Postmodernity in Marketing:  
Relevance of Brand Communities

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INTRODUCTION

The main aim of the current thesis is to understand how the role of brand communities changed in the life of the today’s consumers, in the context of postmodernity.

Postmodernity is not a new notion, literature revolved around it since decades, yet deriving from its ever-changing nature, the phenomenon can always show something new. Moreover due to its close relationship with technological advancements and their increased availability, or more precisely the effect of these factors postmodernity is always present in the life of individuals on a different scale. In order to answer the main question of the thesis first the mind-set of postmodern consumers have to be understood and their desires have to be explored. The current thesis is especially involved in the presence of the “Linking Value” first articulated by Bernard Cova (1997) who inspired the conduction of the study as well. He claims that due to the increased level of personal freedom of human beings high level of individualism, so called “extreme-individualism” has developed. As a result, individuals cut themselves off of traditional social ties and as a result the need for social re-composition has appeared as well. Since consumption became a determining phenomenon in the life of postmodern individuals, as a source of self-expression marketers willingly or unwillingly became cogwheels in the process of building social relationships as well.

In my personal opinion one of the best tools that marketers (or rather the firms/brands as a whole) can manage in order to facilitate this phenomenon is the establishment and nurturing of brand communities, hence the secondary topic of the current study, which revolves around the notion of brand communities themselves.

Up until now literature regarding brand communities mostly centered around luxury products or ones with high barriers of entry such as the Harley Davidson Community, and The Jeep Community analysed by McAleander and Schouten (1998), and the Macintosh Community and Saab Community as discussed be Muniz & O’Guinn (2001). Distancing themselves from the luxury category Cova and Pace (2006) conducted a study with the famous convenience product, Nutella. A community of diabetic patients and their relationship to the relevant brand was analysed by Stokburger (2010).

This current study puts a community into a limelight which revolves around a free-to-play online game called League of Legends, from RIOT Games. In my opinion the
postmodern elements are greatly present within this brand community, although the bare existence of this community has to be proved before the analysis can begin.

Deriving from the intention of nurturing the brand communities as well, the effect of “brandfests” first introduced by McAlexander & Schouten, are intended to be analysed in case of League of Legends as well as a final tone of the thesis.

In my opinion, which I mostly base on the articles written by Firat & Venkatesh (1993), Firt Dholakia and Venkatesh (1995), and Keller (2013), in today’s world only those companies are destined to succeed who assume the mind-set of putting the consumer first and profits second. Since the high amount and easy availability of information, consumers are extremely well-informed about the available products, and moreover they aware of the marketing actions as well (or at least could be). Considering these reasons the idea of putting consumers first is enhanced even further. The study partially also going to touch how companies can still be profitable on the market if putting the consumer first.
1 Emergence of Postmodernity

“The Customer is King” is a generally approved phrase amongst the scholars and masters of marketing discipline, along with the “Customer is always right” and list goes on indefinitely, but there is one common element in these phrases, they are all centred around the glorified manifestations in the business world, the customers.

However one might rightfully ask who the consumers actually are? What are their wants and needs? What do they value? What do they truly desire? What is the motivation behind their decisions? What are the goals of their consumption? What will their needs be in the near or distant future? How they want to be treated? How did they become the center of everything?

During the first chapter of my thesis I intend to find possible answers for the aforementioned questions on a societal and psychological level describing the current goals of consumption and the customers’ ways of thinking.

Before digging further into the topic it would be important to define the postmodernism itself. However it is already a rather difficult task given the fact that there is no generally accepted definition for it. Additionally, setting something in stone clearly would create metanarratives (grand ideas) what happens to be against the philosophy of postmodernism in a first place. What postmodernist generally agree on is the rejection of modernist ways. (Firat & Venkatesh, 1993) At the same time I would like to remonstrate that throughout my thesis work whenever I refer to postmodern society, or one of its main conditions I take the developed, western welfare countries as points of reference, where consumer society could actually develop.

Therefore before providing some of the definitions or further clarifications I would like to bring up the emergence of consumer-centricism, development of the consumer society, or rather the contemporary postmodern society. Demonstrated through the evolution of the well-known marketing model, the 4P-s (Product, Price, Place, and Promotion) Marketing Mix of Jerome McCarthy (McCarthy, 1960) as in my opinion the basics of postmodernism can be grasped through the process. The 4Ps model represents the modernist way thinking while the 4C-s version presents the postmodernist way.
At the time of its establishment in 1950, marketing was product/producer centered. The philosophy was about producing the right product and distributing it at the right price, at the right place, at the right time, in a way that the product would provide the most possibly achievable benefit for the company. Later on the theory was challenged and updated by many, among others by Lauterborn (1990) who suggested that the value aspects should be considered from the point of view of the customers as well, thus changing the “P”-s of the mix to “C”-s. Product became Customer Value indicating the major difference between the two approaches, that a company should introduce products that provide actual value to the customers instead of just pushing a new thing to the market to create turnover. Price transformed to consumer’s Cost to satisfy asking the question “How much the customer is able and willing to pay to satisfy his or her need?” instead of “How much the company aims to earn?” Place was replaced by Convenience to buy promoting the idea that the availability of the product must be as simple and fast as possible. The final aspect, Promotion, turned into Communication. Lauterborn considered promotion (mostly advertising) manipulative and suggested to communicate values instead, preferably in an interactive way. (Lauterborn, 1990)

Although it must be noted that Lauterborn took the first version of the 4Ps marketing mix as a basis which was established shortly after the 2nd World War when, after a long period of deprivation (lack of supply), even the notion of consumption was demanded. (Lauterborn, 1990) Otherwise the difference between the two concepts might be confusing or difficult to grasp as the 4Ps model evolved and got much more refined throughout the time as well. It is generally not the case nowadays just to launch a product on the market, price it, promote it and hope for the best. It takes serious background research and planning forward in time for a product not to be destined to fail, all this with the help of the updated toolkit of marketing activities such as search engine marketing, social media marketing, database marketing, just to mention few of them. (Lauterborn, 1990)

The reason why this change in mind-set could occur can be greatly contributed to the saturation of the market, the overflow of new products, the enhanced and easily available technology, and the fact that any information is available on the internet at a cost of a click (product information, price, place, promotions, even similar products in value and price range, and reviews and feedbacks regarding the brand or the product). Consumer
society could develop because customers nowadays have every information at their disposal, therefore they are able to pick products most appropriate to their liking with low search costs. Equally importantly they are more difficult to scam, and even if they fall prey to such situation they are able to cause a strong backlash to the product/brand through word of mouth (WoM) effects via social media platforms such as Facebook or TripAdvisor.

The two approaches and thus the difference between them is extremely similar to how the modernist mind-set and the postmodernist mind-set relate to each other. At the end of the day they analyse the same problem and have the same goal, yet the way from getting from A to B is completely different.

Although the transformation of the 4Ps to 4Cs represents the consequences of the formation of postmodern society well, it must be noted that it is just the tip of the iceberg, it does not show how society changed below the surface or how individual needs transformed. In order to truly understand postmodernism, one must understand modernism first, as it was hinted in the beginning of my thesis, definitions of postmodernism are generally based on (the rejection of) modernism or one of its key elements as it can be seen on some of the collected definitions below:

“Postmodernity generally refers to the current period in world history signifying the change of course of modernity if not its end” (Firat, Venkatesh, & Sherry, 1993, old.: 220)

“Incredulity toward metanarratives” (Lyotard, 1984) in (Firat & Venkatesh, 1993, p. 228)

“Postmodern first and foremost is a cultural phenomenon. While it rejects modernity, as the sole guiding principle in determining social order, postmodern strives to achieve the following aspects: return of aesthetic approach with special regard to linguistic and symbolic aspects of human life, emphasises the role of visuals and spectacles, and recognises the importance of subjective experiences.” (Horváth & Mitev, 2008, p. 3)

Modernity is an era based on scientific ideology roughly beginning with the appearance of Enlightenment. Its value system is based on metanarratives, “grand, unified idea systems or ideologies which determine the meanings and perceptions regarding truth and life in general” (Firat & Venkatesh, 1993, p. 228), which are omnipresent, and independent of
human presence. Greatest-scale representatives for these ideologies are for example Marxism and Capitalism. Metanarratives were established through scientific analyses and methods creating and defending arguments against the rivalling system, religion, with great success. The idea system was a huge step forward at that time, although as time passed, postmodernist thinkers appeared more and more frequently challenging and eventually denying the modernist approach. Some, such as Cova (1997), expressing utter disappointment, some simply saying that times (mostly referring to society and technology) have changed, the old ways have become outdated and therefore they should give way to the new system. (Firat & Venkatesh, 1993)

“Modernity entered history as a progressive force promising to liberate humankind from ignorance and irrationality but one can readily wonder whether that promise has been sustained.” (Cova, 1997)

This thought from Cova summarizes the base of postmodernity, the denial of modern approach. It expresses the disappointment in a value system that was thought to be ultimate and true no matter the circumstances, yet as time lapsed, technology and society evolved further, the failures of this way of thinking became apparent and obsolete. This thought is the core why postmodernity decided to decline the metanarratives and the “general truth” and instead put emphasis on absolute freedom as the greatest value, experiencing the aspects of life from as many point of views as possible. (Firat & Venkatesh, 1993) At the same time this idea system also promotes tolerance towards one another and the acceptance of differences. Further leading to the demolition of restraining barriers for individuals deriving from “born-with” attributes such as race, ethnicity, or gender.

Deriving from the fact that postmodernism reject metanarratives the situation emerges that postmodernism does not have metanarratives either, therefore it must be noted that not all postmodernist accept every single aspects of postmodernism. Firat and Venkatesh (1993) even suggests that marketing might be the metanarrative in postmodernity as it has serious resonance with the postmodern values.

1.1 POSTMODERN CONDITIONS

However, even though there are no metanarratives, there are some conditions which are accepted and included by most of the postmodernist researchers such as Cova (1997),
Firat, Venkatesh, and Dholakia (1995). These “Postmodern Conditions” are namely hyperreality, fragmentation, reversal of production and consumption, decentring of the subject, paradoxical juxtapositions of opposites, and loss of commitment. (Firat, Dholakia, & Venkatesh, 1995)

1.1.1 Hyperreality
As one of the core conditions of postmodernity refers to the phenomenon when something that originally was just a hype or simulation becomes real. Starting from this, the created reality can be considered to be “hyper” for two reasons. First it is a reality that is understood beyond what reality has been understood in the modernistic sense (scientific sense) and secondly the attributes that were considered to be “hype” but at some point of time became real. (Firat, Venkatesh, & Sherry, 1993)

Such effect is possible to achieve through different ways of communication, the original meanings of a given product are to be detached while later on additional, new meanings are going to be attached, thus a new reality can be forged. A classic example for this phenomenon is the “toothpaste” example. Originally the toothpaste had the functional value of cleaning the teeth resulting healthy mouth hygiene. Later on through marketing communication the product (and the results of healthiness deriving from its usage) got attached with additional meanings such as attractiveness, confidence, and happiness. The sensation became reality as consumers started considering such values to be true incorporating it to their social standards. (Firat & Venkatesh, 1993)

Interestingly there is a tendency amongst consumers that they actually prefer the hype or simulation over the real thing. (Firat & Venkatesh, 1993) One might wonder what could be the reason for this. It can be deriving from societal development, the established, stable life-conditions, monotony, and lack of adventure, therefore consumers prefer to enhance their reality through these forms of moderated creativity instead. The question also arises what can be considered under the phrase reality? In an exaggerated way, an alternate reality can be created just as simply as a physical object from its required raw materials, thus becoming real.

Firat & Venkatesh suggests the answer for this question is that postmodern consumers simply find it easier to rely on experiential sensibilities in the search of a better world and consumers enjoy the playful area more than reminding themselves to the harsh reality. (Firat & Venkatesh, 1993)
As a result of this they also suggest that everything in postmodernity becomes superficial while the deeper hidden meanings disappear.

In terms of marketing the presence of postmodernist way of thinking also means that providing a basic, functional product does no longer provide satisfaction for the consumers, they strive for something more, something to serve their desire for expressing themselves, a symbolic value. Consumers consume signs/brands so that they can signal their identity to the outside world. Capitalist market supports the individuals on their quest to forge their own identity and express themselves through consumption.

1.1.2 FRAGMENTATION

Following the same thread as it was the case before, fragmentation is the next condition to be explored. Fragmentation implies the phenomenon that consumer choices and preferences are not unified and coherent anymore as they were in the era of modernity. Instead of focusing on a single way of being, consumers wish to try different products to experience life from more points of view, they became more fickle. (Firat, Dholakia, & Venkatesh, 1995) This also means that it became highly complicated if not impossible to classify consumers as specific target segments making one of the core tools of marketing, STP analysis useless in theory. Especially if it is based on demographic or psychographic attributes. (Cova, 1997)

The desire to try as many new experiences as possible is just one part of the truth behind fragmentation. In addition to that, tools of marketing communications are also highly responsible. The non-stop encounter with billboards, and flyers in the “real world”, the pop-up ads, banner-ads in the online environment, the instantaneous notifications from social media applications, targeted e-mails also contribute greatly to a fragmented reality, not leaving peace for the mind. Meaning that even if a consumer wanted to focus on a single-way of being the overflowing information and constant stimulation of senses would make such desire extremely difficoult.

Due to the constant life in this fragmented environment the very self of the individuals becomes the mass of fragments as well. Today’s rushing world promotes the phenomenon of multitasking (continuing independent activities without a common goal) as well. Through different actions consumers use different type of products, representing several different images at the same time. Feeding the cat a Whiskas, while grabbing Cinema City tickets for the night, in a casual set of cloths from Levi’s, before sinking the keys of
his/her Volvo into the pockets communicates several images at the same time. Different sets of used brands in the process are recognised by individuals who can see the chain of events and enable them to draw conclusions regarding the person’s financial status, desired level for quality and appreciated values, all this in a matter of (split) seconds.

On the other side of the coin, individuals do indeed get judged based on the images and spectacles they radiate. Firat and Venkatesh (1993) suggests regarding fragmentation, that “The necessity to find a central meaning, to understand connections, so important in the modern sensibility, is transcended in postmodernism”. (Firat & Venkatesh, 1993, p. 232) Although I absolutely agree that the phenomenon is present in the society I do not agree with the idea completely. In my opinion the phenomenon is present in todays’ society because of the factors mentioned above (overflow of information, vivid distractors fighting for the consumer’s attention, instantaneous notifications), but the “necessity” to find central meanings has not disappeared just yet, it just became extremely difficult to actually find it due to the difficulties in focusing one’s attention.

