

# **FIFA to EA Sports FC: Understanding Brand Loyalty and Player Identity in a Changing Football Gaming Landscape**

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# **FIFA to EA Sports FC: Understanding Brand Loyalty and Player Identity in a Changing Football Gaming Landscape**

## **Abstract**

This thesis investigates how emotional brand attachment and social influence shape consumer loyalty and purchase intent following the co-branding dissolution between FIFA and EA Sports. Drawing on theories of brand loyalty, emotional attachment, and social dynamics, the study examines the transition from the long-standing FIFA video game series to EA Sports FC. Through ten semi-structured interviews with long-term players, the research explores why consumers continue to engage or disengage with a franchise, despite dissatisfaction and brand transformation. Findings reveal that loyalty is not solely based on product satisfaction but is deeply linked to emotional attachment, nostalgia, identity reinforcement, and social dynamics. Players remained attached to the series due to personal memories, habitual engagement, and perceived social obligations. Many expressed critical views of gameplay and monetization, but continued purchasing out of routine, lacking alternatives, or participating in community activities. Influencer culture, social media, and peer networks further reinforced these behaviors, demonstrating that loyalty is co-constructed through emotional and social factors rather than rational evaluation alone. This thesis contributes to brand management literature by highlighting the power of emotional bonds and social influence in shaping loyalty, even toward disliked or changing brands. It offers insights for marketers navigating brand transitions in emotionally charged, digitally mediated environments (ChatGPT, 2025).

**Keywords:** Brand Loyalty, Emotional Attachment, Social Influence, Co-branding dissolution, Video game consumption.

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## Chapter 1

### Introduction

#### 1.1 Introduction

Co-branding is the strategic alliance between two or more entities aiming to combine their reputations, resources, and audiences to create a product with stronger market appeal than either brand could achieve independently (Pengmao, 2024, p. 41). These partnerships are compelling in industries where emotional attachment and social dynamics drive interest. However, when co-branded collaborations end, a process known as co-branding dissolution, the consequences can substantially impact brand perception, consumer loyalty, and ultimately, purchasing behavior (Ott et al., 2019, p.203). While the logic of entering and exiting such partnerships is often linked to monetary and strategic factors, consumers' emotional and behavioral consequences are less explored, particularly in the medium of video games.

This thesis investigates a co-branding dissolution case in the video game industry: the 30-year partnership between Electronic Arts (EA) and the Federation Internationale de Football Association (FIFA) (Datta, 2022, par. 1). Together, the two organizations built the globally successful football video game series, *FIFA*, which held an undisputed monopoly in the football gaming market for decades. Since the late 1990s, the *FIFA* franchise has consistently outperformed competitors like Konami's *Pro Evolution Soccer* (PES), becoming the market's dominant product and a cultural and social icon for millions of players worldwide (Deshbandhu, 2020, p.51).

In 2023, this long-standing partnership came to an end. Disputes over licensing fees, reportedly reaching over \$1 billion per World Cup Cycle, and conflicting visions for the franchise's future led to the split (Tassi, 2021, par. 2). EA, seeking creative freedom, rebranded its game as *EA Sports FC*, framing the move as a new direction toward building "the world's largest football club" (Bresaola, 2024, par. 23, 30). Yet the launch of *EA Sports FC* revealed the risks of severing a long-established co-branded identity. The game was met with mixed reviews, many of which echoed long-standing frustrations from the FIFA era, criticisms of repetitive gameplay, limited innovation, and aggressive monetization. Despite these issues, many players

continued to engage with the game, raising critical questions about what drives loyalty when satisfaction is low.

This thesis explores this phenomenon: when consumers continue to purchase and engage with a dissatisfied brand, especially when it has undergone significant change. This case offers insight into co-branding's emotional and behavioral factors and how players respond when the familiar is disrupted. These transitions reshape the product and challenge the emotional investments players have built over time. The thesis is particularly interested in such moments of rupture, where consumers must negotiate meaning, and make new decisions about loyalty.

This thesis aims to answer the following research question: *How does emotional brand attachment and social dynamics impact players' loyalty and purchase intention following the EA-FIFA co-branding dissolution?*

When answering this question, the thesis explores two essential concepts: emotional brand attachment and social influence. Emotional brand attachment refers to the emotional and symbolic connections consumers form with a brand through repeated interaction over time (Park et al., 2006, p.3; MacInnis & Folkes, 2017, p. 110). Studies on *FIFA* and other video games have shown how these attachments are often linked to personal identity, nostalgia, and routine play (Bertholet & Juistenga, 2021, p.2-4). A critical sub-component of this concept is loyalty toward a disliked brand, where consumers continue to purchase and engage with a product despite expressing dissatisfaction. *FIFA* has frequently been criticized for its lack of innovation and monetization practices (OpenCritic, 2020, n.p), yet many players remain loyal, further explained by *FIFA*'s complete market dominance (Deshbandhu, 2020, p.53). This paradox shows that emotional connection can outweigh negative opinions about the product, leading consumers to stay faithful even when they are not fully satisfied (Kaplan et al., 2015, p. 140).

The other concept, social influence, refers to interpersonal dynamics, community norms, and digital peer networks shaping consumer behavior (Cheung & Thadani, 2012, p. 462; Liang et al., 2024, p. 2-5). Research shows that video games are highly social products where players engage with them for friends, trends, online communities, and broader gaming culture (Liang et al., 2024, p. 2-5). Concepts like peer pressure, social belonging, and group expectations could explain why players may keep buying *EA Sports FC* games even after the co-branding

dissolution. In this way, social dynamics reinforce loyalty through collective behavior rather than individual evaluation alone.

To explore the research question and its concepts, the study conducts ten in-depth, semi-structured interviews with long-term *FIFA* players who have continued or reconsidered their engagement with *EA Sports FC*. Participants were selected based on extended experience with the *FIFA* franchise and exposure to the brand transition. Using a qualitative research design and thematic analysis, the study examines players' relationships with the previous *FIFA* franchise, how they process the brand shift, and how emotional factors and social dynamics influence their choices to continue playing *EA Sports FC*. The findings offer insight into how brand loyalty is maintained or changed when a brand identity undergoes significant change.

This research is relevant both academically and socially. Academically speaking, prior research has shown that digital brands are increasingly shaped by emotional and social engagement. Yet, there is limited understanding of how consumers respond when brand structures are changed. Most research focuses on co-branding formation and consumers' perceptions of stable brand relationships. This study addresses the underexplored area of co-branding dissolution, particularly in the video gaming industry. It also adds to the literature on loyalty toward disliked brands, providing understanding into consumer behavior when dissatisfaction can coexist with loyalty. From a social perspective, this thesis attempts to question how companies maintain dominance despite consumer frustration. This has broader implications for understanding addictive consumption, dependency, and emotional investment in video game products. This is becoming increasingly relevant in an age where gaming plays a major role in people's lives, especially youth.

The structure of this thesis is as follows: Chapter 2 presents the theoretical framework, offering insights into brand loyalty, emotional attachment, co-branding dissolution, and social influence. Chapter 3 outlines the methodological design, explaining the qualitative approach, participants' recruitment, and thematic analysis process. Chapter 4 presents key findings, organized into themes that reflect how players relate to the brand transition. Chapter 5 answers the research question, discusses broader implications, outlines the study's limitations, and suggests directions for future research.

## Chapter 2

### Theoretical Framework

#### 2.1 Chapter Overview

This chapter presents the theoretical foundation for exploring how emotional brand attachment and social dynamics shape loyalty and purchasing behavior following the dissolution of EA Sports and FIFA's co-branding partnership.

The chapter begins by discussing the logic of co-branding and its dissolution, positioning the EA-FIFA split within strategic business and consumer psychology frameworks. This is followed by an analysis of brand loyalty, particularly the phenomenon of continued purchasing despite dissatisfaction, also known as loyalty for a disliked brand. The discussion further includes key insights, emphasizing how inertia, lack of alternatives, and nostalgia explain habitual and reluctant (dissatisfied) loyalty.

Next, the chapter explores emotional brand attachment, distinguishing it from related constructs such as satisfaction, attitude, and involvement. Drawing on Park et al. (2006, p.3), Thomson et al. (2005, p.79), and Alkhafagi et al. (2023, p.28), this section highlights the enduring role of emotional bonds, including nostalgia and identity reinforcement, in shaping brand commitment.

Finally, the chapter continues to explore the role of social influence. Building on studies by Liang et al. (2024, p.2-5) and Cheung & Thadani (2012, 462), it explores how face-to-face friendships, online networks, electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM), and influencer viewership influence decision-making. These social mechanisms help explain how consumer loyalty is co-constructed, sustained, or eroded in digital environments, especially when long-term brand affiliations are disrupted.

Together, these perspectives: co-branding dissolution, emotional brand attachment, loyalty for (disliked) brand, and social influence, create a framework for understanding how players experience, interpret, and respond to the shift from *FIFA* to *EA Sports FC*. This

theoretical foundation directly informs the development of the interview guide and analysis of findings in subsequent chapters.

## **2.2 Co-branding & its Dissolution**

Co-branding and its dissolution are complex, driven by both strategic factors and external pressures. The theories discussed below help explain the rationale behind the formations and dissolutions of co-branding, specifically regarding learning, flexibility, and resource reallocation. Yet as this thesis argues, understanding consumer responses requires an equally deep focus on emotional attachment and social influence. The intersection of these factors plays a vital role in shaping post-separation purchasing behavior and loyalty dynamics. This is especially true when consumers must choose between formerly allied brands in a competitive marketplace.

Helmig et al. (2008, p. 286) define co-branding as a partnership between two or more established brands that collaborate while maintaining their identities. These alliances create a structure for sharing resources, reducing risk, and generating mutual value (Helmig et al., 2008, p. 286). Co-branding allows brands to expand their market presence, access established consumer bases, and leverage each other's reputations (Rao & Ruekert, 1994, p. 89). As a strategic method, co-branding has been examined across various industries, particularly in evolving and competitive markets (Pengmao, 2025, p. 40; Singh et al., 2020, p. 840). Its value is combining complementary brand strengths without requiring full integration or rebranding.

Typically, co-branding arrangements are pursued over the medium to long term, especially when the anticipated benefits do not justify the creation of a new brand or a formal joint venture (Helmig et al., 2008, p. 286). This is appealing when both brands carry substantial equity, allowing them to create additional value while maintaining their separate identities. In such partnerships, the more prominent the brands involved, the more likely they will preserve their distinct identities, even while working closely together.

The co-branding partnership between FIFA and EA Sports mainly reflects this logic. FIFA had its global football brand and licensing power, which offered official team names, leagues, and tournaments, as well as the prestige of the World Cup. EA Sports provided video game expertise, infrastructure, and credibility in sports game development. While closely

integrated in the final product, each brand maintained a separate and distinct identity. Their co-branding structure allowed both parties to capitalize on their respective strengths without merging into a single unified brand. However, the separation between the two brands exposed structural limitations. The lack of full integration means that long-term creative alignment and control over the product's direction were constantly negotiated, rather than jointly owned. As a result, the partnership remained commercially practical but inherently unstable, ultimately leaving both sides vulnerable when strategic interests began to diverge. While many co-branding cases have led to successful new products or services through strategic brand alignment, these partnerships are not always permanent. As already expressed, changing business priorities, creative differences, or financial disagreements can eventually lead to the dissolution of long-term alliances. In this context of co-branding dissolution, the case of FIFA and EA Sports becomes particularly relevant.

