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Identity on display: pop culture, belonging and purchase decisions

Identidade em cena: cultura, pertencimento e decisões de compra

Identidad en escena: cultura pop, pertinencia y decisiones de compra

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ABSTRACT

Background: Purchase decisions related to POP culture items frequently transcend strictly functional logic, being driven by symbolic meanings, identification with narrative universes, and affective bonds.

Purpose: This research investigated how the use of social media (USM), nostalgia (NOST), community formation (CF), and bonding with POP culture (BPC) influence purchase behavior (PB).

Method: Data were collected through an online questionnaire between September and December 2024. The sample consisted of 388 valid respondents. For data analysis, Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modeling (PLS-SEM) was employed, using SmartPLS 4 as supporting software.

Results: The findings indicated that social media use positively influences community formation and, more importantly, bonding with POP culture. Bonding with POP culture emerged as the strongest predictor of purchase behavior. Additionally, social media use influenced purchase behavior both directly and indirectly through bonding with POP culture, whereas nostalgia showed a weaker direct effect and did not sustain indirect effects through community formation or bonding with POP culture.

Conclusions: The results reinforce the centrality of bonding with POP culture as an explanatory mechanism for digital consumption, demonstrating that social media contributes to purchasing behavior mainly when it strengthens symbolic identification with this cultural universe.

Keywords: consumer behavior; digital communities; digital engagement; cultural identity; marketing.

RESUMO

Contextualização: As decisões de compra de itens vinculados à cultura POP frequentemente ultrapassam a lógica estritamente funcional, sendo orientadas por significados simbólicos, identificação com universos narrativos e vínculos afetivos.

Objetivo: Esta pesquisa investigou de que modo o uso das redes sociais (URS), a nostalgia (NOST), a formação de comunidade (FC) e o vínculo com a cultura POP (VCP) influenciam o comportamento de compra (CC).

Método: Os dados foram coletados por questionário online entre os meses de setembro e dezembro de 2024. A amostra foi composta por 388 respondentes válidos. Para a análise, optou-se pela Modelagem de Equações Estruturais via Mínimos Quadrados Parciais (PLS-SEM), tendo como ferramenta de apoio o software SmartPLS4.

Resultados: Os resultados indicaram que o uso das redes sociais influencia positivamente a formação de comunidade e, principalmente, o vínculo com a cultura POP, enquanto o vínculo com a cultura POP se destacou como o preditor mais forte do comportamento de compra. Adicionalmente, verificou-se que o uso das redes sociais influencia o comportamento de compra tanto de forma direta quanto indiretamente por meio do vínculo com a cultura POP, ao passo que a nostalgia apresentou influência direta de menor magnitude e não sustentou efeitos indiretos via formação de comunidade ou vínculo com a cultura POP.

Conclusões: Os achados reforçam a centralidade do vínculo com a cultura POP como mecanismo explicativo do consumo em ambientes digitais, ao evidenciar que o uso das redes sociais contribui para a compra principalmente quando fortalece a identificação simbólica com esse universo.

Palavras-chave: comportamento do consumidor; comunidades digitais; engajamento digital; identidade cultural; marketing.

RESUMEN

Contextualización: Las decisiones de compra relacionadas con artículos vinculados a la cultura POP con frecuencia trascienden la lógica estrictamente funcional y se orientan por significados simbólicos, identificación con universos narrativos y vínculos afectivos.

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Objetivo: Esta investigación analizó cómo el uso de las redes sociales (URS), la nostalgia (NOST), la formación de comunidad (FC) y el vínculo con la cultura POP (VCP) influyen en el comportamiento de compra (CC).

Método: Los datos fueron recolectados mediante un cuestionario en línea entre los meses de septiembre y diciembre de 2024. La muestra estuvo compuesta por 388 respondentes válidos. Para el análisis se empleó la Modelización de Ecuaciones Estructurales por Mínimos Cuadrados Parciales (PLS-SEM), utilizando como herramienta de apoyo el software SmartPLS 4.

Resultados: Los resultados indicaron que el uso de las redes sociales influye positivamente en la formación de comunidad y, especialmente, en el vínculo con la cultura POP. Este vínculo se destacó como el predictor más fuerte del comportamiento de compra. Además, se verificó que el uso de las redes sociales influye en el comportamiento de compra tanto de manera directa como indirectamente a través del vínculo con la cultura POP, mientras que la nostalgia mostró un efecto directo de menor magnitud y no sustentó efectos indirectos mediante la formación de comunidad o el vínculo con la cultura POP.

Conclusiones: Los hallazgos refuerzan la centralidad del vínculo con la cultura POP como un mecanismo explicativo del consumo en entornos digitales, evidenciando que el uso de las redes sociales contribuye a la compra principalmente cuando fortalece la identificación simbólica con dicho universo.

Palabras clave: comportamiento del consumidor; comunidades digitales; engagement digital; identidad cultural; marketing.

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1 INTRODUCTION

During the 1990s, people witnessed the emergence of a new facilitator of social connections and entertainment: social media (Suvojit, 2016). The rise of these communication platforms led to Generation Z (individuals born between 1997 and 2010) being labeled the Net Generation, associating these young people with familiarity and confidence in the use of digital technologies (Tapscott, 1998). Although this concept was originally developed in the early context of the Internet, more recent studies demonstrate that Generation Z uses digital environments more intensively, employing social media not only for communication and entertainment but also for identity construction, value expression, community building, and interaction with brands and products (Priporas et al., 2017; Rosnerova et al., 2025).

According to Carvalho (2011), social media has achieved such widespread public preference that Brazil currently ranks fifth worldwide in the number of connected users, making it the second-largest market in the Americas and the largest in Latin America (Statista, 2025a). This prominence is also reflected in patterns of digital platform use, as Instagram accounts for 34% of the daily time Brazilian users spend on social media, making it the preferred platform among Millennials and Generation Z (Statista, 2025b). Beyond its role in social interaction and entertainment, social media has also become an important source of information, with YouTube and Instagram being identified by 37% of users as frequent sources of news consumption (Statista, 2026).

Given its essential role in everyday life, immersion in these platforms enables the formation of dialogical social ties, which over time may evolve into stronger relationships (Granovetter, 1973; 1983; Slutcliffe et al., 2018; Taylor et al., 2022; Faustino-Dias et al., 2025). Moreover, users increasingly seek to build their online presence in ways that express their identities, share their interests and personal experiences, and participate in communities based on common interests, hobbies, opinions, and lived experiences (Xie, 2023; Hu & Noor, 2024; Faustino-Dias et al., 2025). In this sense, social media has become a space where reciprocal social interaction shapes the perspective of relational belonging, an inherently human need characterized by the feeling of “being part of” (Smith et al., 2021; Li, 2022; Hu & Noor, 2024; Faustino-Dias et al., 2025).

These transformations have significantly expanded marketing opportunities, resulting in exponential growth in the number of companies using social media to retain customers, attract new audiences, and interact with their target markets (Appel et al., 2020; Jamil et al., 2022; Félix-Silva et al., 2024). In the effort to renew initiatives surrounding the phenomenon of consumption, one trend first identified in the 1990s and that has gained increasing momentum among brands is the use of nostalgia (Stern, 1992). Jungselius and Weilenmann (2023) emphasize that with the consolidation of digital platforms, nostalgia has taken on new forms, being amplified by social media, which facilitates the large-scale sharing of memories, cultural references, and collective experiences. Consequently, nostalgia tends to function as a trigger of meaning and value when it is socially shared and validated within networks, transforming memories into preference and, potentially, purchase behavior.

In music, films, television series, fashion, events, design, and even the “#tbt” hashtag that became popular on social media, looking to the past has evolved from being merely a topic of informal conversation to becoming a longing for a different time (Grębosz-Krawczyk et al., 2021; Jungselius & Weilenmann, 2023). Belk (1990) and Boym (2017) further argue that nostalgia can create a sense of familiarity, stability, and coherence in identity formation in the face of uncertainties about the future.

According to Havlena and Holak (1991), companies explore product innovation through nostalgic attachment. Within this context, brands adopt this type of strategy to foster closer relationships with consumers by evoking positive memories (Cui, 2015). An example of these marketing strategies can be observed in *The Eras Tour*, the global concert tour by singer Taylor Swift, which successfully achieved its objective of evoking fans' nostalgia and became the first tour in history to surpass US\$1 billion in revenue (McIntyre, 2023). Well-established film franchises, such as *Harry Potter*, have been the focus of marketing campaigns since the release of the films (2000), serving as a continuous source of capital generation for companies across various industries (Gunelius, 2008; Souza-Leão & Costa, 2018). In these cases, nostalgic appeal does not operate alone; rather, it is typically anchored in references to pop culture that make memories recognizable, shareable, and marketable.

