The Impact of Brand Loyalty on the Consumer Buying Decision of Millennials in the Irish Sportswear Market.

A Dissertation Presented by

Sean Dolan

Submitted to the National College of Ireland in August 2021 in partial fulfillment for the award of MSc Marketing.

Abstract

This dissertation delves into the topic of brand loyalty while focusing on millennials and the sportswear market. It aims to measure the role that brand loyalty plays in the purchase decision and discusses the key factors that cause individuals to have favorite sportswear brand. This study builds on the research carried out on the subject brand loyalty while investigating a scarcely researched area regarding the topic, the sportswear market. It is a qualitative study, consisting of six in-depth interviews. The participants were chosen for this study based on their and their familiarity with sportswear brands in order to answer the primary research question. The subsequent findings from this study proved to be very interesting and provide a solid foundation for further investigation in this scarcely researched area.

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Title of Thesis: The impact of brand loyalty on the consumer buying decision of millennials in the Irish sportswear market.

Date: 18/08/2021

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Acknowledgements

I would like to express a deep sense of gratitude to my supervisor Dave Hurley for his fantastic support and expert insight which has guided me throughout this project. Dave's support and advice have been invaluable and played a vital role in the completion of my dissertation.

A special thanks to all of the people that participated in the interviews for giving me their time and honest opinions. Without you this research would not have been possible.

I would like to thank my friends and family that have supported me throughout this process. Particularly my parents for all the encouragement and advice they have given me.

Finally, I would like to thank my girlfriend Emma for being so patient and understanding through the duration of this project.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

1.1 Background to the Study

In the rapidly evolving modern business environment of today, there are a number of driving forces that have combined to create a hypercompetitive marketplace. As global competition intensifies, supply is on demand (Al-Surmi et al, 2020). However, there is no evidence to suggest that there is an increase in demand worldwide. Increasing price wars, commoditization of services and products and declining profit margins are the result of this trend towards globalisation. As a result, brands are becoming increasingly similar (Kim & Maubornge, 2005). In order to gain a competitive advantage in the marketplace, there is an increasing emphasis from companies to understand the feelings and perceptions of consumers towards brands.

Brand loyalty provides companies with a number of benefits that increase revenue and lower costs (Keller & Swaminathan, 2020). There is a considerable amount of research on the topic of brand loyalty, (Leahy, 2008) defines it as "a measure of the attachment that a customer has to a brand". It has been regularly stated that the retention of existing customers is considerably less costly than attracting new ones (Aaker, 1991). Brand loyalty not only allows companies to retain customers but also presents a number of benefits that will be discussed in this study such as lowering customers sensitivity to price and reducing expenditure on attracting new customers (Rowley, 2005). Both attitudinal and behavioural factors combine to establish brand loyalty. To date, there has been much discussion on how to best measure brand loyalty with practical measures of the construct being somewhat limited (Knox & Walker, 2010). This study will adopt a loyalty measurement model developed by (Moola & Bischoff, 2014) which is highly regarded among academics.

This study focuses on the sportswear market as it is massive global market growing at a rapid rate. In 2018 the revenue of the sportswear market worldwide was $116 billion and is projected to increase to $149 billion by the 2023 (Statista, 2021). There are a number of factors generating this growth such as the worldwide increase of people living a more active, healthy lifestyle as well as the rise in popularity of athleisure. Some of the major sportwear brands such as Nike and Adidas are renowned for their implementation of

expensive, powerful marketing campaigns that aim to develop and maintain brand loyalty among consumers (Singh, 2014). However, despite this there is a very limited amount of research on the topic of brand loyalty in sportswear. Furthermore, this research will focus on millennials as the generational cohort have recently surpassed the baby boomer generation to become the highest spending generation in the US(David D. Dames et al, 2018) . With this in mind, millennials will be of most interest to sportswear brands when aiming to create brand loyal customers.

1.2 Gaps in the Literature

While there is not a substantial amount of current literature on the impact of brand loyalty on the consumer buying decision of sportswear, there has been a rise in the level of research in recent years due to the growth of the industry. It became apparent to the researcher when analysing these studies that within the limited research on the subject, there is no study that implements a recognized brand loyalty model. The majority of these studies list several factors such as brand name, promotion, and store environment as measures of brand loyalty. The rationale for the application of these factors is not given as they generally listed at the 'six brand loyalty factors.' Although these factors can be applied to measure brand loyalty, the lack of theoretical framework leads to unjustified, unstructured research and restricts the researcher from expanding into a broader area of the subject (Lederman, 2015). As a result, there are still vast areas on the subject of sportswear brand loyalty that still have not been researched. For example, the brand loyalty model mentioned in the introduction highlights the importance of brand performance, with research using sportswear as an example of a product which brand performance would be of major importance.

Second to this, it has been recognised that the current literature on brand loyalty towards sportswear brands is lacking in regard to research on millennials. The studies that have been conducted to date predominantly focus on geographical location. Age cohorts provide researchers with a method of analysing change over time which creates a way of understanding how different formative experiences interact with the life cycle and shape people's views of the world" (Gordon, 2017). Millennials are often referred to as 'digital natives' as they were born into the digital era and have grown up "exposed to the

continuous flow of digital information" with technology such as computers and the internet being a natural part of their lives (Roevens, 2015). In order to connect to these consumers and encourage brand loyalty, companies had to drastically alter their marketing strategies. From examining the literature on brand loyalty towards sportswear, there is a noticeable gap in regard to the implementation of online marketing strategies aimed at millennials.

The sportswear industry has a long history of using celebrity endorsements and brand ambassadors to increase brand recognition and advertise products to consumers. These companies often invest significant amounts of money into campaigns to associate their brands and products with influential celebrities and sports stars with the aim of persuading "consumers perceptions, attitudes and purchase intentions" (Mittal, 2021). While there is an abundance of literature on the effects that celebrity endorsements and brand ambassadors have on creating brand loyalty, there is currently very little data on the subject in relation to sportswear. Furthermore, there has been an emergence of more recent research which suggests that companies are increasingly turning to social media influencers and micro influencers to advertise their brands (Schouten et al, 2019). Likewise, there has been insufficent research conducted on this subject with regards to sportswear brand loyalty.

1.3 Academic Justification

Brand loyalty has received a lot of attention from academic researchers, as the concept evolved and researchers began to develop methods and frameworks to measure brand loyalty, there has been vast amounts of research conducted on the topic (Ha, 1998). Much of this research measuring brand loyalty focuses on a specific industry. Despite the magnitude of the sportswear industry and the potential for growth there has been little research conducted that measures the brand loyalty of sportswear brands.

The available literature has provided a foundation and presented a sense of direction for further research to follow. However, there is no framework in place to provide structure and support for the research. Within the existing research there is very little justification given for factors chosen to measure brand loyalty. Many of the factors in these studies differ greatly which leads to inconsistent, disreputable findings. By presenting a cohesive

piece of research that implements a prominent brand loyalty framework, this study aims to enhance the current literature on sportswear brand loyalty.

The present literature on sportswear brand loyalty is clearly lacking in research on millennials. This paper hopes to provide clear, insightful data on this subject area by combining secondary research on millennials and brand loyalty with primary research gathered by the author. By conducting research in the form of in-depth interviews, this study will provide detailed findings. It is hoped that by contributing this research on millennials, a more thoughtful approach that will study the various generational cohorts will be used by academics moving forward.

It has been recognized that the existing literature on sportswear brand loyalty is lacking in regard to research on the effectiveness of celebrity endorsements and brand ambassadors. As many sportswear brands utilize both celebrity endorsements and brand ambassadors to advertise their brands, this area is of major interest and relevance. The significance of research on this topic is increased due to various recent studies stating such advertisements have a negative effect on their perception of a brand (Bailey, 2007). This paper hopes to be an early contributor to the research on celebrity influencers and brand ambassadors in sportswear advertising and to measure the impact this has on the brand loyalty of millennials.

1.4 Overall Aim of the Study

Given the literature gaps regarding sportswear brand loyalty, the aim of this study is to begin to fill these gaps by gaining a more extensive understanding of the general public's perspective on sportswear brands and the impact brand loyalty plays on the consumer buying decision. This is an area that has not yet been sufficiently addressed in the literature to date, with little research specific to millennials and the population of Ireland, despite a projected revenue of $318 million for sportswear in Ireland by 2025 (Statista, 2020). The overall aim of the research will be reached by answering the following research questions.

1.5 Research Questions

In acknowledgement of the gaps highlighted in section 1.2, the following relevant questions have been established with purpose of examining the areas of the literature which are deemed under researched to date:

1. What impact does brand loyalty have on the consumer buying decision of sportswear in millennials ?
2. What strategies do sportswear brands use to create brand loyal customers ?
3. How do sportswear companies target specific demographics ?
4. What are the key factors that cause consumers to switch brands in relation to sportswear products ?

The following primary research method was applied in order to answer these research questions.

1.6 Methods and Scope

From analyzing the secondary data for this research, a number of significant gaps on the subject of sportswear brand loyalty became evident to the author which supported the purpose of this study. When deciding on the research approach, both a mono method and mixed method approach were considered by the researcher. The mixed method approach uses both quantitative and qualitative research methods to collect data (Saunders, et al 2019). Due to the secondary data and academic studies that were available to the researcher, there was a sufficient amount of literature to support the study. As a result, the mixed method approach was rejected by the author in favor of a mono method approach (Saunders, et al 2019). The mono method approach uses one qualitative or quantitative research method. To conduct the research for this study, a qualitative approach in the form of semi structured, in-depth interviews was chosen in order to acquire and examine the data on sportswear brand loyalty from the perspective of the participants.

The semi structured interview approach was conducted with six chosen interviewees that each have an understanding of what they believe brand loyalty to be, as well as good a knowledge of, and interest in sportswear brands which was critical to the study. Although this study is limited to a small sample size, this has allowed for an extensive analysis of the

primary data to be gathered which will expand on the current discussions in the present research.

1.7 Overview of Research Structure

Chapter 1 – Introduction

This chapter provides a brief introduction into the chosen research subject, highlighting the major gaps in the literature on brand loyalty in sportswear. The overall aim and format of the study are introduced.

Chapter 2 – Literature Review

An in-depth examination of the current literature is carried out in order to gain a deeper understanding of the topic. The prominent literature on brand loyalty is explored as well as the research conducted on sportswear brand loyalty to date. A framework for measuring the factors that influence brand loyalty is introduced in this chapter. The impact of brand loyalty on the consumer buying decision is also discussed with a focus on millennials.

Chapter 3 – Research Methodology

The methodology chapter makes a clear case for the chosen methodology while considering the overall aim of the study. A detailed insight into the chosen research objectives as well as the chosen methods to collect the primary data is given in this chapter. A detailed review of the instrument used to conduct the research will also be discussed in this chapter.

Chapter 4 – Findings and Discussions

The findings and discussions chapter interprets and describes the significance of the primary findings from this research while comparing these findings to the secondary research from the literature review. Underlying themes from the primary research will be highlighted and synthesised with the secondary data, adding to the imperative discussion from this research.

Chapter 5 – Conclusion and Recommendations

The conclusion and recommendations section provides a sweeping summary of the research. Recommendations for further academic research as well as any practical connotations for professionals are also given in this chapter.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

2.1 Chapter Introduction

This chapter addresses the existing literature on brand loyalty as well as the positive impact it has on the consumer buying decision. It begins by defining the concept of a brand before examining Keller's Brand Equity Model. The author next explores the literature and research to date, focusing on the key factors affecting brand loyalty, such as brand trust, brand commitment and perceived value. Existing relevant literature on consumer behavior among millennials will be examined firstly on a general basis, then narrowed to its context and relevance to sportswear brands. Through assessment of the Irish sportwear market, the author will explore the leading and emerging brands, analyzing the various approaches taken to create brand loyal customers.

2.2 Concept of a Brand

(Keller & Swaminathan, 2020) state "ever more firms and other organizations have realized that one of their most valuable assets is the brand name associated with products or services". The word brand originates from the Old Norse 'brandr', which means to burn. This dates back to the branding method used by owners of livestock to distinguish the animals of one farmer from another. It was from this process that the utility of brands as a guide choice was established, which to date has remained unchanged (Simmons, 2003). The American Marketing Association (AMA) defines a brand as a name, term, design, symbol, or any other feature that identifies one seller's goods or service as distinct from those of other sellers. In the 1980's as marketing methods continued to develop, marketers looked towards cognitive psychology to find out why consumers behaved the way they did. As a result, branding became about 'share of mind' where a brand was created by associating a name with a single consumer benefit and repeating this to consumers via advertising (Trout, 1981). As research on branding continued to develop, brands became known as "a set of mental associations held by the consumer, which add to the perceived value of a product or service" (Keller K. L., 1998). Subsequent to the development in research, building a strong brand became a priority for many organizations as it was evident that strong brands outperform the market (Simmons, 2003).

