

Joining the Anti-Brand Communities on the Internet: Who and Why

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Abstract

This paper aimed to empirically deepen our understanding of the growing phenomenon of negative consumer-brand relationships in the Internet, striving to investigate “who and why” consumers join anti-brand communities against the top ten global brands. In particular, this study aims to investigate whether the consumers’ profile affects whether they develop negative feelings or not, and the main reasons for their negative feelings. Methodologically, this study is based on the quantitative methodology of the survey and on the statistical verification of several research hypotheses formulated on the impact of the main consumer characteristics (gender, age, country of origin, education, empathy) on their behavior towards the hated brands. Regarding “who”, our findings show that gender, age and country of origin are the main consumer characteristics affecting both their negative feelings towards brands and their willingness to join an anti-brand community. Regarding “why”, low quality of products/services and a lack of corporate social responsibility are the main reasons for hating brands. Finally, this study contributes to knowledge of negative consumer-brand relationships in the Internet domain and provides advanced insights into consumer behavior with reference to the top global brands. It also encourages further research on the interconnections among the central questions of this paper, i.e., who and why individuals join anti-brand communities, and represents a starting point for further studies aimed at expanding the consumer characteristics investigated in this paper, including personality traits. This study also pioneers the profile of anti-brand community participants in the Internet, which is so pertinent in the rise of marketing 5.0.

Keywords: negative feelings; negative consumer-brand relationships, brand hate, anti-brand communities, social networks.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Negative emotions play a relevant role in the consumer-brand relationships phenomenon. Numerous psychological studies have concluded that negative information is

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more memorable, more prominent, more deeply processed and more plausible than positive information (Baumeister, Bratslavsky, Finkenauer, & Vohs, 2001; Ito, Larsen, Smith, & Cacioppo, 1998; Taylor, 1991; Taylor & Brown, 1988). Negative emotions are also more significant than positive ones, in the sense that escaping from danger is more critical to survival than experiencing a positive emotion, such as increasing one's sense of pleasure (Aaker, 1996; Fournier & Alvarez, 2013).

In this way, in recent decades, there have been countless negative feelings about brands with very significant impacts on companies and especially on the value of brands (Pinto & Brandão, 2020). It is therefore extremely important to be able to deal with them in the context of brand management (Zarantonello, Romani, Grappi, & Bagozzi, 2016). For example, low cost airlines, such as Ryanair, have been heavily criticized for poor service, unreliable safety conditions and a poor customer care; Apple has been embroiled in labor scandals with its logistics chain in China due to poor working conditions. Similarly, Nike was accused of using child labor in manufacturing processes in Cambodia (Hills & Welford, 2005), Coca-Cola faced customers protests in the UK and the USA because of what was considered their poor environmental record in India and allegations of human rights violations in Colombia (Popoli, 2016). These examples constitute a small sample of the scandals surrounding the decline in brand reputation over recent years due to a strong negative evaluation all over the world.

Moreover, with growing negative feelings regarding brands and increase in the phenomenon of opposition to capitalism, marketing activities and corporate globalization, an increase in the anti-brand communities has been observed (Brandão & Popoli, 2022; Dessart & Cova, 2021). Indeed, in little more than a decade the number of anti-brand websites has grown exponentially, to the point of inducing some companies to buy sites that denigrate its image, trying to avoid the spread of negative impact of these anti-brand sites on brand value (Hollenbeck & Zinkhan, 2006).

Despite this phenomenon being increasingly present in our society and its great relevance to management, the available literature on anti-brand communities and anti-brand sites is very scarce (Krishnamurthy & Kucuk, 2009; Zarantonello et al., 2016). Previous research on negative consumer-brand relationships in the context of anti-brand communities has highlighted the phenomenon of repulsion/ attraction for a brand (Dessart & Cova, 2021); antecedents and consequences of brand hate (Fetscherin, 2019; Kucuk, 2018, 2019; Rodrigues, Brandão, & Rodrigues, 2021) and the brand anthropomorphism phenomenon in the negative feeling context (Brandão & Popoli, 2022). Thus, there is a gap in the knowledge about the individual profile of those who join and participate in anti-brand communities which, this paper aims to bridge. Thus, this research focuses on the study of anti-brand communities in the Internet, investigating two aspects of the negative consumer-brand relationship phenomenon. The first concerns the profile of consumers who decide to join anti-brand communities. In this regard, after splitting consumers with negative feelings into two categories, based on their participation in some anti-brand community (or not), we investigate whether the decision to join anti-brand communities is influenced by attributes such as age, gender, country of origin, education and empathy. The second aspect concerns the main reasons that drive consumers to join an anti-brand community, with particular reference to global brands.

Therefore, the following research question for this study was formulated:

RQ: *"Who and Why": consumers who join the anti-brand communities?*

This research is pertinent for academia, since it expands the knowledge on negative consumer-brand relationships in the Internet domain, in particular, consolidating the reason why the profile and the Internet platforms represent the arena for individuals to participate in anti-brand communities. Moreover, it is also relevant for practitioners and brand managers to be aware of the anti-brand phenomenon and their main individual motivations, profile demographic characteristics and Internet platforms used for joining those anti-brand movements.

This paper is structured as follows: after a literature review relating to the antecedents and types of negative consumer-brand relationships and anti-brand communities in the Internet domain, empirical research carried out through a survey on consumers of the top 10 global brands. The findings are presented and then a discussion of the research findings and conclusions are provided. Finally, limitations of the study and future research directions are highlighted.

2. CONCEPTUAL BACKGROUND

2.1 Negative consumer-brand relationships

Consumer-brand relationships cover a wide range of feelings that can be either positive or negative (Japutra, Ekinci, & Simkin, 2018; Sarkar, 2011). According to Fetscherin (2019), feelings towards brands could be distinguished on the basis of the individual's "passion intensity": the positive emotions are brand liking (weak intensity) and brand love (strong intensity), while the negative ones are brand disliking (weak intensity) and brand hate (strong intensity). However, consumers might not have the "passion" and simply be indifferent and uninterested in interacting with the brand. Consequently, there is a fifth type of consumer-brand relationship called "brand indifference" (Fetscherin, 2019).

Within the negative consumer-brand relationships, brand dislike and brand hate represent the extremes of a continuum of negative feelings towards a brand (Romani, Sadeh, & Dalli, 2009; Zarantonello, Romani, Grappi, & Fetscherin, 2018) due to the different levels of intensity. In turn, different levels of intensity involve different degrees of willingness and interest of consumers to translate their feelings into negative behavior such as increasing complaints or reducing patronage (Winchester, Romaniuk, & Bogomolova, 2008; Zarantonello et al., 2016), increasing negative word-of-mouth (Sweeney, Soutar, & Mazzarol, 2012), protesting or joining anti-brand communities (Dessart, Veloutsou, & Morgan-Thomas, 2020; Hegner, Fetscherin, & Delzen, 2017; Kristal, Baumgarth, & Henseler, 2018).

In the last decade, there have been some studies on negative feelings in relation to brands. Some scholars have explored these studies and these have diverged into three different paths - negative consumer relations to the brand (Fournier & Alvarez, 2013; Park, Eisingerich, & Park, 2013); anti-brand communities (Hollenbeck & Zinkhan, 2006; Krishnamurthy & Kucuk, 2009) and the negative double jeopardy phenomenon (Kucuk, 2008b, 2010). Negative consumer emotions about brands arise from stimuli that may be associated with products or services (tangible elements) or branding elements (intangible elements) through information sources controlled or not controlled by companies (Romani, Grappi, & Dalli, 2012). Research on negative consumer emotions towards the brand has generally concentrated on tangible elements of the products or services. However, in the last few years, some studies have enumerated the main causes of negative consumer emotions in relation to brands due to their intangible elements - unwanted brand personality (Hogg & Banister, 2001) and negative acts practiced or believed to have been practiced by the parent company (Kozinets & Handelman, 2004).