Considering the role of nostalgia in corporate marketing strategies for promoting products aligned with global pop culture, this study seeks to answer the following research question: how does nostalgia associated with pop culture influence the purchase decisions of digital consumers? Pop culture, understood as a repository of shared narratives, icons, and emotional experiences, is projected onto consumer goods that function as material extensions of fan identity (Becker & Georgiou, 2024; Yoshida et al., 2024).

Despite advances in research on nostalgia, pop culture, and consumer behavior, theoretical fragmentation remains evident in the literature. While some studies investigate the effects of nostalgia on attitudes, preferences, and purchase intentions (Sierra & McQuitty, 2007; Ju et al., 2016; Xia et al., 2021), others focus on the dynamics of fandoms, digital communities, and engagement with pop culture elements (Campbell et al., 2016; Chadborn et al., 2018). However, there remains a limited number of studies integrating these perspectives into a single explanatory model capable of demonstrating

how social media and the formation of digital communities function as mechanisms that transform nostalgic experiences into actual consumption behaviors, particularly within the Brazilian context.

From a practical perspective, the objective of this study was to investigate how social media use (SMU), nostalgia (NOST), community formation (CF), and attachment to pop culture (APC) influence the purchasing behavior (PB) of Brazilian consumers. Accordingly, the primary contribution of this research is the proposal and empirical testing of an integrative model that simultaneously articulates social media use, nostalgia, digital community formation, and attachment to pop culture to explain purchasing behavior. Furthermore, by considering the Brazilian context, characterized by high levels of digital engagement and strong consumption of pop culture-related content, this study contributes to expanding the understanding of these phenomena in emerging markets, which remain underexplored in the international literature.

From a managerial perspective, the findings may provide valuable insights for marketing professionals seeking to develop more effective engagement strategies by using nostalgic elements and shared cultural references to strengthen consumer relationships, enhance the sense of belonging within brand communities, and improve marketing performance in digital environments.

In this way, the study seeks to support marketing professionals by providing theoretical contributions and scientific evidence highlighting the opportunity to promote a more effective and personalized online presence focused on delivering nostalgic experiences through content, products, and services. In summary, it is argued that pop culture provides the "codes" (icons and narratives), nostalgia provides the "affective force" (familiarity and continuity), and social networks and communities provide the "social mechanism" (validation and belonging) that may ultimately culminate in the purchase decision.

2 THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The Social Identity Theory, developed by Tajfel (1974), constitutes one of the principal theoretical approaches for understanding how individuals construct their identity through relationships established with social groups. The theory is based on the premise that an individual's identity is not formed exclusively by personal characteristics but also by the perception of belonging to groups with which they share values, beliefs, symbols, and common goals. In this regard, social categorization enables individuals to cognitively organize the social environment by defining who belongs to the group ("us") and who remains outside it ("them"), a process that influences attitudes, emotions, and behaviors (Tajfel, 1974).

According to this perspective, individuals tend to seek a positive social identity through association with groups that provide recognition, self-esteem, and social validation. Identification with a group leads its members to internalize shared norms, expectations, and behavioral standards, making them more likely to act consistently with collective values. Consequently, individual decisions become influenced not only by personal motivations but also by the desire to maintain and reinforce one's position within the social group to which one belongs (Tajfel, 1974). Figure 1 summarizes the main elements of the Social Identity Theory.

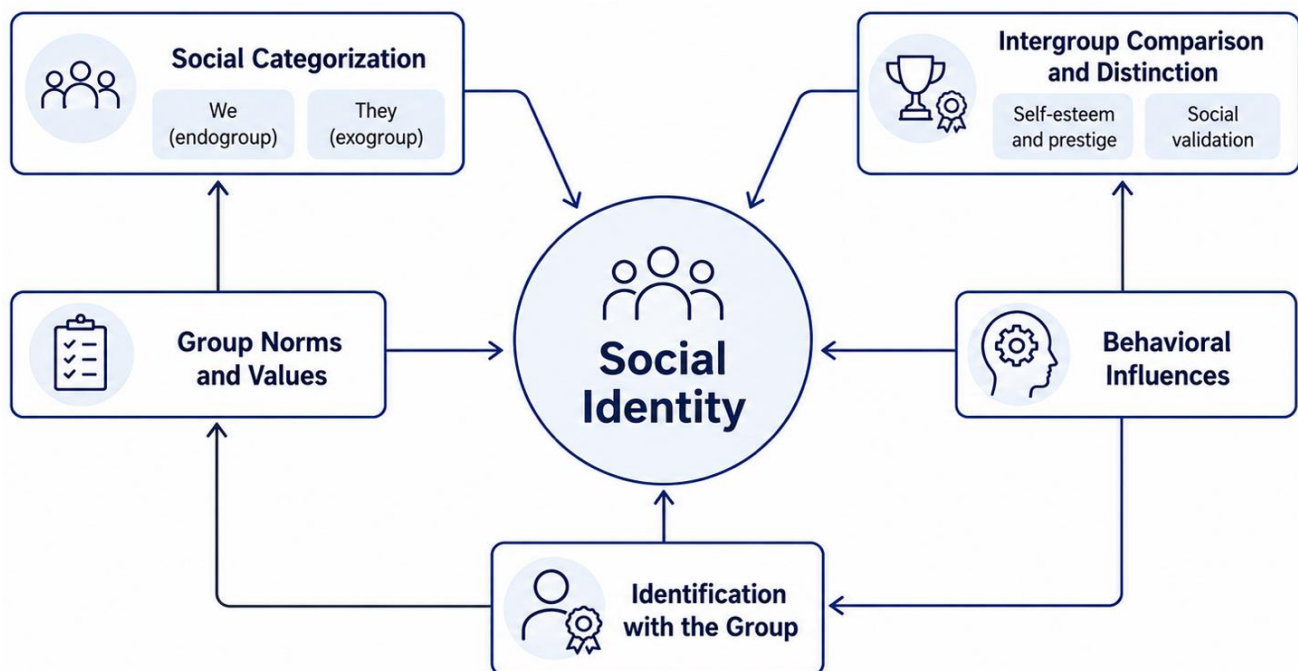


Figure 1. Conceptual representation of social identity theory
Source: Developed based on Tajfel (1974).

As illustrated, social identity emerges from the interaction between group recognition, social validation, and the sharing of values, becoming an important explanatory mechanism for understanding attitudes and decision-making in collective contexts.

Contemporary literature demonstrates that Social Identity Theory has broad applicability for understanding consumer-related phenomena, particularly in contexts characterized by intense social interaction and symbolic sharing. In these environments, consumers use products, brands, and experiences as instruments of identity expression, communicating belonging and alignment with specific reference groups (Belk, 1988; Sierra & McQuitty, 2007; Matsubara & Mizukoshi, 2025; Whelan, 2025; Bingley et al., 2026). Thus, consumption extends beyond its utilitarian function and assumes a symbolic dimension through which individuals publicly express relevant aspects of their social identity.

The advancement of digital technologies further enhances the relevance of this theoretical perspective, as social media provides permanent spaces for interaction where individuals share content, build relationships, and develop connections with groups based on common interests (Appel et al., 2020; Hu & Noor, 2024). Moreover, social identity plays a central role in the formation of digital communities, engagement with cultural manifestations, and the development of relationships between consumers and brands (Dessart et al., 2015; Aditya & Setyawan, 2024; Wang et al., 2024).

Active participation in social groups encourages the adoption of behaviors aligned with collective expectations, increasing peer influence over perceptions, preferences, and consumption decisions (Obilo et al., 2021; Yoshida et al., 2024). Consequently, social identity can be understood as an explanatory mechanism capable of connecting social interactions, cultural ties, and marketplace behaviors.

Within this context, consumer behavior is interpreted as the result of processes of identification and social belonging, in which individuals' choices reflect not only personal preferences but also the pursuit of recognition, integration, and validation within the groups to which they feel connected.