There are several single-live-story experiments regarding this issue all over the internet, focusing mostly on social media, to consciously neglect the distracting factors with the concordant results of improved focus and efficiency, better productivity, longer attention span, and (maybe deriving from these factors) increased general sense of social and mental well-being/ happiness. The positive results are greatly shown through a challenge followed through by Emma Fierberg, who decided to remove all her social media applications for a 30-days-period to see if, and how her life would change. According to her, she realized all the benefits found above. (Fierberg, 2018)

1.1.3 OTHER CONDITIONS

From the point of view of the current thesis the previously mentioned hyperreality and fragmentation are the most determinant elements, yet the remaining three conditions have also are relevant on a moderate level. Therefore these conditions are going to be discussed in a shorter manner.

1.1.3.1 REVERSAL OF CONSUMPTION AND PRODUCTION

A highly interesting consequence of the establishment of consumer society is the reversal of consumption and production. In modernism consumption was considered to be destructive while production was the source of value creation. In postmodernism this mind-set has changed as well. Building the unique and different self became the quest for
the individuals of the postmodern era and in order to do so a great tool became consumption itself. Therefore consumption is not the representative of destruction anymore, but an instrument to create something new and valuable. Going further with the thought this also means consumption became the production process of the unique self, a marketable entity to be positioned and promoted as a product. (Cova, 1997)

The marketable entity is constructed by the set of consumer choices that also differentiates themselves from other entities using different sets of consumer choices. What is meant under the term consumption now means that producers are the images (products), and what is produced are the human beings. (Firat, Venkatesh, & Sherry, 1993)

1.1.3.2 DECENTRING OF THE SUBJECT

One of the consequences of these conditions is the decentring of the subject. Firat and Venkatesh (1993) argue that humanity is becoming the slave of technology a mere follower of instructions, the subject becomes confused with the objects. The reason behind their argument is that machines used to enable humans to fulfil their goals, however now humans are only the operators of the machines, thus becoming the tools only to allow the machines to fulfil their purposes. The actions of an individual gets determined by the products he or she commands and not what he or she could achieve by him/herself. Also meaning that, human goals are “only” achievable through consumption, further reinforcing the existence of consumer society. As a simple example, one could wash the laundry by hand, yet most of the consumers invest into washing-machines or going to washing-salons instead, enabling the machine to do its function that originally was done by the person.

This also leads to the fact, that humans are more and more determined by the objects surrounding them and becoming objectified themselves, a “marketable entity” as mentioned earlier. As a result of objectification, consumers are able and do switch their radiated images and personalities easily depending on the situation they get into to make themselves acceptable. (Firat, Dholakia, & Venkatesh, 1995)

1.1.3.3 PARADOXICAL JUXTAPOSITIONS

Deriving from all the previous conditions this attitude of paradoxical juxtaposition is born as well. Opposites can co-exist right next to each-other, and going even further they are encouraged to do so. A postmodern individual considers such situation to be playful,
uncommon, and unique, therefore one seeks experiences like these. (Foster, 1985) in (Firat & Venkatesh, 1993)

In marketing context this phenomenon looks like as Stephan Brown summarizes the it in a snappy sentence “Marketers know about consumers, consumers know about marketers, marketers know consumers know about marketers, and consumers know marketers know consumers know about marketing”. (Brown, 2006)

What Consumers and marketers (and postmodern individuals in general) are playing, is none other the game “Doublethink”. This means playing along in accordance with a set of rules that are visible on the surface, while the game is actually played by quite different rules. (Firat & Venkatesh, 1993). They brings the example of advertisements claiming that most of the consumer realize the exaggerated nature of advertisements, even see through the purpose of getting awareness and persuading consumers to buy. However they still like to think that they are the only ones seeing the true intentions and thinking other people got persuaded. (Firat & Venkatesh, 1993)

1.2 EXTREME INDIVIDUALISM, EMERGENCE OF “LINKING VALUE”

Based on the previous paragraph therefore it can be seen the kind of environment that surrounds the postmodern individual in his/her everyday life. The building and expression of self along with the enhanced desire for freedom became great value elements that individuals seek, but at the same time they strongly imply inevitable separation from communities as well.

“The individual has never been so free in his or her private and public choices as today and never so alone and cut off from the spirit of community.” – using Cova’s (1997) words.

In modernism individuals were not completely free, they were bound by their born-into communities, hindering them to truly achieve their desired self-actualization. The social link therefore was considered to be a shackle that is difficult to break. (Cova, 1997)

By the establishment of the market economy, and through technological developments now everything (goods and services) is available for the individuals even without entering into physical social contacts while moving from one place to another, therefore actually being able to sever the tense community ties, is now basically possible without making any serious efforts. (Cova, 1997)
This led to the fact that in the postmodern environment individuals are able to become completely independent entities by breaking their shackles from their limiting communities they were unwillingly born into. Becoming free from collective ideals individuals have taken the path towards extreme individualism, where their “quest” became to forge and develop themselves in different ways and eventually show who they have become, what they have accomplished. (Cova, Community and Consumption - Towards a definition of the "linking value" of products and services, 1997)

At the same time with the pursuit of building the self, individuals became separated and the need for social re-composition appeared. Although this time their social universe is no longer based on pre-determined factors, but on their own emotional free choice. Postmodern communities are more unstable and not fixed as the modernist version was. They are characterised as micro- groups that can be held together by shared emotions, styles of life, moral beliefs, sense of injustice, and consumption practices. (Cova, 1997)

Not surprisingly, a single individual can become a member of multiple micro-groups simultaneously, as it was discussed at the paragraph of fragmentation, in a way that they put on different masks depending on the situation they encounter. At the same time social and born-with-attributes (gender, ethnicity) are no longer relevant in belonging to a group. (Firat & Venkatesh, 1993)

Cova (1997) argues that there are two types of values attributed to a product. One of them is the “use value” composed of the traditional brand elements, which in the sense of postmodernity help to forge the self, including functional values (material), symbolic values (immaterial), experiential values, and the mixture of these three. Due to the possibility to choose products from basically all over the world without any social constraints or the threat of being judged, postmodern individuals seek products with high use values to be with zero defects, and the possibility to satisfy their needs in a personalized way. (Firat, Dholakia, & Venkatesh, 1995)

The other value is the one deriving from the desire of social re-composition, the “linking value”. The core idea behind the linking value is that there are products which possess a certain ability that makes it possible for individuals to connect and build social relationships.

Going further from the presence of social isolation, the increased amount of free time, Sarduy (1994) in (Cova, 1997) even claims that the emergence of the linking value can
be explained with the phenomenon called “rebellion against objects” as well (Sarduy, 1994) in (Cova, 1997). The notion refers to the increased clumsiness towards every-day-life-objects from the side of individuals, showing their lack of care and respect towards them, eventually leading to their breakdown. This is possible to be considered as a sign of a deep social crisis, triggered by the individuals just to be solved later on through the replacement of products, thus through consumption. The motivation behind is that this way they can get into contact with others again.

An excellent example for the existence of the linking value was observed by Brenda Gainer in her “Ritual and Relationships” (1995) article focusing on shared consumption practices in the field of art. She analysed the attendance tendencies of live art events such as opera, and found that 78% of the tickets were bought by pairs or groups, while speculating that even though the remaining 22% was purchased separately, the tickets were used together with groups. Later after conducting interviews she found that out of the 10 interviewed people, only one lady attended live arts events alone purely for the enjoyment of such programs, taking a dim view of attendees who participated for social purposes at the same time. The other respondents were mostly attending due to social considerations and for sharing the experience with one-another therefore increasing the overall pleasure. During the interviews asking about subscription even married couples stated, that they were going to such events to have an ensured amount of evenings together. Others declared “I subscribe to the opera every year with the same friend… oh, we’ve gone for years… sometimes we wonder if it’s worth it, but then we think… well we’d never see each other…” (Gainer, 1995) This quote and the behaviour observed is perfectly in line with Cova’s “The link is more important than the thing” statement. (Cova, 1997, p. 307)

The same phenomenon is easy to notice even in the daily life of individuals as well to justify the solid, bare existence of the concept. When someone asks one of the following questions for example “Would you like to have a coffee sometimes?”, “Would you like to have lunch together?”, “Would you like to go to the cinema to watch a movie in the weekend?”, the use value of the products to be consumed are actually secondary and all these questions eventually translate to “Would you like to spend some time with me?”, or according to Cova, “Do you like the linking value of these products?” At the same time I do not argue that the use value is to be neglected completely, as one can easily answer “No, I don’t like coffee”, “I’m not hungry.”, “I don’t like that movie”. After receiving the
proposal, and realising the intended socializing initiation however the asked counterpart might come up with a new suggestion where the use value and linking value is more aligned, such as “I don’t like coffee, but it would be nice to have lunch together.” thus making the use value to receive emphasis in the decision making process as well. Use value can never be neglected deriving from the very nature of human beings, as they always strive for perfection or rather in this case to maximise their total utility.

1.3 POSTMODERNITY’S RELEVANCE OF, AND FOR MARKETING

Deriving from the diverse nature of postmodernity, from the several definitions, the changing amount of its core values that are being accepted by everyone inevitably leads to the fact that there are several ways of understanding even amongst its most dedicated researchers, and therefore consequently there are several ways for implementing it in the field of marketing as well.

Horváth and Mitev says that many, who studies the essence of postmodernity ends up thinking that the core value and focus of the postmodern individual is extreme individualism, however based on the previous paragraphs it can be clearly seen that this is not the case, in fact postmodernism is about the return of community in one way or another. (Horváth & Mitev, 2008)

First of all the relevance of marketing in and for postmodernity must be emphasised. Both Cova (1997), and Firat, Venkatesh and Dholakia (1995) agrees on the fact that marketing is indeed a key discipline in the postmodern age. However there are slight differences in their understanding towards the role marketing would take.

Firat and Venkatesh even gets to the point where they say that marketing should be understood as the “metanarrative of postmodernism”, as much as it is possible of course given the base definition which articulates the rejection of all metanarratives. They arrived to this conclusion because observing the postmodern conditions one can see that the resonance between marketing and the postmodern value system is extremely high. Just like postmodern individuals, marketing keeps deconstructing and reconstructing images and symbols imbuing them with new meanings and radiated images then showing them to the world. Therefore arguing that marketing helps people “filling the vacuum modernity left behind”, they focus on the phenomenon of increased relevance of symbols. They even observed that unlike the previous generation where the literacy was based on
the ability to discover connections in seemingly unrelated objects and arrive to a central meaning, now the literacy of the young generation is completely different. They are no longer involved in the modernist knowledge, but they developed high intelligence and sensibility towards the usage and understanding of symbols and slogans. They put the use value into the limelight and say that the radiated symbols and images make it possible for consumers to signal to each other, understand the represented values, and eventually they might connect and find community. (Firat & Venkatesh, 1993)

Cova on the other hand, while approving the determining existence of symbols and images, puts the emphasis on the societal role of marketing deriving from the “linking value”, arguing that the products have to serve as catalyst for the establishment of social connections, therefore upscaling marketing to become “societing”. (Badot, Cova, & Bucci, 1993)

Tribal marketing serves this purpose given its credo that postmodern individuals not only search for products with a wish to become freer, but for products that link them to a community or a tribe. (Cova, 1997)

Additionally I would like to note that there is a duality/ contradiction within the concept of marketing as well as Firat & Venkatesh argues marketing was born postmodern, and while it is postmodern in practice, the theory and supporting tools are based on modernist methods. The main theme that they question here is the justified existence of STP methodology and quantitative research practices. The argument against the method is basically the reason why tribal marketing received potential for emergence. Segmentation is no longer considered to be valid due to behavioural inconsistency deriving from the postmodern conditions discussed above, supported by the irrelevance of psychographic and demographic segments, but also lifestyle and values are difficoult to target since a single consumer can be part of several different, even contradicting groups at the same time. (Firat, Dholakia, & Venkatesh, 1995) With the help of tribal marketing the tribes/communities could be targeted instead thus creating the “segments” instead of finding them.

However here must be emphasised that most of the literature working with the “postmodern” notion originate from the 1990’s – 2000’s sometimes using articles as basis from even earlier periods. Because of this reason they often did not consider the
emergence of internet, not even the Web 1.0. At the age of Web 2.0, on the doorstep of Web 3.0 the data to be analysed is abundant and accessible, not to mention the new programs and tools enabling marketers to get information out of them. At the same time I am not stating that the above mentioned segmenting criteria became valid because of that, but the establishment of more refined segments based on correlations and regressions between factors can provide segments that are possible and worth to target.

Although if the quantitative data collection and analysis is not sufficient, a fine-tuning is needed or the topic requires a deep and complex emotional or motivational answer qualitative research methods can be implemented to understand such connections.

In a way the relationship between quantitative and qualitative research also represents how modernist and postmodernist marketing relates to each other. Quantitative research sets a metanarrative that can be questioned, challenged, and to be understood deeper with the help of the postmodern way. If the insights deriving from the quantitative research are correct, qualitative research will back them up and provide additional extra information, in the opposing case qualitative findings might suggest the change in direction. This also shows that in order to achieve the result closest to perfection the two ways of thinking have to be combined. Separately qualitative analysis might leave out or fail to recognise something that would be crucial for success, while qualitative analysis might would not even be able to find where to search for answers. Postmodern way of thinking, the deconstructing and reconstructing process can help marketers to understand a problem from different aspects.

This kind of relationship is also suggested by Mitev and Horváth when discussing Heller’s idea about postmodernism in general, claiming that humanity needs structure in their lives as it is difficult to explain anything without grand theories, but for development smaller narratives are also required. (Heller, 1997) in (Horváth & Mitev, 2008)
1.4 HOSTILITY AGAINST MARKETING - BLACKS AND WHITES OF MARKETING

People often consider marketing to be the root of evil, it is accused of being manipulative and exploiting, and last but not least it is considered to be the primary cause for the development of consumer society. Due to this reason, and the scenario that marketing does and going to go even deeper into the social life, and minds of consumers to unfold what their true desires are I would like to provide my point of view regarding the ethical responsibility of marketing as well. In the next chapter of my thesis work I am going to suggest and analyse the promotion of establishment of brand communities that in a twisted way can be considered to be the tool of exploiting the social vulnerabilities of individuals by creating linking values and turning it profitable.