2.3 Keller's Customer Based Brand Equity Model

Strong brands have a high brand equity. As product and service offerings become increasingly interchangeable, creating a strong brand has become crucial as it constitutes a substantial intangible asset for most organizations (Cristoph Burrman, 2009). Brand equity is described by (Kotler G. A., 2018) as "the differential effect that knowing the brand name has on customer response to the product and its marketing". It is a measure of a brand's ability to become the preferred choice in the mind of the consumer. (Aaker, Building Strong Brands, 1996) pinpoints the following five key categories of brand equity – brand awareness, brand associations, perceived quality, brand loyalty and other proprietary brand assets. The Customer Based Brand Equity Model (CBBE) was developed by Keller with two questions in mind; (1) What makes a brand strong? and (2)How do you build a strong brand? (Keller K. , 2001) The CBBE model was developed to answer these questions on the premise that "the power of a brand lies in what customers have learned, felt, seen, and heard about the brand as a result of their experiences over time" (Keller V. S., 2020). With this in mind, it is the responsibility of marketers to create positive, memorable experiences for consumers that they will then associate with the brand. As can be seen below in Figure 1. the CBBE model identifies a sequence of four steps for building a strong brand.

Figure 1. Keller's CBBE pyramid. *Source* (Keller K. , 2001)
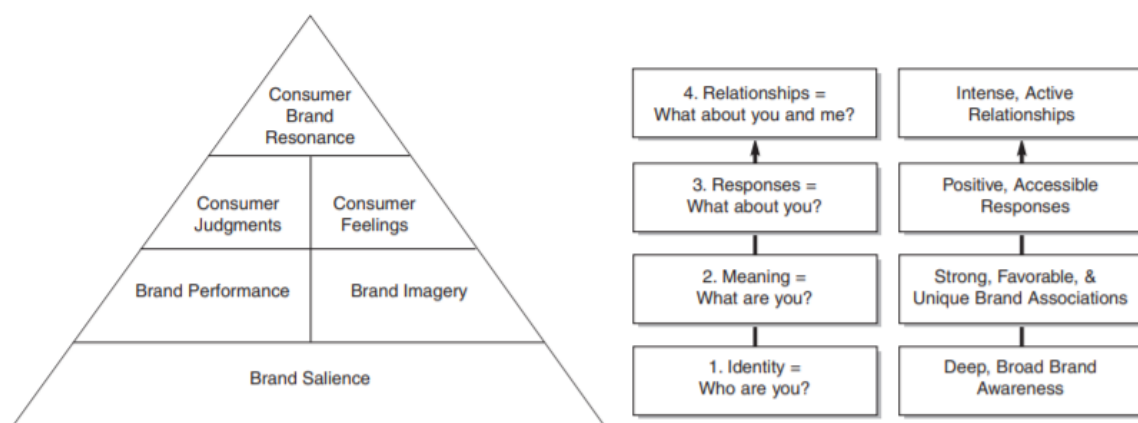
These four steps consist of a set of fundamental questions that consumers invariably ask about a brand. Keller claims that in order to build a strong brand these questions must be answered in a sequence of steps in which "each step is in contingent upon the successful completion of the previous step" (Keller V. S., 2020). The six 'brand building blocks that combine to create the 'resonance pyramid' act as a structured guide for brands to follow

when accomplishing the four steps. The right side of this model highlights the emotional route consumers take as they move up the pyramid, while the left side shows the rational route. By successfully executing these four steps a brand climbs the 'branding ladder' and reaches the top of the pyramid, creating 'brand resonance' among consumers. Brand resonance forges "a completely harmonious relationship between customers and the brand" (Kerri-Ann L, 2008). Keller breaks brand resonance down into four categories, attitudinal attachment, active engagement, sense of community and loyalty.

2.4 Brand Loyalty

As the literature on brand loyalty evolves, marketers have realized the major benefits creating a loyal customer base brings to a brand. (Aaker,1996) specifies that strong brand loyalty has a significant impact on an organizations marketing cost, as it is undoubtedly less costly to retain customers than it is to attract new ones. The concept of brand loyalty was proposed by Melvin T. Copeland in 1923 in relation to consumers buying habits, here it was defined as 'consumer insistence'. Further significant research was conducted by George H. Brown in 1952 with the aim of answering several questions such as What is a brand loyal customer? and Do customers purchase a favorite brand time after time or do they shop around at random? (H.Brown,1953). To answer these questions Brown carried out some basic research with the help of the University of Chicago. For the calendar year of 1951, 610 families kept a diary in which they logged every grocery and medical product they purchased. The number of times a particular brand of product was purchased was recorded as well as the sequence of the purchases for each particular brand. This study of brand purchase patterns found marked consistencies in the way consumers buy brands of various products and concluded that people exhibit both operative and strong brand loyalty (Farley, 1964). Early research paved the way for more sophisticated studies on the topic of brand loyalty. In 1958 Alfred A. Kuehn completed a dissertation that used probability models as a tool for analyzing consumer brand choice which claimed that brand loyalty "appeared to increase with the recency of the previous purchase of the brand" (Frank, 1962). Despite the rapid progress being made in the area of brand loyalty, a report in the Journal of Marketing Research by W.T. Tucker in the Journal of Marketing Research in 1964 claimed that that too much emphasis has been put on methodological techniques in the research field of brand loyalty. Tucker continued to say that "brand loyalty demands some further analysis if it is to

be fully useful either theoretically or to practical marketers" (Tucker, 1964). Research carried out by (Sheth, 1974) noted that "most of the prior empirical research in brand loyalty has been technique-oriented with emphasis on fitting well-defined mathematical models". Following to this research the majority of scholars agree that brand loyalty is a multidimensional concept that can be defined and measured in attitudinal and behavioral terms.

2.5 Measurements of Brand Loyalty

The majority of early studies on brand loyalty "have been measured by the behavioral aspects" (Ha, 1998). As research into brand loyalty progressed these behaviorist measurements came under criticism for their lack of explanatory power. This literature consisted of mathematical models focusing on concepts such as repeat purchase behavior without any consideration given to the cognitive aspects influencing consumers loyalty towards a brand. (K.Basu, 1994) argues that loyalty should not be regarded as repeat purchase behavior. This belief was backed by research carried out by (Lindestad, 1998) that claimed, "loyalty measurement should include customers attitudes rather than repeated purchase behavioral pattern only". As a result of these developments in literature, scholars began incorporating attitudinal measures into their research. Attitudinal loyalty "can be defined as capturing the affective and cognitive components of brand loyalty" and is evident when a consumer chooses to be loyal due to positive brand preference. (Anisimova, 2007). A lot of early research treated attitudinal loyalty as an antecedent of behavior loyalty, however there is an agreement amongst recent literature that behavioral and attitudinal loyalty are equally important (Cheng, 2011). Research conducted by (Rundle-Thiele, 2001) examined brand loyalty literature in detail and concluded that approaches to brand loyalty measurements can be divided into three categories, behavioral, attitudinal, and multi-domain as can be seen below in Figure 2. below. The third multi-domain approach is a combination of both behavioral and attitudinal measurements.

Figure 2. Classification of approaches used to measure brand loyalty. *Source* (Rundle-Thiele, 2001)
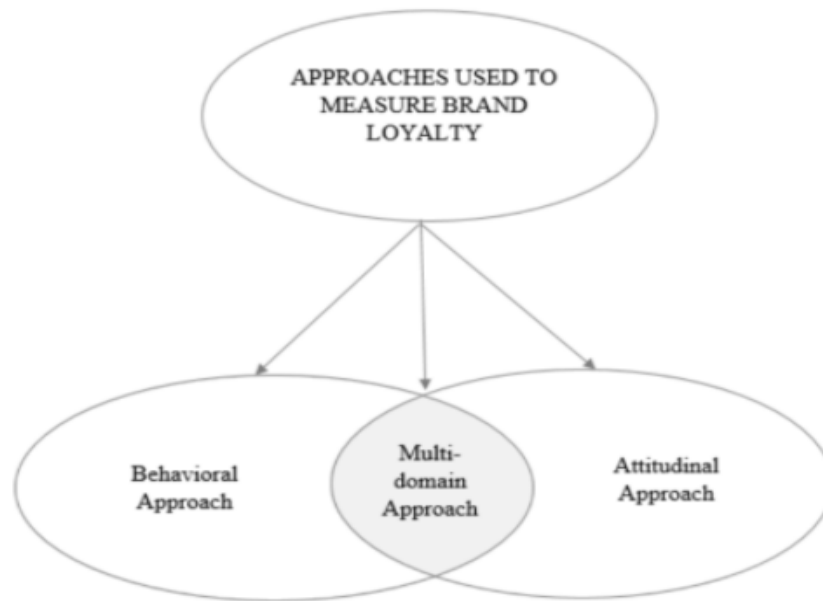
2.6 Factors Effecting Brand Loyalty

Moola and Bischoff developed a conceptual framework for brand loyalty by researching historical brand models, identifying brand loyalty influences, and validating the measurement criteria. This model was developed, validated, and tested in various industries (Moola & Bisschoff, 2014). The original model consisted of 26 loyalty influences taken from numerous admired academics throughout the history of brand loyalty literature. Further extensive research carried out by Moola, and Bischoff saw the 26 antecedents reduced to 12 influences of brand loyalty listed below (Joubert, 2020).

2.6.1 Customer Satisfaction

The concept of customer satisfaction has been widely researched by scholars. (Kotler P. , 2000) defines customer satisfaction as "a person's feeling of pleasure or disappointment resulting from comparing a product's perceived performance in relation to his or her expectations". Many factors that combine to create overall customer satisfaction such as competitive pricing, product quality, good value and billing timeliness (Hokanson, 1995). There is no shortage of empirical studies highlighting the positive affect of customer

satisfaction on repurchase retention. However, there is a host of more recent academic studies stating that consistent customer satisfaction has a deeper impact on a consumer's attitude towards a brand. A recent article published in the Academy of Marketing Studies found that "the more satisfied a customer tends to be, the higher the actual loyalty of the customer is" (Hansuk, 2013).

2.6.2 Switching Costs

When analyzing the influence of switching costs on consumers (Burnham et al. 2003) identifies three types, procedural costs consisting of time and effort spent, financial costs consisting of costs and financial benefits, and relational costs consisting of emotional and psychological discomfort can that arise from breaking a link to a brand. Switching costs can be viewed as intermediary between customer satisfaction and loyalty as "switching costs increase, the relationship between satisfaction and repurchase intentions decreases" (Celso Augusto de Matos et al.2009).

2.6.3 Brand Trust

Brand trust plays a vital role in creating brand loyal customers. (Chaudhuri & Holbrook, 2001) define brand trust as "the willingness of the average consumer to rely on the ability of the brand to perform its stated function". Marketers build brand trust by creating a feeling of reliability, safety, and honesty amongst a brand through the consumers direct experiences with the brand. This helps to create brand loyal customers as it allows companies to develop a "relationship with consumers that becomes a substitute for human contact between the organization and its customers" (J.N. Sheth & Parvatiyar, 1995).

2.6.4 Relationship Proneness

Relationship Proneness is defined as a "consumer's general tendency to buy the same brands over time rather than switching around to try other brands" (Holloway & Parish, 2010). This is an individual characteristic of a consumer that is part of their individual personality. Relationship proneness influences brand loyalty by positively effecting a consumer's resistance to change.

2.6.5 Involvement

Product involvement is the "general level of the centrality of the object or the centrality of the object to the persons ego structure" (E. Day et al 1995). Consumers experience emotions related to the products they consume every day. These emotions influence the customers perception of a brand, often leading to brand attachment. The level of attachment to a product or brand created by product involvement varies depending on the individual. In an attempt to further understand the relationship of consumers and products, research has often studied the topic of involvement. A study carried out by (Quester & Lim, 2003) examined the relationship between brand loyalty and product involvement in ball point pens and sports shoes. This study was conducted using a convenience sample of 253 students with the results finding that involvement plays as significant role in creating brand loyal customers.

2.6.6 Perceived Value

Perceived value can be defined as "the difference between the benefits and the sacrifices perceived by customers in terms of expectations, needs and wants" (Slater, 1996). There have been several renowned studies which have strongly supported the claim that perceived value contributes to brand loyalty. (Punniyamoorthy & Raj, 2007) have further dissected perceived value into the following four dimensions, functional value, emotional value, price-worthiness factor, and social value.

2.6.7 Commitment

Customer commitment is a psychological force linking a consumer to a brand. It can be viewed as an attitudinal construct representing the feeling of customers about the act of maintaining a relationship with a commercial partner (Gordon, 2003). Favorable customer commitment would "lie at the heart of a consumer–brand relationship because consumers come to be identified with and be involved with many of the brands, they regularly consume" (Holbrook A. C., 2002).

2.6.8 Repeat Purchase

Repeated purchase behavior is "an axiomatic term that simply refers to the extent to which consumers re-purchase the same brand in any equal-length period of time" (Ehrenberg, 1988). Therefore, repeat purchase behavior can be viewed as a positive action resulting from consumer's behavioral brand loyalty leading to reoccurring purchases of a brands products or services. When behavioral brand loyalty is firmly established with a consumer it is difficult to impair their bias towards a brand.

