded data were transcribed into hardcopy format resulting in 420 pages of verbal dialogue. Some responses were discounted from the sample as these did not contribute insights to the framework.

Table 2: Participants’ age, gender and occupation (users of luxury fashion online brand communities)

Participant number	Age (years)	Gender	Occupation
Participant 1	34	Female	IT Test Consultant
Participant 2	26	Female	University economics student
Participant 3	30	Female	Procurement specialist
Participant 4	26	Female	MSc International business student
Participant 5	28	Male	Human resource assistant
Participant 6	32	Female	Credit controller
Participant 7	35	Female	Quality controller
Participant 8	26	Male	Human resource administrator
Participant 9	29	Female	Human resource professional
Participant 10	26	Female	Retail Customer Service Assistant
Participant 11	33	Male	Pricing specialist
Participant 12	32	Male	Assistant manager
Participant 13	25	Male	University marketing student
Participant 14	26	Male	University accounting student
Participant 15	26	Female	University finance and economics student
Participant 16	25	Female	University marketing student
Participant 17	29	Female	Project assistant
Participant 18	26	Male	Sales assistant
Participant 19	29	Female	Teaching assistant
Participant 20	25	Female	Teaching assistant
Participant 21	35	Male	Accountant
Participant 22	32	Female	Accountant
Participant 23	25	Female	University finance and economics student
Participant 24	27	Male	University sports coach
Participant 25	30	Male	Project manager
Participant 26	34	Male	Project assistant manager
Participant 27	25	Female	University marketing and management in fashion student
Participant 28	32	Female	Test Engineer
Participant 29	28	Male	University business and language student
Participant 30	27	Male	Sales assistant
Participant 31	29	Female	Administrator
Participant 32	27	Female	University education student
Participant 33	28	Male	University law student
Participant 34	25	Male	MSc Marketing student
Participant 35	25	Male	Sales assistant

Participant 36	35	Male	Fashion retail manager
Participant 37	27	Female	Creative arts teacher
Participant 38	32	Male	Photographer
Participant 39	29	Male	Software engineer
Participant 40	38	Male	Senior project manager
Participant 41	39	Female	IT test consultant
Participant 42	37	Female	Senior project manager
Participant 43	37	Male	Social media consultant
Participant 44	38	Female	Communications Officer
Participant 45	38	Male	Procurement Department Manager
Participant 46	24	Female	International Exchange student (USA)
Participant 47	25	Female	International Exchange student (USA)
Participant 48	30	Male	E-commerce administrator
Participant 49	31	Female	Customer service administrator
Participant 50	23	Female	International Exchange student (USA)

#### 4. Analysis and findings

Data were analysed using thematic analysis (Azemi *et al.*, 2019) following Gioia *et al.*'s (2013) three stage process, which requires researchers' in-depth comprehension of the primary data, their subject-related knowledge and experience, and the inclusion of extant literature to inform their interpretations of the data (Ozuem *et al.*, 2022). The first analytical process starts with the organisation of codes identified from transcribed dialogue. The next process is to define themes that represent the socially constructed data of the data collection stages (Gioia *et al.*, 2013). During the first analytical process, the researchers reviewed notable statements expressed by the participants during their interviews. Following Ozuem *et al.*'s (2022) suggestion, the researchers referred to extant literature during this stage to validate connections between the realities expressed by participants and the concepts explored in the literature.

The second process issued a inductive analysis involving the segmentation of the primary codes into themes. In this stage, the researchers used concepts and categories of social influence theory, loyalty, and OBCs, to assist the second-order coding, and create implicit meanings of



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the data beyond the surface meaning, which enabled an in-depth exploration of key quotations identified during the first analytical process. Data segmentation was conducted topically, as opposed to numerically (i.e., frequency of words), which enabled the segmenting of text from various participants’ quotes despite differences in words used (Ozuem *et al.*, 2022).

The second stage of analysis yielded 14 second-order themes that illuminated the multiple realities articulated by participants. These themes were framed through the integration of concepts from extant literature, alongside the researchers’ reflexivity and experiential understanding of the phenomena under investigation (Gioia *et al.*, 2013). Emerging from this analysis were concepts associated with a diverse array of value drivers—including functional, emotional, relational, and entitativity values (Carlson *et al.*, 2018; Meek *et al.*, 2019)—which offered critical insights into the various moderated and mediated mechanisms of reciprocity shaping consumer participation and loyalty exchanges within online brand communities (OBCs).

These analyses provided deeper insight into how OBCs affect customers’ loyalty, how consumers perceive OBCs and the extent to which OBC customers influence the loyalty of other customers. During the third analytical process, four theoretical concepts (aggregate dimensions) relevant to the research inquiry emerged: relationship with luxury brand, the influence of content valence, socially aligned identity, and collective community intentions (see Figure 1). This process involved a rigorous check in which the thematic representations of the data identified during the first-level processes were confirmed following a review of previous literature and primary data. The four themes represent the nuanced characteristics of reciprocity with OBC structures, that interconnect as mediators or moderators of various consumer emotional and behavioural processes, influencing various forms of affective and behavioural loyalty outputs across OBC consumer groups. The critical review of these data analysis and extant literature, assisted in providing insights into the impact that the four



identified themes have on loyalty and engagement within luxury fashion OBCs. The four themes were used as the foundation for the conceptual model (Figure 2). Upon further examination of these themes, an OBC loyalty typology emerged revealing four distinct groups of OBC customers: traditionalists, inspirers, self-containers and expellers. These four groups were conceptualised with reference to the explicit and implicit realities and behaviours that emerged through analysis of the interview data, and reference to literature of the mechanisms of reciprocity and social influence theory that were significant to the four groups. These are illustrated in Figure 2. The four identified themes are discussed in Subsections 4.1 to 4.4. The four identified groups are reviewed in Subsections 5.1 to 5.4.