It must be noted that marketing and the market, and therefore consumers were always in close interaction with each other throughout history, deriving from the fact that the task of the marketing discipline is to identify and react to the current needs and desires of consumers. This statement is proved by the definition articulated by Philip Kotler:

“Marketing is the science and art of exploring, creating, and delivering value to satisfy the needs of a target market at a profit. Marketing identifies unfulfilled needs and desires. It defines, measures, and quantifies the size of the identified market and the profit potential. It pinpoints which segments the company is capable of serving best and it designs and promotes the appropriate products and services.” (Kotler, 2001-2017)

Marketing therefore reacts to the market tendencies, creates products that serve the arising needs, and finally promoting them to raise awareness, given that at the end of the day it is a business discipline, in exchange for profit. Promotion is the only part that can be considered influencing, but it is not the same as manipulation. Eventually if a product does not provide value to the consumers, they are not going to make the consumer decision. Individuals have the more or less free choice whether to purchase the product or not to purchase the product, of course there are several factors that influence the decision such as monetary position, availability, or time. However in the era of the internet of things, the accessibility of information consumers can even make quick background checks before buying a product, which was impossible before. The presence of brands help them in many ways as well in the decision making process. Finally by
making the purchasing decisions consumers support the trends in market and the “vicious” circle of consumption starts all over again.

Because of these reasons identifying what the actual cause was and what the consequence, is equivalent to ask “Which came first, the chicken or the egg?” However as a technical answer can be provided to this question (considering the evolution theories, the egg had to come first from a less-perfect organism, evolving further towards an even better version of the spices. It must be noted that they were always going hand-in-hand) The same phenomenon can be considered in case of consumption and marketing, marketing would not have been able to be successful if the consumers would not have wished for the values it creates. The constant and continuous interactions led to the phenomenon that is called today as “consumer society”, imbued with the enhanced desire for consuming images and spectacles. The key difference between the evolution of spices and the evolution of marketing is that while evolution is random, marketing and consumption actions are more conscious and possible to be regulated in order to not to lead the evolution of spices that would later go extinct. Deriving from this train of thoughts it can be suggested that marketing is indeed responsible for societal trends and therefore created images have to be treated accordingly, and to be created in a way that it provides actual value to consumers not just to force them to consume everything mindlessly.

The societal role of marketing was already suggested by Cova (1997) while emphasising the importance of the “linking value”. Additionally the increased societal and informative role of marketing was also recognised and promoted by the American Marketing Association in 2008, when they introduced the updated definition for marketing, they stated that “Marketing is no longer a function – it is an educational process”, (American Marketing Association, 2008, p. 1) and thus the definition became:

“Marketing is the activity, set of institutions, and processes for creating, communicating, delivering, and exchanging offerings that have value for customers, clients, partners, and society at large.” (American Marketing Association, 2008)

At the same time practice is always different then theory, and there are communicated messages that are indeed manipulative, distort or withhold truth, and thus confuse/manipulate consumers. However, again, in the age of information the consumers also are responsible for filtering the incoming information and not just consider
Reversal of production and consumption also suggests, that in the era of postmodernity consumers are producers as well, going even further Firat, Dholakia, Venkatesh (1995) argues that in a sense all of them becomes markers of their selves, becoming an active link in the production process instead of just being a target. This way putting even more responsibility to the consumers as well, sharing the burden with marketers. Companies are pressured to open up their operations (design, manufacturing, assembling, packaging, delivering, etc.) in order to satisfy the needs of the “customizing consumer” tendency. For this purpose products are becoming less and less finished, and more and more ready to be customized. (Firat, Dholakia, & Venkatesh, 1995) In case of the car industry for example, both TESLA and Ford provides an online platform for their clients to design and personalize their dream-car.
2 BRANDS AND BRAND COMMUNITIES

2.1 CONSUMER AND COMPANY BENEFITS FROM BRANDS

It could be seen in the previous chapter that it is more and more accepted amongst the postmodern individuals to express and forge themselves through commodities which are imbued by symbols and images, and are provided by the market.

It is easy to see therefore the enhanced importance of brands and their messages in the postmodern world. In this chapter it is intended to clear up the definition what brands actually are, and how do they provide value/ benefit for the consumers, as well as for the firms at the same time.

In accordance with the American Marketing Association “A brand is a name, term, sign, symbol or design, or a combination of them, intended to identify the goods and services of one seller or group of sellers and to differentiate them from those of competition” (Keller, 2013)

Creating a well-functioning and strong brand is one of the most important tasks of marketing discipline as it is responsible how consumers will perceive the product, which can be considered as the 0th step of purchasing decision. As discussed in the previous paragraph, marketing and thus branding only works well in the case if it is able to create value for the consumer in the first place.

Hence consumer-centrism, the chapter is to be started with the introduction of benefits of brands for consumers. Before talking about the benefits however, it is essential to understand what risks the consumers are taking while making the purchasing decisions for a specific brand.

According to Keller (2013) there are 6 major types of risks that consumers are exposed to. At the time of purchase they take functional risk, meaning that the product might will not serve up to their expectations, physical risk referring to the chance that the product poses threat to the physical well-being of the user or others, financial risk when it turns out that the product does not worth the paid price, social risk meaning that the usage of the product causes embarrassment from others seeing the consumer using the product, psychological risk refers to the phenomenon when the product negatively affects the
Based on the potential threat factors therefore we can say, that brands primarily help consumers to feel safe about their consumption decisions by reducing the risk taken while doing so. The risk reduction ability of brands get enhanced even further if the chosen product is considered to be “experience good” (such as automobile tires) or “credence good” (such as insurance coverage) where the product attributes and qualities are not obvious from the very start, and so it takes a longer time to determine whether one of the aforementioned risks appeared through consumption or not. (Keller, 2013)

Brands also help consumers to simplify their purchasing decisions thus ultimately reducing their search costs both in terms of time spent on thinking about the right product choice (internal) and actually finding the desired product (external). The fact that brands serve as symbolic devices was already emphasized earlier, consumers buy products to project their self-images, communicate the type of person they want to be both towards the outside world and in many cases even to themselves. As long as the brand is capable of providing its consumers with continuous high-level utility, they are most probably going to reward the company with their trust, repeated purchases and eventually their loyalty. (Keller, 2013)

We can see that if a given brand keeps up its side of the bargain and consistently satisfies the consumer, the earned loyalty and repeat purchases of the customer is going to be fruitful to the company as well. Loyalty ultimately provides competitive advantage to the firm deriving from predictable and secure demand, increase in the price elasticity of consumers, while it also creates barriers of entry making it complicated for competition to take away the hard-earned market share from the company. In financial terms companies can get access to higher-level, and stable cash flows with reduced associated risk. Consistent branding activities and marketing communications make it possible to establish deep bonds with the consumers over time as well, making them stay loyal even in case if a new brand emerges on the market with identical (or even more beneficial) market offerings. (Keller, 2013)

It can not be neglected either that brands also serve as means of legal protection of the unique features of a product, enabling the company to safely invest into the brand equity
on a long run. It has become one of the most important tasks of companies to establish and build strong brands, create strong brand equity to gain the above mentioned benefits. (Keller, 2013)

Interestingly enough while brands are basically the representatives of postmodernism, as hyperreality is almost equivalent to the definition of brands, fragmentation is present as well since there are several brands to choose from and therefore expressing the selves all in a different unique way. Yet in a contradicting way brands serve as the modernist guidelines/metanarratives for consumption, further reinforcing the idea that human beings actually need such central ideas, to have a point of reference, and not to get lost in the world of separate realities.

2.1.1 CONSUMER-BASED BRAND EQUITY

In order to determine the value of the brand, Keller decided to take an approach from the point of view of consumers and so he developed the consumer-based brand equity (CBBE) model, which proved to be a great tool to build, measure, and manage brand equity and described the notion as follows:

“Consumer-based brand equity occurs when the consumer has a high level of awareness and familiarity with the brand and holds some strong, favourable, and unique brand association in memory.” (Keller, 2013, p. 73)

CBBE concerns itself with two major focus topics, namely differentiation of the brand, and the responses to marketing activities in line with the brand knowledge. Since the model is consumer-based it argues that the value of the brand is determined by the direct and indirect experiences of the consumers receives throughout its existence, what they have learnt, felt, seen or heard about the brand. Therefore also claiming that the brand equity is ultimately resides within the minds and hearts of consumers. (Keller, 2013)

As noted earlier, with the presence of a well-established brand equity consumers react more favourably to marketing activities invested into the brand, than in case if there is no or week brand equity. The emphasis on the differentiating power is extremely high as without it the competition would just be based on price-comparison, and the vulnerability towards competitive marketing actions would increase, and benefiting from loyalty would disappear along with the potential of reaching higher margins. (Keller, 2013)
2.1.2 **Brand Resonance**

Keller (2013) established a brand equity model called the brand resonance pyramid in order to show a path from the foundation of brand building to the peak of the pyramid where the desired, active and intense, loyal consumer relationship is found. If the peak point is not reached by the brand, it can not considered to be strong either.

From the bottom to the top the pyramid consists of four levels and requires six major building blocks to complete it. The first building block of the pyramid is *brand salience* which functions as foundation of the whole process implying that consumer awareness towards the brand should be strong, the brand should be easily recognised or recalled. Having high salience is necessary, however it is not sufficient for success. The second block is called *brand meaning* that is also a must to be established, it consists of a functional and a more extrinsic value deriving from the actual product. The functional aspect is called brand performance, its aim is to successfully satisfy the utilitarian, aesthetic, and economic needs of a consumer as a base for advancing further to create loyalty and resonance. Brand imagery is the extrinsic aspect of the brand meaning serving psychological and social needs rather than functional-ones, the source of information can derive from the consumers’ own experience or from external influences such as ads or word of mouth (WOM) effects. The task of brand meanings is to create strong, favourable, and unique associations within the minds of the consumers, and thus to create the third level of the pyramid, *brand responses*. Similarly to the previous level brand response also have a more rational set of elements, brand judgements, and a set affecting consumer’s emotional responses, brand feelings. Brand judgement is based on the analysis, and evaluation of brand meanings (both utilitarian and symbolic), while taking into consideration if and how the company is able to provide the promised values focusing mostly on quality, credibility, consideration, and superiority. The other branch of responses is brand feelings evaluating the emotional reactions and responses towards the brand which can greatly vary between mild, and intense, and can either be positive or negative. (Keller, 2013)

In case if the responses are positive *brand resonance* can be achieved as the ultimate-piece of the pyramid describing the relationship between consumer and brand by determining how strong is the synchronisation between them. Brand resonance is characterised by intensity implying the depth of the established psychological bond, and
activity embracing the level of loyalty. These two dimensions can be broken down to four further categories, namely behavioural loyalty, attitudinal attachment, sense of community, and active engagement. Behavioural loyalty shows the tendency for repeat purchases, and the possible increase in consumption quantity. This category is an essential implication and measure for brand resonance, although it does not considers emotional attachments, the reason for repeat purchase can be the accessibility of the product as well. Attitudinal attachment refers to the phenomenon that the brand has to be something more than a tool to satisfy the needs of the consumer, it has to take a special place in the heart and mind of the consumer, ideally the brand has to be loved. Sense of community is an important social phenomenon claiming that consumers feel kinship and affiliation with other brand users, let the community be online or offline. Finally active engagement is to be observed which means that at this level the consumer is willing to invest additional resources to the brand (time, energy, money) beyond the regular and frequent consumption of the brand expressing his/her love towards it by purchasing branded merchandises or actively contacting with other brand users. (Keller, 2013)

2.2 BRAND COMMUNITIES

In the previous chapters we could see the potential values companies and their brands are able to create for both consumers and the company. In order to reach a solid brand resonance and at the same time to gain the intense, and active loyalty of consumers utilizing the notion of the linking value and building a brand community is an extremely great tool in my opinion. Given the phenomenon of extreme individualism eventually leading to social isolation, establishment and later on belonging to communities of like-minded individuals where members understand each-other is one of the most needed desires of human soul in the postmodern era. (Cova, 1997)

Throughout this part of my thesis therefore I am going to introduce and analyse the notion of brand communities, show their characteristics, the motivation of consumers in joining such communities and benefits deriving from their creation. However before going further into details, it is essential to understand what brand communities really are about, and to do that the concept of community could serve as a basis.

McAlexander, Schouten, Koenig (2002) describe communities as set of member entities and the relationships they establish amongst each other. They tend to be identified based on their commonality or identification amongst their members let it be a neighbourhood,
occupation, hobby, or an admiration of a brand. Individuals in communities can share different resources which can be cognitive, emotional, or material such as information, moral support, or even food, there is however one thing that is always present: the creation and negotiation of meaning. (McAlexander, Schouten, & Koenig, 2002)

Muniz and O’Guinn (2001) goes sociologically a little deeper in understanding communities, arguing that there are three major components that have to be present in the life of a community to be entitled to bear the name “community”, namely consciousness of kind, shared rituals, and sense of moral responsibility. Consciousness of a kind refers to the connection members feel towards each other which resides in the collective sense of difference compared to the ones who are not members of the community. Shared rituals and traditions serve to contain the values and meanings in the life of the community, while serving as visible public signs. The components of these values are mostly shared history, culture, and consciousness. The final element is the sense of moral responsibility referring to the obligations towards the community and its members, which gains enhanced relevance in case of the occurrence of events threatening the well-being of the community, in order to prevent such events collective action is needed. (Muniz & O'Guinn, 2001)

In addition to these elements Muniz & O’Guinn (2001) also claim that geographical barriers have disappeared, making the communities globally viable, and that community became a form of shared identity. They suggest that the reason behind is the new, easily-accessible communication technology as through mass-media communities are able to spread and reproduce easily, without significant distortions in the actual meanings and values behind. (Muniz & O'Guinn, 2001) Although theoretically there are no geographic boundaries anymore according to McAlexander, Schouten, Koenig (2002) they still can be geographically concentrated or scattered.