Moreover, in a time marked by rapid globalization, some consumers insist on resisting the meanings and/or values imposed by brands. Thus, it is often accusations of company abuses of workers, monopolistic threats to competition, morally deplorable acts and/or ambitious attitudes practiced by the company (Hollenbeck & Zinkhan, 2006; Kozinets & Handelman, 2004; Smith, Palazzo, & Bhattacharya, 2010). In this way, consumers' negative judgements of all these transgressions are often the result of news broadcast by the media and the phenomenon of electronic word-of-mouth, which causes negative feelings about brands (Zarantonello et al., 2016).

Also, other psychological theories suggest that emotions experienced during the buying and/or consuming process are highly determinant in an individual's subsequent actions (Acatrinei & Nistor, 2012). Moreover, some authors argue that individuals consume certain brands to satisfy self-needs, such as confirmation to others or personality enhancement. As a consequence, individuals like to consume products that demonstrate a type of personality with which they identify (Hogg & Banister, 2001). On the other hand, if the brand personality is antagonistic to what the consumer wants to project to others, he will refrain from buying products of that brand. This feeling is taken to the extreme when an individual who does not identify with the brand influences the people around him not to buy products coming from that brand. Because of one or all the abovementioned reasons, consumers can have negative feelings towards the brand that, in their extreme forms, become real hatred and a related desire for revenge (Grégoire, Tripp, & Legoux, 2009). In this situation, consumers tend to gather in groups to express their negative feelings about brands, and anti-brand communities emerge (Hollenbeck & Zinkhan, 2010; Krishnamurthy & Kucuk, 2009; Kucuk, 2008b, 2010).

In the literature, a brand community is defined as "a specialized, non-geographically linked community based on a structured set of social relationships among brand admirers" (Muniz & O'Guinn, 2001). In this way, consumers are motivated to unite themselves in these communities in order to meet their social and identification needs (Phua, Jin, & Kim, 2017). In a community, members share essential resources that may be of a cognitive, emotional or material nature, aiming at creating and negotiating of meanings (McAlexander, Schouten, & Koenig, 2002), driven by a deep sense of mission (McAlexander et al., 2002; Muniz & O'Guinn, 2001).

In the specific context of anti-brand communities, members have negative feelings towards a particular brand, and very often their focus is the pursuit of social justice, being activists of global anti-brand movements (Hollenbeck & Zinkhan, 2010). In these cases, consumers resist capitalism, globalization, marketing efforts, and strategies of a corporate brand, trying to create a new collective identity (Awasthi, Sharma, & Gulati, 2012; Hollenbeck & Zinkhan, 2010). Other members simply take part in these communities due to functional issues of products and/or services (Kucuk, 2008a) based on negative past experiences (Bryson, Atwal, & Hultén, 2013; Zarantonello et al., 2018). In summary, anti-brand communities usually arise due to four reasons (Awasthi et al., 2012):

1. Provide a social community where members share common moral obligations;
2. Provide a support network to achieve common goals;
3. Provide a way to deal with workplace difficulties, fighting for labor rights;
4. Provide a resource center for action, through demonstrations or boycotts.

Thus, members pursue the same cause and have the same feeling about the brand in question, and through this trusting and empathetic environment, they can create and share an enormous amount of information about and against the brand.

Finally, some empirical studies have stated that the more empathic a consumer is, the more empathy can be related to negatives and negative actions on the consumer. The greater the empathy of an individual, where there are transgressions of the company, the more motivated consumers will be to act on moral infractions and the greater the probability of participation in anti-brand communities (Romani, Grappi, Zarantonello, & Bagozzi, 2015). In this investigation, empathy will be positioned regarding the empirical study in line with the conceptualization proposed by Bove (2019) who considered empathy as the individual capacity of feeling, understanding and reacting to thoughts, emotions and perspectives.

2.2 Anti-brand communities on the Internet

Within the Internet domain, there are two places where anti-brand communities develop, and negative consumer-brand relationships are built and spread, that is, anti-brand sites and, more recently, social networks.

2.2.1 Anti-brand sites

Anti-brand sites are a way of expressing and organizing anti-brand communities. By definition, anti-brand sites are online spaces that focus their negative attention on a specific brand, facilitating the collective action of consumers and activists against a brand (Bailey, 2004; Krishnamurthy & Kucuk, 2009). These sites serve as a forum for consumers to express their discontent, facilitate the exchange of anti-brand information, organize boycotts, and coordinate lawsuits (Krishnamurthy & Kucuk, 2009). Anti-brand sites that attack brands more effectively use a very powerful tool -the names of brands are associated with negative connections, because it is easier to remember the name of the anti-brand site (for example, Killercoke.org of Coca-Cola). With these names, anti-brand sites also benefit from the popularity of brand name and web traffic. For example, a consumer may be looking for content about a brand and find content from anti-brand sites (Kucuk, 2008b).

In this context, strong brands have multiple disadvantages over weak brands, such as various anti-brand movements, which are reflected in the Internet, especially on anti-brand sites (Kucuk, 2008b, 2010). Many anti-brand sites have come about because consumers are no longer passive receivers of company information and advertising messages, but actively co-create market value. The Internet can be both the most promising and revolutionary direct marketing tool for businesses (Acatrinei & Nistor, 2012; Micu, 2010), as well as empowering groups of consumer activists, enabling them to deliver messages against brands at low cost and for a large number of people on anti-brand sites (Awasthi et al., 2012). In this way, the growing number of anti-brand sites organized by consumers is a good example of today's empowered consumers raising their voices as they exit the market (Krishnamurthy & Kucuk, 2009; Kucuk, 2008a). In line with this huge phenomenon and the definition proposed by Kucuk, this investigation will focus on where, how and why, individuals looking for integrated anti-brand sites on the Internet follow the consumer empowerment on marketing 4.0 and 5.0.

2.2.2 Social networks and anti-brand communities

A social network is defined as a set of nodes connected by a specific type of relation. In this way, relational connections can be between groups of people, companies or specific

events, etc. (Yu & Chiu, 2013). In other words, social networks allow users to create personal profiles, articulate with other identities, connect to other users and brands, and view, share, upload and comment on photos, messages, videos and other content published in their feed news (Phua & Jin, 2011).

In this way, it has never been easier for consumers to obtain the opinions of other individuals about a particular product and/or service, or to have access to the Internet, in particular to some social network. This phenomenon is called electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM), and manifests itself in the online context. It can be described as an opinion of potential customers, actual or former, on a product or company and it usually produces an effect of influence on other individuals (Hennig-Thurau, Gwinner, Walsh, & Gremler, 2004). This phenomenon manifests itself massively on social networks, particularly on Facebook, because these are more popular than ever.

Further, academic studies have pointed out that negative eWOM has stronger effects on purchasing decisions than positive ones. It is suggested that unfavorable information is somehow more shocking or surprising, and therefore has a greater influence on the formation of evaluations (Chang & Wu, 2014). However, each social network has its own specificity. Typically, individuals use Facebook to connect with friends, Twitter to follow news and trending topics, and Instagram to filter and upload visual images (Phua et al., 2017).

Accordingly, through social networks, consumers are constantly creating new content about brands, and are even more influential than the brands themselves. Thus, consumers are no longer seen as passive recipients of the marketing dynamics of companies and become proactive participants in the process of brand creation and management (Hollebeek, 2013), as co-creators of value for brands (Bitter & Grabner-Kräuter, 2016). For example, in social networks, especially on Facebook, there are companies that advertise their products through publications and some consumers explain to others how the same product works.