2.1 Collective belonging as a market driver

Contemporary discussions on brand communities are grounded in the notion that group cohesion results from the sharing of symbols, rituals, and narratives that reinforce collective identity (Dessart et al., 2015; Martínez-López et al., 2021; Aditya & Setyawan, 2024; Wang et al., 2024). It is argued that such cohesion functions as the "normative infrastructure" of consumption because, by defining what is considered authentic and valued within the group, the community transforms cultural affinities into socially validated criteria for choice, reducing uncertainty and guiding preferences. These virtual communities generate social capital (implicit norms of mutual support, trust in the validity of exchanged information, and a sense of belonging), which reduces individuals' perception of risk and legitimizes consumption choices (Dessart et al., 2015; Wang et al., 2024).

Recent studies reinforce that when community engagement occurs through social media networks, the continuous flow of testimonials, reviews, and tutorials enhances consumers' self-efficacy, favoring purchase decisions based on social validation (Faustino-Dias et al., 2025; Méndez-Lazarte et al., 2025). Social Identity Theory explains this phenomenon by proposing that individuals internalize group expectations, transforming the acquisition of symbolic products into a practice for maintaining their status within the collective (Tajfel, 1974). Therefore, purchasing can be interpreted as a performance or expression of belonging, insofar as it signals alignment with collective norms and cultural competence before peers. Consequently, consumption ceases to be merely a utilitarian transaction and becomes a visible manifestation of loyalty.

Furthermore, the mutual reinforcement generated through recurring interactions, such as likes, comments, and shares, solidifies the perception that belonging to the group requires both the adoption and the tangible display of the same cultural artifacts consumed by peers (Obilo et al., 2021; Razmus, 2021; Faustino-Dias et al., 2025). Thus, it is argued that the underlying mechanism lies in transforming social recognition into symbolic incentives; that is, group approval adds "social value" to the product, making the choice more defensible and desirable. In this scenario, each purchase not only satisfies an individual need but also publicly confirms the consumer's alignment with community norms and values, perpetuating a cycle in which symbolic loyalty and purchasing behavior reinforce one another. Accordingly, H₁ is proposed:

H₁: Community formation positively influences purchasing behavior.

2.2 Affective memory as a driver of community formation and cultural engagement

Nostalgia, understood as a complex emotion combining affection, idealization of the past, and the search for temporal continuity (Stern, 1992), has emerged in recent literature as a trigger for psychological comfort in contexts of instability (Zhou et al., 2012; Hepper & Dennis, 2023; Cao, 2024). From a theoretical perspective, it is important to distinguish between individual nostalgia (autobiographical, centered on continuity of the self) and collective nostalgia (centered on shared repertoires and memories belonging to "us"), as these two forms tend to produce distinct outcomes: the former strengthens personal identity coherence, whereas the latter reinforces group cohesion and social identity.

Experimental research demonstrates that "retro" labels or narratives evoking childhood memories significantly increase purchase intention by shifting product evaluation from technical attributes to the hedonic domain (Shields &

Johnson, 2016; Henriques & Suarez, 2021; Zhang et al., 2022). This suggests that nostalgia "reanchors" the value of an object from functional performance to meaning and comfort, making purchasing decisions less dependent on strictly utilitarian evaluations. This effect is not limited to the individual sphere, as when memories are shared collectively, they constitute what is known as collective nostalgia, reinforcing cohesion by activating shared historical repertoires and providing a sense of belonging and identity resilience during periods of change (Smeekes et al., 2022; Zhang et al., 2022).

Collective nostalgia also stimulates collecting practices and affective exchanges within digital fan environments because objects capable of "anchoring" memories (vinyl records, action figures, film re-releases) become artifacts of domestic musealization (Wang, 2023; Gautam, 2024). Studies of gaming and East Asian pop culture communities reveal that the sense of loss associated with an "idealized past" stimulates not only the search for vintage items but also the creation of new social bonds as members exchange information on where to acquire, restore, or display such objects. This sequence is theoretically relevant because it indicates that nostalgia may indirectly influence purchasing behavior by intensifying symbolic ties with pop culture and strengthening the sense of community belonging, thereby creating the social and identity-related conditions that make consumption more likely and socially legitimized.

Simultaneously, the cultural industry continuously reconfigures media classics by offering remakes and spin-offs capable of updating narratives for new generations without abandoning their original emotional appeal. Studies on TikTok show that soundtracks from successful 1980s productions have re-emerged as "trend sounds," activating parental memories while introducing retro repertoires to digitally native audiences (Brown et al., 2024; Zaborowski & Bennett, 2025). This process strengthens attachment to pop culture by transforming nostalgic references into a language of intercultural socialization.

The sharing of these experiences consolidates increasingly transgenerational and transnational fan communities. The revival of "old but gold" topics in forums and hashtag competitions encourages narratives of "passing the torch," in which experienced consumers introduce icons from their youth to new enthusiasts, creating mentoring relationships and strengthening group cohesion (Smeekes et al., 2022; Zhang et al., 2022; Becker & Georgiou, 2024; Salisu, 2024). Consequently, nostalgia performs a dual function by catalyzing both the desire to reclaim objects from the past and the consolidation of social bonds that underpin collaborative consumption practices.

Finally, by moving across media such as cinema, music, gaming, and fashion, nostalgia provides pop culture with a powerful instrument for maintaining cycles of relevance (Becker & Georgiou, 2024). The continual updating of classics preserves symbolic capital and ensures a continuous flow of associated merchandise, ranging from commemorative editions to limited merchandising, creating programmed scarcity that intensifies the urgency to purchase. Accordingly, H₂, H₃, H₄, H₅, and H₆ are proposed:

H₂: Nostalgia positively influences purchasing behavior.

H₃: Nostalgia positively influences community formation.

H₄: Nostalgia positively influences attachment to pop culture.

H₅: Community formation mediates the relationship between nostalgia and purchasing behavior.

H₆: Attachment to pop culture mediates the relationship between nostalgia and purchasing behavior.

2.3 Social media, community formation, and the expansion of pop culture

Digital platforms have become infrastructures of distributed persuasion by integrating discovery, socialization, and transaction within a single ecosystem (Appel et al., 2020). A recent meta-analysis identified a correlation between influencer attributes (attractiveness, expertise, and trustworthiness) and purchase intention, indicating that social media reduces informational barriers while strengthening consumers' confidence in their decisions (Han & Balabanis, 2023). From an explanatory perspective, this suggests that the effect of social media use on purchasing behavior is less direct and more dependent on underlying mechanisms, particularly the strengthening of symbolic ties with pop culture and the consolidation of community belonging, both of which transform mere exposure into social legitimacy and desire.

From a sociological perspective, these environments facilitate the emergence of virtual brand communities characterized by high levels of interactivity and distributed governance (Vukasovic, 2013; Hayes et al., 2021; Fetais et al., 2023; Ali et al., 2025). Méndez-Lazarte et al. (2025) further argue that social media enables brands to optimize relationships with consumers while measuring the strength of these relationships (likes, comments, and shares), resulting in more accurate assessments of consumer loyalty toward the brand and/or the community.

It is noteworthy that continuous exposure to content produced by fellow consumers establishes normative standards that guide individuals regarding acceptable behaviors, reinforcing the premise that social media use fosters community formation (Jamil et al., 2022). It is also important to emphasize that the continuous sharing of content by peers may positively

influence purchase intentions, as reported by Jamil et al. (2022). However, when brands themselves publish excessive amounts of content or repeatedly interrupt users' experiences, consumer irritation tends to increase and, consequently, purchase expectations tend to decline (Félix-Silva et al., 2024). This contrast reinforces the need to model mediation effects, as the mere intensity of social media use may not sufficiently explain purchasing behavior unless accompanied by sufficiently strong symbolic attachment and/or community belonging capable of sustaining social proof.

Regarding the dissemination of pop culture, TikTok, Instagram, and YouTube function as catalysts for remix culture by enabling users to appropriate memes, reinterpret choreographies, or create duets with classic scenes, thereby reinserting them into contemporary debates (TikTok, 2021). Reports published by TikTok itself highlight that soundtracks from vintage hits consistently rank among the platform's "viral sounds," demonstrating how digital environments reactivate cultural repertoires and extend their generational reach. The engagement generated by these dynamics becomes a relationship marketing asset because, when a meme from a film or television series becomes a trend, licensed products often experience almost immediate spikes in demand, translating cultural attention into revenue (Ayesha, 2024). This phenomenon demonstrates that intensive social media use strengthens attachment to pop culture by transforming every user into a co-director of collective narratives that transcend media boundaries.

Finally, the dialogical relationship among brands, influencers, and consumers creates a feedback spiral in which engagement metrics (likes, shares, comments, etc.) function as social proof, reinforcing both community participation and purchase intention. Algorithmic logic, by prioritizing highly interactive content, further amplifies this cycle of symbolic and economic legitimization. Accordingly, H₇, H₈, H₉, H₁₀, and H₁₁ are proposed:

H₇: Social media use positively influences purchasing behavior.