2.3 TYPES OF CONSUMPTION COMMUNITIES

Brand community is one type of consumption communities firstly identified and defined by Muniz & O’Guinn (2001) as “A specialized, non-geographically bound community, based on a structured set of social relationships among admirers of a brand. It is specialized because at its center there is a branded good or service.” (Muniz & O'Guinn, 2001, p. 412) The three core components are the same as they were in case of traditional communities with the difference, that these components reside in a commercial setting.
They consider brand communities as perfectly legitimate versions of communities, however it must be noted that they also consider brand communities as a commercial tool, and nothing more. They say that communities as such can turn out to be able to forge relatively strong commitment between its members, but they are only rarely extreme, which also leads to the phenomenon that the established moral responsibility is possibly limited & subtle, but can not be neglected either. That being said they also think that brand communities potentially evolve around strong brands with long, and rich history. Having a strong, threatening competitor increases the chances even further. Publicly consumed goods have better chances in establishing a community, but being marginal or opposing the mainstream culture is not a necessary condition. The articulation of these characteristics make them cause contradictions with other researchers such as (Cova, 1997), (Cova & Pace, 2006) (McAlexander, Schouten, & Koenig, 2002) & (McAlexander & Schouten, 1998) when it comes to the notion of brand communities as shown in the next parts.

2.3.1 SUBCULTURE

Subcultures are extremely similar to brand communities based on the definition of Muniz and O’Guinn (2001) in many ways, however there are some fundamental differences. Subcultures are more unusual, the carry much deeper connections than brand communities do affecting even ways community members live their lives. Subcultures generally use symbols that are present in the culture of society, deconstructs, and attaches new, customised meanings to it. While on the other hand brand communities do not reject the culture surrounding their symbols but accept them as they are. (Muniz & O’Guinn, 2001) This contradiction is also possible to observe in one of the articles of McAlexander, Schouten, Koenig (2002) where they approve the legitimacy of the brand relationships as defined by Muniz & O’Guinn (2001) (customer-customer-brand triad), they claim that this model overlooks some of the elements that provide additional support to the communities. They argue that brand communities ought to be considered more from consumer perspective, and therefore say that existence and meaningfulness should be found within the community itself rather than the brand surrounding the community. (McAlexander, Schouten, & Koenig, 2002) Therefore ultimately saying that subcultures seen by Muniz & O’Guinn (2001) are actually the proper versions of brand communities.
2.3.2 Neo-Tribalism

As it was hinted in the previous chapter, Cova (1997) claims that even with the presence of extreme individualism, the search for community is present in today’s society as well. From the point of view of neo-tribalism, communities are considered to be flicker micro-groups that get established, disappear, just for later on to re-appear as something slightly different. (Cova, 1997) The concept of neo-tribalism is different from the one of brand communities in a way that neo-tribes are primarily considered to be local and highly interpersonal, while based on the interpretation of Muniz & O’Guinn (2001), brand communities are geographically unbound, and strictly commercial in nature. Additionally brand communities are perceived to be more stable both in terms of their timeliness and consumer’s devotion towards them, but neither of these factors becomes extreme often. They also think that building a brand community is more than simply compensatory actions for the lack of community. (Muniz & O’Guinn, 2001) Although the differences are noted and accepted by Cova, throughout the article “Brand community of convenience products” (Cova & Pace, 2006) he assumed indifference between brand communities and brand tribes and even used the dimensions articulated by Muniz and O’Guinn (2001).

“For our research’s sake, we will then depict indifferently as a brand community or brand tribe any group of people that possess a common interest in a specific brand and create a parallel social universe (subculture) rife with its own myths, values rituals, vocabulary and hierarchy.” (Cova & Pace, 2006, p. 1089). Similarly to this approach I am going to take the work of Muniz & O’Guinn as a core and expand it with the ideas of both McAlexander et. al. (2002) and Cova (1997) Cova & Pace (2006).

2.4 Brand Community Characteristics

2.4.1 Consciousness of Kind

Consciousness of a kind is the most fundamental attribute of brand communities expressing the sense of belongingness, what it is even translated as “we-ness”. The belongingness is evoked by the brand as well, but in terms of community it refers more to the common ties that members share with each other. Within a brand community shared consciousness refers to the phenomenon when members have a feeling that they “sort of know each other” (Muniz & O'Guinn, 2001, p. 418) without actually meeting before. (Muniz & O'Guinn, 2001)
Consciousness of a kind is expressed in two opposing ways in the determination of a brand community bordering it from two sides. What it is, is described by the notion “legitimacy” and what it is not is hinted by “oppositional brand loyalty”. First and foremost legitimacy serves as a border between members and non-members, but it emphasises differences within the established community as well. It has a purpose of determining who are considered to be the “true-members” and who are only present on the periphery of the community. The status of true-membership is generally not very difficult to obtain, it can be granted to anyone as long as they are devoted to the brand, it must be noted however that there are hierarchical levels to differentiate between members. Additionally members potentially dislike other users who use the brand/product for a “wrong reason” which mostly consists of not acknowledging the culture, history, rituals, traditions, and symbols of the community. This phenomenon can lead to tension points between members, not being able to decide who is a true believer and who is just an opportunistic user. (Muniz & O’Guinn, 2001) New members are especially prone to be perceived and judged negatively if they are not completely aware of the brand and community values. Wrong brand usage also shows the occasional differences in objectives to be reached between marketers and community members. According to Cova & Pace (2006) this difference can also lead to questioning and debating who actually owns the brand? Brand communities are possible to express claims for the ownership of the brand and get to the level that they actually try and hijack it ultimately saying that the brand belongs to them, not to the company. (Cova & Pace, 2006)

Oppositional brand loyalty is a way for indirectly describing what the shared consciousness is about by setting an example what it is not about. It is an important guiding component as it makes it clearer to members what the brand does not stand for. It also helps in uniting members against a common threat let it be actually existing or just on a more perceived level. (Muniz & O’Guinn, 2001) Several companies, who are aiming to establish brand community assume that conflicts should be minimized and a peaceful flow of events should be assured. The opposition between “in groups” and “out groups” however contributes greatly to fuelling passion of the members and helps differentiating between hard-core fans and less involved individuals. (Fournier & Lee, 2009)
2.4.2 **RITUALS AND TRADITIONS**

Rituals and traditions have especially important role in carrying and transmitting the essential values and meanings of the brand within and beyond the community. They generally emerge from shared consumption experiences of the brand. One of their major roles is the celebration of history. Retelling the history of the brand keeps the community alive and helps spreading its culture. Favoured historical elements generally revolve around the formation of the brand, or around the evolution of its logo. (Muniz & O'Guinn, 2001)

Sharing brand stories is an other important means in cultivating the community ties, these are stories that derive from the common experiences of the users with the brand which are particularly interesting. These stories are often repeated even if the members already know them by heart, in this way eventually becoming myths or legends. These elements are highly effective tools to point out, communicate, and to teach communal values by example. Rich history can impress and inspire community members by enabling them to obtain special knowledge about their beloved brand. Due to the global nature of brand communities these stories can easily become wide-spread and well-known in the community, but there are ones that remain only on a local scale. (Muniz & O'Guinn, 2001) In my opinion the linking value element of brands manifests extremely well in this aspect of the brand communities. Rituals and storytelling provide great setting for like-minded individuals to recognise each-other and to have a common topic to start out with, that both party equally enjoys discussing.

2.4.3 **MORAL RESPONSIBILITY**

Moral responsibility is the third major ingredient in the life of brand communities referring to the sense of duty or obligation towards the individual members and the community as a whole as well. It also produces and supports group cohesion. One of its core missions is integrating and retaining its members to ensure the survival of the community. Similarly as it was in case of “legitimacy”, this part intends to let the members know the right and wrong things to do, but more in a moral sense than a functional-one. The question of how to treat the ones, who leave the community is articulated here. Some might even go to a level where they label the leavers as “betrayers” and actual social relationships might get damaged because of such decisions. (Muniz & O'Guinn, 2001)
The second mission of moral responsibility is assisting in the use of the brand optimally meaning that the members of the community should provide with a helping hand if they find their fellow members in distress on a voluntary basis, without giving it a lot of thoughts. Although the scale here might not be wide, these help factors mostly derive from the accumulated experiences of the members who are using the brand for several years at that point. Providing help and information between members makes the community thriving, leading to better problem solving and ultimately better experiences with the brand. From the outsiders’ perspective this information exchange potentially can make the decision of joining to the community more appealing, however it most probably would considered to be a “wrong reason” from the point of view of members. (Muniz & O’Guinn, 2001)

2.5 BUILDING AND MANAGING A BRAND COMMUNITY

2.5.1 BUILDING BRAND COMMUNITIES

We could see that Muniz and O’Guinn (2001) set the ground-rules for the concept of brand community that became widely accepted throughout the studies introduced later on. Even though the base approach is accepted it is just natural that the upcoming studies added more or partly changed the dimensions of their model. McAlexander, Schouten, Koenig (2002) did in accordance with this latter statement. When they suggested the introduction of their version of the model they argued that the consumer is the key figure that should be put into the focus of attention rather than the brand itself, thus giving birth to the “Customer-Centric – Model of Brand Community”. Unlike the customer-customer-brand triad suggested by Muniz & O’Guinn (2001) this interpretation consists of four relationship elements where the focal customer serves as a catalyst. The customer has a relationship with his/her actual branded possession (product), with the brand itself, with the owners and managers of the brand (marketers), and last but not least customers of the same brand also have relationships with each other. (McAlexander, Schouten, & Koenig, 2002) Stokburger-Sauer (2010) also suggests that analysing and utilizing the relationship between the brand and the consumer only potentially misses out other determining factors. (Stokburger-Sauer, 2010)

Marketer should take an effort in order to manage and support the development of the relationship types discussed above. Building a brand community is not an easy task, and while the management of it mostly in the hand of marketers, the company as a whole
should commit itself to the development of it and back up the process in production, and even in employee selection / training. (Fournier & Lee, 2009) Communities should also be carefully engineered instead of just investing into brand equity and expecting the community to follow. There are three major types of community connections, namely pools, webs, and hubs. They all affect different types of relationship levels and in order to form a strong brand community all these connections should be considered and incorporated in the global community strategy. In a pool type of relationship the shared values and goals are the uniting factors, this part of the community is manageable by articulating and communicating clear set of values of the brand frequently. This form of relationship is great for getting awareness and publicity but the connection between the members is rather loose which can be compensated through the formation of webs and hubs. Web affiliations are built through strong one-to-one connections therefore this kind of communities are the strongest out of the three mentioned types. Hubs are connected through a common admiration for an outstanding person. Hubs are potentially good in communicating values and acquiring new members but if the center figure leaves his/her position, the community is likely to fall apart. In order to gain the benefit of all the mentioned community types while reducing the risks of losing members, the best solution is to combine them and thus form a strong global community. (Fournier & Lee, 2009)

Once the groundwork for a brand community is done, the product and the brand is ready, efforts have to be taken from the side of the company as a whole to facilitate the development of the community. It has to be noted however that brand communities first and foremost are intended to serve the consumers first and the business itself only comes after. The point of brand communities to build loyalty to the brand rather than enhancing sales transactions. Consumers participate in brand communities for wide variety of reasons such as finding emotional support, finding motivation or inspiration, satisfy the need for contributing for a greater good, or to develop new skills and interests. Last but not least to consumers often join communities for the purpose of building new relationships. (Fournier & Lee, 2009) Ultimately saying that “People are more interested in the social links that come from brand affiliations than the brand themselves.” articulated by (Fournier & Lee, 2009, p. 107) which is also equivalent to the “Link is more important than the thing.” (Cova, 1997, p. 307)

McAlexander, Schouten, (1998) and Stokburger (2010) also suggests that the main reason for establishing brand communities is the achievement of higher consumer retention.
Based on the Pareto Principle of Joseph Juran (Investopedia, 2018) claiming that 20% of the consumers is responsible for the production of 80% of the company’s profit, McAlexander and Schouten, (1998) claims that a mere 5% reduction of churning consumers can contribute to 85% increase in profits.

2.5.2 MANAGING BRAND COMMUNITIES – NOTION OF “BRANDFESTS”

In order to support the development of a brand community that serves the interest of the consumers well while at the same time provides them with linking value McAlexander and Schouten (1998) suggests the organization of events celebrating the brand, called “Brandfests”. By their definition “Brandfests are corporate sponsored events provided primarily for the benefit of current customers. Their primary function is the celebration of brand ownership.” (McAlexander & Schouten, 1998, p. 2) The classic example for the organization of Brandfests is Harley Davidson’ Harley Owners Group, however there are several other possibilities for Brandfests varying between agricultural to high-tech products, concerts, conventions or other gatherings.

Brandfests are generally organized at a special place and makes consumers break out of their everyday life, making them set time apart for the event to experience something unique. The four major value elements of Brandfests are the facilitation of extraordinary consumer experience with the brand, managing the development of consumer relationships with the product, brand, company, and with other consumers. (McAlexander & Schouten, 1998)

One of the main goals of Brandfests is to forge extraordinary experiences for the consumers, experiences that go beyond the boundaries of simple enjoyment and taps into the hedonistic nature of the human soul. Brandfests have to be emotionally intense, highly memorable and personally significant, and the activities and programs have to resonate with the lifestyle of the customers nonetheless. Later on after the event these experiences can be linked to the brand to foster positive associations in the head of the consumers. In order to achieve such experiences there are three key aspects namely; opportunities for personal growth or triumph have to be provided, perceived risks have to be controlled, and/or finally consumers have to be supported in making new connections amongst each other. Attendance of such events by itself can become an extraordinary experience, even travelling to the venue can serve as one. The risks of attending constitute of three major factors as suggested by McAlexander and Schouten (1998) namely financial, physical,
and social risks. Social risk here refers to the feeling of not fitting in to the community, or potential embarrassment covering the psychological risk aspect as well as it was suggested by Keller (2013). Although McAlexander and Schouten (1998) claim that risks contribute to the excitement factors and therefore to the extraordinary nature, they also emphasise that these risks should be carefully managed by the organizers as they can also discourage consumers from actually attending the event.