2.6.9 Brand Affect

Brand Affect is widely studied in marketing literature and can be defined as a brand's potential to elicit a positive emotional response in the average consumer" (Holbrook A. C., 2002). Generally, brand affect is characterized as two individual dimensions, positive and negative with consumers aiming to avoid negative experience while seeking positive ones. These positive and favorable experiences are associated with high levels of brand loyalty (Holbrook A. C., 2002).

2.6.10 Brand Relevance

In today's extremely competitive environment it is vital a brand maintains its relevance. (David A.Aaker, 2005) states that "as categories emerge, change, and fade, narrow application preference may not be sufficient". Companies strive for strong brand relevance as it leads to consumers perceiving a specific brand more favorably in a given product category. Customer based brand relevance involves two stages, firstly when the consumer picks a product category or subcategory, they deem relevant and secondly when the consumer chooses a specific brand from the product category or subcategory (Maik Hammerschmidt et al, 2008).

2.6.11 Brand Performance

Brand performance "is the subjective evaluation of the core product, comprising of both intrinsic and extrinsic characteristics" (Burrman et al, 2009). Research published in the Journal of Consumer Psychology found that perceived performance of a product or service is directly linked to post purchase satisfaction which encourages brand loyalty. Another factor

affecting a consumer's perception of brand performance is 'direct sellers' performance' which involves the post-performance delivery elements of a product such as the direct salespersons characteristics or the delivery process (Bisschoff, 2014).

2.6.12 Culture

While it is widely accepted that culture has a strong influence on consumer behavior, there is a lack of research focusing on the impact of cultural values on consumers brand loyalty. As globalization has led to the substantial improvements in technology and industrial productivity, competition among brands has intensified. As a result, there is an ever-increasing number of organizations spending billions of dollars every year in order to reach out to consumers around the world (Seock & Lin, 2011). When discussing the influence of culture on consumer behavior the majority of scholars agree that the unique traditions deeply ingrained into specific cultures strongly impact attitudes and behaviors. A prominent study conducted by (Hofstede, 1980) divided "cultural characteristics that influence values, attitudes and behaviors into four categories, individualism, uncertainty avoidance, masculinity, and power distance. From these four dimensions, individualism has been examined with the greatest interest. There is growing evidence from recent research that the individual consumers "who identify more with certain cultural traits are likely to be more brand loyal" (Banihashemi Maryam et al, 2011).

2.7 Consumer Buying Decision

Consumer Behavior is an extensively researched subject, it is the study of what, why, when, and how consumers interact with a product or brand to satisfy wants and needs (Qazzafi, 2019). The consumer buying decision process consist of five stages, each stage represents a step consumers go through before they purchase a product. The figure below illustrates the consumer buying decision, beginning with need recognition. From examining this model each step a consumer pass through when making a buying decision is visible. It can also be noted that the buying decision begins long before the purchase of an item or service and determines effects for a long time after (Qazzafi, 2019). As a result, marketers are becoming increasingly aware of the importance of focusing on all five stages of the process, not just the purchase decision. (Kotler P. , 2017) notes that a consumer may use all five stages of the decision-making process before purchasing a product, they may skip one or more stages

depending on the mind of the individual. This is often the case with low involvement products.

Figure 3. Consumer Decision-Making Process. *Source* (Qazzafi, 2019)

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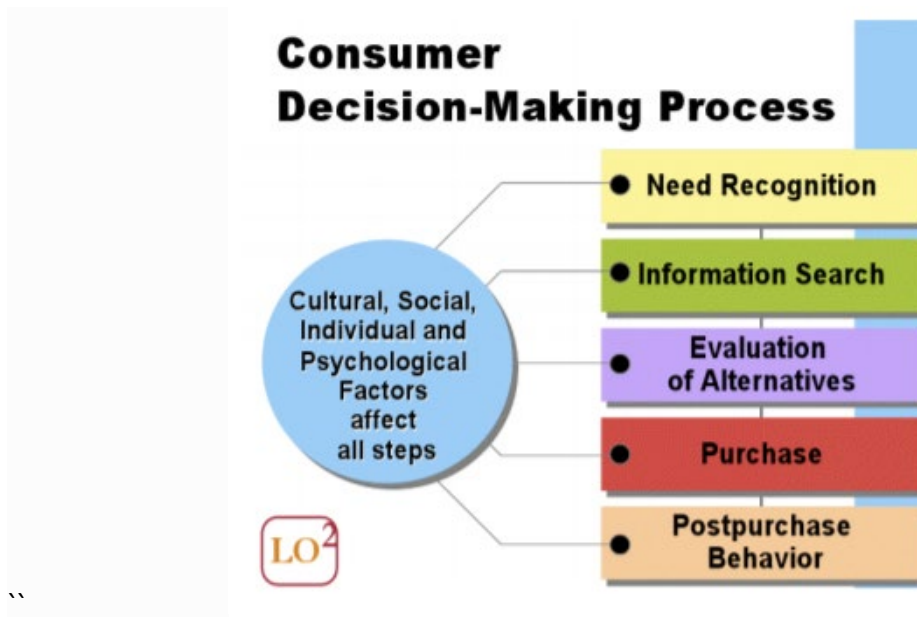
2.7.1 Need Recognition

The first stage of the consumer buying decision process in need recognition, also known as problem recognition. It is the interaction of two components, the desired state and the actual that that combine to create need recognition. The desired state refers to "the way a person would like a need to be met" whereas the actual state refers to "the degree to which a perceived need is actually being met"(Bruner & Pomazal, 1988). Therefore, need recognition occurs when there is a significant difference between a persons desired and actual state regarding a specific need or want. The existence and materialization of the need or want can be caused by internal or external stimuli (Munthiu, 2009). Basic human needs often provoke the internal stimuli, these are typically based at the basis of Maslow's

hierarchy of needs, for example food, shelter, sleep, reproduction. The external stimuli are triggered by more complex wants and needs such as a well-designed advertisement or the information about a new product or service released on the market (Munthiu, 2009).

2.7.2 Information Search

If the problem recognition stage of the consumer buying process is strong it is likely the consumer will move onto the second stage. "This involves the identification of alternative ways of problem solution"(Jobber & Ellis-Chadwick, 2020). This search may be internal or external with the internal being a review of the relevant information from memory. "Potential solutions, methods of comparing solutions, reference to personal experiences and marketing communications" combine to form a consumer's internal search. However, if a consumer cannot find a satisfactory solution to a problem this way, the external search begins. The external search involves sources personal to the consumer such as family, friends, and commercial sources such as advertisements, salespeople, and social media (Jobber & Ellis-Chadwick, 2020). The thoroughness of the information search is heavily related to previous experience of the consumer as well as the error cost related to making an incorrect decision (Munthiu, 2009).

2.7.3 Evaluation of Alternatives

The mental evaluation of existing alternatives is the third step of the consumer buying process. During this stage the consumer reduces their awareness to a set of smaller brands for serious consideration (Jobber & Ellis-Chadwick, 2020). These brands pass through a screening filter to develop an evoked set which is a set of brands seriously considered by a consumer when choosing to purchase a product. Research has shown that consumers don't use a single evaluation process in every buying situation. The level of complexity in the evaluation process is greatly influenced by a number of factors such as the importance of the product or service considered, the urgency at which the decision must be made and, the cost of making bad decisions (Munthiu, 2009). "A key determinant of the extent to which consumers evaluate a brand is their level of involvement (Jobber & Ellis-Chadwick, 2020). Consumers are much more likely to carry out extensive evaluations when making a high

involvement decision, whereas low involvement decisions are often characterized by quick and simple evaluations.

2.7.4 Purchase

The fourth stage of the consumer buying decision in the purchase, here the consumer decides to purchase a product or service after completing some of or all of the previous steps (Qazzafi, 2019). The purchase decision is generally the favorite brand of the consumer, however there are two major factors that can come between purchase intention and purchase decision, particularly with high involvement decisions. The first being the attitudes of others, for example if someone important to the consumer tells them they should purchase a lower priced product than originally intended, there is a strong chance the intention of buying a more expensive product is greatly reduced (Munthiu, 2009). The second factor is the unexpected situational influences. Up to this point the consumers purchase intention has been made based on elements such as expected product benefit and price, however there are unexpected events that can alter the consumers purchase decision such as a downturn in the economy or a drop in price from a competing member of the consumers evoked set.

2.7.5 Post-purchase Behavior

The final stage of the consumer decision making process is the post-purchase decision. This stage consists of the consumers analysis of the purchase where they decide the extent to which the purchase decision was good or not (Munthiu, 2009). For a consumer to be satisfied with a purchase the product or service must the expectations of the consumer and appease or exceed the perceived performance. If the consumer is satisfied then "the chances of increasing the loyalty of consumer towards the product are at a maximum and if the consumer becomes loyal towards the product, then the chances of retention of the product are at a maximum" (Qazzafi, 2019). The majority of high involvement purchase decisions lead to some post-purchase concerns, this is commonly known as cognitive dissonance (Jobber & Ellis-Chadwick, 2020). As most high involvement purchases require compromise, consumers may become "dissatisfied with the disadvantages of the bought product and they may feel uneasy about the advantages of the brand not selected and purchased" (Munthiu, 2009). A satisfied customer is likely to purchase a product or service

from a brand again as well as being more likely to say positive things about the brand to others.

2.8 Millennials

"Organizations that focus on establishing customer-based brand equity, with an implicit attention to the growing millennial market will undoubtedly secure long-term profits" (David D. Dames et al, 2018). Millennials, also known as generation Y, are those born between 1981 and 1997 and have recently surpassed baby boomers to become the largest generational demographic in the United States roughly spending $600 billion per year. (David D. Dames et al, 2018) have been critical of the lack of success in prior research regarding millennials and their level of brand loyalty. An article published in the Journal of Advertising Research claims that millennials present marketers with a challenge as they are "resistant to traditional marketing efforts and difficult to capture and retain as loyal customers" (A.J. Bush et al, 2004). With the lack of literature highlighting how to best encourage millennials to positively perceive brands, (Lazarevic, 20012) conducted a study with the aim of discovering how existing marketing tools can be used in new ways to influence the brand loyalty of the generation Y consumers. This article interestingly adds that the unique attitude of millennials towards brands results from the majority of the demographic being raised in a time when almost everything is branded, making them more comfortable with brands than previous generations. This research continues to list several marketing tools that help brands connect with and encourage brand loyalty amongst millennials. Arguably the three most prominent tools suggested by the author are celebrity endorsements, loyalty programmes and the development of strong brand-customer relationships. The use of celebrity endorsements has become extremely popular with organizations due to the rapid rise of social media. (Lazarevic, 20012) claims that celebrity endorsements have a high level of influence among millennials as they have "an increased obsession with celebrities and their actions and they are very focused on what celebrities wear and which products they use". Loyalty programmes increase the likelihood of repeat purchase and also retrieve valuable information about consumers and their spending habits. (Gronbach, 2000) states that memberships and loyalty programmes appeal to millennials as the demographic have significant belongingness needs and memberships and brand loyalty programmes can satisfy these. Relationship building is an extremely important factor of

building brand loyalty. More than the generations previous, millennials "want to feel appreciated and singled out by an organization" (Lazarevic, 20012). This statement is supported by research conducted by (Tsiu & Hughes, 2001) which claims that if a millennial consumer "perceives the brand as congruent to their sense of self they are more likely to develop a relationship with the brand".

2.9 Conclusion

It is evident from the above analysis on brand loyalty, millennials and the consumer buying that by creating brand loyalty, companies will benefit from a number of significant advantages. While there has been a difference of opinions on how to best measure brand loyalty throughout the academic history, frameworks that measure both attitudinal and behavioral aspects such as the one used in this study have become widely accepted and agreed upon among researchers. Although there is a substantial amount of literature on brand loyalty, research on the effect brand loyalty has on the consumer buying decision is lacking. Furthermore, there is very little research on the topic of brand loyalty in regard to sportswear. In the following chapter, it is the aim of the researcher to add to the existing literature by presenting insightful data that will encourage further discussion on the subject.

Chapter 3: Research Methodology

3.1 Chapter Introduction

Research is more than just the action of gathering information. It can be defined as finding answers to unanswered questions or establishing questions that do not exist (Goddard & Melville, 2007). The research process is systematic and methodical with the objective being to increase knowledge. (Wilson, 2014) defines this "as a step by step process the involves the collecting, recording, analyzing and interpreting of information". To improve knowledge of a particular topic it is vitally important that researchers construct a clear set of research questions. These questions are the focus point of the research product, (Wilson, 2014) describes them as "the glue that holds the project together". The methodology is the approach taken by the researcher when conducting research. This concerns the theoretical application right up to the collection and analysis of the data (Pandey, 2015).

3.2 Research Aims and Objectives

The primary aim of this study is to interpret and measure the impact brand loyalty has on the consumer buying decision of millennials when purchasing sportswear. Critical to the research is the conceptual framework developed by Moola and Bischoff that has been discussed in the previous chapter. The 12 brand loyalty influences provide the researcher with a solid theoretical structure to follow while conducting this research. It is the aim of the researcher to remain objective while gathering meaningful and pertinent data on the chosen topic.

Building on the assumption that brand loyalty is a fundamental element of brand resonance, the pinnacle of Keller's CBBE model, this study investigates the influence brand loyalty has on millennials when purchasing sportswear. The following research questions which can be seen in the table below have been set to accomplish this aim.