H₈: Social media use positively influences community formation.

H₉: Social media use positively influences attachment to pop culture.

H₁₀: Community formation mediates the relationship between social media use and purchasing behavior.

H₁₁: Attachment to pop culture mediates the relationship between social media use and purchasing behavior.

2.4 Pop culture and the monetization of affection

Pop culture, understood as a repertoire of socially shared narratives, icons, and emotional experiences, materializes in consumer goods that function as tangible extensions of fan identity (Becker & Georgiou, 2024; Yoshida et al., 2024). Reports on the "renaissance" of music merchandising suggest that limited-edition products function as tangible symbols of belonging to a symbolic universe, becoming important sources of revenue for artists and brands (Murphy, 2020; Bandyopadhyay et al., 2025). From a psychological perspective, the Extended Self Theory argues that collectible items become integrated into one's self-concept, thereby explaining consumers' willingness to pay premium prices for goods that embody personal histories (Belk, 1988). Controlled scarcity, exclusive drops, timed pre-orders, and surprise collaborations further reinforce purchase desire by activating urgency and the fear of missing out (FOMO), thereby converting cultural capital into economic capital (Hodkinson, 2016; Dinh & Lee, 2024).

Within this context, licensed products cease to be mere commodities and instead become gateways to communities and experiences. The acquisition of VIP tickets, digital collectibles, or fashion items becomes a ritual of symbolic reinvestment that reaffirms belonging (Zhang & Phang, 2023; Zhang & Phang, 2025), thereby supporting H₁₂:

H₁₂: Attachment to pop culture positively influences purchasing behavior.

Considering the proposed hypotheses, Figure 2 presents the proposed structural model for this study, summarizing the hypothesized relationships among the constructs.

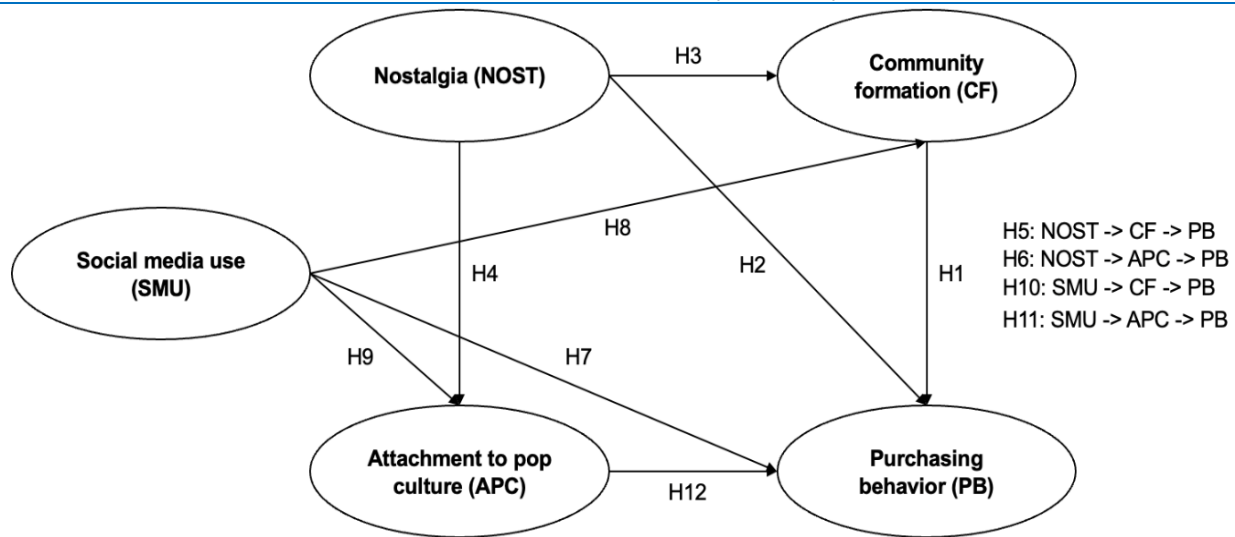


Figure 2. Proposed structural model

Source: Authors' own elaboration.

Note: Hypotheses H5, H6, H10, and H11 refer to the indirect effects (mediations) tested through the structural paths represented in the model.

3 METHODOLOGY

This study adopts a quantitative research design, as its primary objective is to numerically measure the relationships among the constructs tested. Creswell and Creswell (2021) state that quantitative research involves the collection and analysis of numerical data to describe trends, test hypotheses, or examine relationships among variables by using standardized instruments and statistical procedures that ensure the objectivity and replicability of the results.

Data were collected using a questionnaire developed in Google Forms and distributed through social media platforms, including Instagram and WhatsApp, between September and December 2024. This data collection approach was chosen because it enables broader participant reach (Parizot, 2015). The sample size was determined based on the recommendation of Hair et al. (2009), who suggest a minimum of 10 participants for each variable analyzed. Based on this criterion, a minimum sample of 250 participants was recommended for this study, a requirement that was exceeded by the final sample ($n = 388$). Additionally, a post hoc statistical power analysis was conducted using G*Power 3.1, considering $f^2 = 0.146$, $\alpha = 0.05$, 388 observations, and three predictors. The results indicated a statistical power of 0.9999995, substantially exceeding the recommended minimum threshold of 0.80 (Cohen, 1988), thereby confirming the adequacy of the sample size for the application of PLS-SEM. It should be noted that this study was not submitted for review by a Research Ethics Committee because it falls under Exception I of Resolution No. 510 of April 7, 2016, issued by the Brazilian National Health Council (Brazil, 2016).

To complete the questionnaire, participants were instructed to reflect on their experiences as consumers of pop culture content (such as music, television series, films, artists, and media productions) and on their interactions within virtual communities and social media platforms dedicated to these interests. They were also asked to consider their search for content related to this cultural universe in their digital routines, the impact of nostalgic feelings on their preferences, their desire to belong to groups with similar interests, the relevance of pop culture to the construction of their identity, and their relationship with consumption habits associated with products, services, and experiences linked to pop culture.

The questionnaire was structured into three sections. The first section presented the confidentiality statement, ensuring respondents' voluntary participation. The second section collected demographic information (age, state, gender, education, income, and professional field), along with a screening question ("During the past 12 months, have you consumed or interacted with content, products, or services related to pop culture?"), accompanied by an explanatory note providing examples of elements considered part of pop culture (music, artists, television series, films, anime, games, themed events, licensed products, and digital fan communities). For the purposes of this study, interaction was defined as activities related to following social media profiles, participating in virtual fan communities, posting comments, sharing content, or creating content associated with pop culture. Participants who answered negatively were immediately directed to the thank-you page, whereas those who answered affirmatively proceeded to the next section of the questionnaire.

Finally, the third section comprised the study constructs, operationalized through 25 items adapted from previous studies (Table 1) and measured using a five-point Likert scale ranging from 1 = strongly disagree to 5 = strongly agree. It should be noted that the scale measuring Social Media Use was adapted to the specific context of this study to ensure greater alignment with the phenomenon under investigation. To ensure content validity and item clarity, the adapted version was first evaluated by experts in the field and subsequently subjected to a pilot test with members of the target population.

Table 1

Measurement items and consulted sources

Construct (Consulted sources)	Indicators: statements
<i>Social media use</i> (Appel et al., 2020; Jamil et al., 2022; Méndez-Lazarte et al., 2025)	SMU1: I use social media to follow news and updates about pop culture SMU2: I spend several hours per day browsing social media SMU3: I follow pages or profiles of pop culture artists and influencers on social media SMU4: I frequently interact with pop culture-related content on social media SMU5: I use social media to participate in discussions about pop culture
<i>Nostalgia</i> (Stern, 1992; Zhang et al., 2022; Smeekes et al., 2022; Brown et al., 2024)	NOST1: I miss the music, movies, and television programs from my youth NOST2: I feel emotionally connected to artists and trends from the past NOST3: Old songs and movies bring back pleasant memories NOST4: I seek pop culture content from the past on social media NOST5: I prefer consuming content that reminds me of nostalgic moments
<i>Community formation</i> (Martínez-López et al., 2021; Obilo et al., 2021; Razmus, 2021)	CF1: I participate in online groups or communities dedicated to pop culture CF2: I enjoy interacting with other pop culture fans on social media CF3: I share pop culture content in online groups and forums CF4: I feel part of a community when I interact with other fans on social media CF5: Online communities help me feel more connected to pop culture
<i>Attachment to pop culture</i> (Becker & Georgiou, 2024; Yoshida et al., 2024)	APC1: I frequently follow new releases of pop culture music, movies, and television series APC2: I feel emotionally connected to pop culture artists and personalities APC3: I spend time learning about new developments in the world of pop culture. APC4: I participate in pop culture-related events (online or in person) APC5: Pop culture is an important part of my life and identity
<i>Purchasing behavior</i> (Jamil et al., 2022; Ayesha, 2024; Dinh & Lee, 2024)	PB1: I purchase merchandising products (e.g., T-shirts, posters) from pop culture artists and franchises PB2: I spend money to attend concerts, movies, or live events related to pop culture PB3: I purchase digital products, such as music, movies, or streaming services, to consume pop culture content PB4: I am willing to spend money to support my favorite pop culture artists PB5: My purchasing decisions are frequently influenced by my pop culture preferences

Source: Authors' own elaboration.