Figure 1: Data structure

First-order codes: Sample Quotes	Second-order themes	Aggregate dimensions
<p>If I'm going to look at or search for product of a brand, I would go to their specific channel.</p> <p>I know the difference in quality between luxury and mainstream products. The luxury brands are pricy, but when you buy a branded product, you buy the quality.</p> <p>I love the brand's variety of colours, the quality of fabric they use, and I love the style that I cannot find from other brands; to me they are quite unique from other brands.</p>	<p>Searches specifically for brand-related information in OBCS</p> <p>Perceived quality of luxury vs mainstream fashion</p> <p>Attitudinal brand preference</p>	<p>Relationship with luxury brand</p>
<p>Online, the item is not tangible, you cannot touch the item in the picture; what you are seeing needs to be perfect.</p> <p>In the online community it is more real – real meaning, seeing everyday people wearing and discussing the brand.</p> <p>I was reading a blog...there was a discussion about whether low-paid interns should have expensive purses... it got my attention and I enjoyed reading the blog.</p> <p>I don't like the comments that badmouth the brand, it makes a bad atmosphere.</p> <p>Usually online community conversations consist of biased opinion, and just because someone had a bad experience it doesn't mean others will have the same experience.</p>	<p>Enhances the intangible product searching experience</p> <p>Presence of everyday consumers</p> <p>Original and unique content that encourages ongoing conversations in reference to brands</p> <p>Negative response to comments perceived as overly negative</p>	<p>Influence of content valence</p>
<p>Being in OBCs is like a type of window shopping into a different world... you forget what you can or cannot afford.</p> <p>The company's general website tends to be standardised and unrelated to me as an individual, but with OBCs you can find posts that are related to your personality.</p> <p>When I buy the item, it feels like my item rather than everyone else's item.</p> <p>I want to go to a site where there is a community with a shared vision regarding the fashion appearance I am looking for from the brand</p>	<p>Perceived access barriers reduced in OBCs</p> <p>Emphasis on inclusivity through OBC posts</p> <p>Desire for exclusive status, image and information on the luxury brand</p>	<p>Socially aligned identity</p>
<p>You are promoting a great brand; you feel good about it and it gets people talking to you.</p> <p>Others open up and share their experiences, and it gives me a chance to learn about other branded products.</p> <p>I don't communicate with others about my preference towards the brand...most of my male friends don't like the colourful variation style of the brand.</p> <p>You will encounter people who don't like your brand. It's natural to avoid each other so you don't get into arguments.</p> <p>If I have no knowledge other than observing, then I wouldn't feel comfortable recommending a brand publicly.</p> <p>I don't feel I can contribute towards the OBCs and I am not entitled to have a public opinion about the brand.</p>	<p>Desire to act as a brand influencer</p> <p>Engage with other consumers for brand-related learning</p> <p>Connect with like-minded individuals</p> <p>Followers perceive potential comments as irrelevant to the OBC</p>	<p>Collective community intentions</p>

#### 4.1 Relationship with luxury brand

This theme refers to the existing relationship that millennial customers have with luxury fashion brands. This theme reflects OBC activity and loyalty characteristics that favour specific luxury fashion brands, emphasising the specialised searches for brand-related information as a critical factor. This arguably influences a perceived relationship value reciprocity that mediates a strong brand connection between customers and OBCs (Malik, Pradhan, & Rup, 2025). Customers with an interest in brands are more likely to be interested in channels that provide relevant information, as supported by this 27-year-old male university sports coach:

If you're looking for something in particular, like Gucci's collection update, you can't expect to find it within the first 20 minutes you scroll the timeline. The information is obviously there, but a lot of posts makes it harder to find.

This comment reflects the importance of understanding the specific characteristics that are relevant to each individual's online search expectations. The personalisation that OBCs accommodate enables brands to engage with customers in an individualised manner, which enhances brand relationships and customers' subscription to brand information (Hsieh *et al.*, 2021).

Some customers place brands at the centre of their OBC activity, seeking to retain functional benefits by remaining loyal (Ozuem *et al.*, 2021b). This is supported by input from a 33-year-old male pricing specialist, who said:

I follow Dolce and Gabbana through OBCs... I equally like to reflect this image on social media, so it is easy to monitor the new styles, so I continue to reflect the image of Dolce and Gabbana.

When considering identification social influence, a strong relationship between customers and brands reduces the effect of perceived critical mass of OBC followers for brands based on

observing customers who may not have an attitudinal preference towards them. Instead, customers are likely to align with individuals who share a common interest with brands they favour and will join OBCs that are specifically linked to the brands they favour (Algesheimer *et al.*, 2005; Ozuem *et al.*, 2021a). This was supported by a 29-year-old female project assistant:

I have a few friends who sometimes say Why you not buying this? It's cheaper than yours and looks just as good. But I feel, I like my 'Ralph Lauren's, I'm not going to change.

This statement reinforces the centrality of attitudinal brand preference and loyalty. Customers who have a strong relationship with a luxury brand are motivated to retain a valued relationship within the OBC, thus reducing their propensity to seek a second opinion from who may be external to the OBC, thus stabilising the social reciprocity exchange structure. This again re-emphasises that a relationship with luxury brands has a mediating effect in motivating millennial customers to use OBCs.

#### **4.2 Influence of content valence**

The influence of content valence refers to the emotional responses triggered by content individuals encounter within OBCs. Content characteristics like the perceived presence of fellow customers, as well as content originality and uniqueness, can stimulate customers' positive valence and influence perceived functional and emotional reciprocity values (Cheng *et al.*, 2020). This idea is captured in a 34-year-old female IT Test Consultant's response:

Description and visuals are very important in online communities so you can imagine luxury consumption in real life.

In the case of this millennial customer, the intangible nature of online purchasing creates a level of uncertainty for customers who are unable to assess the risk of their online purchase until the product is physically available to them. This underscores customers' need for high-

quality product-related information (Weathers, Sharma, & Wood, 2007). The influence of content valence is not limited to content posted by brands in OBCs. Customers can take note of content posted by other customers, which has the potential to influence observing individuals' valence. The following participant, a 27-year-old male sales assistant, explained how the presence of content from other customers made them feel:

The words community members used describing a Lady Dior bag, complimented with pictures and videos of the bag used by various individuals, makes you feel all the greater for buying that product.

However, some customers absorb the negative sentiments within online comments and develop negative valence, which can influence their expectations of future results (Niese et al., 2019). Indeed, this occurred in the case of a 34-year-old male project assistant manager during an online purchasing experience:

Someone commented that the brand labelled an item as large, but it fitted on them like it was an extra-large, and somebody else said they ordered a medium size, but it was too small for them. I wanted to buy that particular shirt, but I already found a problem with that product based on the comments.

This highlights that customer feedback in OBCs can prevent other customers from making purchasing decisions that they might have regretted. However, the valence of customers' responses to content can differ, and some may even question both negative and positive comments. Customers' individual brand experiences and identification with other customers commenting in OBCs can change their valence towards online content (De Regt, Plangger, & Barnes, 2021). This might lead them to judge whether the content is relevant to their online purchasing experience. Additionally, customers may acknowledge other customers'

comments, but might not accept these as valid, implying a lack of internalised social influence (Kelman, 1958), as indicated by this 25-year-old male sales assistant:

Usually online community conversations consist of biased opinion, and are written when someone felt frustrated about something and was thus fixated on that. But just because someone had a bad experience it doesn't mean others will have the same experience.

Customers do not develop brand sentiments solely based on the words of other individuals. Rather, they use their own critical judgement, which could have developed from an affirmative experience with the brand. In terms of luxury fashion brand OBCs, customers' pre-existing values and experiences and the OBC content all play a role in influencing the commitment of customers to OBCs; so, customers do not simply act on the expressed valence of others.

#### ***4.3 Socially aligned identity***

Socially aligned identity refers to the extent to which individuals perceive a match between their identity and the characteristics of the OBC and its members, and whether they feel a sense of belonging to the community. Consumers' feelings of perceived inclusivity or exclusivity can impact perceived identification with others, which can act a source of social influence on perspectives and behaviours (Kelman, 1958). The inclusion of a range of characteristics linked to personal identity, attitudes and values can influence individuals to feel they are able to identify with the brand and follow it through OBCs (Ozuem *et al.*, 2021b). According to a 25-year-old female university marketing student, concerns regarding how other OBC members perceive them can impact their sense of belonging to the community:

Consumers need to feel confident in adopting or talking about a luxury brand with community members; online you get that confidence without feeling judged or being labelled as the outsider as most online fashion communities are inclusive to many people's identities.