Table 1. Research Objectives.

Research Objective 1	To explore the impact the antecedents of brand loyalty discussed in Chapter 3 have on the consumer buying decision of sportswear.
Research Objective 2	To explore the strategies that sportswear brands use to create loyal customers.
Research Objective 3	To investigate how organisations target specific demographics.
Research Objective 4	To investigate the key factors that cause consumers to switch brands in relation to sportswear products.

3.3 Proposed Research Methodology

This study uses Saunders research 'onion' as a guide to conduct the qualitative research that will be carried out to find the answers to the above research objectives. (Saunders, et al 2007) designed the research onion which can be seen below in Figure 4. This concept consists of an inner, outer, and central layer, highlighting the data collection techniques, analysis procedures and various stages involved in the development of research work. The approach taken when using the research onion model is to start with the outer layer and work step by step towards the inner layer. At the center of the onion is data collection and data analysis while the inner layers consist of various techniques, strategies and research approaches the researcher considers. In comparison, the outer layers of the onion consist of the research phyllophytes and the approaches to theory development. The research philosophy forms the foundation for the research process and defines the method used for the research approach (Saunders, et al 2019). The third step of this research process is to choose a research strategy with the fourth step being to identify a time horizon. The fifth step requires the researcher to decide on what techniques to choose and procedures to follow before collecting and analyzing the data. The research onion is adaptable for almost any form of research and "provides a rather exhausting description of the main layers or stages which are to be accomplished in order to formulate an effective methodology" (Aleksandras Melnikovas, 2018).

Figure 4. Saunders Research Onion. *Source* **(Saunders, Lewis & Thornhill,2019)**
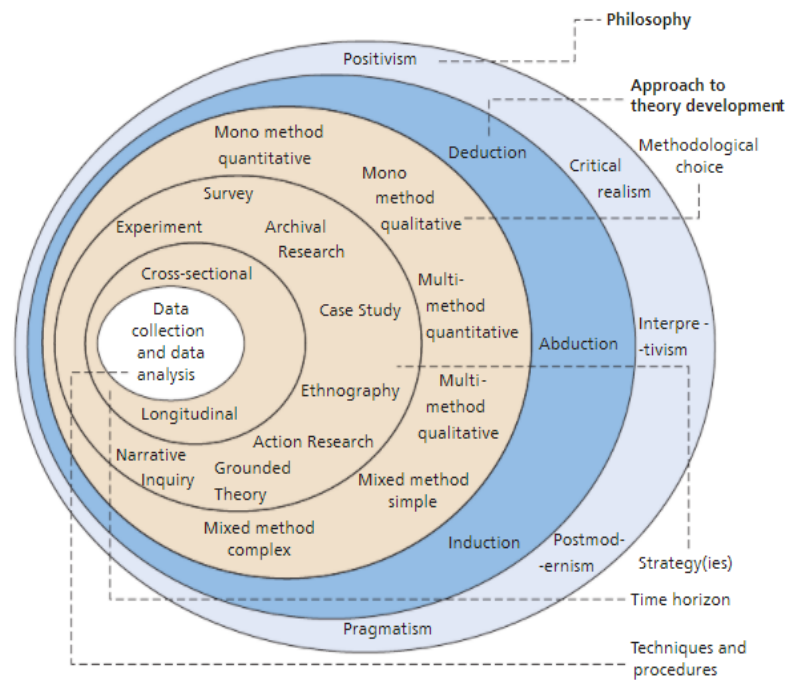
3.4 Research Philosophy

The first layer of Saunders research onion requires the researcher to align the research question with a definitive philosophy. (Wilson, 2014) states that a person's research philosophy is linked to their views on the development of knowledge and this in turn will have an influence on how they carry out research. (Saunders, et al 2019) support this claim by defining the term 'research philosophy' as a "system of beliefs and assumptions about the development of knowledge". Throughout every stage of the research process the researcher will make several assumptions whether they are aware of it or not. As research philosophy is fundamental to how the research process will be approached (Mark Easterly-Smith et al, 2002) propose that there are three reasons why having a solid understanding of research philosophy is important for researchers. Firstly, it will provide the researcher with a clear design. A strong knowledge of philosophy will help the researcher to recognize what design is best suited. Lastly, knowledge of philosophy allows the researcher to adapt the research design to suit different the structure of different subject areas. Saunders states

that there are three primary research assumptions to distinguish research philosophies, axiology, ontology, and epistemology.

3.4.1 Axiology, Ontology and Epistemology Approaches

As this is an exploratory, opened ended study, it is vitally important that the 'what', 'why', and 'how' questions surrounding the research are answered. To ensure this happens, epistemology was chosen as the method. Epistemology refers to "the nature of knowledge, which means how we conceive our surroundings" (Wilson, 2014). While the author considered both axiology and ontology, the decision to go with epistemology was made as it places a heavy emphasis on accurate knowledge as well as assumptions that constitute to acceptable, valid, and legitimate knowledge (Saunders, et al 2019). Another advantage of epistemology is that it provides the researcher with a large selection of methods. Ontology is concerned with "the nature of reality and asks how we perceive the social world" (Wilson, 2014). This method is more abstract the epistemology and as a result is less relevant to this research process (Saunders, Lewis & Thornhill 2019). "Axiology is concerned with the nature of value" and focuses on how the researchers' values have a significant influence on the entire research process (Wilson, 2014). A key concept of the axiology philosophy is that the researcher "must choose to which extent they wish to view the impact of their own values and beliefs on their research as a positive thing" (Saunders, Lewis & Thornhill 2019).

3.4.2 Interpretivist and Positivist Approaches

As epistemological philosophy concerns the question of 'what is' or 'what should be' regarded as acceptable knowledge in each discipline, it can be divided into positivism and interpretivism (Bryman & Bell, 2011). A positivistic approach adopts the stance of the 'natural scientist' where they work with an "observable social reality and that the end product of such research can be law-like generalizations similar to those produced by physical and natural scientists" (Saunders, Lewis & Thornhill 2019). Here researchers believe that only phenomena that can be observed will lead to the generation of credible data (Bryman & Bell, 2011). In contrast to this approach, interpretivism is an epistemology that "advocates that it is necessary for the researcher to understand differences between humans in our role as social actors" (Saunders, Lewis & Thornhill 2019). Here there is a heavy emphasis placed on the act of conducting research among people. Therefore, this

research approach requires a different logic, "one that reflects the distinctiveness of humans as against the natural order" (Bryman & Bell, 2011). Interpretivism is more concerned with variables and factors related to context and the assumption that human beings cannot be explored in a similar way to physical phenomena as they create much further depth in meaning (Alharahsheh & Pius, 2020). Interpretivism upholds that the perceptions of reality are not fully measurable based on quantity intensity or frequency and as a result there are no wrong or right answers to the questions being asked (Lincoln & Denzin, 2008). The research philosophy chosen for this this research process is that of interpretivism as the main objective is to explore the factors that influence brand loyalty among millennials towards sportswear brands. This will be achieved by focusing on people instead of objects and considering differences such as "cultures, circumstances, as well as times leading to development of different social realities" (Alharahsheh & Pius, 2020).

3.5 Research Approach

The term empiricism has two primary meanings in relation to research. The first being to "denote a general approach to the study of reality that suggests that only knowledge gained through experience and the senses is acceptable" (Bryman & Bell, 2011). This generates the belief among researchers that ideas must be firmly tested before they can be classified as knowledge. The second meaning of the term refers to a common belief among researchers that an accumulation of facts is a justifiable goal, this is sometimes known as 'naïve empiricism' (Bryman & Bell, 2011). An alternative way to approach research is to look at the theory as something that happens after the collection and analysis of some or all the data. This relationship between research and theory is segmented into deductive and inductive theory.

3.5.1 Deductive versus Inductive Research

Deductive theory entails "moving from the general to the particular, as in starting from a theory, deriving hypotheses from it, testing those hypotheses, and revising the theory" (Locke, 2007). These hypotheses will consist of concepts that will be translated into researchable entities (Bryman & Bell, 2011). It is the job of the researcher to deduce a hypothesis and transcribe it into operational terms. To test this theory the researcher usually adopts a quantitative, highly structured methodology when collecting and analyzing

the data (Saunders et al 2015). In contrast, inductive research is most associated with qualitative research. An inductive research approach "involves moving from the particular to the general, as when making empirical observations about some phenomenon of interest and forming concepts and theories based on them" (Locke, 2007). There is little or no predetermined theory or structure when taking this approach to analyzing data. Instead, it is the primary data that allows the researcher to determine the structure of the analysis by identifying themes or patterns of meaning within the data (Bryman & Bell, 2011). As this study aims to explore consumers perception of sportwear brands and investigate areas such as brand personality and the emotions brands evoke, as opposed to drawing a hypothesis, an inductive approach is most fitting. A deductive approach is most appropriate when gathering statistical data from samples with the aim of coming to an objective conclusion by proving or disproving a theory (Lin, 1998).

3.6 Research Strategy

A research strategy is simply a general orientation to conduct research and can be split into quantitative and qualitative methods. The obvious differences between these research methods are that quantitative research employs measurement and qualitative research does not. However (Bryman & Bell, 2011) state that "many writers have suggested that the differences are deeper than the superficial issue of the presence or absence of quantification" and continue to say that quantitative and qualitative methods have different epistemological foundations. Qualitative data seeks to determine how people experience and perceive the world around them is usually used in interpretivist research methodology. "Data is explored using descriptive, non-numerical methods and findings are then presented narratively using thick description rather than through numbers" (Laure Perrier, 2020).

3.6.1 Data Collection Method: Semi-Structured Interviews

"The interview is probably the most widely employed method in qualitative research" (Bryman & Bell, 2011). Qualitative interviews can be separated into two different approaches, structured interviews, and semi-structured interviews. It is worth noting that no single interview stands alone, they only hold meaning in terms of other interviews. A semi-structured interview is designed to evoke certain subjective responses from respondents regaining a particular situation or phenomena they have experienced (Morse &

McIntosh, 2015). It follows a relatively detailed interview format and can be used where there is a solid level of knowledge about an experience or phenomenon, but the researcher wants to gain a deeper subjective understanding. This study is on the well-researched area of brand loyalty but seeks to gain a deeper understanding of loyalty towards sportwear brands, semi-structured interviews will help the researcher achieve this. Another reason semi-structured interviews were chosen is that the participants are free to respond to these questions however they wish and from here the researcher can probe these responses to get a deeper understanding of the participants views on the subject (Morse & McIntosh, 2015). This is a unique interview method that creates a great level of flexibility while remaining relevant to the topic and responsive to the participant (K. Bartholomew et al, 2000). The method of study chosen for this research was a mono-method as the researcher aims to give an extremely detailed analysis of the subject by using the research method that is most appropriate to the objectives. State that methods of research must be appropriate to the research question and there is no advantage in collecting more data simply on the basis that more is better (Bryman & Bell, 2011).

3.6.2 Enabling the Semi-Structured Interviews

The researcher carried out the interviews by asking a list of somewhat specific questions known as the 'interview guide'. As it is a semi-structured interview format the interviewee is allowed to answer these questions with a great deal of leeway (Bryman & Bell, 2011). This leads to a relaxed interview which allows the researcher to discover specific themes in a conversational manner. It is important that these questions are open-ended and "formulated to elicit unstructured responses and generate discussion" (Morse & McIntosh, 2015). It is the role of the interviewer to probe the respondent to elaborate on their initial response to the question. 'Such as?' 'In what way?' and 'tell me?' are example of such probes that will generate rich exploratory data. The researcher also included a couple of closed-ended questions as they act as great gateways for open-ended probing. The interview guide formulated for these semi-structured interviews is considerably less specific than that of a structured interview. The guide was created by focusing on three primary sections of research. Firstly, the research focused on the respondents' views and feelings on brand loyalty in relation to sportswear. The second section of the interview guide concentrated on specific categories of the topic while the third section focused question

stems where more complex questions were asked based on the individual response of the interviewee. Once the interview guide was completed an informal pilot study was conducted with a small sample to ensure its cogency (Morse & McIntosh, 2015). This gave the researcher crucial feedback on factors such as the length of time the interviews will roughly take. The pilot study also gave the researcher an idea if the questions were in logical order and eliciting the anticipated answers among other important critiques. It also gave the interviewer the chance to rehearse their own interview performance.

The researcher conducted these one to-one interviews face-to-face with participants allowing for a comprehensive understanding and in-depth data collection. This also allowed the researcher to probe the interviewees to further elaborate on their responses. The locations for the interviews were chosen based on convenience for the interviewee and quietness to avoid disruption. Before the interview started the purpose and format was explained to the interviewee. The interviews lasted between 30-45 minutes and were audio recorded by the researcher for post-interview analysis. To encourage a natural, conversational flow throughout the interviews no notes were taken by the researcher. (Add to Appendix)

3.6.3 Population Sample

In qualitative research "the intent is not to generalize to a population, but to develop an in-depth exploration of a central phenomenon", which is best achieved by using purposeful sampling strategies" (Cresswell, 2004). The researcher considered a wide variety of factors during the sample selection process to secure the most relevant information for this study.