Data analysis was conducted using Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modeling (PLS-SEM). However, before performing the PLS-SEM analysis, descriptive statistics of the constructs were examined. Accordingly, the Jamovi software was used to calculate descriptive statistics, whereas SmartPLS 4 was employed to perform the PLS-SEM analysis because it provides more robust and flexible analyses and represents a suitable option for relatively small samples (Ringle et al., 2014; Bido & Silva, 2019).

The measurement model was evaluated following the procedures proposed by Hair et al. (2014) and Hair et al. (2021), with emphasis on measurement quality and structural relationships. Factor loadings above 0.70 were considered acceptable, while internal consistency was assessed using Cronbach's alpha, ρ_A , and composite reliability (ρ_C), all of which were required to exceed 0.70. Convergent validity was confirmed through the Average Variance Extracted (AVE), using a minimum threshold of 0.50.

For discriminant validity, the Fornell-Larcker criterion was applied, ensuring that the AVE exceeded the correlations among the constructs, and the Heterotrait-Monotrait Ratio (HTMT) was maintained below 0.90 (Hair et al., 2014; Hair et al., 2021). Additionally, the Goodness-of-Fit (GoF) index proposed by Tenenhaus et al. (2004) was calculated to complement the evaluation of the model's overall quality. Thus, its use was complementary, contributing to a more comprehensive assessment of the model's overall performance prior to evaluating the structural model.

In the structural model, the coefficient of determination (R^2), the absence of multicollinearity through Variance Inflation Factor (VIF) values below 3, and the magnitude of individual effect sizes (f^2) were analyzed. Parameter estimation was performed using PLS-SEM, with statistical inference obtained through bootstrapping with 5,000 resamples (Hair et al., 2021). Based on the bootstrapping procedure, the overall quality of the model was further assessed using the Standardized Root Mean Square Residual (SRMR), considering values below 0.08 as indicative of good model fit (Hair et al., 2021).

4 ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION OF RESULTS

4.1 Results

During the data collection period, 437 responses were recorded. However, after data screening, 49 responses were excluded due to incomplete questionnaires, invariant response patterns, incompatible completion times, and/or inconsistencies in the provided information, resulting in 388 valid responses. With the final sample established, the respondents' sociodemographic characteristics were analyzed, as presented in Table 2, in order to characterize the participant profile and provide context for the interpretation of the subsequent results.

Table 2. Sociodemographic characteristics of the sample

Characteristic	N = 388	%
<i>Gender</i>		
Female	292	75.3%
Male	90	23.2%
Non-binary	4	1.0%
Transgender	2	0.5%
<i>Age group</i>		
18-24 years	140	36.1%
25-34 years	195	50.3%
35-44 years	46	11.9%
45-54 years	5	1.3%
55-64 years	2	0.5%
<i>Education attainment</i>		
Incomplete elementary education	2	0.5%
Complete elementary education	5	1.3%
Incomplete high school	10	2.6%
Complete high school	46	11.9%
Incomplete undergraduate degree	87	22.4%
Bachelor's degree	123	31.7%
Graduate degree	115	29.6%
<i>Monthly income</i>		
Less than R\$ 1.000	37	9.5%
R\$ 1.000 - R\$ 2.500	119	30.7%
R\$ 2.501 - R\$ 5.000	125	32.2%
R\$ 5.001 - R\$ 10.000	77	19.8%
More than R\$ 10.000	30	7.7%

Source: Authors' own elaboration.

As shown, the sample is characterized by a strong concentration within specific strata, with a predominance of female respondents (75.3%), individuals aged 25–34 years (50.3%, followed by those aged 18–24 years, 36.1%), high educational attainment (bachelor's degree, 31.7%; graduate degree, 29.6%; incomplete undergraduate degree, 22.4%), and monthly income concentrated between BRL 1,000–2,500 (30.7%) and BRL 2,501–5,000 (32.2%).

After characterizing the participants' profile, descriptive statistical analyses were performed for the study constructs (Table 3). The analysis included means, standard deviations, skewness, and kurtosis. According to Hair et al. (2021), skewness and kurtosis are useful indicators for assessing the adequacy of data distribution, allowing the identification of relevant deviations from normality that may affect parameter estimation and the interpretation of results, particularly in multivariate analyses. Thus, skewness values close to zero indicate greater symmetry around the mean, whereas kurtosis values close to zero suggest distributions with tails and peaks similar to those of a normal distribution. Conversely, high magnitudes for these indices may indicate the need for analytical caution, further assessment of statistical assumptions, and, when appropriate, the adoption of robust estimation procedures (Hair et al., 2021).

Table 3. Descriptive statistics of the constructs

Construct	Mean ($\bar{x}$)	Standard deviation (s)	Skewness	Kurtosis
Social media use	3.65	0.887	-0.288	-0.5832
Nostalgia	3.90	0.816	-0.653	0.0459
Community formation	2.57	1.258	0.435	-0.9053
Attachment to pop culture	3.19	1.091	-0.116	-0.8341
Purchasing behavior	3.10	1.173	-0.182	-0.9953

Source: Authors' own elaboration.

As shown in Table 3, respondents exhibited moderate to relatively high levels of Social Media Use ($\bar{x}$ = 3.65; s = 0.887) and, particularly, Nostalgia ($\bar{x}$ = 3.90; s = 0.816), whereas Community Formation emerged as the construct with the lowest mean and the greatest dispersion ($\bar{x}$ = 2.57; s = 1.258), indicating that the sense of community belonging was not only lower but also more heterogeneous across the sample. Attachment to Pop Culture ($\bar{x}$ = 3.19; s = 1.091) and Purchasing Behavior ($\bar{x}$ = 3.10; s = 1.173) presented intermediate levels, suggesting that engagement and consumption practices were present but not uniformly distributed among participants.

Regarding data distribution, the negative skewness observed for Social Media Use (-0.288), Nostalgia (-0.653), Attachment to Pop Culture (-0.116), and Purchasing Behavior (-0.182) indicates a greater concentration of responses at higher values of these constructs. In contrast, the positive skewness of Community Formation (0.435) suggests a relative predominance of lower levels of perceived belonging. Likewise, the predominantly negative kurtosis values for Social Media

Use (-0.5832), Community Formation (-0.9053), Attachment to Pop Culture (-0.8341), and Purchasing Behavior (-0.9953) indicate flatter distributions, characterized by greater dispersion and lower peaks around the mean. Conversely, Nostalgia exhibited kurtosis close to zero (0.0459), indicating a distribution more closely approximating a mesokurtic pattern.

Following the descriptive statistical analysis of the constructs, the PLS-SEM procedure was initiated. In this stage, the factor loadings of each indicator were examined, considering as valid only those with values greater than 0.70 (Hair et al., 2021). Accordingly, the indicators SMU1, SMU2, NOST1, NOST3, APC1, and APC4 were excluded because they did not reach the proposed minimum threshold, indicating a lower capacity to adequately represent their respective latent constructs. This exclusion suggests that certain aspects initially proposed to operationalize the constructs were not perceived by respondents in a manner sufficiently consistent with the underlying conceptual dimension. Although the removal of these indicators contributed to improving the psychometric properties of the model, the findings indicate the need for further contextual and/or cultural investigation in future research.

Table 4 presents the results of the confirmatory factor analysis, which aimed to evaluate convergent validity, discriminant validity, and composite reliability for each construct (Hair et al., 2021). The constructs were measured by their associated indicators, whose standardized factor loadings ranged from 0.742 to 0.916. These values indicate that all retained items made significant contributions to the measurement of their respective constructs.