The most important aspects from the point of view of this thesis is the facilitation of connections between consumers, therefore I am going to put the emphasis on this factor. Throughout the Brandfests consumers are able to be amongst individuals with shared interests, values, aspirations, and motivations which contributes to their self-affirmation and self-identification greatly. In addition to that as (Gainer, 1995) already found in her research that experiences are the most valuable if one is able to share them. McAlexander and Schouten (1998) emphasises this aspect as well saying that the extraordinary nature of Brandfests exponentially if individuals are able to share it with each other. The establishment of such similar-minded environments are even able to positively affect the consumers’ overall experiences with the brand even if the consumers are not particularly satisfied with product/brand. It must be noted however that negative experiences with the community members can cause reversed effect as well. Optimistically thinking such inter-consumer ties can serve as a strong exit barrier as leaving the community would also lead to the disappearance of the supportive network. (McAlexander & Schouten, 1998)

The other types of relationships supported by Brandfests create value more for the company by more directly developing the brand equity. These relationships are namely the relationship between the consumer and his/her product choice, between the consumer and the brand and between the consumer and the corporation behind the brand. (McAlexander & Schouten, 1998)

Consumer-product relationship suggests that a consumer is actually able to establish a bond with his/her owned product and it can even serve as the extension of the self, brandfests can help to make such connections even deeper. Consumer-brand relationship supports the level of identification that a consumer can develop with the brand. They can determine how well the brand fits their actual or desired lifestyle, furthermore they can see how other members use the brand. This kind of relationship supports the expression of “brand fit”-ness with branded merchandise for example, differentiating between dedicated and less dedicated members. Finally, the relationship between consumer and
company also develops in a sense that consumers can get the impression that the company truly cares about them, while for the employees consumers somehow actually become more than just data in their system. (McAlexander & Schouten, 1998)
3 THE GAME - LEAGUE OF LEGENDS

The primary research of the current thesis revolves around the game called League of Legends. Therefore I dedicate this short chapter to the brand, I am going to summarize the short history of the product, and introduce the most important information about the game itself to provide a better understanding for the primary research later on.

3.1 THE STORY & BUSINESS MODEL

League of Legends (LoL) is an online multiplayer PC game in the genre of MOBAs (Multiple Online Battle Arena). The game was developed and released by RIOT Games in 2009.

What is extremely interesting that the game itself follows the Free to Play (F2P) business model, meaning exactly what it seems to mean: the game is completely free to download and play. From the point of view of raising awareness and gaining popularity this model works perfectly fine. This is shown by the skyrocketing success of the game. By 2011 the amount of monthly active users (MAUs) reached 15 million and through a consistent increase in numbers RIOT Games reached 100 million monthly active players by the year of 2016. (Statista, 2016) Based on statistics from 2012 and 2014, 37-40% of these players use the game on a daily basis. (Statista, 2014)

Even though the game is free to play League of Legends was the first on the list of games in terms of total digital revenue in 2018 in accordance with (SuperData, 2018)). As of 2016, the worldwide revenue of the game reached 1.8 Billion US Dollars, growing further in 2017 to reach 2.1 Billion USD. (Statista, 2017) This achievement also resulted a 66.3-percent share on the MOBA market, followed by the brand major rival, DOTA 2, with 14%. (Statista, 2016)

The income derives from microtransactions executed on the game platform where consumers can purchase characters, visual updates for their favoured characters, and other cosmetic updates for the gameplay. These transactions generally range from around $2 - $15. Additionally it must be noted that the priced products provide absolutely no functional benefits, these kind of purchases are purely for aesthetics. Which supports the postmodern idea of consuming signs and imageries, as well as the notion of hyperreality.
The company is also heavily involved in providing wide variety of branded merchandises such as clothing pieces, arts, and wide range of collectible figures and plush.

As it is written on the homepage of RIOT Games, the most important manifesto of the company is to put “Player Experience First”. (Riot Games, 2018) It is also their vision to make eSports part of the mainstream culture, in which they are taking pioneering steps, organizing championship series, and even world-cups. Such endeavour was initiated by Starcraft, an online strategic game of Blizzard, but the audience was limited to South Korea only. (Fisher, 2014) The aim is to make gaming culture mainstream that can also lead to distinguished appreciation from the side of the consumers.

We can see that the philosophy and the actions taken by the company, as well as the bare existence of the game itself are greatly in line with the postmodern values and provide extremely fertile ground for nurturing brand community and connect individuals from all over the world.

3.2 THE GAME SETTING

The actual game and gameplay includes elements that is relevant from the point of view of postmodernity and community as well. For this reason, and for the reason that during my research some factors have importance here a short summary is provided in regard of what the game is about.

League of Legends is an online computer game in the MOBA genre, which takes place in the fictional universe called “Runeterra”. One game-match is played by two opposing teams that consists of five players each. The objective is to destroy the enemy’s fortified core building called the “Nexus” in a 30-50 minutes-game. In order to do that each player takes one of the positions each requiring different playstyles, with the help of one of the 140 “Champions” that the player, or as he/she is called in this universe “Summoner”, controls. The game gets complicated even further as summoners have to choose the proper set of equipment for their champions throughout match, and the list goes on.

It can be seen that the game is difficult to master, and in order to match players evenly RIOT Games introduced a matchmaking system that helps doing so. Players who are more confident in their gaming skills can proceed to play “ranked games” that can serve as a basis for the hierarchy of members. There are eight so-called “tiers” further consisting
of five “divisions” each, the eight tiers from the bottom to the top are Unranked, Bronze (19.11%), Silver (49.13%), Gold (22.49%), Platinum (7.44%), Diamond (1.65%), Master (0.03%), and Challenger (0.15%). The percentages indicated next to the tiers are representing the relevant share of players in each division who plays ranked games, the ones who never played count as “unranked”. (League of Graphs, 2018)
4 PRIMARY RESEARCH

During the previous chapters aimed to understand, summarize, and introduce what postmodern individuals are like through the essential aspects of postmodernity. As mentioned above in the postmodern era extreme individualism started to develop but in a contradicting way in the meanwhile highly separated individuals realized their evolutionary need for community and social relations, driving them to form social bonds with like-minded individuals. Deriving from this thought I decided to analyse how marketers /companies/ brands have realized this phenomenon arising from the side of consumers and got the notion of brand communities. Understood essential elements within brand communities that have to be present and got some insights on what aspects have more optional nature. Going beyond normal brand communities I have taken a look at companies which create “brandfests” as in my opinion these festivals are the peak for fostering social interactions as they provide extremely great settings for this purpose and therefore promoting the “linking value” of the products. In order to analyse these issues I have decided to work with the community revolving around the online game called League of Legends created by RIOT Games.

4.1 RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The core research question of my thesis is to understand: “How belonging to a brand community evolved in the postmodern context, with special emphasis on the linking value?” This means that first and foremost I intend to uncover the postmodern mind-set of consumers and I am going to analyse the brand community notion mostly in a sense of how it is able to provide consumers with “linking value”. The question itself however carries several notions and further questions that I intend to better understand throughout my primary research and evaluate if the findings are in line with the literature discussed during the previous chapters.

The first group of questions centres around the notion of postmodernity and the postmodern individuals themselves. In a form of question, the main question for this group sounds as follows: “How postmodernity is present in the life of postmodern individuals?” What do these consumers look for when deciding on getting a product in the first place? How the discussed postmodern conditions are present in their lives? How their value system has developed? Within the conditions of postmodernity I am especially
curious of the presence of hyperreality and fragmentation. How the meaning of “reality” shifted, if shifted at all? Do they indeed change their behaviour / personality depending on the situations they encounter? Is the notion of doublethink present, are consumers aware that they are influenced? At what scale do they look for symbols and signs when consuming a product? Does it contribute to their self-expression? How is the aestheticization present in their decisions? Do they prefer physical products or services/ experiences more? What do they look for when deciding on purchasing a specific type of products? In generalized terms I am most interested to explore the motivations and mindset of postmodern individuals.

Regarding the brand communities, first and foremost my study aims to explore the elements of a brand community surrounding the League of Legends to prove its existence. For this purpose the presence of Muniz & O’Guinn’s (2001) three major attributes of a brand community is going to be analysed, namely: consciousness of kind, rituals, and traditions, and moral responsibility. The strength of these elements are also going to be determined. In addition to that based on Fournier – Lee’s (2009)suggestions for establishing strong brand communities, the exact type of the community is also going to be researched to see if all three forms (pools, webs, and hubs) are present in case of League of Legends. In case of the topic of brand communities however the main goal of my research is to see how the brand can help creating social bonds, and what is the quality of these bonds? The study also aims to understand the viewpoints of postmodern individuals social relationships established in the “real world” as well as in the “digital world”.

Last but not least my thesis also includes the events called “brandfests” defined and analysed first by McAlexander & Schouten (1998). The main questions regarding brandfests were if they are indeed able to foster the development of social relationships? What consumers are willing to undergo to participate such events?

In terms of brand equity my research aimed to identify the elements of the consumer-based brand equity pyramid focusing most importantly on the level of brand resonance, and the source of brand loyalty.
4.2 METHODOLOGY

4.2.1 QUALITATIVE RESEARCH – DEPTH INTERVIEW

The goal of my research, and the research questions were to understand the way of thinking, motivations, and feelings of consumers that is an extremely complicated task. Moreover deriving the psychological and sociological nature of my questions to be answered I have chosen qualitative research methodology. In addition to this reason the implementations of qualitative methods are also recommended by the authors concerning themselves with postmodernity. (Firat, Dholakia, & Venkatesh, 1995) (Cova, 1997) (Firat, Venkatesh, & Sherry, 1993)

“Qualitative research is unstructured, exploratory in nature, based on small samples, and may utilize qualitative techniques such as focus groups, word associations, and depth interviews.” (Malhotra, 2009, old.: 41) Out of these options I have chosen depth interviews as for my research I considered this method the most suitable-one. As the name suggests, such interviews are conducted on a one-to-one basis, providing alternative to explore the deepest opinions / thoughts of the interview subject in an unbiased way, as social pressure is minimized, and thoughts are not influenced by others either. (Malhotra, 2009)

Since qualitative data analysis uses words for carrying out the analysis, there are no standard rules for each and every case, the interviewer understands and interprets the answers for the specific questions, providing a subjective nature for the analysis. There are three recommended steps for staying as objective as possible while analysing the obtained data. First step is data reduction taking the question-relevant responses out of the big data, followed by data display in a form of charts, diagrams, or matrixes. The final step is drawing conclusion and implement verification, means second checking the analysed date in regards to the research questions. (Malhotra, 2009) In line with this methodology I have used Microsoft Excel where I have recreated the backbone of the interview and entered all the answers provided by the respondents in the relevant cell. Later on the answers were analysed, notes were added, and based on the identification of common elements or in case of finding information that was highly in line with the reviewed literature conclusions were drawn.
4.2.2 Depth Interview Methodology and Obtaining Participants

In accordance with McCracken (1988) the critical mass for a depth interview series is a small sample of eight relevant respondents, this amount being sufficient in most cases. Based on this I have decided to conduct twelve interviews altogether. Six out of the respondents were selected with a mild requirements. The only criteria for them was to be players of League of Legends. The other six respondents on the other hand had the requirement of attending any of the events organized by Riot Games (LeagueFest, World Championship, League Championship Series [LCS] or Tournaments). Ideally the event attenders should have been further separated into two groups, three attending only one event while the other three attending more to see the differences even further. However given the difficulty of finding such respondents, I eventually managed to gather six out of which only two attended the same kind of events (LCS) multiple times, and one who attended one LCS and an other RIOT-organized event, there was one who attended a Tournament. Additionally I have to note, that one of the participants stopped playing the game three months prior the interview, but given the fact that the respondent was within the top 1.65% highest ranking players, I have made an exception with him. Talking to him also provided great opportunity for asking a semi-professional player why he eventually stopped playing the game.

When designing the backbone of the depth interview (Appendix 6.1.) I started from general, “warm-up” questions and eventually got to more personal ones, and more focused on the research questions. The interview itself was a mostly the same for all the twelve participants, with the only exception that the ones who attended any “brandfests” were asked to describe their experiences regarding the event as well at the end of the interview. In most cases following the structure was working well, and I was able to gather the relevant information from most of the respondents. There were however examples for both extremes where I had to adjust to the flow of conversation. Some of the respondents got extremely excited when talking about their experiences and playing habits, and there was one case where despite all my efforts I barely managed to get more than a short sentence for each of my questions. Interviews were conducted in the form of Skype-Sessions taking 30-40 minutes on average, ranging from 20 minutes to 1 hour.

Respondents were collected from three sources namely; from the Boards forum of League of Legends (7 respondents), from the League of Legends subreddit of Reddit (2
respondents), and from my personal social circle (3 respondents). This group of people are considered to be relevant because they all play the game (except the one mentioned earlier) and their very response to my post proved that they are somewhat part of the community / involved with the brand. In order to motivate their participation respondents were offered a random “mystery skin” as a reward for their contribution. Thanks to the motivating gift and the helpful nature of the community I managed to gather respondents, and schedule and conduct all the interviews within six-days-period. However the initial goal was to gather respondents who attended LeagueFests, as this festival is the closest form of brandfests introduced my McAlexander & Schouten (1998), getting such respondents was extremely difficult. The reason for that is that the event was only organized once since 2016 in the United Kingdom with approximately 3000 attendees, however despite its success, the event was not repeated since then, although promises were made to do so both in 2017 and 2018 in accordance with ENUK ESports News UK. (Sacco, 2018)

In order to avoid any biased response to the questions asked during the interview, no information about the interview was given to any subject, they only knew that questions are related to League of Legends and experiences revolving around it.
5 RESEARCH FINDINGS

5.1 PRESENCE OF POSTMODERNITY

Throughout this chapter the main goal is to understand how postmodern values are represented in the life and consumption of postmodern individuals? Before starting the analysis on the effect of postmodernity however, two major remarks have to be emphasised regarding the research and the sample itself. In terms of research it must be noted that conclusions were mostly drawn based on respondents’ gaming experiences and purchase habits, therefore the findings might not be generalized. Regarding the sample, as it is seen in the table before the age of respondents ranges from mid-teens to late-twenties resulting an average age of around twenty years, which might not be representative for the population in general. Belonging to this age group also means that most of the respondents were not financially independent, which might contribute to their consumption habits, but questions were asked more in a hypothetical way where their desires were in the forefront and not their possibilities.
The primary goal of my thesis was to understand the mind-set of the postmodern individuals in regard to consumption, to uncover the motivating factors when making the consumer decision, and in line with that to look for traces of aestheticization, symbolic consumption, additional meanings attached to a product apart from its functionality, search for quality with zero defect, and most importantly traces for the presence and need for linking value. The effect of postmodern conditions on the life of consumers are also going to be discussed with special emphasis on hyperreality and fragmentation.