Finally, anti-brand communities can truly contaminate the brand image, due to the violations reported in those communities. If anti-brand activists and their audience reach a significant level, the company's sales and brand value can potentially be affected substantially. Thus, companies need to gain a clear picture of their brand in the online environment and transform consumers' negative experiences and language into positive attitudes and experiences (Kucuk, 2010). In other words, an adequate and clear communication of this brand, and being attentive to these communities, can reverse this situation (Awasthi et al., 2012). Thus, this investigation aims to deepen our understanding of those social networks with negative consumer brand relationships DNA, in particular, anti-brand communities: Where are these placed on the Internet?

3. METHODOLOGY

3.1 Methodology procedures

As mentioned above, the main objective of this study is to delve deeper into the phenomenon of negative consumer-brand relationships in the context of the Internet, in order to answer the research question synthesized in "who and why" consumers join the anti-brand communities.

A quantitative study was conducted to achieve a twofold objective: a) identify who the consumers joining the anti-brand communities are, and furthermore, verifying whether certain

characteristics of their profile (age, sex, country of origin, education and empathy) affect whether and how they develop negative feelings and whether they choose to join an anti-brand community or not; b) secondly, to identify the main reasons for their negative feelings towards certain brands.

To answer this research question, two preliminary and sequential studies were conducted to define the boundaries of empirical analysis, identifying firstly the ten main brands at a global level and secondly, with regard to the ten identified brands, the location of the anti-brand communities in the Internet domain. For both these objectives, the methodology proposed by Kucuk in 2008 was used, updating it to 2018, the year in which the empirical surveys were carried out. The netnographic approach is a qualitative research method used to understand online brand communities in line with previous studies on negative consumer-brand relationships (Brandão & Popoli, 2022; Dessart & Cova, 2021; Popp, Germelmann, & Jung, 2016). This methodology is the most suitable for this type of study, since this empirical approach examines online conversations, behavioral patterns and basic emotions of relationships between different members of the social network in question (Kozinets, 2015).

Regarding the first study (which brands attract more anti-brand communities?), based on the assumption that strong brands have multiple disadvantages compared to weak brands such as various anti-brand and anti-consumer movements, Kucuk (2008b) used two indicators - Brand Rank and Brand Consistency – to identify the strong brands in the market. Therefore, the ranking of companies in the BW List was used to identify the Brand Rank, and the longer a specific brand remained on the list in the last five years identifies the Brand Consistency. However, as this study is from 2008 and the business market is extremely dynamic, there is evidence that the brands that Kucuk identified at the time as strong, may no longer be so.

Thus, to achieve this goal, the Kucuk methodology was employed in this study. To measure Brand Rank, we use the “Interbrand Best Global Brands 2017” list. On the other hand, to measure the Brand Consistency, we used the same list, but of the previous five years, from 2012 to 2016. In order to find the strongest brands, and as Kucuk does not describe this in his empirical study, we performed a weighted average between Brand Consistency and Brand Rank, these two indicators having exactly the same weighting. Therefore, the ten strongest brands in today’s market were identified (Table no. 1).

Table no. 1 – The 10 strongest brands on the market

1°	Apple	6°	IBM
2°	Google	7°	Toyota
3°	Coca-Cola	8°	GE
4°	Microsoft	9°	Amazon
5°	Samsung	10°	Mercedes

Regarding the second study (where are anti-brand communities currently concentrated on the Internet?), Kucuk (2008b) stated that anti-brand communities were concentrated on anti-brand sites that were very popular at the time. However, the digital environment is very dynamic and since 2008, social networks, especially Facebook, have grown exponentially in the number of users, as already mentioned. Thus, there is also evidence to believe that anti-brand communities have begun to focus on social networks. We therefore deduce that these are likely to be concentrated in the most popular social networks in the world, that allow the creation of pages or groups with people who do not know each other but have a common

interest. Through this theory, the social networks that are likely to add more anti-brand communities are Facebook, Instagram and Twitter (Phua et al., 2017).

Through the method that Kucuk (2008b) used in his empirical study, we searched the Google search engine for each of the world's strongest brands using a set of negative terms (Anti, Sucks, Hate, Fuck, Murder, False and Boycott). Firstly, the search was performed using both the brand name and a negative term, and then the same search was performed using the tag and the negative term in quotes (e.g., Starbucks suck and "Starbucks suck") (Kucuk, 2008b). The negative terms used in this research have suggested and confirmed the existence of negative feelings, such as hate on the Internet.

In order to evaluate whether anti-brand communities are concentrated in social networks, we use the same methodology for each social network (Facebook, Instagram and Twitter), adapting it to the referential social network, using the search bar to search the name associated with the negative term. On the other hand, at the time we were doing Google search and found anti-brand communities that were not included in any of the first four scenarios, we used that data and included it in the "other" category. The following Table no. 2 shows the number of anti-brand communities on the websites of Facebook, Instagram, Twitter and other social and/or other networks.

Table no. 2 – Anti-brand communities on the Internet

	Google	Facebook	Instagram	Twitter	Others	Total
Apple	3	65	14	15	2	99
Google	3	29	0	13	1	46
Coca-Cola	2	30	0	3	1	36
Microsoft	3	26	1	10	2	42
Samsung	1	34	2	14	0	51
IBM	0	2	0	1	1	4
Toyota	3	22	5	2	1	33
GE	1	4	0	0	0	5
Amazon	0	54	2	10	0	66
Mercedes	1	9	0	1	0	11
Total	17	275	24	69	8	393

In this way, we verified that the anti-brand communities are no longer located mainly in the websites, but in Facebook (we consider those that were present in the pages and in the public and private groups). Also, Twitter has a relatively high number of anti-brand communities. Subsequently, the empirical study was conducted to answer the research question related to the "who" and "why" consumers join the anti-brand communities.

3.2 Design and research hypotheses

Individuals who participate in anti-brand communities on the Internet feel so unhappy with a company that they spend the time and effort to critique the brand. Therefore, there is an urgent need to answer an important first question: Why do some individuals join anti-brand communities on the Internet and others not? Thus, in order to answer this question, several hypotheses were constructed:

Hypothesis 1: Different consumer profile characteristics (gender, age, country, education and empathy) result in significant differences in the intensity of negative consumer feelings towards brands.

Demographic variables such as age, gender and education influence the profile of the consumer. However, the culture of the different countries has been characterized as the key factor that defines the consumers' behavioral differences, despite the globalization phenomenon (Hofstede & McCrae, 2004). How these factors influence consumer behavior may also have an influence on the feelings and relationships individuals have with brands. According to some authors, empathy influences consumer feelings about brands (Zarantonello et al., 2016). Thus, these variables make up the consumer profile and can influence their feelings about brands.

Hypothesis 2: Different consumer profile characteristics (gender, age, country, education and empathy) result in significant differences in the willingness to join anti-brand communities on the Internet.

In the previous hypothesis, it is assumed that the profile of consumers in relation to brands influences their feelings towards brands. In this way, we can also infer that the profile of consumers can influence the participation of individuals in anti-brand communities.

Hypothesis 3: The more empathic a consumer, the greater the sense of brand hatred.

Empathy is related to negative beliefs about individual unethical actions (Romani et al., 2015). Hate has as its causal element the behavioral irregularities of the company (Zarantonello et al., 2016). Thus, we will test whether the level of empathy is related to the level of hatred a consumer has for a brand, and we will divide between consumers who participate in anti-brand communities and those who do not, but who hold negative feelings for brands.

Hypothesis 4: Different intensities of individual brand hate result in significant differences in the willingness to join an anti-brand community on the Internet.