The results presented in Table 4 indicate satisfactory validity and reliability of the measurement model, with Cronbach's alpha, rho_A, and Composite Reliability (rho_C) values exceeding 0.70 for all constructs, in accordance with the criteria established by Hair et al. (2014) and Hair et al. (2021). Both Cronbach's alpha and rho_A surpassed the recommended threshold of 0.70 for every construct, confirming their internal consistency (Ringle et al., 2014). Composite reliability (rho_C) ranged from 0.845 (NOST) to 0.924 (CF), further reinforcing the robustness of the adopted measurement standards.

Table 4. Standardized factor loadings, Cronbach's alpha, rho_A, Average Variance Extracted (AVE), and composite reliability of the measurement model

	CC	FC	NOST	URS	VCP
Factor loadings	PB1 (0.796)	CF1 (0.825)	NOST2 (0.742)	SMU3 (0.787)	APC2 (0.871)
	PB2 (0.782)	CF2 (0.867)	NOST4 (0.916)	SMU4 (0.888)	APC3 (0.867)
	PB3 (0.773)	CF3 (0.800)	NOST5 (0.743)	SMU5 (0.828)	APC5 (0.873)
	PB4 (0.841)	CF4 (0.858)			
	PB5 (0.811)	CF5 (0.858)			
Cronbach's alpha	0.860	0.897	0.740	0.782	0.840
rho_A	0.864	0.900	0.905	0.785	0.840
rho_C	0.899	0.924	0.845	0.874	0.904
AVE	0.642	0.709	0.647	0.698	0.757

Source: Authors' own elaboration.

Note: Purchasing behavior (PB); Community behavior (CF); Nostalgia (NOST); Social media use (SMU); Attachment to pop culture (APC).

Furthermore, the Average Variance Extracted (AVE) yielded satisfactory results, with values exceeding 0.50 for all constructs, thereby confirming convergent validity (Hair et al., 2014; Hair et al., 2021). For example, the Attachment to Pop Culture construct presented an AVE of 0.757, indicating that 75.7% of its variance is explained by its indicators. Likewise, the Community Formation construct exhibited an AVE of 0.709, demonstrating that 70.9% of its variance is explained by its indicators. Therefore, Table 4 confirms the reliability and adequacy of the questionnaire instruments, ensuring their suitability for capturing their respective theoretical dimensions.

Subsequently, the Fornell-Larcker criterion and the Heterotrait-Monotrait Ratio (HTMT) were examined, with the results presented in Table 5. These procedures assess the convergent reliability and consistency of the measurement model. According to Hair et al. (2014) and Hair et al. (2021), the Fornell-Larcker criterion is satisfied when the square root of the AVE for each latent variable exceeds its correlations with all other latent variables, thereby demonstrating that the constructs are empirically distinct. Additionally, the HTMT index should remain below 0.90, confirming discriminant validity among the constructs.

The results presented in Table 5 indicate that the measured constructs exhibit satisfactory discriminant validity. The Fornell-Larcker criterion is fulfilled because the square root of the AVE for each construct exceeds its correlations with the remaining constructs. For example, the square root of the AVE for the Purchasing Behavior (PB) construct is 0.801, whereas its correlations with other constructs, such as Community Formation (CF) (0.568) and Nostalgia (NOST) (0.297), are considerably lower, confirming its distinctiveness.

The HTMT index, which should remain below 0.90 (Hair et al., 2014; Hair et al., 2021), also confirms discriminant validity among the constructs. Notably, none of the constructs exceeded this threshold, with the highest values observed between Attachment to Pop Culture (APC) (0.868) and Social Media Use (SMU) (0.869). Although correlations exist among the variables, they do not compromise the conceptual distinctiveness of the constructs. In this context, the Fornell-Larcker

and HTMT results reinforce the model's ability to adequately distinguish the theoretical constructs, thereby validating both the conceptual framework and the robustness of the adopted measurement scales. These findings confirm that each construct measures a unique phenomenon within the scope of this study.

Table 5. Fornell-Lacker criterion and Heterotrait-Monotrait ratio (HTMT)

HTMT					
	PB	CF	NOST	SMU	APC
PB					
CF	0.640				
NOST	0.341	0.256			
SMU	0.754	0.796	0.379		
APC	0.868	0.792	0.323	0.869	
Fornell-Lacker criterion					
	PB	CF	NOST	SMU	APC
PB	0.801				
CF	0.568	0.842			
NOST	0.297	0.229	0.804		
SMU	0.617	0.671	0.330	0.835	
APC	0.741	0.689	0.284	0.704	0.870

Source: Authors' own elaboration.

Note: Purchasing behavior (PB); Community behavior (CF); Nostalgia (NOST); Social media use (SMU); Attachment to pop culture (APC).

Subsequently, the model's overall fit was evaluated using the Goodness-of-Fit (GoF) index (Tenenhaus et al., 2004). The decision to assess model fit using the GoF index was motivated by the fact that PLS-SEM models are primarily oriented toward maximizing explained variance and predictive capability and, in their original formulation, do not provide a widely established and universally accepted global fit index comparable to those available in covariance-based approaches. Consequently, the GoF was employed as a complementary summary measure by integrating information from both the measurement model and the structural model into a single indicator, thereby providing an overall assessment of the estimated model's performance (Tenenhaus et al., 2004; Hair et al., 2021). The results of this analysis are presented in Table 6.

Table 6. Overall model fit (Goodness-of-fit index)

Constructs	AVE	R ²
Community formation	0.709	0.450
Nostalgia	0.647	
Social media use	0.698	
Attachment to pop culture	0.757	0.498
Purchasing behavior	0.642	0.573
Mean scores	0.690	0.507
AVE * R ²	0.350	
GoF = $\sqrt{\text{AVE} * \text{R}^2}$	0.592	

Source: Authors' own elaboration.

Initially, it can be observed that, within the structural component, the reported R² values for the endogenous constructs are 0.450 (Community Formation), 0.498 (Attachment to Pop Culture), and 0.573 (Purchasing Behavior), with an average value of 0.507, suggesting a moderate to substantial explanatory capacity of the model for these endogenous outcomes, particularly for Purchasing Behavior. The GoF value (0.592) indicates a high overall model fit, as it combines strong performance of the measurement model (AVE) with substantial explanatory power of the structural model (R²).

Finally, the structural model was evaluated through hypothesis testing using the bootstrapping procedure with 5,000 resamples, following the recommendations of Hair et al. (2014) and Hair et al. (2021). Table 7 and Figure 3 summarize the results by presenting the path coefficients (β), t-values, effect sizes (f^2), collinearity indicators (VIF), and the empirical support for each hypothesis.

Table 7 indicates that, of the 12 hypotheses tested, 6 were supported (H2, H7, H8, H9, H11, and H12) and 6 were rejected (H1, H3, H4, H5, H6, and H10). Among the direct relationships, the effects of Nostalgia (H2; $\beta = 0.071$; $f^2 = 0.011$) and Social Media Use (H7; $\beta = 0.152$; $f^2 = 0.023$) are statistically significant, although their effect sizes are small. The strongest effects are observed in the influence of Social Media Use on Community Formation (H8: $\beta = 0.668$; $f^2 = 0.724$) and on Attachment to Pop Culture (H9: $\beta = 0.684$; $f^2 = 0.832$), as well as in the substantial influence of Attachment to Pop Culture on Purchasing Behavior (H12: $\beta = 0.579$; $f^2 = 0.327$). In contrast, Community Formation does not influence Purchasing Behavior (H1: $\beta = 0.051$; $f^2 = 0.003$), while Nostalgia does not influence Community Formation (H3: $\beta = 0.008$) or Attachment to Pop Culture (H4: $\beta = 0.058$).

Regarding the tested mediation effects, the results demonstrate that Nostalgia does not indirectly influence Purchasing Behavior through Community Formation (H5: $\beta = 0.000$) or through Attachment to Pop Culture (H6: $\beta = 0.035$). Likewise, Social Media Use does not indirectly influence Purchasing Behavior through Community Formation (H10: $\beta = 0.034$), whereas it does exert an indirect influence on Purchasing Behavior through Attachment to Pop Culture (H11: $\beta = 0.396$).

Furthermore, the assessment of the model's overall fit after the bootstrapping procedure yielded an SRMR value of 0.064, which is below the recommended threshold of 0.08, indicating a satisfactory fit between the observed data and the proposed model (Hair et al., 2021).