This response highlights the advantage of OBCs that enable users to join in with the option of maintaining anonymity as enabled by technology-based services. It likewise emphasises the issue of perceived community membership barriers that are inflicted by other members. Individuals' internal evaluation of their self-identity and its alignment with the community also plays a role. Bellezza and Keinan (2014) argued that external groups' appreciation for the brand can reinforce the image and desirability of the brand, giving core users a sense of pride. Additionally, OBC consumers come from a range of behavioural and psychographic segments, and the brand is central in their decision to join a community. This is the case even if they do not align with the identity of other OBC members. OBCs that build excitement about luxury brands can attract non-brand owners, as experienced by a 27-year-old female creative arts teacher:

When you join an online network of fashion enthusiasts, you feel like it's normal to have a bag that costs \$10,000, you forget who you are and what you can or cannot afford, you're caught up in the group excitement.

We argue that this response indicates OBCs role in reinforcing brand recognition by provoking excitement from non-brand owners who do not necessarily evaluate the alignment between their identity and the identities of other OBC members, but still feel a sense of belonging with the community. This can help reduce the exclusivity of brand image, which can become compromised, and maintain a balance between exclusivity and inclusiveness (Liu, Shin, & Burns, 2019). A 32-year-old male photographer described his involvement in luxury fashion OBCs:

I like football and Cristiano Ronaldo, he has great qualities as a footballer and leader that appeal closely to me. When he has been featured in posts, I've found myself talking

to others in online communities for Nike, Adidas and even ZALORA because I feel I can be part of the conversation concerning Ronaldo's persona display.

According to the above response, OBCs enable individuals to explore ideas or topics that appeal to them without restricting them to the core activity of the established community. Building authenticity and truthfulness involves making improvements to the brand's core, and advancing brand heritage by expressing innovation through experiences. The absence of such activity could generate negative perceptions from consumers or a lack of active participation in OBCs. This was described by a 35-year-old male fashion retail manager as follows:

Luxury brands need to be open-minded to different people through online communities especially if they are targeting worldwide audiences. They need to change their features, photographers, models and discussion topics to make it more realistic to the audience and give them something relatable to talk about.

However, an overemphasis on inclusivity in OBCs and their content may cause users to feel that the OBC lacks the quality, functionality and relevance to help customers reach their intended goals. Such a perception was identified by a 25-year-old female university marketing student:

Right now the brand's OBC does not provide the information I want to know. It consists of followers with too many different style ideas, it doesn't provide specific information related to the category I am looking for.

Similarly, another participant, a 38-year-old male senior project manager stated:

Mr Porter is a brand with a suit product line I really like. They have a website and an online brand community. But I think their OBC is rather inactive with their suit category, and the pages are filled with latest fashion trends that do not match the suit product image of the brand, making the information far to generalised than specialised.



This supports the view that the desire to maintain brand identity or exclusivity comes from customers as well as from corporate managers, despite external industry trends that may compromise a brand's image and make adaption or change necessary. However, the decreased functionality of an OBC for an existing customer does not mean they will discontinue their loyalty to a luxury brand. OBC customers may acknowledge that change is necessary, and understand that brands need to adapt to remain relevant within the industry.

#### **4.4 Collective community intentions**

Collective community intentions refers to individuals' intentions to become active socialisers with other customers through OBCs. Commitment can be defined as an individual's biased and emotional attachment to an organisation's goals and values that align with their own. When the goals and values of a fashion brand align with individuals, these individuals are likely to remain committed to an OBC (Michel *et al.*, 2022). Customers seeking to act as influencers are often driven by intrinsic motivations (Algesheimer *et al.*, 2005). This form of participation can support the formative entitativity value within online communities (Carlson *et al.*, 2018) which can be beneficial for the reciprocity exchanges between members within OBCs. Customers involvement in these forms of activities is based on personal interest and spontaneous satisfaction. A 26-year-old female retail customer service assistant expressed her desire to become an influencer within the fashion industry:

I've become interested in informing online community members of the fashion brands I encounter. I want to inspire other people to enjoy their life and take control over their fashion style.

The intrinsic motivation individuals demonstrate in showcasing their consumption can be used to describe influencers' authentic passion to endorse brands (Ozuem *et al.*, 2024), arguably supporting an actual display of the internalised social influence category, between the brand and customer through OBCs. A brand may be greatly integrated in a customer's identity and

the customer's passion and interest in the brand may motivate them to engage with the brand online within OBCs. Customers who become active socialisers within OBCs obtain benefits, such as a sense of enjoyment from engagement, which can generate reciprocal value to the brand. For example, customers with a strong brand relationship can be committed to maintaining brand equity, which can counter the influence of negative electronic-WOM (e-WOM) on consumers who may not have experience of a brand or confidence in a brand, including luxury brands. This was expressed by a 34-year-old male project assistant manager customer:

The brand gives me so much in terms of return for my investment... For other customers doubting the brand's quality I am able to tell through an accessible online community platform that the brand does deliver as expected, which is my way of repaying the brand.

The online engagement customers deliver can likewise benefit new customers within OBCs who are yet to build a relationship with a luxury fashion brand. One potential intention that influences customers to visit OBCs is to enhance their brand-related knowledge, which can be done by taking into account the opinions, thoughts and knowledge of active socialisers in OBCs (Meek et al., 2019). The perceived value of an OBC and the intention of customers to participate collectively in such communities are mediated by the perceived resources and benefits of the OBCs. These include a sense of belonging, which can increase the value of basic online activities, such as information searching. This was supported by a 30-year-old female procurement specialist:

I haven't regularly bought the brand before... I rely on other OBC members because I trust their brand experience and knowledge.

This response suggests that OBC users follow brands and consume user-generated content, but do not necessarily participate. Similarly, another participant, a 28-year-old male human resource assistant stated:

I do follow luxury brand OBCs but I didn't normally take part in posting content ... I am a sociable person though, so if I develop a liking towards luxury fashion products and ones that my friends like, I see myself engaging within the OBC.

Although this participant stressed they were not an active participant in luxury fashion OBCs, they highlighted the importance of connecting with like-minded individuals with whom they share common interests, values or hobbies (Ozuem *et al.*, 2021a). In contrast, a perceived difference between customer groups reduces the likelihood of intentions to engage with each other. A 33-year-old male pricing specialist shared his perspective regarding the differences between his luxury fashion vision and that of others in a social network OBC he is part of:

I don't communicate with the majority of friends on and offline about my preference towards the brand... I think most of my male friends don't like the colourful variation style of the brand.

This indicates that individual social groups exist in the main in-group of online communities where several opposing customer perspectives can be identified, particularly in the luxury fashion context. For individuals to feel included in a community, a degree of shared language with the majority of the group is needed to encourage their membership.