Co-branding dissolution involves separating formal partnerships between established brands (Ott et al., 2019, p.202-205). While it may be perceived as a public failure, academic literature positions it as a consequence of strategic decision-making. According to Kumar (2019, p.10-12), previous research suggests several key drivers account for brand separations. First, relational risks such as opportunism, learning races, or imbalances in resource contribution may hinder the cooperative structure (Kumar, 2019, p.10). Second, and closely linked to relational risks, is strategic misalignment, including divergence in long-term vision, market goals, or innovation priorities, which often makes continued collaboration unsustainable (Kumar, 2019, p.10). Third, environmental changes, such as shifts in consumer preferences, industry regulation, or technological disruption, may render the partnership less effective or obsolete (Kumar, 2019, p.11). These factors show that co-branding dissolution is not the result of a single issue. Instead, it is part of a multi-varied set of complex ongoing tensions that build over time. For FIFA and EA Sports, it is evident that these tensions ultimately led to a decisive break that changed both brands' business strategy and likely disrupted the consumer experiences. This makes this case further relevant for this thesis, which examines how players respond when these long-term brand partnerships are restructured.

To better understand these dynamics, it is essential to consider how co-branding operates by design. It is often intended to be flexible, allowing brands to explore new markets or

capabilities without committing to irreversible investments (Kumar, 2019, p.3). Thus, separations may happen not specifically because of a failure, but because a firm has completed its learning phase and is ready to either internalize operations or exit the collaboration (Chi, 2000, p.667). The option to co-brand has “matured” through complete acquisition, independent continuation, or decisions to re-focus resources (Kogut, 1988, p. 320-321). Regardless of their strategic logic, these separations often trigger shifts in consumer perceptions, loyalty patterns, and brand attachment, making their consequences as significant as their causes in branding research.

Firms are not always immune to the consumer-side consequences of brand separation, especially when partnerships have been long-standing and publicly visible. Co-branded products often serve as stable emotional commodities for consumers, where habits and expectations are formed. These co-branded products can become part of consumers’ identity, memory, and routines. As Liu and Chelliah (2025, pp. 3908-3909) explain, emotional attachment to a brand builds through consistent interactions, creating a sense of familiarity and trust. Therefore, co-branded products are also a means of emotional investment and are more deeply attached to consumers than one may think.

Moreover, the dissolution of partnerships introduces a form of emotional disruption. Consumers deeply attached to the co-brand are assumed to experience confusion, loss, or uncertainty when the alliance is broken. As Saeedi (2025, p. 3) argues, emotions in consumer-brand relationships are not only passive outcomes. Emotions actively shape how brand value is perceived and whether long-term loyalty is sustained. Emotional reactions to brand dissolution can thus be complex: loyalty may exist even with disappointment, or it may be withdrawn if the change is seen as a betrayal of the consumer-brand relationship (Saeedi, 2025, p. 3). Therefore, emotional ambiguity is fundamental in digital products like video games, where engagement, loyalty, and purchase intent can be determined by emotional attachment (Liang et al., 2014, p.4). Grasping this dynamic is key to understanding how brand dissolution affects both business outcomes and the personal ways consumers experience and relate to a brand.

Social dynamics also play a compelling role in how consumers respond to co-branding dissolutions. *FIFA* has always been a game shared across friend groups, online platforms, and wider gaming communities and culture, where opinions are exchanged. Research on digital

communities shows that peer influence, online reviews, and influencer endorsements contribute to how consumers form and adjust brand perceptions, especially during transition or uncertainty (Cheung & Thadani, 2012, p. 462). These social interactions can strengthen support and skepticism, shaping how players interpret and process the past *FIFA* franchise, the new *EA Sports FC* game, and the separation between the brands. In this sense, brand loyalty is not formed in isolation; it is co-constructed through ongoing social interactions, social comparisons, and collective experiences that influence how players choose to stay, adapt, or disengage. This social aspect is crucial to understanding brand loyalty after the co-branding split.

Where emotional attachment explains players' personal bond with the brand, social dynamics explain how those bonds are reshaped through interaction with others. Understanding these emotional and social dynamics is essential for examining how brand loyalty develops or shifts in moments of co-branding dissolution. The theoretical framework will continue to explore brand loyalty in more depth, including how it operates even when consumers are dissatisfied. This sets the foundation for examining the emotional attachments and social dynamics at the heart of this study, and how they impact brand loyalty and purchase intent.

## **2.3 Loyalty Frameworks**

### **2.3.1 Brand Loyalty**

Brand loyalty refers to a consumer's preference for purchasing a specific brand within a product category (Yap, 2019, p.7). In gaming, it emerges when consumers perceive that a brand delivers superior quality, image, features, and experience. Brand loyalty is closely tied to customer preferences, emotional attachment to the brand, and social interactions (Yap, 2019, p.7-8). Although various theories and frameworks have explored the concept and implications of brand loyalty, this study focuses on a few key insights from Aaker's Brand Equity Model.

David Aaker (1991) defines brand loyalty as a commitment to repurchase a preferred product or service consistently in the future, despite situational influences and marketing efforts by competitors (Shashikala & Suresh, 2013, p.6) In his framework on brand equity, brand loyalty is one of the five core components of consumer perception. Brand equity refers to the intangible

value and responsibilities linked to a brand, shaping how consumers perceive, trust, and relate to it and how much value they attribute to it (Rao et al., 2023, p.377). When brand equity is substantial, Keller (2001, p.17) believes consumers tend to respond more positively to elements like pricing strategies, promotional efforts, and distribution channels than those of generic or lesser-known brands. Substantial brand equity can increase consumer trust and preference toward a particular brand over its competitors, strengthening consumer loyalty (Yap, 2019, p.8). Therefore, it is argued that brand equity is contingent on consumer brand loyalty associated with co-branding dissolutions.

Aaker (1991) introduces a hierarchical model of loyalty, starting with brand switchers at the bottom (no loyalty), and progressing to the top with committed buyers (strong attachment and advocacy) (Shashikala & Suresh, 2013, p.6-7). In Aaker's hierarchy, consumers move from basic recognition and habitual buying to deeper forms of commitment, where switching brands becomes unlikely due to attachment, trust, and perceived risk in alternatives. As with many large brands, consumers find themselves in the upper tiers of this model, having developed a consistent history of purchasing and engaging with the brand over many years. These habitual consumers may continue purchasing new products out of satisfaction or behavioral characteristics and risk aversion (Yap, 2019, p.11). For Aaker, brand loyalty is a key component and one of the most influential drivers of substantial brand equity (Yap, 2019, p.8). Moreover, strong brand loyalty can significantly lower marketing expenses by encouraging positive word of mouth and making consumers more resistant to switching to rival brands (Moisescu, 2006, p.1126). Since cultivating brand loyalty is often viewed as the ultimate objective of branding efforts, it plays a critical role in shaping and sustaining brands and their overall equity.

However, loyalty is not always driven by high satisfaction or positive sentiment. In some cases, consumers may remain loyal to brands they actively dislike, revealing a complex and less understood dimension of consumer behavior that challenges the traditional satisfaction-based loyalty. This phenomenon has become increasingly relevant in game products like *FIFA* or *EA Sports FC*, which can sustain loyalty even as frustration grows and consumers actively voice their disappointment online or in person. This suggests that loyalty can persist for reasons beyond product satisfaction. Understanding this dynamic is vital for seeing how brands endure dissatisfaction, particularly after co-branding dissolutions.

### 2.3.2 Loyalty for a Disliked Brand

While brand loyalty is often assumed to stem from satisfaction and positive sentiment, this assumption does not fully explain how or why consumers stay loyal to brands they openly criticize or dislike. Recent studies have shown that brand loyalty can persist even in negative feelings (Kaplan et al., 2015, p.137). This paradox is especially relevant in markets like gaming, where consumer expectations can be high and emotional responses are often intense. Hegner et al. (2017, p.3-4) suggest companies risk fueling negative emotions such as brand hate without consistent relationship-building efforts and avoiding brand dislike. This backlash can manifest through consumer behaviors like public criticism, heavy hits on sales, or even retaliatory attacks on brand reputation. Romani et al. (2009, p. 496) further highlight that once negative emotions solidify, they can significantly deter existing and potential customers from maintaining or forming brand relationships. Thus, it becomes apparent that brands need to understand the presence of brand dislike and its drivers. This allows them to anticipate and mitigate damaging consumer responses.

Kaplan et al. (2015, p.137), explore why consumers continue to purchase brands they have negative feelings toward. Through qualitative methods, including in-depth interviews and observations, the researchers identified several key reasons for this phenomenon: inertia, a lack of better alternatives, and lower economic costs (lower prices or extra incentives) to the consumer. Each explains the reasoning for continued loyalty to a disliked brand.

Inertia is the behavioral tendency to continue engaging with a brand out of habit, without active reflection or reassessment. Kaplan et al. (2015, p.144) found that many consumers stick with brands they disliked simply because it feels easier than investing time, energy or emotional effort into seeking alternatives. This insight is especially critical in gaming, where users develop habitual routines and product familiarity over many years of recurring usage. This aligns with broader literature on habitual loyalty, where brand choices become automatic over time through repeated engagement (Yap, 2019, p.9). Once routines are established, especially in product categories that require regular interaction, consumers could continue purchasing because that is what they have always done (Kaplan et al., 2015, p.148). The idea of inertia is further reinforced

by Verplankem and Orbell (2023, p.69), who argue that habit-driven behavior requires little conscious thought and is often performed in stable, familiar contexts. Thus, even when negative emotions emerge, behavioral engagement patterns will persist because disrupting familiar routines usually demands effort and mental energy that consumers are unwilling to invest. When the emotional cost of switching brands is perceived as higher than the frustration of staying, consumers may find themselves stuck in a cycle of passive loyalty (Verplanken & Orbell, 2023, p.73). Inertia shows that dissatisfaction coexists with repeated purchasing. This insight is especially critical in gaming, where users develop habitual routines and product familiarity over many years.

The second factor Kaplan et al. (2015, p.144) discuss is the absence of appealing alternatives. Consumers may feel resigned to staying with the disliked brand when they perceive that competitors fail to offer comparable value or features. This is particularly relevant in monopolistic or highly consolidated markets where one brand dominates. As Gounaris and Stathakopoulos (2017, p. 202) also observe, when the barriers to switching are high and viable alternatives are scarce, loyalty becomes less about preference and more about necessity. This loyalty is unstable and reactive; it may dissolve quickly once a better competitor emerges. This is something that EA Sports should particularly consider: separating from FIFA means they now hold the market power and control over much of the football gaming market. This gives the company significant power over consumer choice and exposes it to risks. If players feel trapped, their interest weakens, so loyalty may vanish the moment a realistic alternative appears.

Another finding from Kaplan et al. (2015, p. 138) is the influence of economic incentives. Consumers may tolerate dissatisfaction when the brand offers lower prices or a better deal that could outweigh their frustration. This transactional loyalty, while effective in the short term, does not reflect emotional commitment. It positions the consumer-brand relationship as a cost-benefit calculation. Dick and Basu (1994, p.103) would likely support this view, arguing that loyalty can result from repeated value-based reinforcement. They, too, highlight that such loyalty is more fragile as it relies on continued rewards and consistent utility. At this point, loyalty becomes a rational calculation rather than an emotional bond. However, it's essential to recognize that not all repeated purchasing reflects genuine loyalty. As Shin et al. (2019, p.4) pointed out, some consumers return to a brand out of habit or convenience, not commitment. This distinction

remains relevant: true brand loyalty involves emotional attachment and trust, whereas habitual purchasing without emotional investment can be easily disrupted by better deals or greater convenience (Shin et al., 2019, p.4). Building absolute loyalty requires consistent satisfaction, trust, and a sense of connection between the consumer and the brand.