While there is a significant amount of research on the topic of brand loyalty, the research on brand loyalty in relation to sportswear remains sparse to-date. In Ireland there has been very little research carried out on the subject. Furthermore, most of the research that has been carried out on brand loyalty in sportwear has been quantitative measuring larger sample sizes meaning the results have been mostly numerical representation of a larger population. These studies do not provide an in-depth, flexible insight into people's feelings and views on a specific subject (Bergin & Stokes, 2006). In contrast to this a smaller sample size can provide the researcher with richer data and more accurate results as significantly more time can be spent with each interviewee (P. Dolan et al, 2009). As a result of this the

researcher chose to interview six members of the general public in Ireland born between 1981 and 1997 as they fit into the millennial demographic discussed in the previous chapter. The researcher used convince sampling to recruit these participants. Convince sampling, also known as 'accidental sampling' is a form of nonprobability sampling where "members of the target population that meet certain practical criteria, such as easy accessibility, geographical proximity, availability at a given time, or the willingness to participate are included for the purpose of the study" This sampling style was chosen with the current Covid-19 travel restrictions in mind as well as the timeframe of the study (Etikan, 2015). Information on the participants can be found in the table below.

Table 2. Participant Information

Participant 1	Participant 2
Female	Male
Born 1996	Born 1994
Participant 3	Participant 4
Male	Female
Born 1993	Born 1992
Participant 5	Participant 6
Male	Male
Born 2002	Born 1989

3.7 Data Analysis Method: Thematic Qualitative Data Analysis

The analysis of semi-structured interview data is designed to "provide a comprehensive and accurate descriptive summary of participants' perspectives" (Morse & McIntosh, 2015). An interpretivist research approach usually requires the researcher to process the data inductively. Thematic analysis has been used to make sense of collective and shared meanings among the participants, allowing the researcher to establish themes from the data and to cross reference statements and feelings of participants (Bryman & Bell, 2011). The audio tapes were transcribed by the researcher while doing this it is vitally important that the tape is transcribed word for word. Once all interviews have been transcribed the content was sorted and summarized by common characteristics. After this had been completed the began the qualitative content analysis. As each participant answered the same question, the researcher read all responses to the same question and using a standard coding procedure highlighted important words and phrases in the responses (Morse &

McIntosh, 2015). When the researcher has a clear idea of commonalities in the responses the sorting process began. Here the data was sorted based on more detailed characteristics and common themes and was subdivided into smaller categories. All of this information was organized into a table so that the theme discovered could be correlated with the studies research objectives and compared further in relation to the secondary data.

3.8 Ethical Considerations

While conducting this research, the author took the ethical concerns of the participants into consideration. When carrying out research it is of upmost importance that ethical guidelines are followed to ensure the safety of the interviewees. There are various ethical codes of conduct that a researcher can use as a guide when gathering data such as the American Marketing Association's guide which states that researchers must not "knowingly do harm" when collecting data and that following the code of ethics is vital in maintaining research integrity (Polonsky, 2004). Before undertaking the research for this study, the author completed an extensive ethical review which has been developed by the ethics committee at the National College of Ireland. Here the steps taken by the researcher were outlined to ensure the participants of the study were treated ethically throughout the process. The ethical form was filed with the college among completion of the research.

3.9 Limitations to Research

As the sample size for this study is relatively small, consisting of six participants it is feasible to presume that the findings may not be conclusive. A noticeable limitation due to the sample size is that the potential for bias influencing the participants throughout the interview process. With this in mind, the interview questions were carefully designed to limit as much bias and subjectivity as possible. However, it is inevitable that a small amount of the primary data will consist of bias and subjectivity.

The limited timeframe and the current Covid-19 pandemic had a significant impact on the research for this study. Focus groups were considered as a method of research as they provide an abundance of in-depth data from a considerable number of respondents. However, under the current government restrictions this was not possible. If the researcher

had more time, further interviews would have been conducted to get a better representation of the population.

Chapter 4: Findings & Discussion

4.1 Chapter Introduction

In this chapter the findings from six in-depth interviews carried out in July 2021 will be presented. The research objectives discussed in Chapter 3 were utilised to identify the numerous themes which can be seen in Table 4.1. while the methodology was used as a guide to analyse the data. A comprehensive examination of both the major and minor themes relating to each research objective will be used to structure this chapter. These findings will reference the interviews carried out by the researcher and will consist of relevant quotes from each individual interview participant. The researcher will present any parallels between the data collected in this study and the current literature discussed in Chapter 2. Furthermore, this chapter aims to examine new perspectives and explore the gaps in the literature previously discussed in Chapter 1.

Table 3 Emerging Themes from Research Objectives

Research Objectives	Major Themes	Minor Themes
1.To explore the impact the antecedents of brand loyalty discussed in Chapter 3 have on the consumer buying decision of sportswear.	Contrasting views on Individual Brand Loyalty among Participants	Customer Satisfaction
	Brand Performance, Brand Trust and Perceived Value	
2.To explore the strategies that sportswear brands use to create loyal customers.	Social Media	Social Responsibility
	The varying effectiveness of Loyalty Programmes	
3.To investigate how organisations target specific demographics.	Advertising	Community
	Ambassadors & Influencers	
4.To investigate the key factors that cause consumers to switch brands in relation to sportswear products.	Quality	Style
	Price	

4.2 Research Objective 1.

To explore the impact the antecedents of brand loyalty discussed in Chapter 3 have on the consumer buying decision of sportswear.

Interview Themes

- Contrasting views on Individual Brand Loyalty among Participants
- Brand Performance, Brand Trust and Perceived Value
- Customer Satisfaction

The first segment of the interviews analysed the opening research objective. During this section of the interview the participants were encouraged to talk about their perception of brand loyalty and to discuss in depth, their opinion on what factors influence brand loyalty when purchasing sportswear. Focusing on these topics allowed the researcher to investigate the antecedents of brand loyalty from the conceptual framework developed by Moola and Bischoff discussed in Chapter 3. It was the aim of the researcher to discover to what extent, if any, each of the antecedents have on the participants decision when purchasing sportswear.

4.2.1 Contrasting views on Individual Brand Loyalty among Participants

A recurring theme that emerged from the opening section of the interview was that all participants had a similar view on what they believed a brand loyal customer to be. The general belief among the participants was that a brand loyal customer is someone that actively seeks the products of a favoured brand and would choose this brand over similar brands despite factors such as increased price and inconvenience. This is consistent with the literature in Chapter 2 which looked at the early research into brand loyalty by Melvin T. Copeland, where he simply defined repeat purchase of a favoured brand as customer insistence. One participant described a brand loyal customer as:

"Someone that loves a specific brand and tends to go to that brand instead of competing brands when purchasing a product even if it is more expensive." (Interviewee 1, Female)

Another participant expressed her personal opinion on what they believed a brand loyal customer to be. This participant gave a similar answer, however stated that a brand loyal

customer is someone that prefers a list of brands from the same product category. This answer differed from the rest given by the participants as the other five answers claimed that a brand loyal customer is loyal to a particular brand from a product category:

"Somebody that prefers a particular brand or has a list of brands that they will choose over other brands that sell similar products and would go out of their way to buy this brand." (Interviewee 4, Female)

The consistency among the answers of the participants continued as each one stated that they have one or more favourite sportswear brands that would be their go to brands when purchasing new sportswear products. However, when questioned whether they believed they were a brand loyal customer themselves the answers from the participants began to differ. While each participant disclosed that they have a preferred sportswear brand or brands, there was a difference of opinion as of to whether this made them a brand loyal customer or not. Two interviewees said that they purchase from the brand they claimed to be loyal to simply as a result of habit:

"I would say probably Nike, I think the quality is good, but it is probably not much better than a lot of other brands. As I said I am used to Adidas and Nike and wear them the most." (Interviewee 6, Male)

 As discussed in section 2.5 of this study, the majority of early research measured the behavioural aspects of brand loyalty. Similarly, to the beliefs of the two participants mentioned above, scholars measured consumer brand loyalty based on concepts such as repeat purchase. This one-dimensional style of measurement came under criticism as the research on brand loyalty continued to evolve and gain considerable attention. As mentioned in Chapter 2, brand loyalty literature began to focus on the cognitive aspects. (Lindestad, 1998) claimed "loyalty measurement should include customers attitudes rather than repeated purchase behavioral pattern only". The remaining four interviewees supported the findings from this research as they believed themselves to be brand loyal due to attitudinal factors such as preferred style and image. One participant declared himself as a brand loyal customer to the sportswear brands Adidas and Nike, primarily based on the quality of products:

"I would say I am loyal to specific Sportswear brands as there are a couple of brands that I would always look for first. Adidas and Nike are the two brands that I find most trustworthy. I think that their products are made to a high standard" (Interviewee 3, Male)

4.2.2 Brand Performance, Brand Trust and Perceived Value

From examining the six interviews it was evident that the 12 antecedents from the Moola and Bischoff brand loyalty framework had an influence on the participants buying decision of sportswear products. However, it was apparent that some of these antecedents played a more significant role than others. In particular, Brand Performance, Brand Trust and Perceived Value were recurring themes among all six interviews.

"It has to be a good fit and be suitable for the activity I buy it for. I buy a lot of Nike Sportswear for the gym and for training, so it is important to me that it is good quality, that it is tough and washes well. I think price is also important, but you get what you pay for, so it is usually worth spending a bit more on good quality products." (Interviewee 5, Male)

Brand Performance was especially important to participants that purchased a lot of sportswear for physical activity. Those who placed a high value in brand performance were consequently willing to pay more for sportswear products they believed to deliver on this performance aspect:

"I like a particular fit with my sportswear, especially the sportswear I wear when I go to the gym such as leggings and gym tops. The main reason I wear usually wear Nike and Adidas is because I love the fit of their clothes. I think it's really important that sportwear is comfortable as you wear it while exercising." (Interviewee 1, Female)

Another participant had a similar view in relation to the performance and price of sportswear products. He suggested that there is a correlation between the performance and perceived value of sportswear with products of a higher value being of better quality which was a theme that ran through most of the interviews:

"I play soccer so I would choose brands that make good quality products that I believe will help my game and last a good while. I know I could get boots for a quarter of the price, but they

will not do the same job and will end up having a negative impact on my performance or lead to injury because the quality is not the same." (Interviewee 3, Male)

The primary data gathered from the interviews draws parallels with secondary research. (Burrman et al, 2009) stated that brand performance "is the subjective evaluation of the core product, comprising of both intrinsic and extrinsic characteristics" It is evident from the above participants comments that the inherent and external attributes they associate with their preferred sportswear brand influences their opinion on brand performance of the brand. As all participants mentioned at least one aspect of brand performance when explaining why they prefer a particular brand, it is evident that performance has a major influence on brand loyalty. However, the literature fails to acknowledge the link between brand performance and price. Four of the six participants brought up price when discussing the performance of sportswear products. Each of these participants noted that brands that produce high performing products are generally more expensive. All four of the participants went onto say that they are willing to pay more for a higher performing product. While the primary research supports the literature from Chapter 2, the data also suggested that there is a deep-rooted link between brand performance and price:

"I will spend around €200 on a pair of football boots if I know they are good quality and will give me my money's worth." (Interviewee 2, Male)

"I would pick Nike. I really like the style of a lot of their clothes and the fit. Although there are cheaper alternatives, I feel like I will always think of Nike first when buying new sportswear." (Interviewee 1, Female)

Brand Trust was a salient factor among participants and played a vital role in creating a sense of brand loyalty towards each individual's preferred sportswear brand. A consistent theme among the six the participants is that the trust in a particular sportswear brand comes from the aforementioned factors, brand performance and perceived value as well repeat purchase and Relationship Proneness, two other antecedents from the brand loyalty model. All of the participants stated that the behavioural aspects of repeatedly purchasing products from a

specific brand created a resistance to change and made them more likely to buy from a brand they have built a relationship with:

"I've being wearing Adidas for as long as I can remember and always feel like I get good value for money from their stuff even if it is more expensive than a lot of other brands." (Interviewee 4, Female)

Another participant supported this opinion by stating that he repeatedly purchases from a sportswear brand he originally switched to due to superior quality:

"I play a lot of football and hurling and for the past six/seven years I have bought Adidas boots because they are great quality and last for ages." (Interviewee 2, Male)

In section 2.6.3 the secondary research findings state that marketers build brand trust by creating a feeling of reliability, safety, and honesty amongst a brand through the consumers direct experiences with the brand which supports the findings of the primary research. The secondary research continues to declare that this feeling of brand trust develops into a relationship between consumer and brand that creates a strong sense of brand loyalty which in turn encourages repeat purchase and relationship proneness:

"Yeah, I think the brands I mentioned, specifically Nike and Adidas are trustworthy because they are the brands, I grew up wearing most of the time." (Interviewee 6, Male)

4.2.3 Customer Satisfaction

As the interviews progressed the participants discussed the sense of satisfaction that they feel when purchasing sportswear. While each participant stated that they do get a sense of satisfaction when purchasing sportswear products, the levels of satisfaction differed among the participants. The interviewees that received the most satisfaction from purchasing sportswear where those that bought products primarily for performance purposes:

"Yes, I would definitely get a sense of satisfaction. Just say when I buy a good pair of football boots that will last a season and help me perform on the pitch while being comfortable at the same time". (Interviewee 3, Male)

Interestingly, another participant relates the sense of satisfaction he feels when purchasing sportswear directly to his performance in the gym but also to his overall health and fitness:

"When I buy a Sportswear product, I know that I will wear it in the gym or while running so there is also a sense of satisfaction that comes from that as it is like an investment in yourself." (Interviewee 5, Male)

This is consistent with the secondary findings from the literature where (Kotler P. , 2000) defines customer satisfaction as "a person's feeling of pleasure or disappointment resulting from comparing a product's perceived performance in relation to his or her expectations". As the participants that purchase sportswear products for performance purposes are analyzing the product much more than those who are not, there is a greater sense of satisfaction when they purchase a product. To further support this finding below is the statement made by another participant that wears sportswear more casually and seeks style and comfort primarily. This participant still got a sense of satisfaction when purchasing sportswear, but to a lesser extent than participants who did so for performance purposes:

Yeah, I do a bit. The same with if you bought a new top and shorts if you were going on holidays. In general, I think buying new sportswear is satisfying because I like buying new clothes, especially runners." (Interviewee 6, Male)

4.3 Research Objective 2

To explore the strategies that sportswear brands use to create loyal customers.