A lack of motivation to engage in collective community behaviours could also be impacted by the individual's reflection on their potential contribution. A 38-year-old male Procurement Department Manager reflected on why he was less active in OBC conversations:

I don't see any point posting my own comments or pictures. Lots of people post stuff that is repetitive, so I doubt my post would be noticed.

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This participant wondered about the perceived usefulness of their involvement within OBCs. The short-term experience new customers have of OBCs may have an impact on the nature and duration of the conversations they take part in, potentially causing them to feel that they cannot contribute to OBC activity. They may instead prefer to follow experienced community members.

**5. Discussion**

Following the data gathering process and initial data analysis, the emergent data, themes, concepts and relevant literature were cross-examined (Gioia *et al.*, 2013). This led the researchers towards the discovery of deeper insights, which resulted in the formation of an OBC loyalty typology comprising traditionalists, inspirers, self-containers and expellers (TISE) (Figure 2). The illustrated framework depicts the multidimensional antecedents associated with social influence, namely variables of OBCs and community members, that can positively or negatively influence customers perspectives and behaviours towards OBCs, and loyalty towards brands. These are integrated with the discussed customer taxonomy, to comprehend affective and behavioural responses from customers towards OBCs. Each classified customer is interpreted with insights from the systematic analysis of the four themes, along with perspectives drawn from extant literature and the researchers reflexivity (Ozuem *et al.*, 2022) concerning the degree of social influence and reciprocity exchanges within OBCs that influence the four customers loyalty. The four identified customer categories are reviewed in Subsections 5.1 to 5.4.

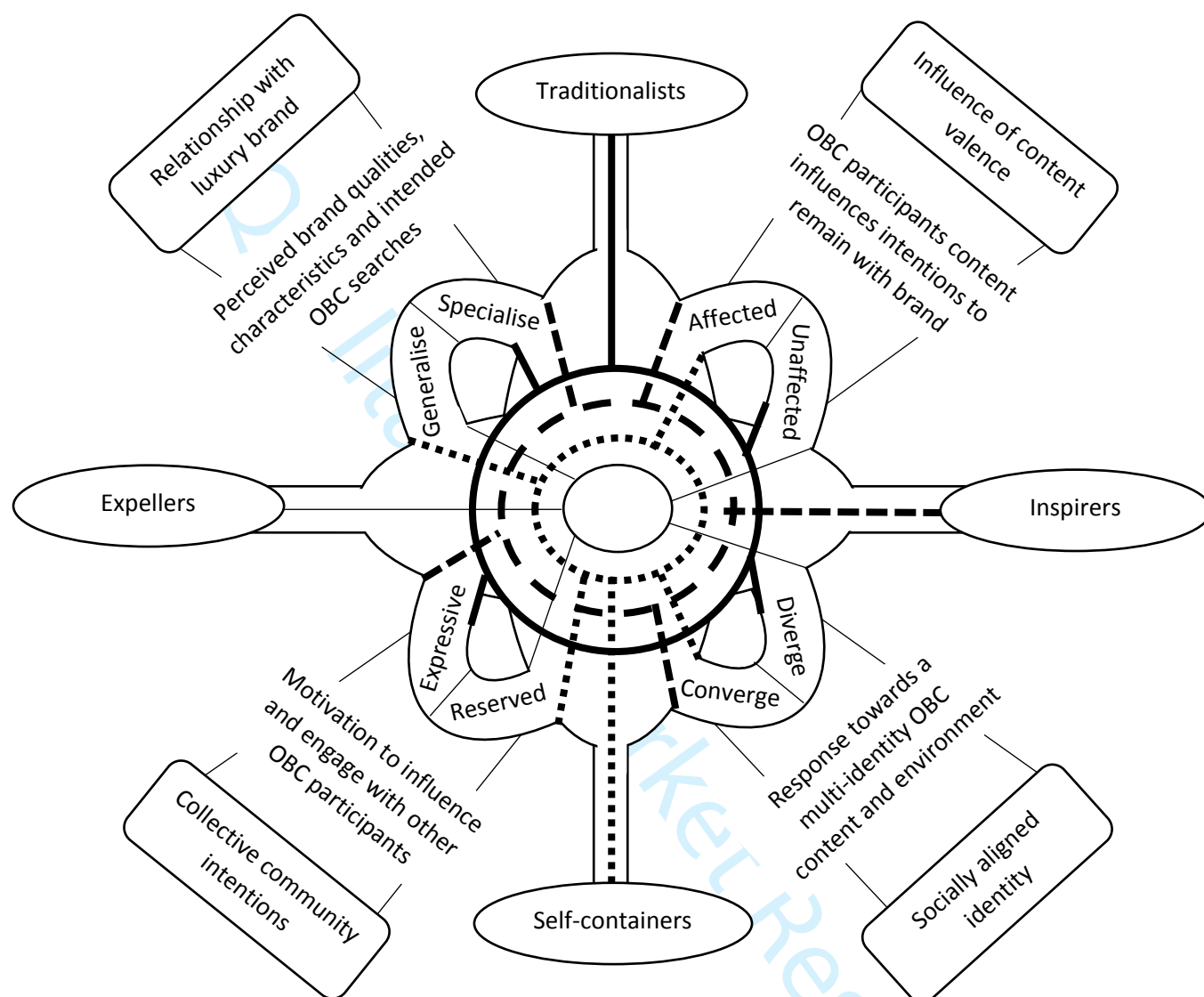


Figure 2: Traditionalists, inspirers, self-containers and expellers (TISE) framework. OBC, online brand community

### 5.1 Traditionalists

Traditionalists are active customers who are heavily influenced by their relationship with a luxury fashion brand. Traditionalists desire the preservation of the brand's core (its original or traditional qualities and characteristics) both offline and online. These customers are arguably influenced by entitativity value as a mechanism of reciprocity (Carlson et al., 2018), and respond more positively to reciprocity that is more restricted to established members, as

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opposed to generalised reciprocity that is directed to the broad OBC network (Leung, Shi, & Chow, 2020). Luxury brands with a worldwide recognition can influence consumers to recognise the social value of luxury, and identify with and desire the characteristics attached to a luxury brand (Ma et al., 2021). This can critically influence their willingness to buy foreign products (Lam et al., 2010). Similarly, traditionalists identify with luxury fashion brands that reflect key characteristics, and want these to be preserved and transferred into OBCs. This arguably reflects characteristics of the social internalisation category of social influence theory (Kelman, 1958). This contrasts with the idea of the brand adapting its personality or image to match those of consumers. We therefore argue that traditionalist customers' perspectives reflect that a brand's symbolic value goes beyond simply acting as a socially signalling branding tool. Instead it is used by customers as a focal object that symbolises memories of the past to communicate cultural and social meaning (Appiah & Watson, 2021). Traditionalists may have a relatively low search history due to their specialised focus, as OBCs may contain content, themes and topics that do not necessarily align with traditionalist customers' expectations. This can reflect a customer's attitudinal loyalty towards the symbolic aspects of a brand, which can be associated with millennial consumers in the luxury industry. This is particularly the case if the symbolic significance of the brand is central to a customer's value system. In such cases, they are likely to remain loyal to the brand and this will influence their online searches.