One of the more striking findings from the data in the study of Kaplan et al. (2015, 145), is that nostalgia can play a decisive role in shaping emotional attachment to a brand, to the extent that consumers may remain loyal even when they feel disappointed by or have developed negative feelings toward the brand. Nostalgia is the emotional connection individuals feel toward cherished elements of their past, such as objects, experiences, or brands (Alkhafagi, 2023, p.9). This emotional bond, linked to positive memories or associations from the past, appears to override present dissatisfaction in some cases (Kaplan et al., 2015, p.145). While several possible explanations were considered for why consumers continue repurchasing brands they no longer favor, nostalgia consistently emerged as the most influential factor throughout the data (Kaplan et al., 2015, p.145). Participants frequently referenced nostalgic feelings in their responses, more than other potential influences such as habit, convenience, or social pressure. This recurring emphasis suggests that nostalgia possesses a more substantial value than the alternatives. Similarly, in their 2002 study, Pascal et al. (p.40), identified nostalgia as a powerful yet often overlooked driver of consumer loyalty. Beyond other determinants such as trust, satisfaction, or utility, the researchers found that positive emotional memories associated with a brand can strongly influence customer behavior (Pascal et al., 2002, p.40). They also argue that nostalgic memories are often viewed through an idealized lens, commonly called seeing the past through “rose-colored glasses” (Pascal et al., 2002, p.40). This means that people tend to selectively remember the positive aspects of past experiences while ignoring or minimizing the negative ones.

Nostalgia is essential for this study because it is a key driver of brand loyalty, particularly for disliked brands. It highlights how past emotional experiences can shape present consumer behavior in ways that are not always rational or based on current brand performance. Nostalgia is therefore considered a supporting factor in the development of emotional brand attachment, especially considering the case of long-term engagement with cultural products like *FIFA* or *EA Sports FC*. While nostalgia plays a central role in shaping consumer attitudes and behaviors, it

does not exist independently of other influences. The following section examines emotional brand attachment as a key concept for understanding consumer-loyalty relationships shaped by other emotional factors. Again, this is useful for understanding how consumers react when co-branding dissolutions occur in an emotionally attached product or brand.

## **2.4 Emotional Brand Attachment**

The idea of emotional attachment was first borrowed from the attachment theory introduced by Bowlby (1982) (Bretherton, 1992, p. 759). Attachment is not solely a trait of the person or the object itself, but instead emerges from the connection between them, reflecting the strength of their relational bond (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2012, p.175). This concept has been adapted to explain how people interact with brands, particularly those that become part of how one can see themselves (Shimu, 2022, p. 401- 402). Emotional brand attachment is the deep bond one can form with specific brands. It consists of affective ties and mental associations that reflect how a brand aligns with a consumer's identity and self-perception (Park et al., 2006, p.3). This emotional bond is similar to people's deep connection with close friends, family, or relationships with partners.

Thomson et al. (2005, p. 77) suggest that emotional attachment to a brand should be understood as separate from other key concepts like attitude, satisfaction, and involvement. Although these constructs are often connected, they describe how consumers relate to brands differently. Making these distinctions is essential for this thesis because emotional brand attachment explains why players stay loyal to a franchise and predicts their purchase intent, even when they express criticism or dissatisfaction. Without separating these ideas, it would be difficult to identify the specific emotional forces that help explain this continued loyalty. The theoretical framework becomes more focused by clearly outlining how attitude, satisfaction, and involvement differ. It allows for a deeper understanding of the emotional connections at the heart of long-term brand relationships.

First, brand attitude refers to an individual's evaluative judgment of a brand and how favorable or unfavorable they perceive it. Attitudes can develop without direct interaction and are often shaped by media exposure, social influence, or general beliefs about the brand (Thomson et al., 2005, p. 78). For example, a consumer may express a positive attitude toward a

brand they have never used, simply due to its cultural popularity or advertising appeal. Yet, emotional attachment typically requires a deeper interaction and experience. It is highly selective, develops over time, and is reserved for a limited number of brands with personal meaning and relevance. Baldinger and Rubinson (1996, p. 23) agree with this as they point out that while attitudes can influence brand choice, they do not always predict long-term loyalty unless combined with actual behavioral commitment. Their Brand Builder model shows that high brand loyalty is strongest when favorable attitudes and consistent purchasing align, what they call “real loyals” (p. 23). However, like Thomson et al. (2005, p.78), they warn that some consumers may express favorable attitudes but lack behavioral loyalty, showing that attitudes alone are unstable predictors of consumer attachment. This supports the idea that proper emotional attachment demands a more meaningful identity-based relationship with the brand.

Second, satisfaction is a post-consumption evaluation based on the degree to which a product or service meets or exceeds expectations (Thomson et al., 2005, p. 79). While it may contribute to attachment formation over time, satisfaction alone does not necessarily indicate a strong emotional bond. Two consumers might be equally satisfied with a brand’s performance, yet their emotional connection may vary significantly. Satisfaction is usually transactional and episodic, often influenced by a single experience, whereas emotional attachment is affective and cumulative. Moreover, satisfaction does not typically lead to behavioral markers associated with attachment, such as separation distress or the desire to maintain proximity (Thomson et al., 2005, p. 79).

Thirdly, involvement is another construct frequently associated with strong consumer-brand relationships. It is the level of personal relevance or interest a consumer gives to a brand or product, often resulting in greater cognitive effort and decision-making engagement (Thomson et al., 2005, p. 80). However, involvement is primarily mental, while emotional attachment is affective. Consumers might be highly involved with a brand because it is functionally vital, yet they still feel no emotional connection. Solem (2016, p.339) backs this distinction by arguing that high involvement can exist without emotional connection, especially in utilitarian or goal-directed consumption. The study shows that customer participation and brand engagement can increase involvement. Still, these do not automatically result in emotional

loyalty unless accompanied by affective components like identification and attachment (Solem, 2016, p.339).

Park et al. (2006, p.3) emphasized the cognitive side of attachment by focusing on how easily a brand is mentally accessed and the degree to which it becomes part of one's identity. Other academic perspectives have explored this connection through psychological dimensions, distinguishing between utilitarian (functional) and deeply personal (existential) forms of attachment (Belaid & Behi, 2010, p.41). Only the latter captures the emotional resonance that brands can evoke, indicating that proper attachment arises when a brand holds deeper symbolic or experiential meaning for the consumer.

#### 2.4.1 Causes and Effects of Emotional Brand Attachment

Park et al. (2006, p. 11-14) argue that emotional brand attachment arises from three core sources: gratifying the self, enriching the self, and enabling the self. These factors interact to shape the strength of a consumer's emotional bond with a brand, which has implications for behavior, commitment, and long-term loyalty. Each of these causes is especially relevant when examining consumer loyalty in emotionally charged, culturally embedded products like the one this thesis focuses on.

Gratifying the self through hedonic and aesthetic experiences is what Park et al. (2006, p. 12) refer to as sensory and emotional pleasures a brand offers. Brands that reliably provide such gratification, whether that be through taste, sound, scent, or atmosphere, can shift attention away from external stresses and redirect it toward emotionally positive, self-focused experiences (Park et al., 2006, p. 12). These experiences can change moods such as optimism or emotional comfort, which, as a result, can deepen the bond between consumers and a brand. While this concept may seem more applicable to lifestyle or experiential brands (e.g., Starbucks or Disneyland), it is relevant to any product that offers immersive, repeatable emotional experiences (FIFA games). This helps this study explain why consumers feel emotionally drawn to a brand, even if their satisfaction with recent performance is low, because the brand continues to deliver or recall meaningful affective recollections.

The second cause of emotional brand attachment, which Park et al. (2006, p. 13) argue, is enriching the self through symbolic self-representation. This path to attachment involves the brand representing who the consumer was, who they are, or who they wish to become (Park et al., 2006, p. 13). This can occur through nostalgic associations with the past, alignment with present values and identities, or aspirations for the future. This insight is crucial for this thesis, as it explains how consumers can remain loyal to a brand even when their rational evaluations suggest they should disengage. If a brand is tied to one's personal history or future goals, detachment is not simply a matter of dissatisfaction; it involves emotional cost and identity disruption.

Lastly, enabling the self through functional utility shows how brands support a sense of self-efficacy by helping consumers accomplish goals or navigate life challenges (Park et al., 2006, p.14). When a brand is consistently reliable in performing its intended function, it earns the consumers' trust and reinforces their confidence. While this may appear to be a more rational or utilitarian pathway, the emotional bond can still be strong, especially when a brand becomes associated with competence, independence, or control. Attachment formed through enabling experiences is often linked to trust and performance; over time, these interactions may acquire emotional weight.

It is vital to understand that Park et al.'s (2006, p.3-36) framework is particularly valuable because it recognizes that the three routes to emotional attachment are not mutually exclusive. Brands that foster the strongest attachments often engage consumers across multiple areas. In terms of effects, emotional brand attachment has been shown to drive a range of behaviors including brand loyalty, advocacy, and resistance to negative information (Park et al., 2006, p 15-18). Importantly, attachment also creates a willingness to sacrifice. As Huaman-Ramirez and Merunka (2019, p.612) note, consumers may forgive shortcomings, pay more, or resist switching even with better alternatives. This is a crucial point for this thesis, which investigates why consumers remain loyal to brands they sometimes criticize and how this loyalty is shaped upon a co-branding dissolution. It suggests that emotional attachment is not merely about how a brand performs today, but about how it fits into the consumer's ongoing narrative of self.

As this section has shown, while brand loyalty is primarily shaped by emotional attachment, it can also develop through social interactions. Social relationships such as friend groups, online communities, or broader cultural groups are critical in shaping how consumers perceive, evaluate, and emotionally connect with brands. These external influences can reinforce, challenge or even initiate the emotional bonds consumers form. To fully understand the formation and maintenance of brand loyalty, especially in the context of socially embedded products like video games, it is essential to consider the impact of social influence.

## **2.5 Social Influence**

Kelman's (1958) theory of social influence explains how influential figures or social groups can shape a person's thoughts and behaviors, as stated by Liang et al. (2014, p.2). Social influence is a key driver of consumer behavior, directly and indirectly shaping decisions through active persuasion or subtle social cues. According to Turner and Oakes (1986, p. 239), only information perceived as trustworthy can genuinely alter an individual's attitudes and behaviors. In this sense, the credibility of the information source is an essential condition for effectively shaping consumer behavior. Mi et al. (2019, p.101) further emphasize that influence often stems from interpersonal and broader social contexts. Interpersonal influence typically originates from close relationships such as family and friends, while social influence extends to the impact of online social networks (Mi et al., 2019, p. 101). Social influence can be defined in various ways, depending on the theoretical perspective and research context.

Social influence can occur directly, for instance, through explicit communication, but usually it operates indirectly and involves three key mechanisms: compliance, identification, and internalization (Liang et al., 2014, p.3-6). Compliance is when individuals conform to the expectations or requests of others to gain approval, avoid disapproval, or fulfill a perceived obligation. For instance, a person may purchase a product simply because it was recommended by someone they admire, or due to a feeling of reciprocity (Burger et al., 2001, p. 1581). Interestingly, Burger et al. also found that even minor similarities between individuals can significantly increase compliance, reinforcing how easily influence can be activated when social factors align (Burger et al., 2001, p. 1581).