5.1.1 Linking Value – General Presence

The most relevant and interesting finding for the research question was when one of the participants started explaining explicitly, how he is looking for the linking value of the products, basically repeating the famous line of Cova (1997) “The link is more important than the thing” What he said goes as follows:

“Generally I spend money on foodstuffs …. but I like experiences much more. Especially communal, social events such as watching a movie together in the cinema, going to theatre, cultural events, hiking, anything like that... maybe having some beers, but the emphasis is on the social factors.”(Viktor)

There was an other respondent who emphasised the linking value when asked to talk about one of her favourite purchases that caused her high satisfaction or happiness. Although in her case the motives were more hidden, she did not say it out loud, in my opinion this also goes back to socializing intentions:

"Tough question actually... I would say it is the liquid for my e-cigarette... My mom actually makes some liquids for e-cigarettes, so I could have gotten it for free from her. But there is a shop near here in *city name*... they are very nice, the shop is nicely-done as well, so I like going there, and they are always really cool people. So really... one enters to the shop, and they are very kind, so I like going back there even if don’t actually need it... because I could get everything for free actually ...*laughs*... but it feels good. (Viktória)

After finishing the explanation she was further questioned if there is any difference between the type of liquids she can get at this shop or the liquid her mom creates, for which her answer was:
“Well actually not really, the liquid types are slightly different, there is a bit of a difference in taste, but quality is more or less the same.” (Viktória)

Which further supports the evidence for the search of linking value in this case.

Interestingly enough they were also the ones, who implied that they lack social connections either in the game or in reality. Viktor doesn’t have friends in the game anymore, because all of them stopped playing and he doesn’t like meeting new people online as he also plays less recently. Viktória mentioned similar thing while discussing League of Legends related merchandises. She mentioned that she actually kind-of-liked a board game related to League, but in the end decided not to buy it for two reasons, one being that it is quite pricy, second that she actually doesn’t have anyone to play it with as her friends are in Hungary while she is currently in Germany.

"The board game made me think of buying it... the price was not so bad either, but then eventually I decided not to buy it. It would be kinda awkward because who would I play it with? ... If I would be at home I might have purchased it actually."

It is difficult to say however if they are looking for the linking value because they had changes in their social circles or rather deriving from their very personalities. But the presence of it can be approved.

5.1.2 GAINING UNIQUE EXPERIENCES AND MEMORIES

Unique, memorable experiences therefore seem to be highly valued by these individuals. Even respondents who named a physical object as their preferred product choice mostly had some other factors involved in the decision apart from the functional use only, if functionality was a criteria at all. The motives generally were intrinsic, mostly deriving from enjoyment and noticeably not for the purpose of self-expression as it was suggested in the first chapter. An unusual example was when a respondent mentioned that he likes buying branded merchandise which product category generally has a very strong symbolic and expressive value, but he claimed that the products are more for serving as mementos for events what happened in the past rather than expressing himself.

"It's usually like some merch...could be a merch from RIOT Games as well...for example a jacket, a jersey, or a mousepad... Anything that can give you memories, to have fun things to look back at stuff you did." (Jachun)
An other example was a young lady, who also mentioned physical products, but not for the sake of having them, but to make some tinkering with them. In this case functionality is almost negligible again, as the purpose is to gain a unique experience.

“I like little electronic toys like mobile phones, but also like the smaller things I can play around with, see how they work and program them and stuff like that” (Marissa)

Later she noted her preference for online shopping as well, where the demand for (relatively) high quality and zero defect expectation can be observed well:

“Recently I bought a drawing tablet - I draw a lot as well, I really wanted to try it but I don’t have that much money and I also had to be able to buy it ... and internet helps you to find something that is cheap but will work well.” (Marissa)

Sometimes even the process of obtaining / collecting a product can serve as the mentioned unique experience, when the subject is deeply involved in getting a product, especially if it is a high-quality-one, which seems to be popular as well.

“Actually I like the experience that the shopping process itself gives me, I like to research the best alternative as much as it is objectively possible, and get the highest functionality. I think I like high quality products in the first place, I don’t buy things I don’t really need, but if I have the opportunity and like something a lot, I research quite deeply. I’m willing to get the product possibly in the highest product category, of which I know that it possibly doesn’t have to be that good. They don’t necessarily have to be objects though, I gladly spend money on travelling as well as on programs. If I can get a unique experience in exchange I don’t regret it generally” (Zoltán)

However he described that the product is chosen in the most objective way possibly, he also mentioned in a contradicting way that it is highly possible that he ends up buying a product in such high quality that is not necessary anymore nor creates additional value, which eventually refers to the domination of emotions in the decision making progress. Additionally throughout the highly selective research process the product probably ends up with an attached story to it as well which can serve as memory. He mentioned travelling and attending different programs as well, that was also mentioned by other respondents:
"Anything that involves travelling a lot… that fulfils me I guess … I attended lots of camps and stuff all around my country and I enjoyed all of them, and if there would be any chance to go travelling I would take it" (Mladen)

"One of my best experiences was on the "Fezen Festival" last year where I could listen to one of my favourite bands, which involved high expenditures, at least compared to my habits" (Viktor)

5.1.3 AESTHETICIZATION

Throughout the primary research, the traces of aestheticization were possibly the most dominantly present amongst the aspects of postmodernity. It was present while naming the favourite champions, it was especially emphasised when choosing skins, it was even present when respondents were asked why they play the game itself.

In case of naming their favourite champions two of the respondents highly emphasised the visual experiences behind their choices over the functionality or the feelings the playstyle provides them with:

“In case of this champion I got really intrigued by the art and story … Thresh looked cool … I started playing Maokai after his visual update got released, and he just looked cool… I play them everywhere….” (Mladen)

“I like them because they are visually interesting …” (Marissa)

It was also interesting to realize that these respondents were/are involved in drawing and art, both named drawing tablets as a product that caused them high satisfaction.

Most of the respondents mentioned visual aspects when it came to skins while attachments to the champions were also present. There were some, who only bought skins for their “mains” because they played a lot with them

“I kinda only ever bought Gnarr skins for myself … because I have hundreds-and-hundreds of games on him, and I like the colours, the way the abilities look from time to time …” (Marissa)

There were also quite many people, who simply bought the skins for their visual value mostly emphasising their increased level of “coolness”:
“I value idolizing champions. Let’s say I don’t play a champion if it looks ugly... *laughs*... For that same reason I also buy skins because I think they look cool for the champion, if they look better than the base.” (Bruno)

"Mostly because I like the champion or I like the skin.... But it doesn't always mean I like to play them it could be like... Ohh I like that skin... I like to collect them." (Jachun)

“I can't really play a champion without a cool skin... that is probably why I spend so much money on this game" (Sebastian)

In truth, all the participants were influenced by a friend or relative to try the League of Legends, but apart from that, aestheticization was one of the key drivers on eventually deciding to play the game over the competitors, some of the respondents mentioned in the following way:

"I saw DOTA and the gameplay just seems boring, dark, stale. League is just more brighter, more diverse champions, better names of champions, better personality for each of them. Flashy abilities ... So the game is better” (Arnes)

“My cousin showed it to me maybe in season 1 or season 2, you'll calculate the year... at that time I didn't really like it because it was quite ugly, but then it got a visual update... or at least started looking nicer and due to the influence of my, now-ex, boyfriend I downloaded and installed it” (Viktória)

Therefore it can be that the desire for aesthetics are present in the minds of consumers on a moderately high level and does have an influence on their purchasing habits.

5.1.4 HYPERREALITY

This topic was partially touched already by exploring and supporting the idea that gaining functional value is not necessarily the goal for consumers anymore to reach satisfaction. This subchapter uncovers how the perception of reality shifted in the minds of consumers through analysing the perceived differences between traditional and online friendships, obtaining skins, and expressing the self through consumption.

During the conduction of interviews, respondents were asked to share their views regarding the difference between the traditional type of friendships and the ones formed in digital environment. Results show that most respondents can see the opportunity for
digital friendships to be as strong as a traditional-one, and have experiences with both types. The main counter argument against digital relationship is the lack of physical contact, in some cases respondents noted that without physical contact a relationship can not be strong, they are negligible:

"I personally do find a difference between my real friends and people I meet on chat ...When I go to PC if they are there it's good, but they do not really mean anything to me personally" (Arnes)

"Real world experience is totally different ... I don't think online relationships could ever replace real life relationships, meeting online isn't gonna live nearby" (Sebastian)

Most of the respondents however noting, and accepting the lack of physical contact argued that an online relationship can be as strong as a traditional-one, just as in case of traditional friendships in an online setting everything goes back to the question of how much, and in what quality do the parties share with each other, how much time do they spend together in the digital atmosphere:

“... If we lived closer to each other it could have been like a real relationship, because we would have met in the real world as well ... I don't think it is that much different though, an online friendship can be as good as a traditional-one because we discussed lots of things that you can discuss next to a beer or tee if you meet friends in the real world. So I don't think there is lots of differences. The way of meeting is different." (Zoltán)

“Of course it is better if you can meet in real life as well, but I think that the amount of time spent together is what counts in a friendship. So if I’d play LoL every day with a random guy from anywhere and would talk to him every day, then even though he would be thousands of kilometres away, I'd say he is my best friend because I talk to him a lot..." (Viktória)

“You are missing the physical aspect like being face-to face with the person. But I think in our world today it doesn't really make the difference since we are online so much anyways, so I think they can be just as good as traditional-ones." (Nicolas)

As an indirect way of approaching the topic one might rightfully ask if all the relationships in real life are strong. Apart from the reasons discussed just above the indifference
between the bare-notion of traditional vs digital relationships can be seen as described here:

“...There are people who are really bad, and not good friends but also people who are really good to you, there are also bad friends. So it is just like in real life as well. You know more about real life friends, online friends you can still know a lot, but only stuff they told you...” (Jachun)

There were even respondents who tend to prefer the online relationships emphasising its convenience and security.

"I honestly prefer online, it is more convenient and I don't find as many people playing League in real life that I talk to." (Kierstin)

"For example I end up spending a lot more time with him online, cause I don't have to actually go anywhere, do anything, set a meeting up, spend money, anything like that." (Max)

It can be seen therefore that the acceptance and approval towards online relationships tends to increase, there are still some who do not prefer them, but on the other side of the coin there are some who think just the opposite, at the same time there are many who shows an open mind towards the issue.

The online game setting and especially skins are great example for hyperreality on their own. As discussed above skins have absolutely no functional value in any sense. Players of League of Legends purchase them nonetheless, therefore even though they are not real in the traditional sense they still provide value for the consumers. The action of purchasing a skin was even compared to shopping in traditional further implying the indifference between real and hyperreal products:

. "About these skins well... if you think about it in terms of money they don't cost more than getting a box of smoke, and they actually give a lot to the gaming experience... they are generally really well made and creative ... Gives a huge plus like ... woah this looks really cool. (Viktória)

The final aspect of hyperreality that is going to be discussed during the current research is the self-expression through the consumption of symbols. While conducting the
interviews with participants they were provoked to provide direct or indirect opinion about someone wearing symbols, and what does it tell them about the person or player.

In a direct way only one respondent emphasised his desire to show his expertise and attachment to his champion who he equipped a skin with:

"Having a skin for a champion sometimes changes a lot ... you can have a lot more fun if you are playing with the skin ... They always give me the feeling of accomplishments, because I just see all the skins for my champions and I just want to stand out with the champion so everybody knows that "this guy bought a skin for the champion so he really must like this champion" getting a skin can get to completely new experiences...

“(Sebastian)"

He got the idea quite right, because most of the respondents shared this thought of self-expression. Even the more sceptical-ones said that the player either has lots of money or he most have invested lots of time into playing the certain champion and probably experienced with it.

“Common sense would be that it means nothing just because they have the skin that doesn't mean they should win. But you still feel that they are somehow better, because the logic is if they have the skin they had to pay money for that and you only pay money if you really like the champion, if you really can play that champion.” (Marissa)

"Not necessarily, but subconsciously you still think that “Ohh, he has a skin, he is more committed compared to somebody who doesn't have the skin" but doesn't necessarily have to mean anything” (Max)

Although as it turned out skins are now possible to get even without investing real money into the game through “Hextech Crafting” which is a progress where players periodically can get skins or as a reward for high performance. Additionally there is a symbol in the game called “Mastery Icon” which is earned by players through playing the same champion frequently:

"... doesn't say much anymore since this Hextech crafting when you can get a skin without even paying anything... So lately doesn't say much, but if it comes along with high champion-mastery and the name of the player is also identical to the champion, then it
says that this player must really love the champion and plays exclusively ... if someone has a skin for every champion I just think that this person must have loads of money, doesn’t really shows his skills” (Zoltán)

Additionally there is price- and availability difference between the skins, which can further support the symbolic meanings behind.

"If I see someone with an expensive skin, I think that either they like the champion like I do or they just got the skin for the champion and that made them play this champion” "When I see someone with a 520 RP skin I think they just got this skin and equipped because why not? ... If I see a rare skin....I say woah, this guy must have invested lots of time into this game” (Sebastian)

It could be seen therefore skins can serve as a symbol for demonstrating level of expertise or invested time, which can be further supported by an additional symbol called mastery icon, if a player has these symbols he is probably a formidable player.

5.1.5 FRAGMENTATION

The game itself supports the notion of fragmentation as well. The 30-50 minutes-long- games are independent of each-other, and one can always change the champion he/she wants to play in each game. They can try different playstyles and even roles, basically anything depending on their mood, goals, or opportunities. Although there is a certain level of commitment, hence the term “my main” which basically implies that the players are playing the same champions or roles most of the time, the term was also put into plural quite often such as “my mains”, “one of my mains” implying that even though there is a favoured combination, it can be changed if wanted.