Hate created a strong desire for revenge and a need to avoid those who triggered this feeling. In this way, clients wish to punish companies for the attitudes they had which generated a sense of hatred (Grégoire et al., 2009). As stated above, hatred is the extreme form of disliking a brand (Romani et al., 2012; Zarantonello et al., 2016). Thus, consumers who hate brands the most, participate in anti-brand communities (Kucuk, 2008b, 2010; Zarantonello et al., 2016)

Hypothesis 5: Consumers who hate brands the most are those who participate actively in anti-brand communities.

Consumer hatred of brands is the result of a deliberate intention to avoid them, accompanied by behaviors that display this rejection by brands, with typical behaviors being the negative WOM, boycotting and intentionally sabotaging corporate actions (Hu, Qiu, Wan, & Stillman, 2018; Zarantonello et al., 2016). Thus, we will test whether the greater the consumer hatred for a brand, the more they will participate actively in the anti-brand communities.

Regarding the second question related to the reasons why consumers join anti-brand communities, nine reasons were proposed to the respondents, also giving them the opportunity to identify additional elements underlying their negative sentiment towards the brand not included in the proposed list. The nine issues provided were: "Low product/service quality", "Inefficient purchasing process" (Kucuk, 2018); "Lack of brand

identification” (Hogg & Banister, 2001); “Insistent brand communication” (Godfrey, Seiders, & Voss, 2011); “Labor rights abuses”, “Monopolistic threats to competition”, “Morally bankrupt actors”, “Exceptionally greedy agents” (Hollenbeck & Zinkhan, 2006; Kozinets & Handelman, 2004; Romani et al., 2015; Smith et al., 2010); “Foster capitalism” (Hollenbeck & Zinkhan, 2010); moreover, the item “Other...” was proposed.

3.3 Method and procedure

In order to achieve the study objectives, we use a quantitative research methodology. Thus, we used the online questionnaire survey method to identify and profile consumers participating in anti-brand communities and their motivations (Malhotra & Birks, 2006).

The questionnaire was addressed to the general population; we considered that the most commonly indicated sampling is that of convenience. Although this type of sampling may bring about some uncertainty of representativeness, it is often applied in investigations carried out within a short time-frame, since it allows individuals with availability to contribute voluntarily (Marôco, 2014).

After obtaining the responses of the general population, the individuals were divided into three distinct profiles:

Profile A: Individuals participating in anti-brand communities;

Profile B: Individuals with negative feelings about brands but who do not participate in an anti-brand community;

Profile C: Individuals without negative feelings towards brands, and thus do not participate in an anti-brand community.

In order to obtain the responses of individuals with Profile A, we considered all groups and pages, 393 anti-brand communities of the 10 strongest brands on the market discovered in the second preliminary study of this research. As these communities are quite closed to all those who do not share their ideology. The publications were quite clear, explaining the objective of the questionnaire in a simple and concrete manner (Mkono, 2017). Meanwhile, in order to obtain answers from the other profiles, the questionnaire was disseminated primarily through social networks, in the most different types of social networking groups and, additionally, by e-mail to all students at the University of Porto. These procedures were used in order to reach a heterogeneous sample regarding the demographic variables and the different profiles.

The way in which the questionnaire was constructed in its seven sections made it possible to distinguish between the three profiles (Profile A, Profile B and Profile C). It was made available on the Google Docs platform from June until July 2018. To make it easier for readers to understand its dynamics, we provide a summary (Figure no. 1).

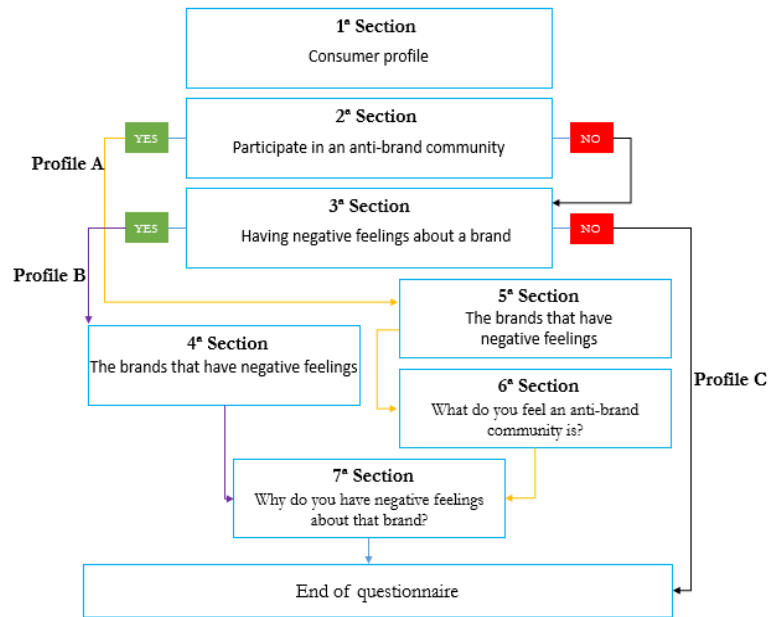


Figure no. 1 – Summary of the questionnaire

4. RESULTS

4.1 Characterization of the sample

In the survey, 570 answers were obtained, of which all are valid: the majority of the sample is female (63.5%), less than 25 years old (62.8%), resident in Europe (88.9%), with a high educational level (71.4%) and considered very empathetic (44.6%) (Table no. 3).

Table no. 3 – Characterization of the consumer profile

		Frequency	Percentage	Cumulative Percentage
Gender	Female	362	63,5%	63,5%
	Male	208	36,5%	100,0%
Age Range	Less than 25 years	358	62,8%	62,8%
	26-35 years	131	23,0%	85,8%
	More than 36 years	81	14,2%	100,0%
Country	Europe	507	88,9%	88,9%
	North America	25	4,4%	93,3%
	South America	22	3,9%	97,2%
	Asia	16	2,8%	100,0%
Education	Medium	132	23,2%	23,2%
	High	407	71,4%	94,6%
	Very High	31	5,4%	100,0%
Empathy	Low	20	3,5%	3,5%
	Medium	206	36,1%	39,6%
	High	254	44,6%	84,2%
	Very High	90	15,8%	100,0%

The sample is composed of the three profiles described above, so that, to make it easier to describe the sample characterization, we will divide the findings according to the three different consumer profiles. The total sample of 570 respondents with respect to the three different profiles: 46 individuals (8.1%) who join the anti-brand communities (Profile A), 278 respondents (48,8%) who have negative feelings about brands but do not participate in anti-brand communities (Profile B) and 246 individuals (43,2%) who do not have negative feelings about brands (Profile C).

Profile A: Individuals who join the anti-brand communities (Figure no. 2).

Gender. Male consumers are the ones who are most likely to join the anti-brand communities. Specifically, 16.3% of male respondents claim to participate in anti-brand communities, while only 3.3% of female subjects are members of anti-brand communities. Thus, we can conclude that individuals with Profile A are mostly men.

Age. The older consumers in this sample are more likely to join the anti-brand communities (54.3%), but on the other hand, have less importance in not being part of any anti-brand community (10.7%). Contrasting with the younger consumers in the sample, they have a smaller importance in anti-brand communities (13%) and higher in non-participation in anti-brand communities (67.2%). Thus, we can conclude that the majority of consumers with Profile A are over 36 years old.

Country. The majority of consumers participating in anti-brand communities come from European countries (34.8%) and North America (34.8%). But respondents from North America have the least weight through non-participation in anti-brand communities (1.7%). Thus, it can be stated that in the sample the majority of consumers in North America have profile A, the same happens with the respondents coming from Asia.

Education. Those individuals who have a medium education level are mostly in our sample of consumers with Profile A (63%), but also those who do not predominantly participate in anti-brand communities (72, 1%); this happens because the majority of our sample has this educational level. On the other hand, individuals with other educational levels have a higher share of participation in anti-brand communities than the opposite.