Identification occurs when individuals adopt attitudes or behaviors to gain approval and sustain a value relationship or affiliation (Liang et al., 2024, p. 3-6). Here, the influence reflects a desire to align with a group or person with whom one feels connected, such as a peer group or admired influencer. This influence is particularly prominent in online and gaming communities, where individuals frequently adopt the behaviors, preferences, or daily habits within their social circle, such as preferred games, platforms, teams, or playstyles.

Finally, internalization represents the deepest form of social influence: when the values, attitudes, or behaviors others endorse fully integrate into one's belief system. At this stage, the individual no longer acts to please others but is guided by internal conviction. Liang et al. (2014, p.3-6) relate internalization to situations where consumers genuinely change their attitude or behavior after trusting the information source, including friends and influencers. This is similar to what Turner and Oakes (1986, p. 239) argue, that only trusted information can lead to genuine attitudinal change, highlighting the essential role of credibility in the internalization process.

Compliance, identification, and internalization offer a helpful framework for understanding how social influence works offline and online. These processes show that influence does not only involve conscious decision-making; people may follow others to fit in, maintain relationships, or because the influence becomes part of how they see the world. This is particularly relevant in digital environments, where influence spreads through various sources and platforms. The following sections explore these sources, such as face-to-face friendships, social networks, online reviews, and influencer content, and examine how they shape consumer behavior. This is important for the overall aim of this thesis: to understand how different forms of social influence help explain loyalty, even when users express frustration or dissatisfaction.

### 2.5.1 Face-to-Face Friendships and Group Dynamics

Face-to-face friendships are characterized by mutual understanding, shared interest, and an awareness of each other's habits, personalities, and preferences (Liang et al., 2024, p.3-6). These close relationships are fundamental in increasing emotional well-being and overall life satisfaction. People are often influenced by the advice or behavior of their friends due to shared values, similar ways of communicating, and aligned interests. Following that, the desire to preserve social bonds or the fear of social exclusion can motivate individuals to conform to peer

expectations. One's personal beliefs and identity can be shaped over time through interactions with close social circles, including family members, friends, and coworkers (Lian et al., 2024, p.3).

Moreover, perceived social identity is the way individuals define themselves based on their group memberships and how they believe others perceive them within those groups (Lian et al., 2024, p.3-6). According to Social Identity Theory individuals categorize themselves and others into groups, and this group affiliation contributes to their self-concept (Islam, 2014, p.1781). Within these groups, individuals try to maintain a positive social identity by conforming to the norms and behaviors that the broader group shapes.

### 2.5.2 Online Social Network

Online social networks are highly influential environments where consumers interact, exchange opinions, and co-construct brand meanings. These platforms have transformed traditional models of communication and consumption by creating decentralized spaces where information flows horizontally, among peers and online, instead of top-down from brand to consumer. Social influence no longer depends solely on close personal ties but is increasingly shaped by broader online communities and digital ecosystems (Liang et al., 2024, p.3-6).

The nature of social influence within a network is shaped not only by participants' attitudes, behaviors, and attributes but also by the depth of their relationships and the degree of connection between them (Liang et al., 2024, p.3-6). Zhuang et al. (2021, p.1) build on these foundations and propose that social influence can be categorized into three core dimensions: informational, behavioral, and structural. Various interpersonal dynamics, including the length of closeness of relationships, emotional investment, reciprocity, and the patterns of interaction, such as the frequency, type, and context of communication, shape these dimensions.

### 2.5.3 Electronic Word-of-Mouth Readership

Electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM) plays a central role in shaping consumer perceptions. Defined as any positive or negative statement made by potential, actual, or former customers about a product or company, eWOM is available for a variety of people and takes the form of online reviews, forum discussions, or comment sections on platforms like Reddit, Youtube, and

Steam (Cheung & Thadani, 2012, p. 462). These reviews are seen as more authentic and relatable than traditional advertising and are also perceived as coming from “real users”, giving them substantial persuasive power (Liang et al., 2024, p.3-6). Consumers often consult these reviews during pre-purchase decision making, especially in high-involvement categories like gaming, where user experience and product performance vary greatly. The perceived credibility, usefulness, and volume of eWOM can significantly affect attitudes and even override personal brand preferences.

#### 2.5.4 Social Media Viewership

Live streaming involves promoting and selling products via popular social media platforms, often featuring engaging and influential online personalities (Liang et al., 2024, p.3-6). This form of e-commerce has grown rapidly, with live stream sessions generating significant sales volumes. By leveraging their unique personalities, perceived expertise, and visual appeal, these digital celebrities use persuasive performance techniques to shape consumer attitudes toward the products they endorse.

The rise of influencer culture has extended social influence into more curated and aspirational forms. Social media influencers serve as modern opinion leaders, especially in consumer domains such as fashion, tech, and gaming (Jamil, 2024, p.368-369). These figures blend entertainment, expertise, and relatability, creating parasocial relationships that feel intimate and trustworthy to viewers. Following that, whether explicit or implied, influencer endorsements can significantly shape viewer attitudes and behaviors, particularly when followers perceive a high degree of authenticity or shared identity with the influencer (Sokolova & Kefi, 2020, p.3-4). This dynamic is evident in digital game ecosystems, where influencer gameplay, reviews, or commentary can drive interest, shape reputations, or create backlash.

As Liang et al. (2024, p.3-6) argue, face-to-face friendships, electronic word-of-mouth engagement, and social media content exposure profoundly shape consumer decision-making. Thus, digital environments should not be viewed merely as communication channels but as social ecosystems that shape consumer identity, group affiliation, and emotional engagement with brands. Understanding these factors as forms of socially constructed influence helps to better explain post-separation consumer behavior in digitally saturated markets like gaming.

## Chapter 3

### Methodology

#### 3.1 Chapter Overview

This chapter outlines the qualitative research approach employed to investigate the impact of emotional brand attachment and social dynamics on loyalty and purchase intent following the co-branding split between EA Sports and FIFA. The focus is on how brand loyalty, emotional attachment, nostalgia, social influence, and the impact of brand dissolution shape player decisions and long-term brand relationships.

To explore these dynamics, ten in-depth semi-structured interviews were conducted with individuals with a minimum five-year engagement history with the *FIFA* franchise. Some participants have continued playing *EA Sports FC* post-rebrand (n=4), while others have not (n=6). The purposive and snowball sampling method enabled the study to capture continuity and rupture in brand loyalty.

The chapter begins by justifying a qualitative design, explaining how this method is suited to uncovering personal motivations, emotional memory, and social pressures. It then details the participant recruitment process using social media and university networks. Operationalization is addressed through a close alignment between the theoretical constructs, such as emotional brand attachment, nostalgia, social influence, and disliked loyalty, and the formulation of interview questions. These constructs were explored through both abstract participant reflections. Finally, the chapter describes how Braun and Clarke's (2006, p.4) thematic analysis was employed to analyze the data. Each analysis phase is explained in detail, including the steps to ensure the research process was systematic, theoretically informed, and trustworthy. This methodology chapter provides the basis for a good understanding of consumer behavior in the case of co-branding transformation.

#### 3.2 Sampling Strategy

Participants were recruited using some purposive sampling and mostly snowball sampling. Purposive sampling is a widely recognized non-probability technique particularly

suited for qualitative research where the goal is depth rather than statistical generalization. Memon et al. (2025, p. 4) highlight its strength in intentionally selecting participants based on relevant characteristics aligned with the study's objectives, strengthening credibility and methodology, especially when inclusion criteria are clear. As Memon et al. (2025, p. 10) also note, Snowball sampling is a valuable extension of this approach, allowing initial participants to refer others within their networks who share similar characteristics or experiences. This is especially useful when accessing niche populations, as it helps expand the sample efficiently while maintaining relevance to the research focus. These methods support a flexible yet focused recruitment strategy for exploring experience-based phenomena in social environments (Memon et al., 2025, p. 3).

The research began by posting and sending messages for participation in several large groups, primarily on social media platforms (Reddit and Facebook groups) where no personal connection to potential participants existed. *FIFA* and *EA Sports FC* players were assumed to be active in these spaces. The platforms were selected due to their diversity and the likelihood of reaching individuals beyond the researcher's social network. Another method was to go to university campuses with a QR code in Amsterdam, Netherlands (University of Amsterdam, Vrije Universiteit). These were chosen partly out of convenience, as they were geographically easily accessible to the researcher. However, these institutions also have large, international student populations and are known for their cultural diversity. This made them an appropriate location for reaching various participants with varying backgrounds and a high chance of finding *FIFA* or *EA Sports FC* players.

Although a few participants were indirectly connected through shared institutions, they were not individuals with whom the researcher had any personal relationship. This distance helped minimize potential ethical concerns, such as perceived pressure to participate or bias during data collection. As Xu et al. (2020, p.2) note, maintaining a neutral relationship between researchers and participants is essential for preserving the integrity of informed consent, particularly in qualitative studies where trust, voluntariness, and the absence of power dynamics play a crucial role in ethical research practice.

Semi-structured interviews were selected as the primary data collection method due to their ability to allow for detailed, personal accounts while allowing for flexibility in the conversation. As qualitative research literature notes, this method enables the researcher to investigate the reasons, emotions, and values influencing participants' behaviors and choices (Oranga and Matere, 2023, p.6). Open-ended questions encouraged participants to share their thoughts in depth and offered room for spontaneous elaboration on topics of individual relevance.

Interested individuals were asked to complete a short eligibility screening (one question) via text or in person to ensure they met the experience requirements (i.e., having played *FIFA* before and being aware of or having interacted with *EA Sports FC*). In all cases, informal conversation was used to assess participants' fit further, and in some cases, to encourage participation. At the end of each interview, participants were invited to refer others who met the same criteria and might be willing to participate. This snowball sampling approach was essential in expanding the sample to include players with diverse experiences and attitudes.

The interviews were conducted between March and May 2025. All interviews were held via video call on Google Meet, and with participant consent, they were audio-recorded on a mobile phone. Sessions ranged from 40 to 55 minutes. Before the interviews began, participants were given an oral summary of the study's purpose, procedures, and ethical considerations such as anonymity, voluntary participation, and the right to withdraw. Verbal consent was recorded at the start of each session. All recordings were later transcribed verbatim using the mobile phone and double-checked using software (Atlas.ti and Grammarly). To protect participant privacy, all data were anonymized during transcription, with identifying details removed or replaced with pseudonyms. Anonymization was made by the researcher to meet ethical standards and also to encourage honest and open responses, particularly when discussing critical or personal opinions about the franchise (Xu et al. 2020, p.5).

The only selection criterion applied was that all participants must have purchased at least 5 *FIFA* and/or *EA Sports FC* games. The five-year minimum was selected based on Wansink's (2003, p. 303) definition of a 'loyal' customer, which uses this duration as a minimum. Choosing

this threshold also made it feasible to reach the target of at least 10 participants while ensuring that participants had enough knowledge to speak in-depth.

The resulting population for this study consists of all male participants between the ages of 20 and 25 who have at least a five-year history of engagement with the FIFA and/or EA Sports FC video game franchises. All participants were male due to a lack of interest from other genders. The mean age for the study was 22. All participants have purchased and played at least five titles within the series, with several continuing into the *EA Sports FC* era (n=4) following the co-branding dissolution between EA and FIFA. This level of engagement reflects habitual play and an extended history with the franchise, qualifying them as experienced and informed consumers.