For traditionalist customers, the positive valence they develop from observing OBC content and activity is influenced by their relationship with the brand. Thus, the key characteristics of the brand reflected in the content are a major positive influence on their cognitive processing. Traditionalists want to preserve the brand's traditional image. However, if traditionalists perceive that the brand image that reflects their self-concept is adapted or changed through OBC content, then this could potentially cause emotionally negative or neutral-driven valence

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3 towards the content. This indicates a perceived lack of social identification and internalisation  
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5 (Kelman, 1958), which may cause traditionalists to diverge from an OBC and from collective  
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7 community intentions. This is particularly the case if the community is perceived to be less  
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9 specialised. The engagement of some OBC participants may not represent the image of a brand,  
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11 and might sometimes even threaten the exclusivity of a luxury brand in its effort to appear  
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13 inclusive. In the case of traditionalists, a lack of shared vision regarding the brand by the  
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15 majority of traditionalists may cause them to diverge from engaging within an OBC. We  
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17 therefore argue that community members exert little influence on traditionalists.  
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## 22 **5.2 Inspirers**

23 Inspirers, as active customers, share some characteristics in terms of their OBC behaviour with  
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25 traditionalists, but they might differ in terms of their attitude towards the brand and their role  
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27 within OBCs. Inspirers have a positive relationship with a luxury fashion brand and will  
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29 conduct specialised searches of OBCs for brand-related information. However, inspirers, while  
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31 appreciative of the luxury fashion brand's original or traditional qualities and characteristics,  
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33 do not desire to preserve the image of the brand. According to norms of reciprocity, online  
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35 communities may implicitly reflect defined reciprocity exchanges expected from members,  
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37 including specific types of participation and content publishing (Hsieh, Fang, & Liao, 2024).  
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39 Unlike traditionalists, who seek to retain standard reciprocity norms, inspirers may seek to adopt  
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41 new norms of reciprocity within OBCs. This can include strengthening their social  
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43 identification within OBCs, which arguably supports the role of relational and emotional values  
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45 within a reciprocity process that influence inspirers OBC participation and loyalty. Consumers  
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47 with self-enhancement motives perceive a match between a brand and a self, or an image they  
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49 idealise (Malär et al., 2011). They do not consider the brand to be an extension of their current  
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51 personality (Carroll & Ahuvia, 2006). Additionally, these consumers are less concerned about  
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53 changes to the brand or with variance in consumer personalities. Indeed, a brand may reflect  
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different identities that invoke varied consumer behaviours towards the brand (Gaustad et al., 2019). For inspirers, the idea of adapting a luxury fashion brand to include and represent individual personalities, themes and topics is useful to enhance their identification with the brand and OBC, and establish entitativity value through the reciprocity process between inspirers and OBCs.

When inspirers encounter content in OBCs, they might develop a positive valence if they are attracted to content that reflects the images and values associated with the brand that are appealing. The vividness and completeness of content can be driving factors for post popularity, and perceived social presence on online environments can cause consumers to feel closely connected to others or a brand (Bleier, Harmeling, & Palmatier, 2019). We therefore argue that OBC participants have a social identification influence on inspirers’ intentions to remain with a brand long term. The presence of individuals who are relatable to inspirers, or with whom they share common values and characteristics, can be a key seeding strategy to retain inspirers’ attention to the OBC and influence their intention to remain committed to the OBC.

Inspirers do not object to OBCs that reflect multiple identities through OBC content. Inspirers are expressive and harbour a level of curiosity towards OBC members who may differ from them in terms of personality, interests and online language. Research argues that consumers with high curiosity are more likely to conduct exploratory behaviour, which is invoked by their desire for acquiring knowledge or new experiences. Such curiosity leads inspirers to perceive multi-identity communities positively and to take a more proactive role in OBCs; they express themselves with the intention of displaying their status or relationship in reference to the luxury fashion brand.



### 5.3 Self-containers

Self-containers have a psychological attachment to luxury fashion brands, but have a relatively weak self-brand connection with them compared to traditionalists and inspirers. We argue that self-containers are passive consumers who mostly observe online engagement among other customers, which can influence self-containers to become active customers. Self-containers' searches on OBCs are relatively generalised. This generalised search is not due to indifference towards a brand and its competitors (Ozuem et al., 2016), but because there is no specific brand-related quality or characteristic that they are searching for through the brand's OBC. Additionally, the large volume of online content can make it difficult for them to conduct engagement on a specific brand-related topic that would interest them (Olmedilla, Martínez-Torres, & Toral, 2019). As such, they rely on customers who actively engage and directly endorse specific content within OBCs. Self-containers' relationship with a luxury fashion brand is based on the concept that they know the brand and its reputation, and associate positive equity with the brand. However, they do not consider themselves to be official members of the OBC or to have status in the social hierarchy they perceive in the brand's community (Dion & Borraz, 2017). Thus, they are not necessarily motivated to disclose their brand preference or actively engage through OBCs.

Some self-containers can be categorised as community members who have weak ties with the community, though they maintain an association because of the brand. According to Meek *et al.* (2019) members with weak ties to the community can still feel part of the community through a shared language used by a critical mass, and members' ties to the community can be gradually strengthened through regular interactions. This can be established with the intervention of perceived relational value, as a mechanism of reciprocity, which can increase the likelihood of forming trust within digital environments (Chen & Chen, 2025) including through interaction directly, and indirectly between novice and established members of OBCs.

However, self-containers are relatively passive in their engagement and can be characterised as lurkers who choose simply to follow or consume content rather than contribute. This means that they are less likely to directly communicate within OBCs until they feel confident to do so, and will instead passively engage by observing OBC content. As passive engagers, self-containers are susceptible to the influence of OBC participants' messages and the valence they express through their content. The content they observe builds their valence, which gives them a sensory experience of a luxury brand through the online space and positively enhances their intention to remain with the OBC. Likewise, OBC content can influence their intention to remain loyal to the luxury fashion brand. However, negative e-WOM may reduce their behavioural loyalty intentions, as they may not yet have as much confidence in the brand as traditionalists and inspirers have.

#### **5.4 Expellers**

Expellers are categorised as passive consumers who have lower emotional attachment to luxury fashion brands than the other three categories of OBC customers. Expellers visit and consume information from OBCs, and may purchase products from particular brands, but their loyalty can be categorised as behavioural and indifferent. This supports that functional value attributes are significant mechanisms of reciprocity for expellers to encourage participation within OBCs. Customers with indifferent loyalty display behavioural loyalty traits through their actions, but do not attach themselves to specific brands unless it is useful to do so. Although some millennial consumers are experimental and dedicated consumers of luxury fashion, millennials, like some other generations of consumers, are likely to be careful about purchasing luxury goods due to perceived sustainability and economic and other social values. However, not all expeller customers will be solely focused on the economic constraints of luxury fashion. If the purchase of a luxury fashion product is seen as beneficial, the consumer will proceed with the purchase.