Empathy. This is the category that is most balanced in terms of the percentage of consumers who participate in anti-brand communities by empathic level. Thus, the majority of consumers participating in anti-brand communities consider themselves to have an average empathic level (45.7%).

Profile B: Individuals who have negative feelings about brands, but do not participate in anti-brand communities (Figure no. 3).

Gender. Consumers with Profile B are mostly female (61.5%).

Age. The younger consumers are mostly in Profile B. More than half of the sample (64%) comprised individuals less than 25 years old. Additionally, 22.70% were between 26 and 35 years old and, finally, 13.3% was over 36.

Country. Most consumers with Profile B are from Europe (91.7%), followed by 4.70% from South America.

Education. Most consumers with Profile B have a high educational level (73.4%), while 23% have a medium level and 3.6% have a very high educational level.

Empathy. Most consumers with Profile B consider that they have a high level of empathy (46.8%) and average (34.9%).

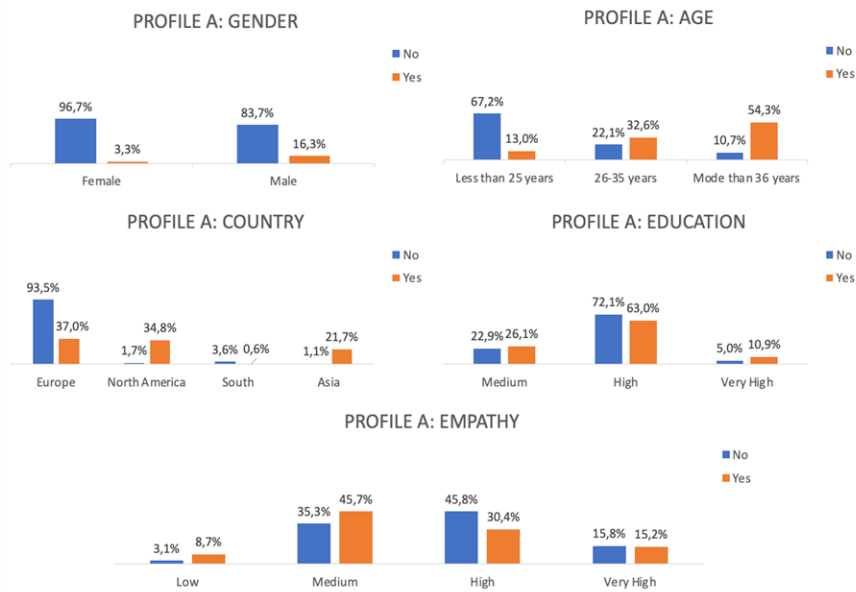


Figure no. 2 – Profile A



Figure no. 3 – Profile B

Profile C: Individuals who do not have negative feelings towards brands (Figure no. 4).

Gender. Consumers with Profile C are mostly women (72.80%).

Age. Younger consumers are those who are mostly in Profile C. More than half of the sample (70.7%) comprised individuals less than 25 years old. Additionally, 21.50% were between 26 and 35 and, finally, 7.7% over 36.

Country. Most consumers with Profile C are from Europe (95.5%), followed by 2.40% from South America.

Education. Most consumers with Profile C have a high educational level (70.7%), while 22.8% have a medium level and 6.5% have a very high educational level.

Empathy. Most consumers with Profile C consider themselves that they have a high level of empathy (44.7%) and average (35.8%).

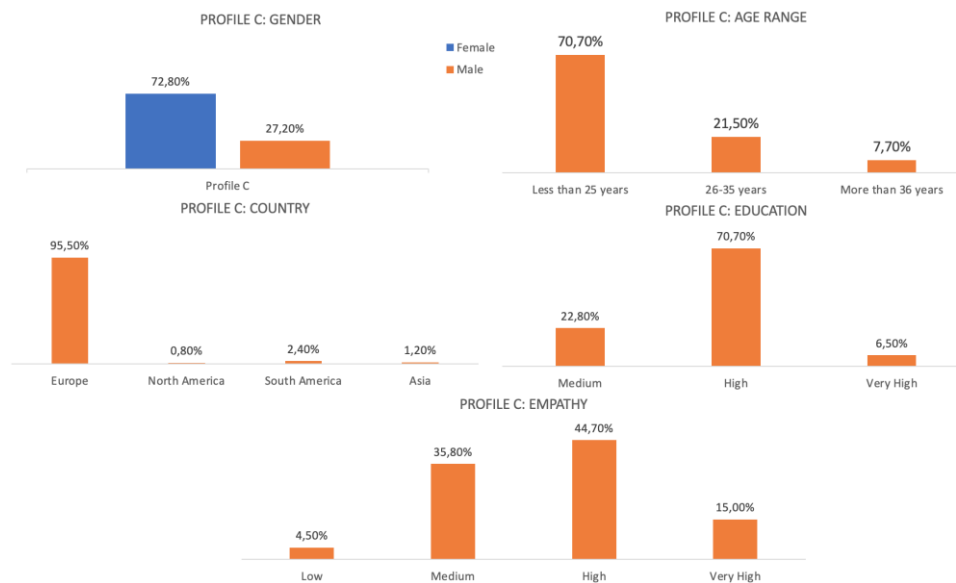


Figure no. 4 – Profile C

4.2 The most hated brands

Profile A: Individuals who join anti-brand communities.

Most respondents who participate in anti-brand communities have negative feelings for Apple (57%), Amazon (13%) and Toyota (6%) (Figure no. 5). Most of these individuals belong to an anti-brand community on Facebook (91%).

Profile B: Individuals who have negative feelings about brands but do not participate in anti-brand communities.

Consumers with Profile B have negative feelings mainly about Apple (39%), Coca-Cola (14%) and Samsung (5%) (Figure no. 6).

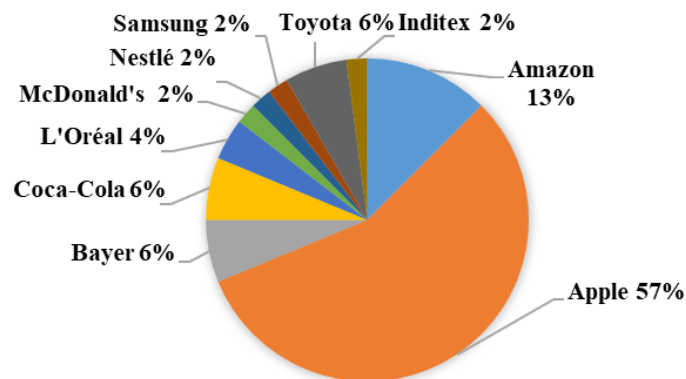


Figure no. 5 – Brands about which individuals with Profile A have negative feelings

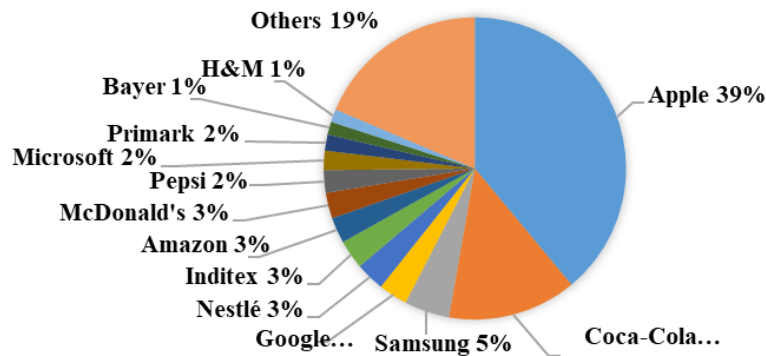


Figure no. 6 – Brands about which individuals with Profile B have negative feelings

When these individuals are asked which would be the best anti-brand community platform, most respond that it would be Facebook (51%), then the Website (37%) and finally Instagram (7%).