The reason for having main characters to play derives from the difficulty and competitive spirit of the game. However even the most competitive players have a smaller set of champions they play frequently. In the literature review it was discussed that consumers adjust their personalities/styles based on the situation they encounter, during this part of the study answers were searched if players change their style in different games, or do the played-champions have some effect on their behaviour / the way they feel. As in almost all the cases there were respondents who claimed that they only consider the functional aspects of the champions when they play:
“I like Tristana ….she is more powerful than the others ... playing different champs gives you different tools to handle. They are different because you have different tools at disposal. Doesn’t really feel different” (Arnes)

However there were others who considered more the personalities or the playstyles and admitted that it does change the way they act and think. The difference is mostly articulated in a sense of playing a “chill” role versus a more active-one. This can result from the nature of the champions:

“For example when I play Alistar or some of those champs I'm like... okay I'm here, I need to play passively, but when I try out Ekko or some Assassins, I really get into the mind-set that like ... Okay I'm going to carry this team, carry this game and that's my job. ” (Mladen)

... Biggest example is Ivern. Ivern is a champion which is really passive in a sense that he doesn't fight himself it's more like a supportive champion, and when I play it puts less pressure on me to perform so I guess it's really zen, really calm." (Bruno)

“... I always feel good when I’m playing Nami because I usually win, since I play her so much ... but I have to be in the mood for Ahri or else I’d be terrible ...” (Kierstin)

An other frequent example was when participants compared their playstyle when they were playing their “mains” versus playing something new. As they noted playing their main makes them more confident and relaxed while playing something else is rather stressful.

“... most played champs are "comfort picks" ... I'm much more relaxed playing them. I know my boundaries with the champion, I know what I can and can't do with it ... If I'm playing new champions or ones that I don't have experience with it is always more stressy, but provides the feeling of something new”(Viktória)

5.2 RELEVANCE OF BRAND COMMUNITIES

In order to see the relevance of brand communities for individual social relationships it must be proved that the brand community is indeed existent when talking about the League of Legends. Does brand community exist around League of Legends? During
the first part of this chapter the presence of the building blocks of brand communities are going to be analysed as it was suggested by Muniz & O’Guinn (2001) Throughout the second part of the chapter the study aims to show how brand communities are able to affect the development of social bonds and what is the quality of these bonds, i.e. how the linking value is present in relation with brand communities?

Before going further into details, the global nature of the brand community has to be noted. As seen in Table 1 discussing respondent profiles, participants of the survey are gathered from an international sample coming from different countries of Europe and even from North America.

5.2.1 CONSCIOUSNESS OF KIND

As a first marker for the existence of brand communities the current thesis analysed if there is consciousness of kind amongst members mostly referring to the phenomenon if members feel identity between each other before getting in touch with each other, based on the only fact that they consume the same brand, or as in this context they play the same game, the potential hierarchy system was also analysed while oppositional brand loyalty was researched as well.

In order to identify if respondents felt that they have common ground with an unknown League player, they were set in an imaginary scenario where they were asked to share their thoughts of this stranger knowing only that he/she is also plays League. Most of the responses revealed that they feel connection to the mentioned stranger, and that they wish to get to know the person:

"I'd probably feel that I have something in common with that person" (Mladen)

"...it sort of feels like that we belong to the same pack. It is a good common ground, good for getting to know each other a bit, we can talk a lot about it"(Viktória)

Some were a bit more cautious when presented the scenario, tried not to jump into conclusions quickly but their curiosity was sparked.

"I think there is something in common with them, just for playing games. That would at least give me a good first impression on them, but you can’t just base everything on that... but there is something in common for sure.” (Nicolas)
Some of the respondents, especially two of the ladies, Marissa and Viktória found the scenario so real, that they immediately started talking about their personal experiences and how they got to know people starting from their realized consciousness of kind, some further explained how they feel that they would understand each-other:

"Actually I don't even have to imagine this because it happens to me most of the time when I see strangers talking about League ...sometimes I just have to hold myself back because I just want to go there and talk to them about the game as well ... my parents don't understand the game because they are from different generation, and I just want to talk to these persons because I understand their situation...I just feel connection to them..." (Sebastian)

Shared consciousness therefore is existent amongst the members. The next step was to identify if there is any hierarchy within the community. Respondents were not judgemental when asked about lower-ranking members in the game when it came to their personality. However they approved that the system is reliable most of the times and the rank indeed says something about the gameplay of a person.

“"It tells me about the gameplay, yes, but not the personally overall ... Only if he is a good payer or a bad player." (Arnes)

"I have friends from all the divisions, they are just players like me, I'm not judging them" (Nicolas)

However low-ranked members were not judged, the high-ranking players were regarded with respect and recognition. Lower-ranked members were highly inclined to play with them.

„"If they would be challenger than I'd say that wooah... that's something! How did you achieve that? ... other than that it's just a rank in a game” (Mladen)

In case if the person is diamond, I would easily look up to that person, simply because it might help me to grow myself. A person who is lower wouldn't be like that but I wouldn't have any negativ views towards that person. Both is the same, but a rank certainly does shape a certain image of them."(Bruno)

Part of the truth is that there probably is a certain teasing from the high-ranked players towards the ones in lower tiers:
“In reality the rank shouldn't really matter. You can always play normal games together... you can always joke about them but shouldn't have an impact on your relationship with the person.” (Jachun)

“Since I always played competitively... Maybe the game means something different to this person, but I'd laugh a bit at him and made some jokes ... but you know, not in a serious or ill-willing nature, just jokingly... I met a guy and found out he was Master, I was surprised and thought that this guy must be good in other aspects of life as well, since the game is influenced by several factors. So I think this person must be good at something else as well, either learns quickly, or gets the hang of something as well, this is why I respect the ones who are at high levels.” (Zoltán)

The overall conclusion is that there is a loose hierarchy based on the League System introduced in the game, which is regarded as a legitimate benchmark. Members of the lower tiers are sometimes joked with but there is no judgement aiming to their overall personality, and has no effect on personal relationships. High-tier members are treated with respect and adoration.

In regard the oppositional brand loyalty respondents were generally able to identify the overall competition for League, naming mostly DOTA 2, Heroes of the Storm, and Smite, some of them tried them as well, but have not played with them. When asked the respondents just virtually shrugged their shoulders and said:

"They must have lots of time, good for them... I don't judge, lol” (Viktória)

Viktória’s response was very typical, almost all the other respondents used the “good for them” expression.

There is a certain rivalry nonetheless, but the nature of it is similar to the reactions of a low-tier member of a community. Respondents generally just laugh it off and does not attribute great relevance towards it:

"It's good for them, they can have some variations... I feel there is a certain need to joke with them ... we always do it like... if you play League you joke on DOTA or Smite, they do the same to League. They kinda poke like HAHAHA, but It is just normal to make fun of each other, but nothing serious....There are probably people who are taking it too
seriously, but for me it is just a joke. In the end it is just a game, why do you have to be mad?” (Jachun)

One respondents was at some point probably member of the “more serious” group as described by Jachun, who claimed that:

"It's like I have my Senpai, and anybody who touches my Senpai I'll kill them immediately... Like if anybody who ****-talks League I'd feel to go to them and ****-talk their game and their likings of their game" (Sebastian)

Sebastian also admitted that he is obviously biased towards the League, but he doesn’t have any negative thoughts towards anyone who plays both League and one of the rivals. In exchange he expects others to mind their own business.

In conclusion therefore it is to be seen that the community so far is existent, however hierarchy is present at a moderate level, and rivalry is also noticeable, but probably not very serious. Players seem to be open-minded and tolerant. However their mentality might be different in-game as it was suggested by Max:

"Typically I have noticed that toxicity in League is just in-game... I'd imagine they're relatively a decent person. Wouldn't label them with good or bad” (Max)

5.2.2 Rituals

Ritualistic features were also researched during the interviews, and in order to find that an imaginary scenario was used, when respondents were asked to describe how their games typically go by. There is a basic sequence of actions that can be considered as ritual, although it is rather insignificant, it is still something that players described frequently in different details. The process summary looks as follows:

They log in to the game client, chose a game mode, maybe invite friends, search for a match, wait until everyone choses their champions, goes to loading screen, and arrive to the game where they spend their first ability points, and buy the first items, then they go to the lane and start the match itself.

A short game was described by Zoltán that he came up with, played it with friends and eventually it became a small tradition.
"First when I realize someone is playing I look at him/her for a while and wonder what role does this person play? And actually I can guess quite accurately what roles do they main. Then I guess what champion could they main. I always played it, and later on my friends got into this game as well, and we had fun guessing like that."

This a good example for the presence of micro-rituals as well as offline involvement with the product.

5.2.3 Moral Responsibility

Moral responsibility was also a researched area during the thesis. Respondent tended to be positive in terms of providing help when they could let it be in-game or out of game.

Out of game the main platforms they could provide help was the League of Legends forum, where they mostly claimed that they would help out a fellow player in distress if their knowledge was sufficient in solving the problem.

"I generally help them, but most of the times problems are already solved, so there is no need to tell them anything" (Jachun)

This comment is very typical. Good intentions are present in most of the cases, but generally they do not even have the opportunity to help as someone else already did so. This also indicates that the community as a whole is active and helpful, they take care of each other.

Sebastian proved to have the highest level of moral responsibility often making implying that he feels the need to help the other members of the community out saying things such as:

“If they are lower rank than me... since I have quite a lot of experience I really just want to help them getting better at the game, giving them tipps what I always look for ... I think we are in the same boat and I just have to share my knowledge with them, like grandpa does with the grandchildren" (Sebastian)

+ the way the community responded to my post could be also added here.

Providing help in-game is a bit more challenging and limited as it takes time to write them and the games are generally quite intense, and sometimes even if a player obviously struggles sometimes they are not willing to accept help:
“If they have a build-problem I can generally give them some recommendations, but if they are dying a lot, I generally tell them just to play safe” (Nicolas)

“I’ll try help, but he should also be willing to accept help. Community is quite toxic sometimes” (Jachun)

5.2.4 Community Structure

The community structure proved to be well designed based on the suggestions of Fournier-Lee (2009). The traces for both pools, webs, and hubs are present in the case of League of Legends.

Members of the forums based on servers, or as forums in general are forming the pools of community.

Friends of individuals who are added in game can be considered to be the webs in the community, which can reach quite high numbers as well:

“Well out of the 234 people who I have on my friends list I met some IRL and some online ... Most of the people I met online were just like holy hell, this person is good I add them and keep them so I don’t have to play with randoms... ” (Max)

Finally there are several hubs within the community revolving around professional players, streamers, and youtubers who the members of the community follow and discuss frequently.

"My friends also know the popular streamers, so if something happens in their stream I try to share that with my friends”(Bruno)

People like that in some cases are so often topics in interpersonal conversations that even the ones who do not watch them personally knows their name and what they do:

“I personally never followed anyone but my friends, and especially boyfriends were watching and I became part of it in a way that I also had to watch it, so compared to the fact that I’m not interested I have seen tonnes of streams in my life” (Viktória)

Based on this subchapter therefore evidence was found that there indeed is a brand community around the brand League of Legends, as the core elements are all observable,
5.3 RELEVANCE OF BRANDFESTS

In the framework of this study LCS events were considered to be the representative of Brandfests, organized by RIOT Games and in line with the brandfests description provided by McAlexander & Schouten (1998), although it is not as grand-scale as it was in case of Harley Davidson or Jeep.

In accordance with the story told by the respondents the event was indeed interesting and had an intense atmosphere.

“I liked it because the crowd there was nice” (Kiersten)

"Everyone was nice and kind, lots of foreigners were there. The atmosphere was awesome, the event was well organized" (Viktória)

“The crowd was amazing, it was intense, sometimes it was dead silence because everyone was so tense and then they were like, oh yeah! That was pretty amazing” (Jachun)

As McAlexander & Schouten (1998) described there was no limit in emphasising the brand and making it basically omnipresent, everything revolved around the brand and respondents got richer with extraordinary experiences as well, however possibly deriving from their differences in personality they mentioned different things.

“There were even "cosplayers" so you could feel that it is indeed a League event ... We got even these clapping-rods, and even if it was basically a 500-Huf piece of plastic, it was a great experience to watch the match and see that everyone hitting these rods. This also gave me a good experience, I loved it.” (Viktória)

"The event itself was fun, I got to meet a lot of people, who are usually behind the screen and you could see who they are in real life, so it was really nice and interesting to see. They were different people." (Bruno)

The most extreme case was when a respondent described the place as “home” or “paradise” hinting strong brand resonance with the person:

“When I entered to this giant hall I really felt that I was at home, because I love this game and it's like my favourite hobby to do... it was like paradise for me... while waiting for
players to play I really felt I was part of that it really was my favourite LCS game ever." (Sebastian)

Sebastian was always highly emotional when explaining his views and experiences regarding my questions, he is the one who is mostly associated with the brand and loves it very much, his personality is possibly part of the reason as well. Regarding his involvement with the brand he also mentioned during the interview that he wants to work for RIOT Games as well:

"I would also love to work for RIOT games, it must be really chill, you can talk about the video game and work with it all day" (Sebastian)

In terms of Linking Value it can be observed that respondents generally travelled with friends which implies that brandfests can serve as great tool for building and strengthening already existing relationships. Additionally all the respondents mentioned that they have met some new friends during the event, however part of the truth is that these relationships were mostly temporary:

“Nothing long lasting, but we did meet lots of people there, interact, meet up and talk about our common interest LoL, that was fun, but nothing like really long lasting stuff.” (Bruno)

None of the respondents mentioned any of the potentially arising risks associated with the event before there, even though they were asked about their expectations.

Regarding the traveling as challenge it must be emphasised, that this effort was only taken by Viktória who travelled from Budapest to Krakow, and Jachun, who also had to travel out of the country. Other respondents were simply lucky-enough to have the event organized close to their homes. Even Viktória noted that she had some other business to do in Krakow at the time of the event. This can be either translated in a way that she possibly wouldn’t have attended the event if this other “business” were not present, or it can be translated in line with McAlexander and Schouten who claimed that travelling to the place of destination can by itself contribute to the extraordinary experience of the consumer, while enhancing the participant’s status in the group. (McAlexander & Schouten, 1998) The latter statement however was surely true for Jachun.
Based on the conducted interviews it is possible to be stated that the LCS events indeed serve as a source of extraordinary experiences and a setting formation of social bonds, the organization of the events itself might serve as valuable element of the brand history but otherwise they do not contribute deeply to fostering brand communities.

It must be noted however that this research area would require deeper analysis. Throughout the interviews there was only one set of questions regarding brandfests at the last part. As most of the time was consumed by the previous two topics, this part got a bit rushed which could be felt on the responses as well.