The participants come from various occupational backgrounds, including students and part-time/full-time working individuals in varying fields. While all participants share a similar demographic profile regarding age and gender, their attitudes toward the franchise and decisions regarding whether or not to purchase *EA Sports FC* vary greatly. This allowed the research to capture a variety of perspectives and players who have consciously disengaged from the brand and video game.

### **3.3 Operationalization**

The theoretical framework directly informed the interview guide, which identified several key concepts: brand loyalty (including loyalty for disliked brands), habit, emotional brand attachment, nostalgia, social dynamics, and responses to brand dissolution. These concepts were explored causally to allow participants to reflect on their experiences without risking being too abstract or theoretical.

Generally, each theoretical concept was addressed in a corresponding section of the interview guide. Brand loyalty, including loyalty toward a disliked brand, was addressed by exploring participants' long-term purchasing habits, reasons for repeated engagement, and ongoing play despite dissatisfaction. Particular attention was given to frustration, brand obligation, or perceived lack of alternatives. Such responses were used to identify and interpret

instances of “disliked loyalty,” following Kaplan et al. (2015, p.137) and Gounaris & Stathakopoulos (2017, p.202).

Nostalgia, deeply linked to disliked loyalty, was identified in participants' references to past versions of the game that they recalled with memory and affection, and their expressions of loss or disappointment following the brand split. If participants expressed past games as better or more meaningful, despite their current engagement, this was interpreted as a form of nostalgic attachment, in line with the findings of Meuhling and Pascal (2011, p.110).

Moreover, emotional brand attachment, including feelings of identity and connection to the FIFA series, was approached by encouraging participants to reflect on the game's meaning over time. If participants described the franchise in words that suggested personal significance, identity, or belonging, this was interpreted as indicative of emotional attachment, following the studies by Park et al. (2006, p.13) and Thomson et al. (2005, p.79).

Social influence was explored by examining participants' reflections on how their offline and online environments shaped their decisions. This included mention of friends or peers' expectations, behavior seen in gaming communities, or reactions to online content such as influencer content and online reviews. Any instance in which participants stated that these social inputs informed their decision to purchase or avoid *EA Sports FC* was considered evidence of social influence, in line with studies from Liang et al. (2024, p.3-6) and Cheung & Thadani (2012, p. 462).

The broader idea of co-brand dissolution was addressed by asking participants to reflect on their reaction to the split between EA and FIFA. This was vital as it allowed for examining participants, how they perceived the changes, and whether this affected their engagement with the product. Where participants described confusion, frustration, or emotional disconnection after the brand separation, this was taken as evidence of a disruption in brand continuity and identity, in line with studies on co-branding and dissolution (Ott et al., 2019, p. 202-205).

This method provided factual accounts of purchase behaviour and brand loyalty, with qualitative insight into the emotional and social dynamics underlying those decisions. The

interviews were crucial in addressing the study's research question and contributed directly to developing the themes discussed in the following analysis chapter.

### **3.4 Data Analysis**

This study adopts thematic analysis as the primary method of interpretation to analyze the qualitative data collected through semi-structured interviews, following the suggestions of Braun and Clarke (2006, p.3). The thematic analysis was conducted using software (Atlas.ti).

Thematic analysis is a foundational method in qualitative research that allows for systematically identifying, organizing, and interpreting patterns of meaning across a dataset (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p.6). Proposed by Braun and Clarke (2006, p.4), it is a flexible and widely respected approach that fits well within an interpretivist paradigm, which prioritizes the subjective experiences and social constructions of meaning articulated by research participants. Thematic analysis does not demand allegiance to a particular theoretical framework, making it especially suitable for this study's approach, which draws from existing theory while remaining open to emergent insights grounded in the data (Braun and Clarke, 2006, p.4).

This study is interested in how players understand and respond to the brand separation between EA Sports and FIFA, and how their emotional attachment and social relationships influence their loyalty, purchasing behaviors, and identity negotiations. Therefore, thematic analysis offers an excellent method of capturing individual perspectives and broader patterns across participants' experiences. This thesis applies a reflexive thematic analysis approach that recognizes the researcher's active role in meaning-making and acknowledges that themes are not simply found in the data, but constructed through careful iterative engagement (Braun and Clarke, 2006, p.9).

The analysis will follow the six-phase process of reflexive thematic analysis as proposed by Braun and Clarke (2006, p.5). It will be conducted manually, supported by some data management tools, but emphasizing developing an intimate familiarity with the material and allowing theoretical insights to emerge in dialogue with the data.

The analysis was conducted in six steps (Braun and Clarke, 2006, p.16-23):

1. Familiarization with the data. The first stage of thematic analysis involves becoming deeply familiar with the data. All interviews are transcribed verbatim, ensuring that tone, emphasis, and emotionally charged expressions are preserved for analysis. The transcripts are read in full to absorb the content and the emotional and contextual subtleties of participants' narratives. During this process, notes capture points of interest, recurring language, and early impressions of patterns. These notes allow for better interpretation of the data and help identify early signals of relevant concepts. Familiarization ensures that the coding and theme development stages are connected in an intimate understanding of the dataset.
2. Generating initial codes. Coding involves identifying and labeling data features relevant to the research question. In this study, a hybrid approach to coding will be used: some codes will be deductively derived from the mentioned theoretical concepts, while others will emerge inductively from the data. This approach ensures the analysis remains grounded in theory and participants' experiences. Codes will be applied to meaningful text segments to maintain coherence and avoid over-fragmentation.
3. Searching for themes. Themes represent patterns of shared meaning across the dataset, organized around a central concept. This process involves collecting codes into broader categories and examining how they may relate. At this stage, the aim is not to finalize the structure of the analysis but to begin constructing a thematic map that reflects the depth and complexity of participant accounts. Early themes may be overlapping or provisional, an expected part of the analytic process.
4. Reviewing themes. Once provisional themes have been identified, they must be examined to ensure their internal coherence and external distinctiveness. This involves two levels of review: first, at the level of individual coded extracts, and second, concerning the entire dataset. Each theme is examined with the data extracts it comprises and the dataset. Themes that appear overly broad, conceptually inconsistent, or insufficiently supported are modified, split, or combined as necessary. This process ensures that each theme tells a coherent and analytically valuable story about participants' experiences. The review process also allows for additional depth, enabling the analyst to return to the original transcripts and consider whether new or overlooked material may contribute to the

evolving themes. Thematic adjustment is a repetitive activity that strengthens the study's analytic clarity and theoretical grounding.

5. Defining and naming themes. Defining a theme involves articulating its core narrative, boundaries, and relevance to the research question. This includes identifying the key idea or social process that the theme represents and explaining how it contributes to an understanding of loyalty, purchase intent, emotional attachment, or social influence in the gaming context. Naming the theme is also necessary, as labels must be concise yet conceptually expressive.
6. Writing the analysis. The final phase involves constructing the thematic analysis as a written account that combines thematic findings, participant quotations, and theoretical interpretation. This paper attempts to summarize themes, interpret them, and put individual experiences within broader discourses. This section is used to highlight how the identified themes intersect and how they contribute to answering the study's research question. Participant quotes are purposefully selected to show key themes and add emotional and contextual depth. The analysis results in a theoretically informed interpretation that draws connections between the experiences of participants and the dynamics of brands in the context of the EA-FIFA separation. This approach ensures the analysis is empirically grounded, analytically rich, conceptually rich, and deep.

### **3.5 Reliability**

Reliability in qualitative research refers to the consistency, transparency, and trustworthiness of the research process, rather than the replicability of findings (Golafshani, 2003, p. 601). This study ensured reliability through precise documentation and consistent data collection and analysis procedures.

All participants were interviewed using the same semi-structured guide, which was directly informed by the theoretical framework. This consistency allowed the interviews to remain focused while offering participants enough flexibility to express their in-depth views. Each interview was audio-recorded (with consent), transcribed verbatim, and anonymized to preserve ethical integrity and data accuracy. Transcriptions were cross-checked using Atlas.ti to minimize errors and support reliable data handling.

Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase model of reflexive thematic analysis was followed to strengthen the reliability of interpretation. A hybrid coding strategy was applied using theoretical (deductive) and emergent (inductive) codes. This balanced approach ensured that findings were grounded in participant narratives while remaining linked to the research's conceptual goals. Reflexivity was maintained throughout, with ongoing awareness of the researcher's influence on interpretation.

Finally, by providing detailed explanations of sampling, data collection, operationalization, and analysis, this study offers a transparent research process that enhances internal consistency and methodological trustworthiness. The following chapter presents the results that emerged from this analysis.

## Chapter 4

### Results

#### 4.1 Chapter Overview

This chapter presents the findings from ten semi-structured interviews, analyzed using thematic analysis. The research question guiding this chapter is: *How does emotional brand attachment and social dynamics impact players' loyalty and purchase intention following the EA-FIFA co-branding dissolution?*

The analysis yielded four key themes and nine sub-themes, providing a good understanding of the dynamics that sustain player loyalty and purchase intent. The first theme, Emotional and Social Foundations, illustrates how participants' deep-rooted love for football, nostalgic attachment to the game, and shared moments with friends formed a strong emotional bond with FIFA that often outweighed gameplay-related frustrations. The second theme, Structural Dependence and Brand Loyalty, explores how the lack of viable competitors, habitual purchase behavior, and confusion following the EA-FIFA split contributed to players remaining loyal out of familiarity and inertia rather than satisfaction. The third theme, Psychological and Behavioral Dynamics, explores how changes in life stage, time availability, and even addictive tendencies shaped how participants related to the game over time. Finally, the fourth theme, Influence of Media and Digital Culture, highlights how social media personalities and digital content shaped the cultural meaning of FIFA, reinforcing loyalty through hype, identification, and parasocial relationships. These themes demonstrate that loyalty to *FIFA* and *EA Sports FC* results from a multi-varied equation of emotional history, social identity, market conditions, and cultural influence. This chapter provides the foundation for the following discussion, where these findings are interpreted together with the theoretical framework.

#### 4.2 Factors Shaping Perceptions of *FIFA* and *EA Sports*: Emotional & Social Foundations

This theme focuses on the experiences that shaped how participants viewed FIFA and EA Sports FC. These perceptions were linked in their love of football, the personal memories of

playing the sport, and its role as a shared social activity. These subthemes (1) Importance of Football and & General Gaming Habits, (2) Nostalgia and Personal History, and (3) FIFA as a Social Ritual, were grouped because they reveal how deeply FIFA was tied to identity, emotion, and relationships.

Many participants saw FIFA as an extension of their passion for football. Others described growing up with the game, linking it to key life stages and personal memories. FIFA also had a strong social meaning, often played together with friends, and used to maintain connections. Together, these factors created a strong emotional attachment and routine-based engagement. These factors help explain why many continued to play (or not to play) even after frustrations with the game and the rebranding of the FIFA franchise. It also highlights how emotional and social factors, rather than product quality alone, were central to long-term loyalty.

#### *4.2.1 Importance of Football & General Gaming Habits*

Football video games' popularity and cultural relevance among participants in this study were closely linked to their broader passion for the sport. Across all ten interviews (n=10), a consistent theme emerged: football is vital in the participants' lives and interests, and playing a football game offers a virtual extension of their general interest in the sport.

[...] It was one of the first games that I played all the way when I was sort of 9, 10 years old. And it stems from the fact that I'm a big fan of football, playing it and watching it. So it was quite a natural transition to also play a video game around football. (P1)

[...] FIFA was also one of the games which I was attracted to because of my real world connection to it. I always enjoy playing football. (P6)

[...] Basically, it's something that has been sort of continuous in my life, bringing me closer to the whole culture of football, which is something that I enjoy and love. (P9)

Thematic coding showed that codes such as “football fandom”, “early engagement”, and “identity expression” frequently co-occurred, highlighting that FIFA was emotionally and symbolically meaningful to players. This reveals that football video games are valued for their role in maintaining ties to the sport of football and a virtual version of their offline passion.