Expellers are less influenced by OBC participants' content and remain loyal to specific luxury fashion brands. However, OBC participants' content can still exert an influence on expellers, and particularly on their purchasing motivations. According to Ozuem *et al.* (2021c) consumers who prefer to consume OBC content for functional reasons, like product choice and price evaluations, can develop a positive valance in online communities. Thus, although expellers have low attachment to a brand, they are not without emotions when consuming online content. If the expeller has brand experience internalised in their cognitive thinking, and OBC participants maintain positive sentiment or endorsements, then expellers may be affected by social internalised influence, whereby they privately agree and perceive benefits in agreeing with a belief or behaviour (Kelman, 1958). Likewise, if the expeller had a negative experience, internalised social influence may occur if they encounter OBC participants who share negative e-WOM. If, however, an expeller has no experience with a specific brand they can be affected by social compliance, where individuals accept influence to obtain benefits or avoid disadvantages despite a lack of agreement with an influencer (Kelman, 1958), or they may resist influence as their weak community ties with other OBC participants can reduce the potential of social influence on expellers' brand-related decisions. The low connection expellers have with a luxury brand can imply that they consider brand image as less relevant (Gaustad *et al.*, 2019). As such, they will not closely examine the perceived fit between a brand and the OBC's members in terms of identity, image and shared interests.

## 6. Theoretical implications

This study advances the understanding of reciprocity within online brand communities (OBCs) by demonstrating that reciprocity functions through a range of interconnected mechanisms that shape distinct emotional and behavioural processes. These mechanisms, in turn, characterise OBC consumer groups by their varied patterns of engagement and loyalty. In response to calls for deeper qualitative exploration of reciprocity structures within online communities (Gharib,

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2024), this research offers theoretical contributions by unpacking the nuanced factors that influence both loyalty and participation within OBCs.

The proposed TISE customer typology—comprising Traditionalists, Inspirers, Self-containers, and Expellers—provides a valuable analytical lens for researchers seeking to understand the layered emotional and behavioural dynamics that underpin OBC engagement. These categories reflect the diverse motivations and reciprocity responses that shape how different consumer segments interact within digital brand ecosystems. By investigating these typologies, scholars can deepen enquiry into the specific antecedents of customer loyalty and participation, thereby offering rich insights into the mechanisms of reciprocity and the influence of OBC structures on consumer behaviour.

The findings also affirm the presence of multiple value dimensions—functional, emotional, and relational—derived from OBC participation, each embedded within varying reciprocity structures. Traditionalists, for example, engage in a norm-driven form of reciprocity rooted in established brand values, where loyalty is primarily attitudinal. For this group, reciprocity is underpinned by a desire to maintain the brand’s core identity, with emotional, entitativity, and relational values emerging from this alignment. Conversely, Inspirers exhibit dynamic reciprocity, characterised by proactive participation and content creation aimed at reshaping and innovating brand narratives. These findings underscore that reciprocity within OBCs is not monolithic but rather manifests through differentiated mechanisms aligned to distinct consumer motivations. This challenges the prevailing assumption of a singular, normative reciprocity structure (Muñiz & O’Guinn, 2001; Hsieh et al., 2024), instead emphasising the need for context-sensitive interpretations of reciprocity grounded in specific consumer behaviours and engagement profiles.

The findings affirm the importance of recognising online brand communities (OBCs) as multifaceted platforms through which customers and consumers independently engage in information-seeking activities to inform their purchase decisions. OBCs also act as a source of entertainment and socialisation to satisfy customers' hedonic and eudaimonic well-being. Although brand relationships have been recognised in the context of offline and online communities, an emerging stream of research on OBCs has been guided by the phenomenon of anthropomorphism, extending research into the types of emotions towards brands that influence various types of relationships with customers and brands (e.g., Azemi *et al.*, 2020; Ozuem *et al.*, 2021a). An attitudinal connection between a customer and a luxury fashion provider prior to OBC membership affects the customer–brand relationship. Additionally, the nature of the relationship influences customers' reactions to the valence of OBC content, and the time they invest to search for and consume information, including visualisations of luxury brands' tangible products and virtual content. This study contributes to the limited research that has so far examined the multiple relationships customers have with luxury brands within OBCs based on their functional and hedonic motivations for accessing brand-related content, by interconnecting the direct and indirect influence of other OBC members participation in prompting OBC consumers responses to the mechanism of reciprocity.

As a digitally fluent generation, Millennials tend to prioritise authenticity, co-creation, and socially embedded brand interactions, which may increase their sensitivity to reciprocity mechanisms and anthropomorphic brand relationships (Dong *et al.*, 2024; Ozuem *et al.*, 2025). Their active engagement with social media and reliance on peer evaluation suggest a heightened receptiveness to content valence, social contagion, and participatory modes of brand engagement. Millennials' combined pursuit of hedonic gratification and meaningful brand affiliation positions them as prominent participants within the TISE typology—particularly among Inspirers and Self-containers. Integrating a generational lens therefore

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offers a valuable opportunity to deepen insight into Millennial engagement with OBCs and the ways in which their behaviours influence the evolving dynamics of reciprocity and social influence in digitally mediated brand communities (Kumar & Kaushal, 2023)

With increased consumption of online content, managers of luxury OBC platforms are enhancing their digital design features to influence instrumental and affective responses from their customers and motivate purchase and information search outcomes (Kang, 2023). The findings suggest that encountered content, and the sentiments and emotions expressed through content, can incite positive and negative valence from consumers and influence social commerce behaviours. In OBCs, observing other individuals’ actions can reduce the economic and social risks associated with online content and purchases, referred to as social contagion. Such activity has enabled researchers to observe the direct potential online community interactions have to infer social contagion, and influence behavioural and psychological processes (Park *et al.*, 2018) and support the established reciprocity values within OBCs. However, the anthropomorphic status customers establish with luxury fashion brands can be a strong driver of OBC loyalty and engagement and can influence other OBC networks in terms of content creation and valence. Some consumers self-categorise themselves according to the dominant brand characteristics; they process these characteristics in their cognitive evaluations of other focal objects causing them to be unaffected by the influence of other OBC users. This study integrates literature insights into social influence to explain how psychological processing and online behaviours regarding content valence differ across OBC customers.

The study also extends insights of social influence theory, addressing the mediating impact of social identification and internalisation on influencing the four customers groups responses to the mechanism of reciprocity within OBCs. Prior social influence research has primarily focused on the mediating role of group identity to influence brand adoption and OBC membership (Fournier, 1998; Helal *et al.*, 2018) where identification and internalisation are the

significant social influence categories. The findings of this study reveal that some OBC customers will be susceptible to the influence of content published by individuals or focal objects they categorise themselves with. However, the strength of the influence of the content is subject to the customer's anthropomorphic relationship with specific luxury fashion brands and other OBC customers. Customers who exhibit strong attitudinal attachment to luxury brands are generally less susceptible to the social influence exerted through direct and indirect reciprocity mechanisms within online brand community (OBC) exchanges. However, as OBCs increasingly attract broader and more diverse populations, participants encounter a plurality of identities and value orientations. It is therefore essential to consider how the coexistence of these multiple identities within OBCs influences the functioning of reciprocity mechanisms embedded in community participation processes. Furthermore, the presence of heterogeneous consumer profiles with varying susceptibilities to social influence may drive structural shifts within OBCs, potentially altering the norms, expectations, and dynamics through which reciprocity is expressed and sustained.