Interview Themes

- Social Media
- The varying effectiveness of Loyalty Programmes
- Social Responsibility

4.3.1 Social Media

As the interviews further progressed it was the aim of the researcher to discover the most effective strategies sportswear brands use to create loyal customers. It became evident that social media was an approach taken by sportswear brands to attract and retain customers. Each of the six participants followed at least two sportswear brands on social media with the majority following several brands. While each participant followed the brand or brands, they stated they were loyal to, many of them followed other brands they liked and occasionally bought from. One of the primary reason's participants follow their preferred brands on social media is to keep up to date with the latest products:

"I follow Nike, Adidas, Under Armour and Gym Shark. Firstly, I like the products of these brands so that would be the main reason". (Interviewee 1, Female)

It became evident to the researcher that as most participants used social media to keep up to date with the latest sportswear products this consequently led to them stating that they also used social media to keep an eye on any sales that these brands had. Section 2.7.2 discusses the information search consumers go through when seeking new products. (Jobber & Ellis-Chadwick, 2020) describe this search as "the identification of alternative ways of problem solution" where consumers search both internally and externally for a potentioal solution. The literature states that a key external search method today is social media which is eviednetly supported from the primary findings from this research. Once the participants had followed a brand online the brands were then using sales as a strategy to encourage first time or repeat purchase:

"I follow Adidas, Nike, New Balance, Puma, Umbro, Brooks, O'Neills and there is a few more I cannot remember. I started following them because I like their clothes. Now I see their new products and sometimes they have interesting ads or sales." (Interviewee 2, Male)

Adidas, Nike Puma, New Balance, Gym Shark and Gym+Coffee that I can think of. It is a great way to see new stuff they have out and when they have sales on." (Interviewee 4, Female)

Four of the six participants stated that they follow certain sportswear brands due to the content they create. After further research it became evident that certain sportswear brands use content marketing strategies to effectively create loyal customers. This content

was primarily focused on sports performance in the form of workout routines, nutritional tips, and motivational content:

"I also like the content that these brands create, a lot of it is beneficial like gym tips and workout ideas especially with Nike. Some of the content these brands make is really high level and engaging and often relates to current affairs." (Interviewee 1, Female)

"I listen to Nike podcasts and follow their social medias and they help a lot of people all over the world improve themselves, I think that is very important. They provide workouts, nutritional videos and help people of all ages and fitness levels succeed." (Interviewee 5, Male)

4.3.2 The varying effectiveness of Loyalty Programmes

Loyalty programmes are widely used by sportswear brands to create attract and retain customers. This research investigates the impact of such loyalty programmes on the six participants. Each participant claimed that loyalty programmes influence their decision when purchasing sportswear, with certain participants being more influenced than others:

"I tend to buy a lot from Nike's website, particularly for runners. Because of this I get good discounts and would tend to buy from them again." (Interviewee 6, Male)

While the above participant frequently uses the loyalty programme offered by Nike, the brand he stated he is most loyal to, the participant below who also said Nike is her preferred brand doesn't avail of the same loyalty programme. A possible conclusion for this is the altering factors that affect the two participants decision when purchasing sportswear. Interviewee 6 stated that quality and price are the most important factors when buying sportswear and as he frequently buys from Nike he approves of the quality. Interviewee 1 on the other hand listed fit and comfort as the most important factor when purchasing sportswear. As a result, seeing the physical product and trying it on could be of more importance to this participant:

"I like a particular fit with my sportswear, especially the sportswear I wear when I go to the gym such as leggings and gym tops. The main reason I usually wear Nike and Adidas is because I love the fit of their clothes. I think it's really important that sportwear is comfortable as you wear it while exercising. I also wear some sportswear casually for

comfort like tracksuits so it's really important that they are comfortable." (Interviewee 1, Female).

The secondary research findings highlight the increasing importance of loyalty programmes. As discussed in section 2.8 (Lazarevic, 2012) carried out in depth research on millennials and found loyalty programmes along with celebrity influencers and the forementioned social media channels as the most effective methods of creating brand loyal customers. The research of Lazarevic and the primary data from this study had similar results. Each of the six participants stated that loyalty programmes influence their buying decision, with five of the six saying that they have purchased from a sportswear brand as a direct result of a loyalty programme. The research conducted by Lazarevic found that loyalty programmes "increase the likelihood of repeat purchase and appeal to millennials as the demographic have significant belongingness needs and memberships and brand loyalty programmes can satisfy these." While the primary data from this study supported the findings from Lazerevic regarding the repeat purchase associated with loyalty programmes, there was little evidence to support the second theory of a need for belongingness among millennals. Further research on this topic by the researcher found that there was gaps in the literature.

4.3.3 Social Responsibility

A subsequent minor theme emerging from this section of the interview was the influence that the social responsibility of sportswear brands had on the participants. Similar to the effectiveness of brand loyalty programmes, the participants had altering views on the importance of social responsibility for companies. Interestingly, the secondary research findings suggest that values, attitudes, and behaviours of consumers are influenced by culture with some cultures having a stronger impact on consumer behaviour than others. A prominent study conducted by (Hofstede, 1980) found that cultural characteristics can be split into four categories with individualism being the most prominent. Consumers aim to align their own individual beliefs with the brands they buy from. The varying individual beliefs of the interviewees led to a difference of opinion regarding the social responsibility of sportswear companies. While all participants agreed that social responsibility is something every brand should strive for, the level of impact it had on the consumer buying decision varied among participants. One interviewee felt very strongly about the subject:

"It is very important to me; I would pay extra for a brand that is socially responsible and would avoid a brand if I knew they were not." (Interviewee 4, Female)

Another participant who also said that the social responsibility of sportwear brands is important to him explained how he bought a jersey from a sports team he did not support in order to back a green initiative.:

 "A few years ago, Adidas brought out a jersey made of 100% recyclable material which I thought was a great idea. I bought the jersey, but I cannot remember the team" (Interviewee 2, Male)

Other participants did not feel as strongly about the social responsibility of sportswear brands and believed that in the current times it would be unlikely for these brands to get away with a major social scandal such as child labour:

"Without trying to sound bad I am personally about price and quality and would not give the brands socially responsible too much thought if I am being honest. In saying that if there was a company behaving in a bad way, for example using sweatshops or child labour, I would say hang on a minute and would stop buying from them, but it is not something I actively look for." (Interviewee 6, Male)

While it is becoming increasingly important that brands are socially responsible there was little evidence from the interview data to suggest that it creates brand loyal customers. However, 3 of the 6 participants claimed that if a brand was found to be socially unresponsible they would no longer buy products from that brand. One of the interviewees mentioned a major sportswear brand that was found to be using unethical manufacturing a number of years ago as an example:

"I know there was a lot of controversy a few years ago with the clothing industry and that Nike were exposed for having sweatshops in underdeveloped countries. There are no excuses that make that acceptable and I think that all the big sportwear brands are more than capable of making their products ethically". (Interviewee 1, Female)

4.4 Research Objective 3

To investigate how organisations target specific demographics.

Interview Themes

- Advertising
- Ambassadors & Influencers
- Community

4.4.1 Advertising

Throughout the next section of the interview, it was the aim of the researcher to discover in detail how sportswear organisations target specific demographics. When questioned on this topic, all six participants agreed that sportswear brands strategically target specific demographics. One participant went into detail on how she believes that many of these organisations produce certain products that are aimed at different specific demographics:

"Yes, I think they do, certain brands target specific groups with certain products. I think that nowadays all brands target gym goers and people into exercise because it's such a big market. I think that brands like Nike, Adidas, Under Armour really target this group with a lot of their clothes which is obvious with the style of the clothes and how they are advertised. They use a lot of sporty ads with athletes and people working out." (Interviewee 4, Female)

Another interviewee gave a more sport specific answer as he talked about sportswear brands using athletes to target younger people that play the sport:

"I do think that they do. Like I said with the football boots earlier, Sportswear companies use football players to target a young audience with an interest in the sport." (Interviewee 2, Male)

Most of the participants commented that they found social media to be the most appealing method of advertising used by sportswear brands. A recurring factor behind this was that adverts on social media were specifically targeted at each individual which made the content more engaging and relatable. As a result of this, four of the six participants said that they have positive experiences with these adverts and will regularly engage with them:

"I like to see adverts on social media, particularly Instagram and Facebook as they have ads tailored to me and usually show me clothes that I like. A lot of the time this sportswear is on sale so I like to see these posts as I probably would not know about the sale otherwise." (Interviewee 4, Female)

This is consistent with the findings in Chapter 2, (A.J. Bush et al, 2004) claim that millennials present marketers with a difficult challenge that they have never faced before as they are "resistant to traditional marketing efforts and difficult to capture and retain as loyal customers". Further research from the secondary findings state that millennials have a unique attitude towards brands as they are the first generation to grow up in a time when almost everything is branded, making them more comfortable with brands and advertising (Lazarevic, 2012). This has led to companies placing a heavy emphasis on modern advertising tools such as social media and celebrity influencers. The primary data from this research supports the literature as five of the six participants declared that they prefer to see sportswear advertisements online via social media. A gap in the literature highlights the fact that companies are still unsure of the most effective methods to employ in order to encourage millennials to positively perceive their brands online. Although more extensive research is required, it can be suggested from the primary data that providing millennials with informative, engaging content is an effective approach to take in order to achieve this. Four of the six interviewees mentioned useful, informative as a reason for following a specific sportswear brand online:

"I also like the content that these brands create, a lot of it is beneficial like gym tips and workout ideas especially with Nike." (Interviewee 1, Female)

As the majority of participants said that social media was the most appealing and engaging channel to experience adverts from sportswear brands, the researcher then asked the interviewees if they have ever purchased a sportswear product from a social media advert. Four of the six said that they have done so on more than one occasion. Three of the participants said that they usually do so when these social media adverts consist of products on sale.

"Yes, I have a couple of times, mainly when the post is advertising a sale, I have bought from Nike a couple of times, and I bought a gym top from Under Armour recently. I have also bought from Lifestyle and JD Sports posts once or twice when they have had sales on." (Interviewee 1, Female)

"I have done a few times, I have bought gym clothes from Adidas a few times, usually when there is a sale on their website." (Interviewee 4, Female)

4.4.2 Ambassadors & Influencers

Another emerging trend that arose from the interviews is the difference in opinion on the effectiveness of brand ambassadors and influencers. One participant claimed that the use of ambassadors and influencers has a negative effect of her perception of sportswear brands, noting the lack of sincerity as the reason for this.

"I do not follow many influencers on social media because I do not like the way they are constantly trying to sell you products." (Interviewee 1, Female)

A different interviewee had a dissimilar point of view on the topic as he stated he frequently purchased sportswear products promoted by ambassadors and influencers.

"Yes, I bought a Michael Jordan jumper recently that I saw an ad for JD Sports with the rapper AJ Tracey. I also follow Steve Cook, the body builder and fitness influencer. He has recently gotten me into Gym Shark gear. I am still to buy from them, but I will soon I would say." (Interviewee 5, Male)

While the opinion on brand ambassadors and influencers differed among the participants, there was a consensus among the sport playing interviewees that famous athletes influenced their sportswear purchasing decision at some point. However, there was also an agreement that this influence was much stronger when the interviewees were of a younger age.