5.4 LINKING VALUE IN REGARD TO BRAND COMMUNITIES

Evidence was found that in postmodern context the search for linking value is present inside the minds of postmodern individuals. It was also concluded that the difference seen between the traditional and online relationships is getting more and more insignificant, while in most cases connections in a hyperreal setting are already considered to be a completely legitimate versions of relationships.

There were several respondents who claimed that they managed to form meaningful social connections through their beloved brand, League of Legends or managed to strengthen the already existing-ones. There are three major ways these relationships can develop in this setting. The first being the phenomenon when in the real environment a member of the brand community recognises a stimuli emitted by an other community member which triggers their consciousness of kind. As it was seen in case if the imaginary scenario measuring we-ness, this is oftentimes sufficient to motivate members for social interactions especially if the social setting allows it:

“Depends on where it is, but I'd probably talk to him, because that's how I met all my friends at uni. Either they talked to me because I was drawing Gnarr, I draw Gnarr everywhere, or I talked to them because I heard them talking about the game” (Marissa)

She also emphasised the role of League of Legends in maintaining and strengthening her social bonds:

“...this is my main way of having fun, especially with my friends since everyone has to travel an hour or more to get to the uni, we are scattered around the Netherlands so this is like the easiest way to do stuff together”(Marissa)
Similarly to this, an other respondent mentioned a non-official LCS viewing event that she attended and eventually managed to form some lasting relationships:

“…basically I'm playing with my friends, who actually I got to know via LoL as well. There was a real life event, they organized an LCS viewing in a pub, and basically all my friends I have in Budapest right now are from this event … I can be grateful for League of Legends for quite many things actually” (Viktória)

The second major way a relationship can develop is meeting online in a game and adding each other to the friend lists:

“I had an online friend with whom I'm not really in touch anymore. I played with him for years, he is Swedish, I'm Hungarian, we never met but we know lots of things about each other because we really talked a lot, and actually I think it is very nice that a game could connect two people like this. I also played with his friends.” (Zoltán)

Although Zoltán managed to form a rather strong digital relationship, his case was not unique, as others also described their familiarity with the process:

"At first your topics are League related ... You know there are those general questions like.. Where are you from? ... Then it might goes this far and stops there, but if the person is more open minded you start private stuff ... It quickly does develop into personal stuff” (Arnes)

The third major way of relationship development is when the relationship starts out in an online setting and the parties are lucky enough to be able to fight off the geographical barriers and actually be able to meet in real life as well:

"When I met my ex, it was also in a game versus each other, we just joked when the game ended like - Do you want to marry me? - I didn't know if she was a male or female- I just joked. And she was like - yeah, sure, so we got to talk more and more and then she became my girlfriend. It was fun, like, that's how you meet people through games, events, irl... and so on” (Jachun)

As the evidence shows, belonging to a brand community in the postmodern era can serve as a basis of identification and a strong connection between the members before they could actually meet, which contributes to the development of social relationships both in traditional and digital environments.
As it was introduced hierarchical benchmark is rather lose, although high performing members of the community are well-respected. Rivalry between the groups of opposing brands are less relevant and tend to be playful in nature, which represents the postmodern mind-set greatly as well.

In line with the postmodern value system, members of the community generally respect the freedom of others and they prefer not to judge strongly.

The playful nature of postmodern individuals is represented through seeking fun and enjoyment in forms of new, unique experiences that are preferably memorable as well, for which the analysed brand contributes greatly too.

From these factors it can be seen that the postmodern values had great effect in shaping the members’ approach towards the brand community.

5.5 **SUCCESS OF LEAGUE—KNOWING THE CONSUMER**

As it was emphasised during the thesis in many occasions if the consumer need are satisfied the brand/company fosters as well. Therefore during this subchapter it is going to be demonstrated what the main reasons are why League of Legends manages to be the market leader in the MOBA genre and be highly profitable.

Starting with the Brand Salience element it can be seen that the brand made an exceptional job. As a result of the interview it can be seen that all the respondents got into playing League of Legends by the recommendation/slight pressure of someone they knew personally:

“I got into that through my boyfriend. Guys in his friend-group were playing and I thought it's like a pretty fun game, so I just started to join them." (Marissa)

"It was couple of years ago, a friend of mine was playing it and she invited me to play it as well ... I didn't catch up at first, it was new and unfamiliar, it was fun... Later on my brother also started playing it ...it got more and more popular, then curiosity sparked my interest to try it again, and I got again in it" (Bruno)
Bruno’s comment was not stand-out, some of the respondents tried the game but left it for a while, and later on came back to it as a loyal player. The reason possibly is that they have seen the investment into the game, just like Zoltán and Viktória did:

"It was during primary school when one of my classmates recommended this game to me because in his opinion this game was better and more exciting than DOTA. I downloaded, tried it but at that time didn’t really like it so I left it for approximately 1 years and returned later. Then I got stuck with this game as the other was a bit outdated, and was not developed. Development of the game was in limited frames.” (Zoltán)

“…at that time I didn't really like it because it was quite ugly, but then it got a visual update… or at least started looking nicer…” (Viktória)

The ones who came back to the game after a while were generally the ones who explored it in its early period.

The source of loyalty of the players were hinted earlier, as all of them likes the game, they like the aesthetic visuals as well. But what was also interesting to see is that the difficulty of the game can contribute to their loyalty factor as well. This was noted while in the beginning of the interview they were asked to describe their first experiences playing League. Again, all the respondents emphasised their struggles during the first game:

"I remember my first games…they were pretty bad" "It is not an easy game... it is easy to pick up, but there is so much behind it, you just need to learn" (Arnes)

"Oh yeah, it was versus bots... it was horrible ... I think we won but it was a close-one."(Jachun)

The difficulty factor was also mentioned when respondents were asked why they play League of Legends and not the competing games:

"I know it for a long time, if there is any update in a game it is easier for me to see it through" (Viktor)

"I found League first, and that's what I invested the most time in, so I couldn't really see myself playing other games because I'd have to diverse more time to League and to other game and I don't think that would be worth it” (Nicolas)
Nicolas also mentioned the first-movers advantage of League, even though it was not the creator of the genre, as it was seen through the explanation of Zoltán above. It was developed more rapidly and people probably found it in an easier way. The first game in the genre argument was emphasised in more cases as well:

“The wonders of first occasion and stuff, this was my first MOBA, it is difficult to learn a new game even if we talk about MOBAs... lots of infos can change. My third and most important reason is that my circle of friends are LoL players. 4th that I always missed something form the other games that is present in LoL, I can be biased.” (Viktória)

Viktória mentioned the role of community which was also hinted by the others, although as an explicit reason why they play the game.

There was also an interesting remark when respondents were asked to share why do they purchase skins.

“When I first downloaded the game I was like: I'm not gonna buy anything. This is a free game, skins don't add anything to the gameplay... BUT... since I took the game quite seriously and I really love this game and downloaded it for free it is not a last thing to buy a skin because this way I am supporting the ones who made it, and since I spent at least 3000 + hours in the game I thought that if I take so much enjoyment out of the game it feels good to give something back... On the other hand they look cool indeed, they are nice.” (Zoltán)

Zoltán felt what can possibly describe why putting the consumer first pays off to the company as well, namely the sense of gratefulness towards the brand. He noted however that his purchases were for the aesthetic reasons as well, he still considered the hard work of the company for his entertainment.

All in all, based on statistics, the chapters before, and on this chapter as well the success of League of Legends can be attributed that they have created a postmodern product for postmodern individuals in a very conscious way. Explained in a postmodern context as a starter, the game itself resides in a hyperreal setting, supporting the fragmented and playful nature of consumers. RIOT Games respected freedom of their consumers and did not create any direct barriers of entry or exit. At the same time they fulfilled the brand meaning well through aesthetic and playful elements. In exchange for their investment,
or for putting the consumers first, they managed to achieve extremely strong word of mouth effect that made new consumers try the product rather successfully. Once consumers tried the game apart from experiencing the values the game provide, the difficult gameplay and the established social bonds can be considered to serve as exit barriers. All these leading to the success of League of Legends.
CONCLUSION

The current thesis examined the presence of postmodern values within the minds of postmodern individuals and found evidence that, as expected, the search for linking value is present in the minds of consumers and speculated that the level of its strength is influenced by positive or negative social changes in the individual’s life. It was also found that functionality of the products tend to lose their value as they get replaced by the experiential value and memorability of the products. Aestheticization of products and life as well is present as it was concluded in the literature. Individual’s acceptance and popularity towards hyperreality is increasing, which was particularly analysed in regard with the nature of established social relationships, while traces proving the existence of fragmentation was also found.

The existence of brand community revolving around League of Legends was also researched and justified, as all the elements suggested by Muniz & O’Guinn were found in the research process. Additionally it must be noted that the expected sincerity of hierarchy and viewpoints towards oppositional brand loyalty were not strongly present. Opinions towards these elements were more in line with the postmodern mind-set respecting freedom of others, and being judgemental was replaced by a joking-poking attitude. A basic global ritual was found in the process, while example and further potential for micro-rituals was also found. The feeling of moral responsibility of community member was also found along with the global nature of the community.

The relevance of brandfests was present in a sense that such events are indeed able to provide consumers with extraordinary experiences, brands exposure is indeed high, and evidence of potential for developing social bonds was also found, but based on the conducted interviews the event is better suited to deepen already existing relationships.

The ability of brand communities to connect individuals with each other, and thus the presence of linking value was also found, and three major ways of relationship developments were found, namely offline to offline, online to online, and online to offline.
References


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6 APPENDIX

6.1 DEPTH INTERVIEW BACKBONE & QUESTIONS

Declaimer

- Thanks & Welcome
- Introducing myself
- Nature of Depth Interviews to be explained (informal, all views are accepted)
- No right or wrong answers – point is to get to know what people think
- Duration of the interview is planned to be … 30-40 minutes
- Asking permission for audio-recording

Screening Questions – Before the Interviews

1. Have you ever participated at an event organized/sponsored by Riot Games? (League Fests, Worlds, LCS, tournaments…etc)
2. How many times have you attended such events?

Icebreaker & Warm-Up

1. Please introduce yourself in a few sentences (First Name/Nickname, age, FROM hobbies)
2. General question as opening
   a. Obtaining/Getting what kind of product would make you feel good/happy? (product refers to anything obtainable by money object, service, experience)
   b. Is there a specific example of product that comes into your mind? That you might have purchased already? Could you tell me what it is and why do you like this product?
3. Becoming a Consumer
   a. Could you tell me when and how have you started playing LoL?
   b. Tell me about the first time you played LoL.
   c. OR The earliest memory you have playing.

Postmodernity - Gameplay

4. The “Summoner” and the “Champion”
   a. What roles do you play mainly? How do you choose which one do you want to play (before a match)? Any favorites?
   b. Who is your top (3) favorite champion(s)? (to play or the character itself? if asks: both) Why?
   c. How do you feel when playing different kind of champions? Does playing a different champion affects how do you feel during the game?
Could you tell me an example of this difference? (eg. top lane - tank vs. bot - support)

d. Have you ever purchased a Skin/Skins (set of visual updates for each champion)? (Why/Why not?)

e. What made you decide on buying the Skin?
   i. Any emotional attachments (to the skin or to the champion)?

f. If you get into a game with a player who has a Skin equipped, what does it tell you about the player?

g. Have you ever bought or received (as a gift) any League of Legends related products? (T-shirt, Figures, Keychains…etc) If yes- How did you get it, what do you think of this products?

h. Could you tell me what is your “Rank” in the game, or what was your highest rank so far that you achieved? What do you think about this rank or ranks in general? Do you have any aims related to this rank?

Community

5. Consciousness of Kind
   a. Imaginary Scenario – “Imagine a scenario that you meet a stranger about whom you find out that he/she is a League player as well. – maybe he/she has a branded T-Shirt or you simply overheard them talking.”
      i. What do you think about him/her? What could he/she be like?
         Would you talk to him/her?
      ii. If you talked to him/her and found out her division is Bronze/Diamond how would that affect the way you think of the person?

b. Do you know any other MOBA games? Do you play them? Do you think there is a rivalry amongst them, which one is better? /Why do you play LoL and not the rival? What do you think about the ones who play both League and the rival?

6. Rituals, History
   a. Imaginary Scenario - “Imagine that you are sitting in front of your turned-on computer and you decide that to play a match in League of Legends. - Could you guide me through one of your games starting from this scenario?” After explanation if needed: Is there any communication during the game? What kind of things do you generally say on chat?

7. Linking Value, - you mentioned, that you invite players/friends to play with...
   a. Do you have friends in the game? How did you meet them? (- real world or digital world)?
      i. If there is one, they met online → Could you tell me the story how did you meet?
   b. How do you communicate with these friends? (in writing, any voice-chat program?)
   c. Do you talk about League centered topics of do you talk about out-of-game topics as well?
d. How do you see this kind of friendships compared to the traditional ones? *(are they “less-real?”)*

8. **Moral Responsibility** (- also the fact of ppl applying for interviews)
   a. Are you member of League Forums, or League related social media groups?
      i. How often do you check these platforms?
      ii. Do you consider yourself as an active member?
   b. How do you react when a fellow League player has some issues with the game – client problems, bugs, transaction problems?
   c. How do you react if you see someone is struggling “*in-game*”?

9. **Community Structure**
   a. Do you follow watch League related content online? Streamers/professional players, youtubers online?
   b. Could you name a few?
   c. Do you have a favorite? Care to tell me why? Do you talk about him/her sometimes/do others around you talk about them sometimes?

In the beginning of the interview you have mentioned that you have not attended….

10. **Reason**
   a. Why didn’t you participate?
   b. Do you watch them online?
   c. Would you like to attend such events in the future?

11. *Do you feel that you are member of a community through League?*

12. Closing the interview, saying thanks, and saying goodbye.

**Brandfests – If the subject participated RIOT- sponsored events**

13. Please think back and describe your visit to a League Fest/ Worlds/ LCS/ Tournament
   a. How did you feel about it before going there?
      i. Did you have any expectations? Prejudices?
      ii. Did you have to travel a lot to get there?
   b. What was the event about?
      i. What were your impressions when you got there?
      ii. How could you describe the general atmosphere?
      iii. Have you played League while you were at the event?
      iv. Did you buy some kind of products/ mementos at the event?
   c. How were your overall experiences?
      i. Have your prior assumptions change?
      ii. Did you make some new friends?

14. *Are you planning to visit again?*

15. *Do you feel that you are member of a community through League?*