OBC customers with a tendency to converge with communities are more likely to extend their socialisation with multiple users and explore new anthropomorphic characteristics of the luxury brand to transmit through the OBC. However, for diverging customers, similar anthropomorphic characteristics of the brand and OBC networks will strengthen their intention to remain within OBCs to maintain hedonic experiences. These findings offer a novel contribution to the literature, and can help guide practitioners' actions in OBCs to enhance luxury fashion customer loyalty and engagement.

## 7. Practical implications

The findings highlight the crucial OBC constructs that act as a bridge between customers and luxury fashion brands. Digital marketing practitioners in the luxury fashion industry should



observe these intermediaries to inform their customer loyalty strategies. The TISE framework provides evidence that OBCs encompass multiple users with different levels of loyalty and mechanisms that lead to engaging behaviours. For managers, it is useful to understand the different responses OBC users make corresponding to the four constructs of the TISE framework to determine four customer categories (traditionalists, inspirers, self-containers and expellers). Although the four customer categories may be prompted by similar mechanisms of reciprocity that generate value through OBCs, their behavioural responses will vary according to the members and OBC activities they encounter, and their characterisation according to the four theoretical concepts displayed in figure 1. These are identifiable through OBC social interactions and other content that could affect the valence of other OBC customers. For example, traditionalists are heavily influenced by their relationship with a luxury fashion brand and desire the preservation of the brand's core qualities and characteristics to motivate their participation with OBCs. In contrast, expellers are passive consumers with lower emotional attachment to luxury brands, and their loyalty is more behavioural and derived from functional reciprocity value they obtain from OBCs. The recommended action for OBC managers would be to manage content and community members based on the TISE framework by analysing the content OBC groups significantly engage with, and tailoring their strategies to create diverse and engaging content that resonates with each segment. This includes highlighting brand heritage for traditionalists, showcasing innovation for inspirers, providing clear product information for expellers, and fostering a diverse and creative community environment that encourages participation and builds trust among self-containers. By recognizing contributions and gradually introducing users to the brand's emotional as well as functional aspects, managers can enhance the reciprocity value and engagement and loyalty across the customer segments.

As this context-specific research reflects, OBC members can be co-creators of online brand image and equity, and can exert cognitive influence over other OBC customers. However, as



implied by the separate customer groups in the TISE framework, diverse loyalty attitudes and behaviours necessitate effective audience targeting for functional- and hedonic-motivated engagement, and virtual products and content displayed through OBCs. Managers can enhance the desirability of OBC experiences by directing traditionalist and inspirer customers to hedonic content that reflects the brand's attributes. The attitudinal loyalty of traditionalist and inspirer customers emphasises their alignment with brand-specific searches through OBCs, and they are likely to be experienced users. For these customers, managers should direct content that reflects the brand and prioritises hedonic-motivated engagement over functional information searches. While both traditionalists and inspirers seek hedonic engagement, traditionalists' responses differ from inspirers' responses regarding OBCs that signal diverse attributes that do not align with the image they envision of the brand. Managers can manage their OBCs by sharing content with users who are likely to positively diffuse the information. Algorithms and artificial intelligence (AI) systems can be adopted to assist in locating these online customers to generate greater returns from social networks following luxury fashion brands.

Managers should consider the social influence impact traditionalists and inspirers have on other OBC consumers. Traditionalists and inspirers are likely to respond positively towards customers aligned with their category and towards expellers and self-container users. Expellers and self-containers are novice users whose searches and engagement are based on purely functional motivations. It is beneficial for managers to understand the brand information these customers will search for through OBCs, and to transfer such information through social connections to influence positive reciprocity engagement and loyalty behaviours. Digital marketers should target expellers and self-containers with content that emphasises promotional information, assisted by positive valence signalled by traditionalists or inspirers. Novice customers require assurance before they commit to purchasing from a luxury fashion brand or

choose to switch brands; therefore, the positive valence of traditionalists' and inspirers' content can contribute to influencing expellers and self-containers to remain with a specific luxury fashion brand.

In summary, the distinctive characteristics of a luxury fashion brand OBC environment are created by its users and the luxury fashion brand. It is essential for managers to identify these characteristics that emerge from online engagement. When applied in a strategic manner, managers can comprehend the unique aspects of their OBC, their users' motivations, and how these correspond to the mechanisms of the four OBC themes. Although digital marketing practitioners acknowledge the co-creation dynamics of OBCs, they need to further explore how the intermediaries of OBCs will influence the depth of interactivity customers will conduct, and to appreciate the results this will have for customer retention for marketing propositions.

## 8. Future research

The current study has addressed the perspectives of OBC users and the capability of online content and social networks to socially influence engagement and loyalty towards luxury fashion brands. Future research could extend knowledge around engagement and loyalty in luxury fashion OBCs, and strengthen and validate the current findings through further netnographic research of online communities in other contexts. Future studies should also consider cultural contexts, as cultural values and norms may shape how reciprocity, engagement, and loyalty are experienced and expressed within OBCs. Moreover, further research could investigate different brand types beyond the luxury fashion sector to explore how the mechanisms of reciprocity and loyalty may differ across industries with varying symbolic and functional value propositions. In addition, future studies should explore how these dynamics manifest across different generational cohorts (e.g., Gen Z, Millennials, Gen X, and Baby Boomers), as age-related preferences, digital literacy, and value orientations may significantly influence engagement and loyalty behaviours within OBCs.

Future research could further examine these constructs from an organisational perspective to capture interpretations relevant to targeting and retention strategies through OBC content and social networks. Luxury fashion brands such as Dolce & Gabbana and Tommy Hilfiger have made substantial investments in digital initiatives aimed at enhancing consumer engagement and brand centrality within OBCs. Investigating OBCs from an organisational viewpoint may help determine whether managerial understandings of engagement and loyalty align with those of consumers, offering insight into the strategic alignment of digital practices. Such research could also shed light on how decisions regarding emerging technologies—such as non-fungible tokens and AI-based platforms—impact loyalty strategies and co-creation processes within OBCs. Additionally, future studies should examine the evolving characteristics of digital platforms and tools, and their influence on consumers' cognitive reasoning in adopting them as part of their consumption practices. As demonstrated in this study, certain content formats and channels may inadvertently lead to disengagement. It would therefore be valuable to explore how social value creation and exclusivity strategies affect consumer engagement and loyalty in the luxury fashion industry.

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**Appendix 1: Pre-interview questions to determine respondents luxury fashion brands consumption and engagement**

a) Pre-phase demographic details

1) Please tick your age range:

Age	
18–20 years	
21–23 years	
24–26 years	
27–29 years	
30–32 years	
33–35 years	
36–39 years	
40 years and above	

How old will you be on your next birthday?