Table 7. Hypothesis testing results

Hypotheses	β	T-value	f^2	VIF	Decision
H1: CF $\rightarrow$ PB	0.051	0.878	0.003	2.193	Rejected
H2: NOST $\rightarrow$ PB	0.071	2.073	0.011	1.129	Supported*
H3: NOST $\rightarrow$ CF	0.008	0.196	0.000	1.122	Rejected
H4: NOST $\rightarrow$ APC	0.058	1.446	0.006	1.122	Rejected
H5: NOST $\rightarrow$ CF $\rightarrow$ PB	0.000	0.127	-	-	Rejected
H6: NOST $\rightarrow$ APC $\rightarrow$ PB	0.035	1.430	-	-	Rejected
H7: SMU $\rightarrow$ PB	0.152	2.928	0.023	2.360	Supported**
H8: SMU $\rightarrow$ CF	0.668	19.655	0.724	1.122	Supported***
H9: SMU $\rightarrow$ APC	0.684	23.098	0.832	1.122	Supported***
H10: SMU $\rightarrow$ CF $\rightarrow$ PB	0.034	0.875	-	-	Rejected
H11: SMU $\rightarrow$ APC $\rightarrow$ PB	0.396	9.455	-	-	Supported***
H12: APC $\rightarrow$ PB	0.579	10.723	0.327	2.401	Supported***

Source: Authors' own elaboration.

Note: Purchasing behavior (PB); Community behavior (CF); Nostalgia (NOST); Social media use (SMU); Attachment to pop culture (APC). Hypotheses H₅, H₆, H₁₀, and H₁₁ do not report f^2 or VIF because these indices are applicable only to direct relationships, not to indirect effects. Statistical significance: * $p < 0.05$; ** $p < 0.01$; *** $p < 0.001$.

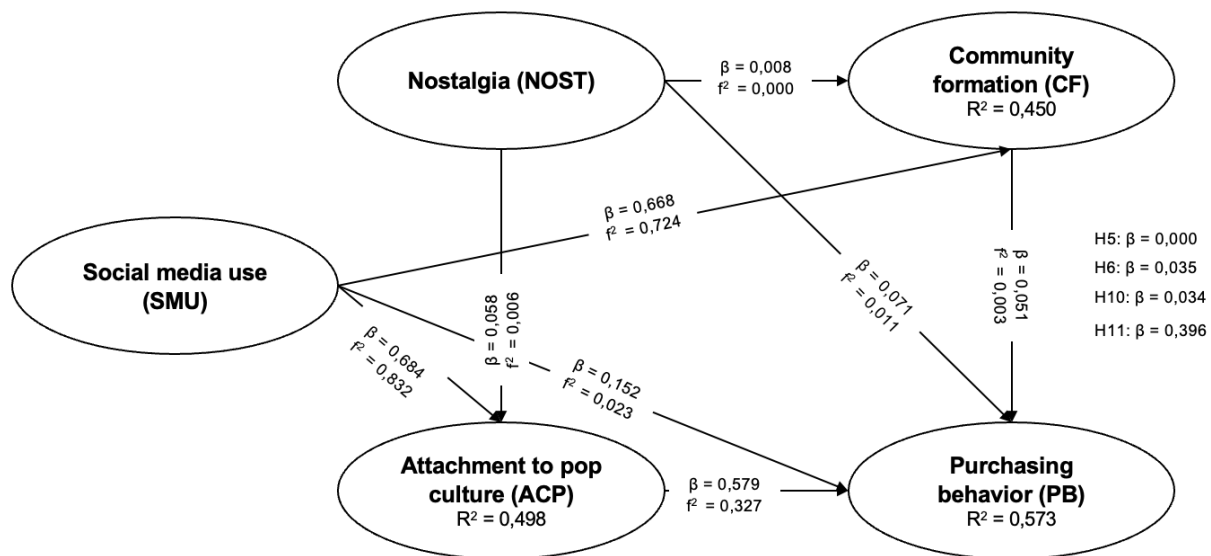


Figure 3. Estimated structural model

Source: Authors' own elaboration.

Accordingly, the model's overall fit demonstrates consistency between the initial estimation stage and the bootstrapping validation stage. Specifically, the GoF = 0.592 indicates a high level of overall model fit during the initial estimation, whereas the SRMR = 0.064 confirms satisfactory model fit in the subsequent validation stage, suggesting a low discrepancy between the observed and estimated covariance matrices. These findings reinforce the robustness of the proposed model and the reliability of the results for interpreting the structural relationships examined.

4.2 Discussion

The evaluation of the structural model reveals a configuration in which social media use is strongly associated with community formation and attachment to pop culture, while attachment to pop culture emerges as the primary antecedent of purchasing behavior. In contrast, community formation did not exert a statistically significant influence on purchasing behavior, and nostalgia exhibited only a small direct effect on purchasing behavior, without supporting significant relationships with either community formation or attachment to pop culture. This pattern shifts the explanatory focus of

consumption toward symbolic identification with the pop culture universe rather than toward community membership in the strict sense or recollections of the past as the dominant determinant.

The unsupported hypothesis linking community formation and purchasing behavior (H1) invites a distinction between digital interaction and community belonging characterized by normative density. Although social media facilitates encounters and exchanges among fans, communities on digital platforms tend to be heterogeneous, episodic, and event-oriented, displaying varying degrees of reciprocity and commitment (Dessart et al., 2015; Aditya & Setyawan, 2024; Wang et al., 2024; Méndez-Lazarte et al., 2025).

This type of sociability may foster information exchange and social visibility but does not necessarily generate a stable pattern of symbolic obligation capable of directly guiding consumption, as suggested by classical approaches to weak ties and social diffusion (Granovetter, 1973, 1983; Sutcliffe et al., 2018; Taylor et al., 2022). In practice, participation in fan spaces may primarily serve purposes of discovery and entertainment without constituting a fully developed brand community characterized by rituals, boundaries, and governance, as discussed in the literature on brand communities and online community engagement (Muniz & O'Guinn, 2001; Dessart et al., 2015; Razmus, 2021).

It is also possible that community formation, as empirically measured, is more closely associated with lightweight interactions than with relationships capable of generating sufficient trust to guide purchasing decisions. Recent studies indicate that communities and engagement may contribute to trust and loyalty, but only when conditioned by the quality of interactions, the credibility of shared information, and the governance of the digital environment (Aditya & Setyawan, 2024; Wang et al., 2024; Faustino-Dias et al., 2025; Méndez-Lazarte et al., 2025). Within highly dynamic networks, the continuous circulation of recommendations may coexist with ambiguous perceptions of credibility and uncertainty regarding participants' intentions, thereby reducing the potential for conversion into purchasing behavior, particularly when purchases involve financial expenditure.

The absence of mediation through community formation, both for nostalgia (H5) and social media use (H10), can be interpreted consistently with this perspective. Even when social media use strengthens community formation (H8), the transition to purchasing behavior may require additional mechanisms, such as perceived value, alignment between identity and the object of consumption, and specific marketing stimuli. The dynamics of digital platforms themselves may hinder the consolidation of consumption-oriented communities (Fetis et al., 2023; Aditya & Setyawan, 2024), as user experiences are characterized by information overload and communication strategies perceived as repetitive or intrusive, potentially increasing consumer irritation and reducing purchase expectations (Félix-Silva et al., 2024). This scenario aligns with a social media marketing perspective that recognizes opportunities for relationship building while also acknowledging challenges associated with saturation, informational noise, and competition for consumer attention (Appel et al., 2020; Ayesha, 2024).

Conversely, the robustness of the relationships involving attachment to pop culture and purchasing behavior (H12) supports the interpretation of consumption as an extension of identity and as a material language of symbolic belonging. The extended self-theory argues that objects, experiences, and collectibles can become integrated into an individual's identity repertoire, increasing the willingness to acquire goods that embody personal histories and cultural positions (Belk, 1988, 1990). Within pop culture environments, this process is likely intensified by the role of shared icons, narratives, and emotions, which provide codes for social recognition and self-expression, as discussed in studies addressing the uses of the past and contemporary popular culture (Becker & Georgiou, 2024; Gautam, 2024; Salisu, 2024).