According to Park et al. (2006, p.13) emotional brand attachment emerges when a brand enriches the self through symbolic meaning or gratifies the self through emotionally rewarding experiences. The participants' recollections of long-term engagement with the FIFA franchise exemplify this process. Their comments reflect an affective bond formed through repeated interaction and comfort, aligning with the attachment theory perspective that familiarity and emotional consistency reinforce attachment (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2012, p. 3-4).

This is further backed by the fact that all participants (n=10) stated that they had interacted with at least five different FIFA or EA FC editions, with half (n=5) going back to more than a decade:

[...] I've been playing since FIFA 09 all the way up until about maybe FIFA 23. (P5)

[...] I actually remember getting my first FIFA. It was FIFA 08. [...] So I've had it for a lot of years. I've literally had every single one up until now. (P3)

[...] I started with FIFA 9 probably. And then I played every FIFA irreligiously up to about FIFA 17. (P7).

In addition to FIFA's immersive potential, several participants (n=4) described it as a tool for low-effort escapism, using it as a moment to “zone out.” These responses suggest that the game offers two simultaneous experiences by stimulating emotions for football and providing a mindless, comforting routine. This reflects what Park et al. (2006, p.13) call the gratification function of emotional attachment, where a brand becomes a tool for managing mood or emotional states:

[...] FIFA can also be a bit mindless, right? So, it doesn't require all your focus. (P1)

[...] There are still occasional times when we do pick up the controller and just kind of let those brain cells die a bit and just play a little bit of football. (P3)

[...] It's one where I think you're playing with friends and the game's going on the in background but actually facilitates you just to relax with your friends and you talk about other things while you're playing (P10)

For these participants, FIFA became a dependable video game because it felt familiar, emotional, and mentally safe. This includes the emotional bond that forms through repeated,

meaningful interaction. Shimu (2022, p.401- 402) explains that people tend to form strong ties with things that offer comfort, routine, and a sense of belonging.

This section has shown that participants' engagement with FIFA is not purely functional or for entertainment purposes. It shows long-term emotional ties to football fandom, identity, and habit. This foundation is vital for understanding how loyalty endures in highly emotional products.

#### *4.2.2 Nostalgia and Personal History*

Nostalgia was another prominent theme that came up in the interviews. All participants (n=10) described FIFA as a big part of their past routines and identity throughout adolescence and childhood. While some participants used the term “nostalgia” directly, others expressed it through vivid, specific recollections of *FIFA* as a ritualized part of their youth, often intertwined with friendships or memorable game editions and moments. These emotional recollections seemed to create a sense of continuity and connection between past and present, helping to explain why some participants remained loyal to the franchise and continued to purchase *EA Sports FC*.

[...] Growing up as a kid, it was always the first thing on my Christmas list. (P3)

[...] There's a lot of memories attached to this game at this point [...] it runs deep and causes me to purchase the game because it's really a lot of positive, good nostalgia. I think the last purchase was very much based on nostalgia. (P4)

[...] The times I played FIFA were for playing with friends, or to try and feel nostalgia, and to try and feel those feelings that I used to feel playing the game when I was 12 or 14 years old. (P9)

[...] I have a lot of memories with close friends [...] some of the best times [...] just because we were playing together and having a good time. (P9)

These findings support Kaplan et al.'s (2015, p.145) observation that nostalgia can play a central role in sustaining consumer loyalty, even when frustration or dissatisfaction with the

brand is present, as all participants (n=10) mentioned at least once in their responses. Participants' accounts suggest that the emotional bond formed in earlier life stages still shapes their behavior today, making FIFA a ritual of memory and identity. This emotional continuity aligns with Park et al.'s (2006, p.9) concept of enriching the self, in which consumers attach to brands that reflect or preserve essential aspects of their personal history.

Three participants (n=3) also described playing FIFA as fulfilling a childhood desire or dream of becoming a professional footballer. These participants reflected on childhood dreams of becoming athletes, with *FIFA* providing an immersive space to live out those fantasies.

[...] I always played as a player because, as a young boy, I always wanted to be a professional football player. (P2)

[...] As an active football fan, that filled me with joy and sort of fulfilled my dreams in a way because I started to realize what it would be like to be a footballer, which as a child was my dream. [...] So it really sort of gave me that feeling of my dream coming true in a weird way. (P3)

The participants described how the game allowed them to reconnect with a dream. These two recollections are significant because they capture how FIFA operates as a source of entertainment, which is closely linked to personal identity and aspiration. This adds depth to one's understanding of nostalgia as a powerful and personal experience that continues to shape behavior.

Such responses highlight what Pascal et al. (2002, p.40) describe as the idealized and selective nature of nostalgic recall, where memories of past experiences are framed through a lens of emotional positivity. Participants did not necessarily express loyalty based on the current quality of the game, but rather on the emotional legacy it carries from their childhood or adolescence. This supports the research aim by showing how nostalgic attachment can explain loyalty in contexts where rational satisfaction is no longer the primary driver.

In line with Kaplan et al. (2015, p.140), these memories motivate continued purchasing, even when there is critique or brand frustration. Nostalgia strengthens emotional brand

attachment by preserving a sense of self across time, a phenomenon especially relevant in long-standing entertainment brands like *FIFA* and *EA Sports FC*.

#### 4.2.3 *FIFA as a Social Interaction*

For all participants (n=10), FIFA was a shared habit, and social influence was vital in their decision to play the game. Participants spoke about playing FIFA with friends, especially in person, as one of the most meaningful and essential reasons they stayed engaged with the franchise. Recollections were made regarding playing after school, spending weekend evenings at someone's house, or filling in time during holidays or pandemics. *FIFA* has therefore been categorized as a type of social ritual that all participants have experienced, as participant 3 characterized:

[...] It was the sort of thing we'd do every Friday after school because we'd be able to hang out with our friends. And we'd go to my friend's house, get some food, and play FIFA. And that would sort of be our evening. So our nights were sort of dominated by FIFA.” (P3)

FIFA was significant for some participants (n=4) because it allowed them to connect and stay in touch. For some, it was a way to maintain long-distance friendships or connect with friends during the COVID-19 pandemic. For others, it helped build shared memories, inside jokes, and ongoing rivalries.

[...] I mean, I have friends in other countries who were playing it. So it was a good way for me to keep in touch with them, just for a quick game of FIFA. And we'd sort of catch up with them and call as well. (P1)

[...] Obviously, Corona started and took over the world. So I was stuck at home like, you know, most teenagers [...] So I sat around in my room playing my PlayStation, and that's. [...] So, whilst Covid was at its peak for a year or two, I played almost every day. It was a way to connect with my friends, join the PlayStation party, play some pro clubs, and try to go up the leagues. So really, I had again fallen in love with the game. (P4)

[...] I have a lot of memories with close friends [...] some of the best times, and I can completely remember some jokes and whole sequences of events that happened way back just because we were playing together and having a good time.” (P9)

This deep social element shows the importance of face-to-face friendships and group dynamics, as Liang et al. (2024, p. 1-13) explored. When friendships are built on shared routines and mutual understanding, the things people do together become part of maintaining closeness. Participants (n=6) often mentioned that playing locally in person was more rewarding than online matches as it created a space for casual conversation and lighthearted rivalry. As participants 1 and 10 described:

[...] I mean, I have friends in other countries who are playing it. So it was a good way for me to keep in touch with them [...] we'd sort of catch up with them and call as well. (P1)

[...] “It’s one where I think you’re playing with friends and the game’s going on in the background, but it facilitates you just to relax with your friends, and you talk about other things while you're playing. (P10)

FIFA also became a part of how some participants (n=4) saw themselves within their groups. Several mentioned wanting to be the best player among friends, or at least to hold their own. This competitive dynamic was important in staying relevant and respected in the group. This aligns with Social Identity Theory, where individuals place themselves and others into groups, and this group affiliation contributes to their self-concept (Islam, 2014, p.1781).

[...] If I were to play with my friends, I would want them to think that I'm good at the game [...] able to stand up against them, play against someone occasionally and win. (P9)

[...] You may have wanted to impress your friends a bit more and be the standout player. And I'd always say that, without being biased, I was definitely one of the better players. That always felt good. (P5)

[...] I think most guys, they like to get competitive with each other on this type of topic [...] my friends and I, we made jokes about who was the best player, who was the worst. And whilst you're playing against each other as well, you're gonna talk trash. (P4)

It becomes evident that for some, having a FIFA identity or label they had earned and kept over the years was significant. This group role, shaped by history and joking rivalry, made switching to another game unrealistic. As some participants (n=3) mentioned, it was not always because a better game did not exist, but rather because leaving *FIFA* meant leaving the social world they were part of. Participant 3 states this exactly:

[...] I don't think the name of the game matters, whether it is FIFA or PES. As long as there was hype or there wasn't that fear of missing out, then yeah, I would have played PES. (P3)

This reflects Kelman's (1958) findings of social influence. As Liang et al. (2014, p.2) suggest, through the process of identification and compliance, participants kept playing not necessarily because of the game itself but because of what it meant for their relationships. It becomes evident that for some, playing *FIFA* was something they wanted to do rather than something they should do. These perspectives show that social influence was central to shaping participants' engagement with *FIFA*. The game was a means of socializing that brought people together, sustained friendships, and gave players a sense of identity within their groups. As Liang et al. (2024, p.3-6) explain, social influence operates most powerfully when it becomes internalized.

### **4.3 Structural Dependence and Brand Loyalty**

This theme explores how loyalty to *FIFA* and *EA Sports FC* was shaped by external and personal structures, specifically the lack of competition, routine behavior, and brand confusion following the FIFA-EA separation. It includes three subthemes: (1) Market Monopoly & Lack of Alternatives, (2) Attitudes Toward the Product and Habitual Play, and (3) Fractured Brand

Identity Post-Separation. These were grouped because they show how player loyalty can be sustained even when satisfaction is low.

#### *4.3.1 Market Monopoly & Lack of Alternatives*

Another consistent reason participants gave for continuing to purchase *FIFA* throughout their gaming career, and now *EA Sports FC*, was the absence of credible alternatives. All ten participants (n=10) expressed that their loyalty to the franchise was also because the football gaming market lacked meaningful competition. All participants agreed that although the franchise came with some flaws, such as frustration over game mechanics and pricing, there simply was not a football game that could match *FIFA* regarding realism, reach, or cultural and social relevance. Participants 6 and 10 admitted this:

[...] It's not even that I think FIFA is great. It's just that nothing else really comes close. If you want to play football properly, that's the only option. (P6)

[...] FIFA is the only real game that dominates in my mind." (P10)

The analysis also produced co-occurrences of codes such as “monopoly,” “default brand,” “no viable competitor,” and “lack of choice.” This aligns with what Gounaris and Stathakopoulos (2017, p. 202) found: the perceived lack of alternatives also played an essential role in consumers' loyalty to a brand. Although technically other games exist, participants did not see them as viable options.