\_\_\_\_\_

2) Please state your gender:

a) Female

b) Male

c) Non-binary

3) Please state your occupation:



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b) Pre-phase luxury fashion and OBCs questions

How would you describe a luxury fashion brand?

How enthusiastic are you towards luxury fashion brands?

Have you purchased at least one product from a luxury fashion brand in the last 8 years?  
Which brands?

Have you been a member of a luxury fashion brands social media sites and online communities in the last 12 months?

Have you regularly visited a luxury fashion brand's social media sites and online communities more than once in the last 12 months?

Appendix 2: Guided semi-structured interview questions

1. What is your experience regarding the luxury fashion industry?
2. How would you explain your experience in online brand communities (OBCs) and social media sites (e.g., Instagram, Facebook, WhatsApp) in the luxury fashion industry?
3. What motivates you to follow luxury fashion brands through online brand communities? Please explain.
4. To what extent have OBCs influenced your purchasing intentions for luxury fashion brands?
5. How would you compare a luxury fashion brand's social media site (OBC) to a traditional product website?
6. Explain what type of online content/information appeals to you.

- 7. How has other customers’/followers’ online content influenced your perspective or/and purchasing decisions for luxury fashion brands?
- 8. How have positive and negative online comments/reviews affected your perspective or/and purchasing decisions for luxury fashion products?
- 9. Have customers/followers in any way motivated you to keep following the brand online? Explain why.
- 10. How significant are online followers or customers in influencing your intentions to remain with a luxury fashion brand online?
- 11. How would you describe your active participation within luxury fashion OBCs?
- 12. What motivates you to participate or not to participate within luxury fashion OBCs?
- 13. How do you benefit from online content shared through luxury fashion brands OBCs?
- 14. How likely are you to recommend your choice of luxury fashion brand to others through OBCs?
- 15. To what extent do OBCs influence your loyalty towards your choice of a luxury fashion brand?

Dear Dr Närvänen

We would like to express our sincere gratitude to you for reviewing our manuscript titled '**Exploring online brand-mediated communities and customer experience: insights and evidence from the luxury fashion industry**'. We greatly appreciate your valuable recommendations. The attached appendix includes an explanation of the responses we have provided.

We hope that our manuscript now meets the quality required for publication.

Sincerely, Authors of the paper '**Exploring online brand-mediated communities and customer experience: insights and evidence from the luxury fashion industry**' Manuscript ID QMR-02-2024-0031.R3

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*NOTE: The appendix does not include the authors’ full response provided in the manuscript. Instead, it gives a brief explanation of our response and the location of the full response in the manuscript.*

**REVIEWER 1:**

**Reviewer’s comment: 1)**      **Comments:** The authors have clearly improved their paper. The one point still to address is to explain how and why the participation in OBCs and reciprocity is unique when it comes to Millennials.

**Authors’ response:**              Thank you for your encouraging feedback. We extended the discussion on millennials participation in OBCs and reciprocity on page 4. Please see our response to Reviewer Comment 2.

**Location of the response:** page 4

**Reviewer’s comment: 2)**      **1. Originality:** Does the paper contain new and significant information adequate to justify publication?: The authors have made a real effort to take into account prior remarks in order to improve the manuscript. They have strengthened the theoretical framework and the conclusions. However, they still could have better explained how and why their findings could be seen (or not) to millennials.

**Authors’ response:**              Thank you for your valuable feedback. We expanded our discussion on millennials by highlighting their brand consciousness, participatory role in OBCs, and preference for value-driven engagement.

**Location of the response:** page 4

**Reviewer’s comment: 3)**      **2. Relationship to Literature:** Does the paper demonstrate an adequate understanding of the relevant literature in the field and cite an appropriate range of literature sources? Is any significant work ignored?: The authors are improved the identification of a research gap from their analysis of the literature by adding a clear table.

**Authors’ response:**              Thank you for acknowledging the improved articulation of the research gap through the addition of the summary table.

**Location of the response:** N/A

**Reviewer's comment: 4)** **3. Methodology: Is the paper's argument built on an appropriate base of theory, concepts, or other ideas? Has the research or equivalent intellectual work on which the paper is based been well designed? Are the methods employed appropriate?: The method employed is appropriate and authors took into account prior remarks regarding the potential influence of culture, which they included now in the discussion**

**Authors' response:** Thank you for your positive evaluation of the methodological approach and your acknowledgment of the revisions made to incorporate cultural considerations in response to earlier feedback.

**Location of the response:** N/A

**Reviewer's comment: 5)** **4. Results: Are results presented clearly and analysed appropriately? Do the conclusions adequately tie together the other elements of the paper?: I believe that the main remaining weakness of the manuscript is the conclusion regarding millennials. While authors claim that OBCs could influence emotional and behavioural engagement differently across generational cohorts, they do not clearly explain in their results how and why.**

**Authors' response:** We thank the reviewer for highlighting the need for greater clarity regarding generational differences. As the study focuses specifically on millennials, we have clarified this in the manuscript and now explicitly recommend that future research examine how OBCs influence emotional and behavioural engagement across generational cohorts. This addition has been made in the Future Research and Limitations section.

**Location of the response:** page 49

**Reviewer's comment: 6)** **5. Implications for research, practice and/or society: Does the paper identify clearly any implications for research, practice and/or society? Does the paper bridge the gap between theory and practice? How can the research be used in practice (economic and commercial impact), in teaching, to influence public policy, in research (contributing to the body of knowledge)? What is the impact upon society (influencing public attitudes, affecting quality of life)? Are these implications consistent with the findings and conclusions of the paper?: Authors have clearly improved the implications of their research. They have enhanced the presentation of their contributions. As stated above, I still feel like authors could develop more in their discussion what could be specific to Millennials in terms of OBC and why.**

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**Authors’ response:**

We thank the reviewer for their continued engagement and constructive feedback. In response to the suggestion to further develop the discussion on what may be specific to Millennials in the context of online brand communities (OBCs), we have revised the manuscript to incorporate a generational perspective. Specifically, we highlight how Millennials’ digital fluency, preference for authenticity, and reliance on peer-driven engagement make them particularly responsive to reciprocity mechanisms and anthropomorphic brand relationships. We also contextualise their behaviour within the TISE typology, noting their strong association with the Inspirer and Self-container categories. These additions aim to deepen the theoretical contribution of the study by demonstrating how Millennial consumers shape and are shaped by the dynamics of reciprocity and social influence in OBCs. We hope this enhancement addresses the reviewer’s helpful comment.

**Location of the response:** page 44-45

**Reviewer’s comment: 7)**

**6. Quality of Communication:** Does the paper clearly express its case, measured against the technical language of the field and the expected knowledge of the journal's readership? Has attention been paid to the clarity of expression and readability, such as sentence structure, jargon use, acronyms, etc.: The paper is well written

**Authors’ response:**

Thank you for your positive feedback on the quality of communication in the paper.

**Location of the response:** N/A