4.3 The main reasons for brand hate

Profile A and Profile B

Most consumers who have negative feelings towards the brands (regardless of whether they participate in communities or not) focused on two main reasons for their hatred, namely the “low quality of products/services” (38%) and the “abuse of labor rights” (22%). They are followed by four reasons highlighted by consumers in a percentage between about 4% and 6%, in particular: “exceptionally greedy agents”, “monopolistic threats to competition”, “foster capitalism”, “insistent brand communication” (Figure no. 7).

Finally, further reasons emerged in the “others” section, with percentages of 2.5%. Among these, it is interesting that several consumers accuse the companies of not promoting healthy living, and conducting tests on animals, thus confirming that companies are nowadays judged for numerous aspects concerning corporate social responsibility and their role in society, as well as in the economy.

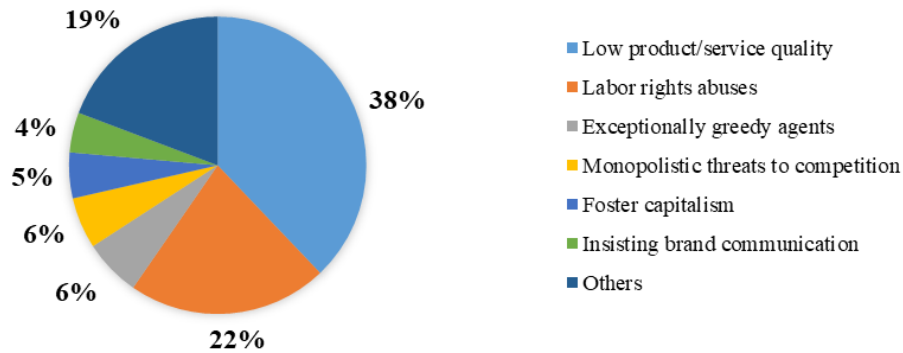


Figure no. 7 – Reasons why individuals have negative feelings about brands

4.4 Analysis of research hypotheses

We now test the research hypotheses presented earlier. A series of statistical tests were carried out to confirm or reject the hypothesis under study.

Hypothesis 1: Different consumer profile characteristics (gender, age, country, education and empathy) result in significant differences in the intensity of negative consumer feelings towards brands.

In order to verify if there are significant differences between the characteristics of the profile of the consumer and the feelings they have for the brands, we used the chi-square test which considered the null hypothesis as a starting point. Thus, the chi-square test allows testing whether the frequency with which the elements of a given sample are divided by the classes of a qualitative variable is random (Marôco, 2014). In this way, we test this hypothesis for the five components of consumer profile (gender, age, country, education and empathy). To verify the null hypothesis, we will consider a significance level $\alpha = 0.05$.

Thus, for p-values less than 0.05, we reject the null hypothesis and accept the hypothesis of the intensity of feelings towards brands being influenced by the consumer profile.

Table no. 4 – Chi-square test of hypothesis 1

Individual profile	Value	gl	Sig
Gender	7,452	1	0,006
Age Range	4,757	2	0,093
Country	4,235	3	0,217
Education	2,353	2	0,308
Empathy	3,389	3	0,333

In Table no. 4 we see that there is only one component of the consumer profile where the null hypothesis can be rejected, that is, gender influences the intensity of feelings that individuals have about brands. The consumer profile of age, country, education and empathy characteristics are independent of the negative consumer-brand feelings, since the p value are above the threshold $\alpha = 0.05$.

Hypothesis 2: Different consumer profile characteristics (gender, age, country, education and empathy) result in differences in the willingness to join anti-brand communities on the Internet.

For this hypothesis we use the same test we used for Hypothesis 1, that is, the chi-square test with a significance level of 5%.

Table no. 5 – Chi-square test of hypothesis 2

Individual profile	Value	gl	Sig
Gender	30,236	1	0,001
Age Range	78,474	2	0,001
Country	185,43	3	0,001
Education	3,389	2	0,184
Empathy	7,341	3	0,062

In **Table no. 5** we verified that the subject's gender, age and country of origin influence him to participate in anti-brand communities, since the p-value of these components is less than 0.05 (level of significance).

Hypothesis 3: The more empathic a consumer, the greater the sense of brand hatred.

The non-parametric Spearman correlation test was used for this hypothesis. This test was chosen because this hypothesis is clearly an inference of a positive correlation between consumer empathy and brand hatred. This test was chosen instead of the Pearson test since it does not require any assumption of normal distribution and in addition, it can be used for ordinal variables. Thus, in the Spearman test the more the variables are close to the edges, that is, closer to 1 or -1, the greater the correlation between their variables. The closer they are to 1, the greater the positive correlation between the variables and the closer they are to -1, the greater the negative correlation between the variables. According to the assumptions of this model, so that an association between variables can be verified, it is also necessary that the p-value be less than 0.10.

In this way, we test the more empathic consumers of Profile A and Profile B (we did not use Profile C, because these consumers did not have negative feelings about brands), to see if more will hate a brand.

Table no. 6 – Spearman correlation test of hypothesis 3

		Empathy
Profile A	Correlation Coefficient	0,08
	Sig.	0,184
	N	278
Profile B	Correlation Coefficient	-0,248
	Sig.	0,097
	N	46

The results revealed that there is statistical difference when we consider the threshold of 0.1 instead of 0.05. Thus, **Table no. 6** shows that the more empathic Profile A consumers are, the more they hate brands. In contrast to individuals with Profile B, the more empathic, the less they hate the brands. However, according to the assumptions of the Spearman model, there is only an association between Profile B and hatred for brands, because p-value is less than 0.10.

Hypothesis 4: Different intensities of individual brand hate result in significant differences in the willingness to join an anti-brand community on the Internet.

First, it is necessary to verify the normality of distribution of the variables. Thus, the non-parametric Kolmogorov-Smirnov or Shapiro-Wilk tests can be applied.

Accordingly, for p-values less than 0.05, we reject the null hypothesis, i.e., we can state with a 95% level of confidence, that there are significant differences between the willingness to join anti-brand communities on the Internet and the brand hate intensity felt by individuals.

Table no. 7 – Kolmogorov-Smirnov and Shapiro-Wilk tests of hypothesis 4

	Kolmogorov-Smirnov			Shapiro-Wilk			
	Statistic	df	Sig.	Statistic	df	Sig.	
Have you thought about joining an anti-brand community?	Yes	0,298	19	0,000	0,777	19	0,001
	No	0,180	259	0,000	0,928	259	0,000

As in this model, the p-value for the two variables is lower than 0.05, through the Kolmogorov-Smirnov test for the first variable and the Shapiro-Wilk test for the second variable, so that the residual hypothesis clearly does not follow a normal distribution. Once the normality of these variables was rejected, the Mann-Whitney test was used to test the hypothesis. Thus, this non-parametric test is adequate for comparing the distribution functions of a measured variable in two independent samples, even for reduced samples as in this case (Marôco, 2014).

For p-values less than 0.05, we therefore reject the null hypothesis, and the intensity of hatred evidently affects the willingness of consumers to join an anti-brand community.

Table no. 8 – Mann-Whitney test hypothesis 4

U de Mann-Whitney	1256,000
Wilcoxon W	34926,000
Z	-3,637
Sig. (bilateral)	0,000

P-value is less than 0.05, so we conclude that the willingness of consumers to join an anti-brand community depends on the intensity of hatred they feel for brands.

Hypothesis 5: Consumers who hate brands the most are those who participate actively in anti-brand communities.

In order to test the normal distribution of the variables, the non-parametric Shapiro-Wilk test was applied.