[...] I don't feel the need to start a whole other journey with a new game that I always put aside because I favored FIFA. (P4)

[...] Even if another game came out, it'd take years to build up what FIFA already has: gameplay, licenses, and player base. [...] Most importantly, all my friends play FIFA." (P8)

[...] I always stand strong with this franchise, and I've never batted an eyelid at the thought of buying or playing another kind of football game other than FIFA or EA. (P5)

Moreover, participants (n=7) frequently mentioned their experiences and knowledge with other football games, specifically Pro Evolution Soccer (PES), but consistently dismissed it as inferior. PES was mentioned as a failed and socially irrelevant game.

[...] I've tried PES and other games before, but they never feel right. So I always end up back with FIFA. (P2)

[...] They used to have a game called PES [...], but FIFA is way more popular. So, essentially, just the fact that other people play FIFA. (P6)

These remarks make it evident that *FIFA* holds a monopoly, also in the social sense. In the participants' experience, the lack of competition was predominantly about social infrastructure: friends and an entire online ecosystem that strengthened FIFA's dominance.

This raises questions about how brand loyalty is formed when there is no proper choice. While other themes in this study explore satisfaction or emotional attachments as indicators of brand loyalty, it is clear that a lack of better or viable options can be equally as vital. FIFA's long history of dominance may reflect a resigned commitment to what is already known, familiar, and widely used among social groups. The next theme explores participants' attitudes towards the franchise and habitual play, which is deeply correlated to this theme.

#### *4.3.2 Attitudes Toward the Product and Habitual Play*

Many participants expressed a long relationship with the FIFA franchise, including emotional ties and habitual behavior. For many, engagement with the game was ingrained so deeply in their livelihood that purchasing the latest version became an annual tradition, which was often done without much thought.

[...] I don't even really think about it anymore. September comes, and I just get the new FIFA. It's like a tradition at this point. (P8)

[...] I've been buying it (FIFA) for over ten years. Even when I'm a bit annoyed about it, I still pre-order. It is just what I do. (P5)

These remarks point to behavioral loyalty that aligns with the notion of habit, where brand engagement continues because it has become essential for participants' routines (Kaplan et al., 2015, p.148). Over the years, FIFA has become so ingrained in participants' daily and weekly routines that disengagement feels unnatural or emotionally uncomfortable. Codes such as “automatic purchase” and “ritual” occurred with emotional descriptors like “comfort” and “nostalgia.”. This further backs the research from Thomson et al. (2005, p.10), who mention repetition as a key emotional driver for how people define themselves and their routines.

However, it is also essential to consider that habit, or other factors discussed in this study, did not mean participants were not critical of the game. On the contrary, participants (n=6) were often very vocal about their frustrations with the game. Common complaints centered around boring gameplay, lack of meaningful updates, and an increasing emphasis on monetized features like the game mode Ultimate Team, a competitive game mode which enables players to create a custom all-star team composed of footballers from various clubs to compete against each other, players, or the game's AI. Several participants expressed concerns that EA Sports prioritized profit over player experience and gameplay, while others expressed frustration with the game itself when playing it.

[...] They don't change anything. That's disappointing because then you see what they are doing to the ultimate team, which is adding a bunch of unnecessary things.” (P4)

[...] I would say that FIFA is one of the limited number of games that makes me feel like I want to throw my controller at the TV. (P6)

[...] There are things that have basically been given no attention by EA Sports. [...] there are some series that have continued to be good long after my childhood. And yeah, FIFA doesn't feel like it's one of those. (P9)

[...] They did all feel very similar, and it seemed a little lazy from developers that they didn't see too much of a difference. (P10)

Yet interestingly, participants (n=4) still migrated to *EA Sports FC* despite their criticisms. This contradiction, where apparent dissatisfaction occurs with continued engagement, aligns closely with the concept of loyalty for a disliked brand (Kaplan et al., 2015, p.137-148), where continued brand commitment can also stem from perceived necessity or emotional legacy. Players remain purchasing *EA Sports FC* even as their frustrations are evident. The result is a sense of loyalty that is both strong and conflicted. This tension is essential for understanding how consumers become increasingly aware and vocal about the brands they still use. So far, the above sections have demonstrated that participants' relationship with the past FIFA franchise and their choice to purchase *EA Sports FC* shows that loyalty is closely linked to legacy, habit, and social norms. This is important for understanding how media brands can maintain dominance, even when their consumers are dissatisfied. As participant 9 mentioned:

[...] You just get it every year. Even if you don't want to. You kind of have to. (P9)

#### *4.3.3 Fractured Brand Identity Post-Separation*

The EA-FIFA co-branding dissolution introduced differentiated responses regarding how it affected the game's identity. This was a major rupture for most participants (n=5), while others (n=4) did not see the split as a key factor in their decision to continue playing the game. With the release of *EA Sports FC*, several participants described feeling emotionally disconnected. While the gameplay remained largely familiar, the shift in branding disrupted their emotional and symbolic connection to what they still instinctively referred to as "FIFA."

[...] I have to say it's a shame. [...] I look at them differently now because I honestly couldn't say a game or mention a game of EA's that I would be interested in buying anymore. (P4)

[...] I would have more loyalty to FIFA than the specific EA FC game. It doesn't feel the same anymore after the rebranding. (P7)

The quotes above reveal that the moment EA went solo, the illusion of shared authorship between EA and FIFA broke, revealing EA as the sole creative force behind a brand that had always been seen as bigger than any one company. A loss of tradition and a

rupture in the perceived legitimacy of EA Sports FC emerge. As Kumar (2019, p.4) describes, brand separations are moments where strategic partnerships dissolve due to misalignment or shifting goals, yet what is missing from most strategic discourse is the psychological fallout on the consumer end. Consumers react differently to the loss of a logo, name, and the disruption in how they see themselves compared to the brand. In the above cases, participants P4 and P7 seemed to change their view of EA as the sole brand behind a product that did not feel co-owned by football culture. Importantly, this break does not necessarily lead to behavioral exit. Even participants (n=4) who expressed disappointment with the separation and other factors of the game continued to purchase *EA Sports FC*.

This theme raises implications about the fragility of symbolic brand relationships. Once a brand becomes part of how people define themselves, as *FIFA* did before *EA Sports FC*, it is not easily replaced or adapted to without emotional cost. The EA-FIFA separation demonstrates how powerful co-branded identities can be and how risky it is to change them despite the perception of a strong legacy and market dominance. Players might adapt behaviorally, but emotionally, the fracture may take longer to mend.

#### **4.4 Psychological and Behavioral Dynamics**

This theme examines how players' changing lives and internal struggles shaped their loyalty to FIFA and EA Sports FC. It includes two subthemes: (1) Temporal Displacement & Life Stage Shifts, and (2) Addiction. Together, these sub-themes show that continued engagement can be shaped by how the game fits, or no longer fits, into a person's broader life.

##### *4.4.1 Temporal Displacement & Life Stage Shifts*

The most significant pattern that emerged across all participants (n=10) was the feeling of temporal displacement. This was because video games no longer aligned with participants' current life stages, values, or daily routines. Every participant reflected on how their relationship with the game had shifted, especially as they transitioned from adolescence into adulthood. All participants agreed that their time playing *FIFA* and *EA Sports FC* games had significantly

dropped. This shift was closely tied to broader changes in priorities and how they now spent their free time.

[...] Now that I'm a bit older and I wouldn't be able to play consistently, that gets annoying. (P4)

[...] The age factor, you become a little bit less interested, time management becomes more of a thing, so I have less time to play. (P5)

For all participants, this change was not necessarily filled with regret; it was simply practical. The responsibilities that come with adulthood, including work, studies, or new social circles, no longer allow for the same kind of immersive, habitual engagement with football video games. Some participants described this change as conscious or deliberate, while others mentioned it being a slow fade-out.

This shift reveals how fragile brand engagement can be when linked to specific social contexts and life stages. For all participants, football video games were central to their lives, yet became something that had to be planned or justified, which ultimately altered their experience. As participant 10 states:

[...] FIFA was how we stayed connected as kids. But now we've grown up, moved to different cities... It's just not part of my world anymore. (P10)

Park et al. (2006, p.13 -14) argue that emotional brand attachment persists only when a brand continues to enrich or enable the self. Attachment can weaken once a brand no longer fits into consumers' current goals, identity, or lifestyle. For many participants, the game no longer reflected who they are or what they prioritize, even if it once held significant personal meaning.

This insight shows how brand loyalty can not be taken for granted, even if past emotional connections are deep. Consumers change, and their environments shift. What mattered to them one year after another becomes obsolete the next. Therefore, it is clear that brands should attempt to evolve with the consumer who plays it.

#### 4.4.2 Addiction

Most of the participants (n=8) described their relationship with the FIFA franchise as a more intense, consuming relationship, one that closely resembled behavioral addiction. Although at times participants spoke of the game as a regular part of their leisure, they often admitted to experiencing long, uninterrupted hours of playing, emotional dependency, and moments of physical or psychological exhaustion tied directly to their engagement.

[...] During my peak addiction, I didn't recognize that the game was bad for me. I refused to admit it because I was so ingrained, I was so addicted, me and my friends were so in love with the game, or so we thought, that we didn't recognize it. (P3)

[...] 100% in the past, yeah. I think it was one of the only games I played. I played that religiously. I just couldn't get off the game at times. Some weekends I'd be on it from Friday to Sunday nonstop. [...] there were times where I wanted to break my screen. (P6)

Upon reading these reflections, it is clear that for some participants, FIFA represented a relationship that became hard to manage, and stepping away from the game was difficult. Even when the experience was frustrating or emotionally draining, they kept returning. This was particularly evident when participants again discussed the “Ultimate Team” game mode. Several participants described it as rewarding and exhausting, the highs of success and the lows of losing, and how this created a rhythm they could not easily step out of.

[...] I think addictive is the one that jumps out to me because it was an addiction to sort of open new packs. (P3)

[...] The introduction of packs as well, I think plays quite a big component with the Ultimate Team features because it's kind of like a gambling aspect of things, which is addictive. (P5)

[...] Ultimate Team is very toxic sometimes, but I keep grinding. It is like a bad habit. (P10)

Participants had been fully aware of these addictive behaviors. They recognized that they were stuck in something that was sometimes frustrating and infuriating, yet they continued to play regardless. This contradiction is powerful because it points to a relationship with FIFA that went deep into emotional dependence. While this study does not suggest any participants were clinically addicted, the way they talked about the game, especially the emotional swings and difficulty stepping away, points to a complicated relationship. This type of loyalty can be seen as conflicted and even painful. It therefore becomes clear that addiction can also be regarded as comprised of repeated decisions that accumulate into something larger, where emotional investment can keep consumers coming back, even if the fun of playing the game no longer exists.

#### **4.5 Influence of Media and Digital Culture**

This theme explores how social media and digital content shape players' engagement with FIFA and EA Sports FC. Most participants said YouTube and influencers played a significant role in keeping them interested, building hype, and shaping how they viewed the game. Content creators felt relatable and trustworthy.

In contrast, traditional reviews and forums had little effect. Many ignored them or did not care what they said, even in the case of negative reviews. Participants preferred trusting their own experiences or familiar online personalities. This shows that influence can come from personal connections rather than broad online opinions in digital culture.

##### *4.5.1 Impact of Social Media and Influencers*

A clear theme across all participants (n=10) was the role of digital content, especially YouTube and influencer videos, in shaping their emotional engagement with *FIFA* and *EA Sports FC*. Most participants (n=8) described how watching familiar content creators helped them feel connected to the game, even when their playtime decreased. This highlights the growing influence of social media viewership and parasocial relationships, as outlined by Sokolova and

Kefi (2020, p.3), where relatability and perceived authenticity drive emotional resonance and trust.