"Yes, I would say Messi when I was younger. I would buy the predator boots from Adidas because he was my favourite player, and they were the boots he wore at the time. That was probably about ten years ago at this stage. (Interviewee 2, Male)

"When I was younger and playing football, I was heavily influenced by football players. I would buy Adidas boots because I loved David Beckham and Messi. I think I still am influenced a bit but not as much as I was when I was a teenager." (Interviewee 6, Male)

The primary findings from this study somewhat contradict the literature. As can be seen in section 2.8, (Lazarevic, 2012) lists celebrity endorsements as one of the most effective methods for developing a strong brand-customer relationship among millennials and encouraging brand loyalty. This secondary research claims that celebrity endorsements have a high level of influence among millennials as they have "an increased obsession with celebrities and their actions and they are very focused on what celebrities wear and which products they use" (Lazarevic, 2012). However, the primary data suggested that the influence of celebrity endorsements was not as effective as the research results from secondary data found them to be. As the research from the literature is from 2012 it might imply that the influence of celebrity endorsements is fading and that millennials believe many of these endorsements to be insincere as can be suggested by two of the participants responses. This is an area that the literature fails to acknowledge needs to be further researched to be understood:

"At this stage there are so many influencers plugging everything and anything its overwhelming and its obvious they are just doing it for the money." (Interviewee 4, Female)

4.4.3 Community

In the next section of the interview the participants were asked if there are any sportswear brands that makes them feel like they are part of a group or community. Again, there was mixed responses, those that played sport or followed a specific sports team were more inclined to feel like they belonged to a specific group or community.

"O'Neills I would say because it is the jersey I wear when I am playing football and hurling. So, I would have a good bit of O'Neills gear for GAA, but I would not ever buy it outside of my GAA teams." (Interviewee 2, Male)

"I would say Liverpool gear that is made by Nike, you feel part of a community, particularly when you go to a game." (Interviewee 4, Male)

Interestingly the participants that stated that sportswear brands do not make them feel like a part of specific group or community declared that they do not feel this way as they do not play or support any sports team. While the interviews had different answers to the question the logic behind each answer was the same.

"Not that I can think of to be honest, I do not play any sports or follow any sports teams really." (Interviewee 4, Female)

4.5 Research Objective 4

To investigate the key factors that cause consumers to switch brands in relation to sportswear products.

Interview Themes

- Quality
- Price
- Style

4.5.1 Quality

The final segment of the interview explores the key factors that influence consumers to switch from their favoured brands when purchasing sportswear. Quality, price, and style were the dominant factors across the six interviews. Of these three factors, quality was of most importance and was the element that most participants mentioned first. This is consistent with the literature, in section 2.3 of Chapter 2, Keller's CBBE pyramid is discussed. Here (Aaker, 1996) pinpoints the five key categories of brand equity and lists quality as one of these crucial categories. (Keller V. S., 2020) supports this belief by stating the "power of a brand lies in what customers have learned, felt, seen, and heard about the brand which can be seen in section 2.3. Furthermore, the majority of participants stated that they have switched from a sportswear brand they at one point frequently purchased due to a negative experience with quality.

"I used to buy a lot of Nike when I was younger, mainly football boots, t-shirts, and jerseys but I found that after a while the quality was not as good as Adidas. For example, the boots would not last as long, and the jerseys would get stretched easily." (Interviewee 2, Male)

"I went through a phase where I bought a lot of Ellesse clothes for a while. But after a while, I would say less than a year most of the clothes were too small or faded when I washed them, I also found the leggings to be a bit tight and not practical for the gym despite being my size. So, I stopped buying their products." (Interviewee 4, Female)

While most participates pointed out that the poor-quality products influenced them to buy from a rival sportswear brand, almost all of them also stated that they would be willing to pay more for a high-quality product. There was also a consensus among most participants that products of a higher quality are more expensive.

"Quality is really important and its why I would pay extra for a good brand because you know the product is good and will last a while." (Interviewee 4, Female)

4.5.2 Price

During each of the six interviews, price repeatedly emerged as a highly influential factor. All of the participants mentioned that price had a direct impact on their purchasing decision. Four of the six interviewees stated that they believed there is a correlation between the price of sportswear and the quality/performance. When questioned about the decisive factors that led them to switching to an alternative sportwear brand, price again emerged as a fundamental motivation. Five of the six participants said that price has been a key factor that has led to them purchasing a product from an alternative sportswear brand. Interestingly when discussing this, each interviewee brought up another brand or list of brands that they liked or were familiar with. This suggests that while price can heavily influence the buying decision, the alternative sportswear brand that consumers choose is from their evoked set:

"I still think of Nike and Adidas as being the best. I would be willing to pay more for these brands but if another brand like Puma or Reebok had a product that I was looking for on sale I would probably buy it." (Interviewee 1, Female)

"I have a list of brands that I like. Adidas is my favorite, but I would easily switch to Nike or Under Armour if I could not get an Adidas product or if I likes the others product more or if it were a lot cheaper." (Interviewee 2, Male)

In section 2.7.4 of this study, research on the topic of purchase intention is discussed. This research, conducted by (Munthiu, 2009) focuses on the elements that influence the purchase intention of consumers with price being noted as a major factor. Similarly to the results from the primary data, results from this study found that a significant difference in price between two similar products from competing brands can "alter the consumers purchase decision" and lead to a purchase from a competeting member of the consumers evoked set.

4.5.3 Style

A final emerging theme from the interviews is the connection some of the participants made with style. Five of the interviewees declared that they stopped purchasing products from a sportwear brand they at one point frequently bought from as a direct result of style. Two of the participants said that they purchased products from a particular brand for a period of time as the brand was fashionable. Both interviewees went onto add that they no longer buy from these brands as they believe they no longer find the style appealing or fashionable:

"I used to buy from Under Armour a bit, but I think they fell out of fashion a bit and I do not think their style and quality are as good as Nike. The price is fairly similar, so I do not buy from Under Armour anymore." (Interviewee 5, Male)

"I went through a phase of wearing a lot of Ellesse sportswear when it was really fashionable a few years ago but found the quality was not the best and I did not get much wear out of what I bought so I stopped buying it. People don't seem to wear it as much anymore, it seemed to be a bit of a phase." (Interviewee 4, Female)

Some of the participants stated that they would be more susceptible to purchasing a particular style of sportwear if it was a style their peers approved of. Four of the six interviewees said that the opinion of their peers influences their buying decision. When discussing this topic an interesting detail to note is that each of these four participants stated

that they believe this is something that should not influence their buying decision but ultimately does:

"I would like to say no but in reality, I probably would. I tend to go shopping with my friends a lot and we would always shop together and talk about the clothes we are buying looking for each other's opinion." (Interviewee 4, Female)

"Yeah, I probably would to be honest. Nowhere near as much as when I was younger and trying really hard to fit in, but it is still a factor to an extent. I cannot really say why, I like to have clothes my friends and that think are nice, I think it is just human nature. (Interviewee 6, Male)

4.6 Study Limitations

While the primary findings from this study predominantly produced consistent similarities between the existing literature and the interviewees responses, it must be noted that the data might not be totally conclusive due to the qualitative method chosen for the research approach coupled with the time constrains. A longer time period for the study would have given the researcher the opportunity to analyze a greater cohort of individuals which would have resulted in a further comprehensive statistical report. The primary research approach of in-depth interviews and the inductive approach relied on the expectation of knowledge of the individuals taking part in this study. This is particularly true when exploring the antecedents of brand loyalty and the strategies that tools used by companies to create brand loyal customers. Another limiting factor noted by the researcher is the potential for bias among the participants that could potentially lead misrepresentation of results. Likewise, it was of equal importance that the researcher removed any personal opinion and bias while conducting the interviews and did not allow bias to guide the interviewee's responses. Nevertheless, it is the belief of the researcher that the sample size for this study was sufficient, and by examining the data it was the aim of the author to add to the limited research on brand loyalty in sportswear and to inspire further research on the topic.

Chapter 5: Conclusion and Recommendations

5.1 Conclusion to the study

This research aimed to explore the impact of brand loyalty on the consumer buying decision of millennials in the Irish sportswear market. The researcher reviewed the present literature and its limitations and set the primary objective to investigate how the participants in this study are influenced by factors of brand loyalty towards sportswear brands. From discovering gaps in the literature, it was the aim of the author to investigate the gaps that required further examination. As a result, the research objectives and subsequent themes that developed from these objectives, focused on collecting conclusive data to underpin the purpose of the research question.

The qualitative and inductive method of the primary research in this study gave the author an in-depth understanding of brand loyalty and the influential role it plays in the consumer buying decision of millennials regarding sportswear. This was achieved by exploring the unique perceptions and experiences of the individuals interviewed and by examining their own brand loyalty beliefs and habits. The data collected in this study signals a lack of understanding from sportswear companies of how best to promote their brands to millennials. Two other key areas that generated compelling data that was inconsistent with the limited current literature were the topics of celebrity endorsements and brand performance. The gaps identified in Chapter 1 are supported by the primary data obtained in this study and worthy of further extensive academic research.

Following the examination of the current literature it became clear to the researcher that there are many flawed studies on the topic of brand loyalty in sportswear. Many of these studies do not implement a brand loyalty model and overstate the significance of the resulting data. Another failing of many of these studies is that they do not take generational cohort into consideration when conducting research. There has been a great deal of research conducted on the topic of generational research with many academic authors believing that "every new generation, whether influenced by the environment, peers or self-developed, has unique characteristics that are substantially different than previous generations" (Liz Thach etal, 2020). The author chose to examine millennials for this

particular study as have recently surpassed baby boomers to become the largest generational demographic and are subsequently of great interest to marketers. Based on the analysis of primary data, it is evident that the millennial interviewees have credible understanding of brand loyalty and are of the belief they are loyal to specific sportswear brands. This made their perspective on the subject particularly interesting and of value to existing research.

A significant aspect recognised by the interviewees more so than in the current literature is affect that brand performance has on brand loyalty towards sportswear brands. In the brand loyalty model examined in Chapter 2, Moola & Bischoff discuss brand performance as the evaluation of the core product of the brand as opposed to the more commonly studied brand performance relating to a brands business and marketing goals. As a result, there is considerably less literature on the topic. (Moola & Bischoff, 2014) state that "performance of a product or service is directly linked to post purchase satisfaction which encourages brand loyalty". During the course of the interview the participants discussed the importance of quality of sportswear, however this was predominantly done so as one would discuss the quality of any clothing item. When talking about the performance of sportswear products the interviewees emphasized factors such as durability, flexibility, and tear resistance with the belief that this has a direct impact of their performance playing sports and in the gym. Subsequently there was a consensus among the participants that these are extremely important sportswear characteristics and worth paying extra for. In some cases, the interviewees that play sport regularly were willing to pay more than double the price of competing brands for a sportswear product they believe to be of high performance. This is a topic that has had little research and is worthy of investigation.

On the subject of social media, the evidence from this study suggests that social media is an extremely effective tool for creating brand loyal customers as well as attracting new customers. Today social media has become a hugely effective and efficient marketing tool for companies all over the world in every industry. This is an area that has received considerable research regarding sportswear companies, with brands such as Nike, Under Armour and Adidas being the subject of many academic articles due to successful social media campaigns. The majority of these campaigns consist of emotional adverts designed to motivate and evoke a reaction from social media followers. However, while the primary

data from this study suggests that these adverts are effective, most of the participants mentioned informative, helpful content as a reason for frequently engaging with the social media pages of sportswear brands. Most interviewees mentioned content such as nutritional tips and home workout routines as reasons for following sportswear brands on social media. This contemporary form of marketing known as 'content marketing' is becoming increasingly popular and according to (Pulizzi, 2017) has many long-term benefits such as "building brand loyalty by engaging with the target audience with valuable content without employing promotional techniques."

There were dividing opinions among the participants on the subject of celebrity endorsements regarding sportswear brands. The rapid rise of social media has resulted in a vast number of brands across many industries utilizing celebrities in order to promote their products and brands. There is an extensive amount of literature on this topic that highlight the positive effects that celebrity endorsements have on brands such as "more favorable advertisement ratings and product evaluations and a substantial positive impact on financial returns for the companies that use them" (Biswas, 2001). The majority of the literature on celebrity endorsements is congruous when discussing the effectiveness of the marketing strategy. (Atkin & Block, 1983) state that "consumers tend to believe that major stars are motivated by genuine affection for the product rather than by endorsement fees." While there are still many brands using celebrity endorsements for the advantages the strategy brings, the primary data in this study resulted in mixed reviews from participants. There is an increasing amount of more recent literature that supports the views of the interviewees that feel celebrity endorsements have a negative impact on sportswear brands. A recent academic study found that celebrity endorsements can "create possible damage to the image and credibility of a brand, particularly when the celebrity image is not congruent with the brand image" (Fei Zhou et al, 2021). While there is significance evidence that the use of celebrity endorsements is effective in attracting and creating brand loyalty there is research to suggest that the opinion of the consumer on this topic is beginning to change which is supported by the findings of this study. There is a noticeable gap in the literature that is worthy of further study, particularly for an industry that uses a lot of celebrity endorsements such as the sportswear industry.

5.2 Recommendations for Future Research

The current study has identified and discussed several topics where further research is justified. The author feels the study has been successful as the conclusion of the study has added to the qualitative data on brand loyalty in sportswear. However, it has only touched on a number of complex subjects that call for more extensive investigation. Given the lack of resources and time available, the researcher was unable to carry out a mixed method study which would have involved both quantitative and qualitative research methods. Future research should look to correct this in order to acquire a greater representation of the population and discover complex data. Due to the constrains of this study the research involved individuals from the one geographical location. It is the recommendation of the author for future research to include a greater number of participants from various geographical locations.