Table no. 9 – Kolmogorov-Smirnov and Shapiro-Wilk tests of hypothesis 5

	Kolmogorov-Smirnov			Shapiro-Wilk			
	Statistic	df	Sig.	Statistic	df	Sig.	
Do you have an active participation (comments, likes and/or shares) in the anti-brand community that you integrate?	Yes	0,327	33	0,001	0,633	33	0,001
	No	0,213	13	0,111	0,885	13	0,082

We found that the first variable rejects the hypothesis that the residuals follow a normal distribution ($0.001 < 0.05$), while the second variable does not reject the residuals following a normal distribution ($0.082 > 0.05$). [Marôco \(2014\)](#) considers that Student's t-test is robust to violation of normality when values of skewness and flatness (Kurtosis) are not very high. Thus, we use this test to check whether the means of the two populations are significantly different. For this purpose, the Levene test was used first, which verifies the existence of homogeneous variances among the samples.

When the p-value is higher than the threshold 0.05, the variables are homogenous and the significance (bilateral) is analyzed in the first row, otherwise the significance (bilateral) of the second row is analyzed. This assures the assumption of homogeneity of the variances, so that we can proceed with the Student's t-test. The application of this is suitable to test if the means of two populations are significantly different ([Marôco, 2014](#)).

Thus, for p-values less than 0.05, we conclude that the intensity of hatred affects the active participation of consumers within the anti-brand community.

Table no. 10 – Levene test and T-test of hypothesis 5

	Levene test		T-test for equality of averages					95% Confidence Interval of Difference	
	Z	Sig.	t	df	Sig. (bilateral)	Average Difference	Standard error of difference	Less	Superior
Equal variances assumed	0,851	0,361	1,811	44	0,077	0,671	0,371	-0,076	1,419
Equal variances not assumed			1,700	19,52	0,105	0,671	0,395	-0,154	1,496

In this way, it is not possible to reject the hypothesis of active participation in anti-brand communities not depending on the intensity of hatred that consumers feel about brands.

5. DISCUSSION

This research included two sequential and interdependent preliminary studies aimed at defining the boundaries and context of the empirical investigation. In the first preliminary study, using the method of [Kucuk \(2008a\)](#), we found that the ten brands which attract the most anti-brand communities are, in descending order: Apple, Google, Coca-Cola, Microsoft, Samsung, IBM, Toyota, GE, Amazon and Mercedes. Thus, we conclude that the ranking of the strongest brands in the market has changed since 2008, as we had expected. In recent years, consumers who have negative feelings about brands have begun to organize in anti-brand communities on the Internet, opposing brands in a structured and transnational manner ([Bailey, 2004](#); [Krishnamurthy & Kucuk, 2009](#)). Thus, if members of anti-brand communities and their public reach a significant level, the company's sales and brand value may be potentially affected ([Kucuk, 2010](#)) even substantially. The increasing popularity of social networks has also increased the scale of this phenomenon, where individuals play a role as co-creators of brand content and sentiment ([Brodie, Hollebeek, Jurić, & Ilić, 2011](#)). Moreover, with the democratization of the Internet, market power has become more balanced, mainly due to its impact on information asymmetry between consumers and businesses ([Krishnamurthy & Kucuk, 2007](#)). Through the eWOM phenomenon, the opinion of potential, actual or former customers about a product or a company usually produces more influence

over other individuals than the companies' own communication actions (Hennig-Thurau et al., 2004). Subsequently, in the second preliminary study, we found that most anti-brand communities of the ten strongest brands on the market focus on social networks, especially Facebook, with 275 anti-brand communities. While Twitter hosts 69 anti-brand communities, Instagram has 24 such communities. By contrast, we only find 17 anti-brand websites and there are other platforms on the Internet (Blogs, WordPress, Google Groups, Wikipedia, Google+ and Tumblr) where its members are exclusively dedicated to exposing their feelings against a particular brand. In total, with this investigation, we found 393 anti-brand communities on the Internet. Research has also clearly revealed that companies operating in technological areas are those that attract more anti-brand communities within the group of the 10 strongest brands in the market. Among these, Apple attracts more anti-brand communities, with 99 pages specifically created against this brand on the Internet, followed by Amazon with 66, Samsung with 51, Google with 46 and Microsoft with 42 such communities. In comparison with the previous study carried out by Kucuk in 2008, where it emerged that anti-brand communities were concentrated in specific independent websites (Kucuk, 2008b), nowadays anti-brand sites have been substituted by social networks. This finding is not surprising, because social networks have undergone an incredible development in recent years and have established themselves as privileged places for sharing and discussion, even among consumers, replacing the traditional blog or forum existing within websites. On the other hand, we find that some of the evaluated brands have few anti-brand communities, such as IBM. This may be explained by the fact that increased consumer engagement with brands is more significant for hedonic brands than for functional brands (Hollebeek, 2013).

In the central study of this research, we focus on exploring the characteristics of consumers who join anti-brand communities and the main reasons leading consumers to join them. As for the "who", findings of the online survey with 570 respondents show that 46 individuals participate in anti-brand communities (Profile A), 278 respondents have negative feelings about brands but do not participate in anti-brand communities (Profile B) and 246 individuals do not have negative feelings about brands (Profile C). Through this survey, we conclude that Apple is the brand that has more consumers with negative feelings, having 27 individuals with Profile A and 113 consumers with Profile B. Following Coca-Cola with 40 respondents and Samsung with 14 individuals with Profile B, they reveal having negative feelings by these brands. Respondents with Profile A reveal they have mostly negative feelings about other brands, like Amazon and Bayer. In this way, companies that provide electronic and software products are those that attract more consumers who do not like them, confirming what emerged in the second preliminary study.

Moreover, this study includes five hypotheses that revealed characteristics of the consumers who join the anti-brand communities.

In the first hypothesis, through the chi-square test for the different variables (gender, age, country, education and empathy), we verified that gender influences negative brand feelings of individuals with Profile B (Hofstede & McCrae, 2004). However, for the other variables, it is not possible to conclude the same, because they have a p-value greater than the level of significance and thus we cannot reject the null hypothesis (the feelings that the consumers have for the brands is independent of the profile of the consumer).

In the second hypothesis, we also used the chi-square test to study the influence of the different variables (gender, age, country, education and empathy) on consumers with Profile A. Thus, we find that the individual's gender, age and country of origin induce the individual

to participate in anti-brand communities. While we cannot conclude the same for the education and empathy, due to the p-value of these being greater than the level of significance.

In the third hypothesis, we investigate whether the more empathic a consumer, the greater his or her hatred for the brand and consequently, the more likely to participate in anti-brand communities. Through Spearman's non-parametric correlation test, we find the opposite for consumers with Profile B, that is, the more empathic individuals are the less they hate the brands. On the other hand, for consumers with Profile A, we cannot draw conclusions because the p-value is less than 0.10. However, it is necessary to consider that the respondents themselves were evaluating their own level of empathy.

In the fourth hypothesis, we conclude that the willingness of consumers with Profile B to join an anti-brand community depends on the intensity of hatred they feel about brands. This hypothesis was first studied through non-parametric Kolmogorov-Smirnov and Shapiro-Wilk tests, in which the data did not follow a normal distribution. Afterwards we performed the Mann-Whitney test, in which we rejected the null hypothesis (the desire of consumers to participate in an anti-brand community is independent of the hatred they feel for them).

Finally, in the fifth hypothesis, we first study the normality of the sample data through the non-parametric Shapiro-Wilk test. We then used the Levene test to study the existence of homogeneous variances between samples, and then the t-student test to test whether the means of two populations are significantly different. Since the p-value is above the level of significance, we cannot reject the hypothesis that the active participation of consumers in anti-brand communities is independent of the intensity of brand hatred. Consequently, we conclude that consumer willingness to join an anti-brand community depends on the intensity of hatred they feel about brands, confirming that consumers who hate brands the most participate in anti-brand communities, as previous studies have shown (Kucuk, 2008a, 2010; Zarantonello et al., 2016).