The confirmed mediation whereby social media use influences purchasing behavior through attachment to pop culture (H11) describes a mechanism consistent with the communicative architecture of digital platforms. Social media functions as an infrastructure for content discovery and circulation, combining socialization, recommendation, and trend diffusion within an ecosystem in which participation and cultural consumption mutually reinforce one another (Appel et al., 2020; Hu & Noor, 2024). Within this logic, attachment to pop culture develops not merely through exposure but through participatory practices such as remixing, reenactment, and content curation, which strengthen identification with cultural repertoires and increase consumers' readiness to purchase related products and experiences (Zaborowski & Bennett, 2025; Brown et al., 2024). Recent evidence also demonstrates consistent relationships between social media marketing activities, engagement, and loyalty, although these relationships are not always linear, supporting the interpretation of indirect effects driven by affective and identity-based mechanisms (Jamil et al., 2022; Fetis et al., 2023; Han & Balabanis, 2023; Ali et al., 2025).

Nostalgia, however, requires a more critical interpretation, particularly because its direct effect on purchasing behavior (H2), although statistically significant, was relatively small, while its relationships with community formation (H3) and attachment to pop culture (H4) were not supported. Nostalgia has been described as a complex emotion that integrates affection, idealization, and temporal continuity, thereby providing psychological comfort and subjective coherence (Stern, 1992; Zhou et al., 2012; Hepper & Dennis, 2023; Cao, 2024). However, within digital ecosystems, references to the past have become part of everyday cultural environments through retro aesthetics, reissues, and algorithmically mediated memories, potentially diminishing nostalgia's explanatory power when nearly all users are exposed to similar nostalgic cues (Brown et al., 2024; Jungselius & Weilenmann, 2023; Becker & Georgiou, 2024). Under these conditions, nostalgia may

function primarily as an affective background rather than automatically translating into consolidated symbolic attachment or sufficiently strong community belonging to stimulate purchasing behavior.

This limited explanatory power of nostalgia is associated with the contemporary transformation of the past into a circulating and reconfigurable cultural resource. Boym (2017) highlights the ambivalent nature of nostalgia, emphasizing that it may provide both comfort and discomfort, particularly when the past is idealized. Within pop culture, the past is frequently reenacted as an aesthetic and commercial resource rather than as a genuine return to a recovered temporal experience, thereby bringing nostalgia closer to cultural performance and a language of sociability (Becker & Georgiou, 2024; Souza & Dias, 2023). This interpretation aligns with discussions of nostalgia as a social practice, in which nostalgic consumption extends beyond remembrance and becomes integrated into media routines, transmedia repertoires, and forms of participation capable of generating symbolic satisfaction without necessarily requiring purchasing behavior (Henriques & Suarez, 2021; Jungselius & Weilenmann, 2023).

The distinction between individual nostalgia and collective nostalgia further helps explain why the mediating effects involving nostalgia were not supported. Individual nostalgia tends to be grounded in autobiographical memories and continuity of the self, promoting psychological comfort and well-being while occasionally encouraging purchasing behavior when a product serves as a trigger for personal memories (Belk, 1988, 1990; Zhou et al., 2012; Hepper & Dennis, 2023; Cao, 2024). By contrast, collective nostalgia is rooted in repertoires shared by a collective "we," strengthening social identity and group cohesion while potentially mobilizing collective action (Smeekes et al., 2022; Zhang et al., 2022; Juhl & Biskas, 2023). The absence of an effect of nostalgia on community formation suggests that the nostalgia experienced in the present context is more individualized and aestheticized, with limited capacity to generate group cohesion. In terms of consumer behavior, this finding indicates the preservation of a small direct effect while failing to support indirect pathways through community belonging.

It is also possible that attachment to pop culture, within the context examined, is more closely associated with continuous updating and platform-mediated participation than with memories of the past themselves. Platforms such as TikTok illustrate how cultural and musical trends circulate through mechanisms of virality and recontextualization, frequently repositioning older cultural repertoires within contemporary contexts and assigning them new meanings (TikTok, 2021; Brown et al., 2024; Zaborowski & Bennett, 2025). Within this dynamic, nostalgia is not necessarily the primary driver of attachment. Instead, participation, aesthetics, trend engagement, and visibility effects may play more prominent roles. Factors such as fear of missing out (FOMO) and socially perceived urgency may contribute to purchasing decisions in digital environments, particularly when scarcity and exclusivity reinforce consumer desire, even though these mechanisms do not depend exclusively on nostalgia (Hodkinson, 2016; Dinh & Lee, 2024).

The direct effect of social media use on purchasing behavior (H7) suggests that digital platforms may facilitate consumption through multiple mechanisms, including commercial stimuli, social proof, and a streamlined path from exposure to purchase. The literature on consumer behavior in social media environments indicates that trends, content formats, and embedded purchasing opportunities influence consumer decisions, with effects varying according to context, platform design, and engagement intensity (Ayesha, 2024; Ngo et al., 2024; Saini, 2025). The contrast between the strong effect of social media use on community formation (H8) and the weak effect of community formation on purchasing behavior (H1) suggests that consumption is driven less by community belonging than by the capacity of social media to consolidate symbolic attachments and transform cultural attention into economic decisions (Appel et al., 2020; Ali et al., 2025; Fetais et al., 2023).

Overall, the combined interpretation of the findings indicates that purchasing behavior associated with pop culture emerges primarily when cultural repertoires become incorporated into individuals' identities and when this incorporation is continuously reinforced through the circulation and recontextualization of content on social media platforms. Nostalgia remains an important affective language; however, its explanatory power appears limited, suggesting that under contemporary cultural conditions, the past circulates in a highly mediatized manner and is frequently detached from community cohesion, functioning more as an emotional and aesthetic resource than as the principal organizing mechanism of belonging and consumption.

5 CONCLUSIONS

The present study aimed to investigate how social media use (SMU), nostalgia (NOST), community formation (CF), and attachment to pop culture (APC) influence purchasing behavior (PB). The findings yielded a model explaining purchasing behavior within the digital pop culture environment through a sequence in which social media use is strongly associated with community formation and attachment to pop culture, whereas attachment to pop culture exerts the strongest influence on purchasing behavior. Although nostalgia demonstrated a statistically significant direct effect, its magnitude was relatively small, and it did not support the pathways involving community formation or attachment to pop culture. These findings reposition the understanding of consumption beyond mere engagement with digital platforms, suggesting that the

symbolic internalization of the pop culture repertoire constitutes a more consistent explanatory mechanism than simple community interaction.

From a theoretical perspective, the findings contribute by distinguishing mechanisms with greater and lesser explanatory power within the same structural framework. In particular, attachment to pop culture emerged as a construct capable of synthesizing the identity-related dimensions of consumption, supporting the notion that products and experiences can function as material extensions of the self and as codes of symbolic belonging. At the same time, the limited role of nostalgia, together with the non-significant effect of community formation on purchasing behavior, indicates that emotions and digital sociability do not automatically translate into consumption. This finding encourages the development of models that conceptualize cultural experiences on digital platforms as layered processes involving mediating mechanisms and boundary conditions that require more rigorous specification.

Regarding practical and managerial implications, the findings suggest that social media marketing strategies are likely to be more effective when they prioritize initiatives designed to strengthen consumers' attachment to the narratives, icons, and shared emotions of the pop culture universe, rather than assuming that merely creating online communities will lead to purchasing behavior. From this perspective, strategies that enhance identification, co-creation, and the circulation of meanings—such as serialized storytelling, repertoire curation, participatory campaigns, and integrated cross-media experiences—appear particularly promising. From a societal standpoint, the findings also suggest that social media expands opportunities for cultural participation and access to shared repertoires; however, such participation appears to be organized primarily through symbolic identification rather than through consistent community belonging. This contributes to a better understanding of how cultural ties are formed and materialized in everyday consumption practices.

Among the study's limitations, it should be noted that the self-reported measures may be subject to social desirability and recall biases, and that the operationalization of the constructs may not have fully captured important nuances, such as the distinction between individual and collective nostalgia, or different forms of community participation. Furthermore, although the model incorporated mediation effects, it did not examine conditional effects that could account for variations in the strength of the proposed relationships, such as fandom intensity, brand involvement, cultural familiarity, disposable income, or consumers' propensity for impulse purchasing.

Accordingly, future research should incorporate variables that explicitly capture the psychological and sociotechnical mechanisms underlying consumption on digital platforms, including fear of missing out (FOMO), self-presentation motives, perceived social proof, information overload, irritation caused by excessive marketing, trust in influencers, perceived authenticity, and hedonic value. In addition, future studies should incorporate moderators capable of refining the proposed model, such as generational cohort, engagement intensity, type of community (brand community, fandom, or platform-based community), product category (physical products, digital products, or experiences), and participation metrics (content creation, commenting, and content sharing).

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