5.2.1 Recommendations for Practitioners

The primary function of this study was to investigate the impact of brand loyalty on the consumer buying decision of millennials in relation to sportswear. Based on the research results, it can be concluded that brand loyalty has an influence on the buying decision of sportswear among millennials. As such this study can decisively state that there are significant factors and strategies that influence brand loyalty. However, despite the various recommendations which may be made for further research on the subject of brand loyalty, this study, independently cannot yet provide practitioners with definite recommendations.

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Appendix 1: Informed Consent Sheet

INFORMED CONSENT SHEET

I hereby agree to give my consent for my responses to interview questions to be used and quoted anonymously in this student project at the National College of Ireland.

Interviewer

Name _____ Year _____

Module _____ Programme _____

Interviewee

Print Name _____

Signature _____

Date _____

MSc Marketing

Appendix 2: Interview Guide

How would you describe a brand loyal customer? Do you feel you are a loyal customer to specific sportswear brand or brands?

What are the main influences that effect your decision when purchasing sportswear?

Do you have a brand or list of brands you believe to be more trustworthy? What brands? Why?

When purchasing sportswear products from your preferred sportswear brand do you get a sense of satisfaction? If so, what creates this sense of satisfaction?

Can you explain why said brand is your favourite sportswear brand and why you believe it is better than competitors? What qualities attract you to this brand?

Can you tell me about a sportswear brand you used to purchase products from more frequently and why you now do so less often or not at all?

Are there any sportswear brands that make you feel like you are part of a community or specific group? If so, why?

Is there a specific method of advertising used by your preferred sportswear brand that you find to be the most appealing or engaging? If so what channels?

On average, how many times a week would you see advertisements from your preferred sportwear brand across all channels?

Do you follow any sportswear brands on social media? If so which ones and why?

Do you actively engage with these brands on social media? why? /Why not?

Have you ever purchased a sportwear product from a social media post? If so which brands?

Are there any brand ambassadors/influencers that have brought your attention to a specific sportwear brand and/or persuaded you to make a purchase?

How important is it to you that a brand is socially responsible?

Are there any social factors, positive or negative that have affected your decision when purchasing sportswear products?

Are there any loyalty programmes that influence your decision when purchasing sportswear products? How does this influence your decision?

Do you believe that sportswear brands target specific groups based on their demographics? Can you explain how you believe this is true?

Are there any sportswear brands you would not wear as you believe their products are not targeted towards you? Can you give an example of such a brand and why you believe this is true?

Would you be more willing to purchase products from a sportwear brand that your peers wear or approve of? If so, why? /why not?

Have you ever felt an advertisement from a sportswear brand has been specifically targeted at your demographic? What brand? Why do you believe it was targeted at the mentioned demographic?

Do you find it easy to switch from your preferred sportswear brand/brands? Why? /Why not?

What key factors would make you to consider switching sportswear brands?

Have you ever stopped purchasing products from a sportswear brand you at one point regularly purchased from? If so, what caused you to stop?

Do you consider sportswear products to be a high involvement purchase or low involvement purchase? Please explain why.

Appendix 3: Excerpt of Interview Transcript

How would you describe a brand loyal customer? Do you feel you are a loyal customer to specific sportswear brand or brands?

Someone that loves a specific brand and tends to go to that brand instead of competing brands when purchasing a product even if it is more expensive. I think that most people are loyal to different brands depending on the product. Not necessarily, there are sports brands that I like but I would not say that I am loyal to a sportswear brand. I tend to purchase sportswear based on style and fit and there are a couple brands like Nike, Adidas and Under Armour that I usually like the style and fit of. Maybe I am brand loyal because I mainly buy them brands.

What are the main influences that effect your decision when purchasing sportswear?

Definitely the fit, I like a particular fit with my sportswear, especially the sportswear I wear when I go to the gym such as leggings and gym tops. The main reason I usually wear Nike and Adidas is because I love the fit of their clothes. I think it's really important that sportwear is comfortable as you wear it while exercising. I also wear some sportswear casually for comfort like tracksuits so it's really important that they are comfortable. I would say quality and price are important as well, most of the major sportswear brands are good quality but I still think of Nike and Adidas as being the best. I would be willing to pay more for these brands but if another brand like Puma or Reebok had a product that I was looking for on sale I would probably buy it.

Do you have a brand or list of brands you believe to be more trustworthy? What brands? Why?

Ye I would say Nike, Adidas and Under Armour are the brands I would trust the most, but I think that most of the mainstream brands are trustworthy. I would say that I trust the brands I mentioned more because I am used to them and am usually happy with their products. I suppose its trust that has been built up over the years of buying these brands.

When purchasing sportswear products from your preferred sportswear brand do you get a sense of satisfaction? If so, what creates this sense of satisfaction?

Ye, I suppose I do. For example, there are products I buy such as Nike leggings that I wear to the gym and I know they fit well, are great quality and will last forever so when I buy them, I know I made a good purchase even if they are one of the pricier brands. It would be the same as gym runners, I recently bought a pair of Under Armour runners for cheap enough on sale that are really comfortable and great quality, so it feels like I got good value for money.

Can you explain why said brand is your favourite sportswear brand and why you believe it is better than competitors? What qualities attract you to this brand?

As I said my favourite brands are Nike, Adidas and Under Armour but if I had to choose one, I would pick Nike. I really like the style of a lot of their clothes and the fit. Although

there are cheaper alternatives, I feel like I will always think of Nike first when buying new sportswear.

Can you tell me about a sportswear brand you used to purchase products from more frequently and why you now do so less often or not at all?
I would say Adidas, I still buy some products from them, mainly clothes I would wear to the gym. When I was younger in my teens, I wore a lot of Adidas clothes. At the time Adidas tracksuits and runners were really popular among people my age and I really liked the style and comfort of their clothes. I do not buy much of their more casual clothes like this anymore because it was kind of a fashion trend I guess and I like more plain sportswear, especially if I am not wearing it to the gym. I still do like a lot of their clothes though so maybe it is a mental thing because it reminds me of me and my friends all wearing similar clothes and it is a bit embarrassing.

Are there any sportswear brands that make you feel like you are part of a community or specific group? If so, why?
Not really, I am not really into team sports and am not a member of any community sports group like the GAA. I guess you could say that my Nike windbreaker jacket makes me feel like a part of a group with me and a couple of my friends. I go for hikes and long walks with a couple of friends, one of them got a Nike windbreaker jacket for these walks that I really liked. I went out and bought one similar and so did my two other friends that come hiking. We have a joke that we look like a hiking team with our Nike jackets so you could say they makes us feel like we are part of a specific group.

Is there a specific method of advertising used by your preferred sportswear brand that you find to be the most appealing or engaging? If so what channels?
I see a lot of social media posts from Nike, mainly on Instagram because that is the platform that I use the most. I think I find these posts engaging because a lot of them are motivational and interesting as opposed to just ads trying to sell you products. While they do have posts that sell to you it is a nice mix.

On average, how many times a week would you see advertisements from your preferred sportwear brand across all channels?
On social media and on television and in my email, I would say a lot, I would see two or 3 a day at least so I would say about 20 a week.

Do you follow any sportswear brands on social media? If so which ones and why?
 follow Nike, Adidas, Under Armour and Gym Shark. Firstly, I like the products of these brands so that would be the main reason even though I only have one or two Under Amour gym tops and have never bought anything from Gym Shark, but I probably will soon. I also like the content that these brands create, a lot of it is beneficial like gym tips and workout ideas especially with Nike. Some of the content these brands make is really high level and engaging and often relates to current affairs which I find interesting. It's also the best way to keep up with trends and sales. I would also follow sportswear shops

like Lifestlye and JD Sports because this is where I buy a good bit of my sportswear, so it is a great way of keeping up with sales and seeing new products.

Do you actively engage with these brands on social media? why? /Why not?
Not really, I would enter the occasional online competition to try and win a new product or voucher but never seem to win. I would click on the links sometimes if there was a post advertising a sale or if I got an email with a promotional code. Very rarely I would tag friends in a post if I liked a product and wanted an opinion or thought they would be interested in it. I'd be more likely to send it in a private chat, the same with a workout video that the likes of Nike and Under Armour sometimes post.

Have you ever purchased a sportwear product from a social media post? If so which brands?
Ye, I have a couple of times, mainly when the post is advertising a sale, I have bought from Nike a couple of times, and I bought a gym top from Under Armour recently. I have also bought from Lifestyle and JD Sports posts once or twice when they have had sales on. I cannot remember exactly what brands.

Are there any brand ambassadors/influencers that have brought your attention to a specific sportwear brand and/or persuaded you to make a purchase?
I do not follow many influencers on social media because I do not like the way they are constantly trying to sell you products. Then again there is a girl called Maria Murphy. She is a make-up artist that posts a lot of sportswear pictures. I would not necessarily buy the sportswear products she is advertising, but I have clicked on the link in the post a few times to have a look, I have a similar style to her.

How important is it to you that a brand is socially responsible?
It is very important to me, nowadays everybody is aware of what is going on with big companies and things like child and slave labour, I think it is a lot harder for these companies to cover this up now because of social media. I know there was a lot of controversy a few years ago with the clothing industry and that Nike were exposed for having sweatshops in underdeveloped countries. There are no excuses that make that acceptable and I think that all the big sportwear brands are more than capable of making their products ethically.

Are there any social factors, positive or negative that have affected your decision when purchasing sportswear products?
I cannot remember 100% but I think it was Adidas sometime last year. They were donating 10% of purchases to help with a crisis in another country, I think it was an earthquake, so that positively motivated me to make a purchase that day.

Are there any loyalty programmes that influence your decision when purchasing sportswear products? How does this influence your decision?

Not really, actually with Nike you get 15% off online for the whole month of your birthday so I would definitely buy more in the month of my birthday and would hold off on buying a product from them if it were close to my birthday.

Do you believe that sportswear brands target specific groups based on their demographics? Can you explain how you believe this is true?

Ye, I do, with age, gender, race etc. You can really see it on social media. I think that sportswear brands use different influencers to target specific groups, I remember last week I seen an ad from Adidas that I liked the clothes being advertised. I liked the outfit but did not know the model wearing it. It was a famous Tik Tok influencer, the ad was aimed at a younger demographic which kind of put me off buying the top. I feel that the younger demographic is particularly targeted by influencers.

Are there any sportswear brands you would not wear as you believe their products are not targeted towards you? Can you give an example of such a brand and why you believe this is true?

I think that there are definitely some brands that are not targeted towards me. For example, I know that the online stores Pretty Little Thing and Missguided sell their own brand of sportswear. I fell the advertising and style of these brands are definitely targeted at a younger demographic. There are also brands I feel that are targeted to a slightly older demographic like the new brand Gym+Coffee.

Would you be more willing to purchase products from a sportwear brand that your peers wear or approve of? If so, why? /why not?

Ye, I suppose I would. I sometimes send pictures of sportswear to my friends to get their opinion before I would buy it but would not discuss it as much as more fashionable clothes. This would not completely influence my decision either, when I was younger it would have mattered a lot more, especially in my teens. If I like the style and fit myself, I will buy it regardless.

Have you ever felt an advertisement from a sportswear brand has been specifically targeted at your demographic? What brand? Why do you believe it was targeted at the mentioned demographic?

Ye, I think that Gym Shark is targeted at my demographic of people between 18 -30 I would say. I think the fit and style of the clothes is aimed at people in that age range, both male and female. The social media posts use a lot of humor and uses language and talks about topics that people in this age range will understand.

Do you find it easy to switch from your preferred sportswear brand/brands? Why? /Why not?

I would say that I do, I find it quite easy to switch from the likes of Nike and Adidas, but I always find myself going to these brands first. If there is a product I like from a different brand like Puma or Reebok I will buy it but generally I prefer the style and fit of Nike

Adidas and Under Armor. If there is another brand on sale, I will be more likely to buy from them or try their product for the first time.

What key factors would make you to consider switching sportswear brands?
Style definitely, I would say style, fit and quality are the most important. I think the most important thing is if I like the look of the clothes and the fit and that they last for a long time and do not misshape or fade. This is the reason I am willing to pay more for the likes of Nike and Adidas. I would say price to an extent as well if there was a product for a lot cheaper than my usual brands and I trusted the specific brand I would be more likely to try it.

Have you ever stopped purchasing products from a sportswear brand you at one point regularly purchased from? If so, what caused you to stop?
I would say Adidas when I was younger, I still buy some Adidas sportswear but it's mainly for the gym because their gym gear is great quality and fits me well. When I was younger, I bought a lot of tracksuits, runners, and clothes more for style from Adidas. I do not really do this anymore because I do not really wear a lot of sportswear casually and I do not really like the style of their more casual sportswear like tracksuits, jackets, and runners.

Do you consider sportswear products to be a high involvement purchase or low involvement purchase? Please explain why.
I think for me it is a high involvement purchase definitely. It is something I put a bit of thought into before I purchase it. I think because its generally fairly expensive I would take my time and compare products from different brands. I tend to shop around a bit in different stores and websites before I buy a sportswear product.