In sum, the study showed that individual gender, age and country of origin influence the individual to participate in anti-brand communities (Profile A). However, we cannot conclude the same for education and empathy, due to their p-value being greater than the level of significance. Regarding consumers who have negative feelings about brands but do not participate in anti-brand communities (Profile B), findings show that the more empathic individuals are, the less they hate brands, undermining the assumption that the more empathic a consumer is, the more likely they will be to take part in anti-brand actions. Moreover, findings show that gender influences the negative feelings individuals with Profile B have towards brands, while for the other variables, it is not possible to conclude likewise.

As for the "why" consumers join the anti-brand communities, our findings show that the main reasons are the low quality of products/services (38%) and abuse of labor rights (22%), confirming what many scholars previously pointed out (Hollenbeck & Zinkhan, 2006; Kozinets & Handelman, 2004; Romani et al., 2015; Smith et al., 2010). Moreover, it is also interesting to note that many consumers genuinely say they do not like brands, because they do not promote healthy living habits and use animals to test their products. This confirms that corporate social responsibility has also assumed increasing importance over time in building brand image, reputation and equity.

Analyzing the consumers' answers, it is also evident that joining anti-brand communities testifies the will of consumers to build a "resistant identity", opposing dominant ideologies and consumerism, and participating in the co-creation process of brand value and image. This antagonistic behavior aims to promote economic, political and cultural changes in consumption, contrasting with the hegemony and social irresponsibility of global brands. In

fact, as for the hegemony, we found that 5,6% of the respondents indicate, as reasons for their negative feelings, “monopolistic threats to competition” and 5,0% accuse brands of “foster capitalism”. As for social irresponsibility, we found that 22% denounce “labor rights abuses”; 2,5% “promotion of negative lifestyle/eating habits; 2% “morally bankrupt actors”; other answers refer to the “destruction of the environment”, and “use chemical composition of the products”. Regarding the “negative purchase experiences” as a reason to hate certain brands, consumers denounce the “low product/service quality (38%), “exceptionally greedy agents” (6,2%), “insistent brand communication” (4,3%). Other answers refer to the “aggressive communication”, “inefficient purchasing process”, “lack of brand identification”, “expensive product for the performance”, “incompetent and untrained employees”, and “political reasons”. In sum, what the relevant findings show is the role that consumers aim to play in the market and their desire to no longer be passive recipients of goods and services, nor passive spectators of the consumption values and meanings proposed by the global brands. This is in perfect line with the recently highlighted notion of “conscious consumerism” (Brochado, Teiga, & Oliveira-Brochado, 2017; Kautish & Sharma, 2020), and “brand repulsion” with respect to brand hegemony (Dessart & Cova, 2021).

This study also has several managerial implications, related to the potential harmfulness of anti-brand communities in terms of brand image and brand reputation. First, through this investigation, it was clear that demographic variables influence the profile of the consumer, mainly the negative feelings that the individuals hold for the brands. Thus, knowing “who” participates most in the online anti-brand communities is relevant for companies in order to develop different communication strategies for different groups of people who normally develop negative feelings towards the brand. This is relevant for companies, as argued by Kähr, Nyffenegger, Krohmer, and Hoyer (2016, p. 25) “one single consumer can lead the brand to lose numerous existing customers and can alienate innumerable potential customers”. Second, according to Zarantonello et al. (2018), companies can identify specific and effective strategies for dealing with negative feelings towards brands, as only they know deeply “why” consumers have such negativity. In this regard, with this investigation, we conclude that the quality of products/services and labor practices are still the reasons that influence consumers the most in terms of having negative feelings about brands. Thus, management has to provide products with a balanced price-quality ratio, taking care of the entire buying process and paying more attention to being able to perceive consumers’ feelings about brands. It was also explicit from the research that individuals are concerned with companies’ socially responsible behavior, such as promoting healthy living habits and protecting animal rights, and consequently, companies need to establish strategies that show they are also concerned about all these phenomena.

6. CONCLUSIONS, LIMITATIONS AND DIRECTIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

This paper aimed to provide insights into anti-brand communities on the Internet, striving to answer to the crucial questions: “*who* and *why*” consumers join anti-brand communities in order to counteract global brands? The decision to investigate this topic which refers to the top global brands is due to the fact that they are more and more commonly the target of anti-consumer movements and anti-brand communities, as a result of their domination of world markets and for the meanings and consumption values they convey through products and services and, more generally, their marketing communication. Therefore, joining anti-brand communities allows consumers to publicly express their

negative feelings towards the hated brand and play an active role in the market through the dissemination and sharing of experiences, ideas and opinions capable of contrasting with and rejecting consumption models proposed by global brands.

Despite the importance of this theme for management (Krishnamurthy & Kucuk, 2009; Zarantonello et al., 2016) the empirical studies on negative feelings towards global brands are still scarce. On the basis of these premises, this empirical study was carried out in order to investigate several issues relating to the negative relationships between consumers and global brands in the Internet domain, through a survey of consumers of the ten strongest global brands.

In the two preliminary studies, we identified the ten strongest global brands nowadays, and subsequently, in reference to them, that most anti-brand communities deal with, in descending order: Apple, Google, Coca-Cola, Microsoft, Samsung, IBM, Toyota, GE, Amazon and Mercedes. Regarding the location of the anti-brand communities, and in comparison, with the previous study carried out by Kucuk in 2008, where it emerged that the anti-brand communities were concentrated in specific websites, we found that nowadays anti-brand sites have been substituted by social networks. In fact, social networks are becoming the main and strongest context in which consumers are able to share ideas, opinions, experiences, consumption values and meanings in contrast to those provided by the companies.

In sum, the findings of our investigation, with reference to the first part of the research question (“who”), can be synthesized as follows. Regarding the individual characteristics of “*Individuals who join the anti-brand communities (Profile A)*”, we found that “gender”, “age” and “country of origin” induce the individual to participate in anti-brand communities, while we cannot conclude the same for the “education” and “empathy”. Regarding “*Individuals with negative feelings about brands, but do not participate in an anti-brand community (Profile B)*”, our findings show that the more “empathic” individuals are, the less they hate brands, unlike what could have been assumed, namely that the more empathic a consumer is, the more likely they will be participate in anti-brand actions. Moreover, the results show that, for individuals with Profile B, “gender” is the only variable influencing negative feelings towards brands, while the other variables show no relevant impact on the formation of Profile B.

With reference to the second part of the research question (“why”), the study findings show that the quality of products/services and working conditions are the most common reasons consumers point to as the cause of negative feelings towards brands. Therefore, the phenomenon of anti-brand communities refers to both negative feelings deriving from aspects related to the physical and functional characteristics of the products/services, and severely disapproving assessments of the intangible elements and how the business is conducted.

Posing the questions of “who” and “why” consumers join anti-brand communities paves the way for further studies on negative consumer-brand relationships, which is a topic not yet widely considered in the literature. Therefore, directions for future research arise from questions this paper has started to answer, in light of the following two main limitations. First, investigating more than one aspect of a given phenomenon through a single questionnaire inevitably prevents one from delving deeply into each of them. This paper has chosen to investigate especially “who and why” consumers participate in anti-brand communities on the Internet, but we are aware that the two questions could be interconnected and interdependent.

Therefore, from a conceptual point of view, the first suggestion for future research is to deepen the interdependence and the links between the two questions. Second, the variables that have been investigated here (gender, age, country of origin, education and empathy) could also be expanded with or replaced by other consumer characteristics that could have relevance

with regard to participation in anti-brand communities. Finally, replicating the survey in other contexts could lead to more respondents and broaden the results.

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