[...] YouTube played a huge role because there were a lot of YouTubers who I was watching at that time who were also playing FIFA. So through them, you would kind of experience the game alongside playing it yourself. (P1)

[...] I think that it (YouTube) would get me even more into the game because, when I wasn't playing the game, I'd be watching FIFA YouTubers. (P8)

This aligns with Kelman's (1958) theory of social influence, as cited in Liang et al. (2014, p.2); this behavior reflects the identification mechanism: players adopt attitudes and behaviors to align with figures they admire or feel connected to. These influencers create a digital peer environment that simulates group belonging, one of the core ingredients of brand loyalty in social ecosystems (Jamil, 2024, p.368 - 369). This was reinforced by participants who mentioned that these influencers helped define what the brand meant culturally, especially when game quality was uncertain.

Moreover, when asked if online reviews or forums had any impact on their decisions, participants (n=9) were largely dismissive. Some said they never bothered reading reviews. Others admitted that even if reviews were predominantly negative, it would not change their behavior or purchase intent. When asked about the influence of electronic word of mouth readership (eWOM), participants generally agreed:

[...] As for online review websites or places, I didn't really read too much about those just because I knew what to expect from a FIFA game. (P5)

[...] Even if I saw a review before it came out saying, "Oh, this FIFA is terrible," I'd still buy it, to be honest. (P7)

[...] Not really, honestly, I think it's all more of my own experiences. (P8)

These responses show that eWOM does not influence all consumers equally. According to Cheung & Thadani (2012, p. 462), eWOM is usually persuasive because it feels more authentic. However, in the participants' experience from this study, it was clear that they thought

they already knew the game well enough that external opinions did not matter. Their decisions were primarily based on habit, personal history, and social factors rather than ratings or reviews.

Participants trusted their own experiences, face-to-face contact, or the personalities they watched online more than anonymous feedback. This suggests that influence is strongest from a familiar or emotionally trusted source. Review websites lacked that familiarity. Youtubers, on the other hand, felt more relatable and aligned with their gameplay preferences.

Moreover, this theme links directly to the research, which explores how loyalty persists. Yet only a few participants (n=2) described continuing to play *EA Sports FC* because of the repeated exposure to influencers and digital communities. Their decisions in this regard were shaped more by these relations than by objective game quality or independent research.

## Chapter 5

### Conclusion

#### 5.1 Conclusion

This thesis explored the impact of emotional brand attachment and social influence on players' brand loyalty and purchase intentions following the separation of Electronic Arts and FIFA. This case represented a prominent shift in the football gaming industry: the dissolution of a thirty-year co-branding relationship that had monopolized and dominated the football video game market. The research aimed to understand how consumers perceive this separation.

Chapter 1 introduced the topic and identified the problem space emerging from the brand dissolution between FIFA and EA Sports. Chapter 2 presented the theoretical framework, reviewing concepts such as brands, co-branding, dissolution, brand loyalty, emotional attachment, and social and online influence. Chapter 3 detailed the qualitative methodology, which included ten semi-structured interviews with long-term FIFA players and explained the thematic analysis procedure. Chapter 4 presented the results through thematic analysis, revealing four core themes: (1) emotional and social foundations, (2) structural dependence and brand loyalty, (3) the friction of change and reactions to post-separation brand identities, and (4) influence of media and digital culture.

#### 5.2 Answering the Research Question

This thesis has attempted to explore the following research question: *How does emotional brand attachment and social dynamics impact players' loyalty and purchase intention following the EA-FIFA co-branding dissolution?*

The data reveals that the answer to this question lies in the connection between emotional brand attachment and social dynamics, both act as central concepts shaping loyalty after the co-branding dissolution between EA and FIFA. These concepts function on individual and relational levels, highlighting the emotional weight of long-term brand engagement and the social environments in which that engagement is embedded.

First, emotional brand attachment was the most powerful internal driver of loyalty. Participants who continued purchasing *EA Sports FC* (n=4) expressed a strong sense of personal identification with the game, often linked to nostalgia and past emotional experiences. Their attachment was primarily related to what the product symbolized, including memories of youth, dreams of football stardom, identity formation, and deep emotional rituals cultivated over a decade. Even participants who had criticisms or doubts about the current quality of the game still maintained a sense of symbolic and emotional loyalty. In these cases, nostalgia served as a bridge between past satisfaction and present commitment, allowing the brand to retain its meaning despite changes in product or branding.

Second, social influence played a decisive role in shaping loyalty and disengagement. Participants consistently described how their choices were affected by peer groups, gaming communities, and especially influencer content on platforms like YouTube. While some (n=4) continued purchasing *EA Sports FC* partly due to these influences, others (n=6) cited the decline in communal engagement, such as friends no longer playing or the loss of shared routines, as a significant reason for disengaging. Identification, one of Liang et al.'s (2024, p.6) key mechanisms of influence, helps explain this: participants who maintained a connection to communities where *FIFA* or *EA Sports FC* were central were more likely to continue engaging. Conversely, those whose environments evolved, or who no longer identified with the digital or physical communities around the game, began to let go.

Third, temporal life changes profoundly shape brand loyalty. Across all interviews, participants discussed how adulthood, shifting priorities, and reduced free time made gaming less frequent or less meaningful. For many, the move away from the game was not marked by a peak break, but a gradual fading of relevance. This supports the idea that brand loyalty is not permanent, even when emotionally present. It must be continually reinforced by personal and social relevance. Life stage, identity shifts, and time constraints all worked against continued engagement and purchase intent.

Finally, the brand dissolution (i.e., the loss of the *FIFA* name) introduced uncertainty and disrupted brand continuity. While participants understood *EA Sports FC* as a rebranding, several (n=5) expressed concerns over authenticity, legacy, and emotional disconnection. Although the

game's mechanics remained largely intact, the shift itself mattered deeply. The FIFA name carried with it institutional prestige and emotional familiarity. Its disappearance caused some to question whether they were still engaging with the same franchise they had grown up with.

In summary, continued loyalty to *EA Sports FC* is best explained by a combination of emotional brand attachment, social dynamics, and temporal identity shifts. Those who remained loyal did so because the game still held personal and symbolic value, reinforced by social engagement and online influence. Those who disengaged had often undergone identity transitions, lost emotional attachment to the product, or no longer found support from their social environments. While nostalgia can sustain loyalty temporarily, it is not always enough to overcome life changes or disruptions in brand identity.

### **5.3 Implications**

The findings of this study have implications for both researchers and professionals in the gaming and branding industries. One area that future academic research might benefit from is a closer examination of how emotional attachments to long-running franchises change over time. This thesis highlighted that loyalty is not always consistent and can be disrupted by lifestyle changes or perceived shifts in brand identity. Researchers could explore how gaming habits evolve as players move through different stages of life, and how brands respond to that change. There is also room to understand better how resignation and obligation, for instance, play into continued consumer behavior.

For those outside academia, this study offers insights for marketers, brand managers, business owners, developers, or people interested in football video games. Companies like EA should consider their products' emotional and social roles in players' lives. The decision to purchase is about preserving a connection to a shared past or group identity. Developers should focus less on yearly performance upgrades and more on maintaining continuity and community-centred experiences.

The research also shows the importance of addressing lifecycle transitions more directly. Several participants expressed that they had outgrown the game or no longer had the time or energy for it, despite still feeling attached to the brand. This creates an opportunity for EA to

produce games for more flexible, time-sensitive gaming modes or other strategies targeting older, less active players who may want to reconnect.

#### **5.4 Discussion and Limitations**

Recruiting participants for this study proved difficult but manageable due to online networks, access to various campus institutions, and the broad nature of the FIFA player community. Yet several limitations still shaped the research and its outcome. All ten interviewees had extensive experience with the FIFA franchise, which allowed for detailed, reflective responses. However, the sample was limited in scope. Most participants were from Western European backgrounds and shared relatively similar age groups, which could have influenced similar reflections and experiences.

Moreover, all participants were male. This gender imbalance means that perspectives from female or other players are absent from the data. Given the role of identity and social dynamics in gaming behavior, a more diverse sample could have introduced new insights.

The use of semi-structured interviews and thematic analysis proved to be well-suited for the research goals. The method allowed participants to speak casually and freely, often leading to stories and reflections that revealed underlying values and motivations. Themes and ideas were therefore explored naturally through this approach. However, qualitative research means that these findings are not generalisable. The goal was not to identify a trend across all FIFA players, but to understand the depth of individual experiences.

Lastly, although thematic analysis helped make sense of the data, a single researcher made coding decisions and was subject to personal interpretation. This could introduce bias. Future studies should involve multiple coders or validation steps to strengthen reliability.

#### **5.5 Future Research**

Some suggestions are given on how future studies could extend this research. One direction could be to focus more on regional diversity. Interviewing players from different cultural backgrounds may reveal how attachment and loyalty vary across markets where FIFA is consumed differently.

Moreover, future studies could examine brand loyalty and emotional attachment across player demographics. This study focused on a relatively narrow age group (20-25), reflecting a specific stage of life and a particular relationship with the FIFA franchise. A follow-up study that includes younger teenagers or older adults might reveal how age, financial independence, and time availability shape the balance between the concepts discussed in this paper.

Lastly, future research could consider a longitudinal approach by interviewing the same participants over several years. This would capture how consumer attachment changes, especially as EA Sports FC removes itself from the FIFA legacy. Questions could focus on when and why emotional connections weaken and what other factors finally prompt a player to disengage.

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## Appendix A

Table of participants

Participant #	Age	Occupation	Purchased <i>EA Sports FC</i>
1	23	Student	No
2	23	Working full-time	Yes
3	22	Working full-time	Yes
4	21	<i>Not stated</i>	Yes
5	25	Working full-time	No
6	20	Student	No
7	23	Working full-time	Yes
8	24	Student	No
9	20	Student	No
10	25	Working full-time	No

## **Appendix B**

### **CONSENT REQUEST FOR PARTICIPATING IN RESEARCH FOR QUESTIONS ABOUT THE STUDY, CONTACT:**

Name: Daniel Zeilstra

Email: [735240dz@eur.nl](mailto:735240dz@eur.nl)

Phone number: +31 6 42 53 21 32

#### **DESCRIPTION**

You are invited to participate in a research about FIFA and EA Sports FC. The purpose of the study is to understand the influence of emotional brand attachment and social influence on your purchasing behavior and loyalty towards the EA-FIFA franchise post separation.

Your acceptance to participate in this study means that you accept to be interviewed. In general terms, the questions of this interview will be regarding your personal experience and history with EA and FIFA games.

Unless you prefer that no recordings are made, I will make audio recording of the interview.

I will use the material from the interviews and my observation exclusively for academic work, such as further research, academic meetings and publications.

#### **RISKS AND BENEFITS**

A. As far as I can tell, there are no risks associated with participating in this research. I will not use your name or other identifying information in the study. To participants in the study will only be referred to with pseudonyms, and in terms of general characteristics such as age and gender.

You are always free not to answer any particular question, and/or stop participating at any point.

#### **TIME INVOLVEMENT**

Your participation in this study will take approximately 45 minutes. You may interrupt your participation at any time.

## **PAYMENTS**

There will be no monetary compensation for your participation.

## **DATA COLLECTION AND RETENTION**

During the interview the following personal data will be collected from you: Name, age, gender and audio recordings.

## **PARTICIPANTS' RIGHTS**

If you have decided to accept to participate in this project, please understand your participation is voluntary and you have the right to withdraw your consent or discontinue participation at any time without penalty. You have the right to refuse to answer particular questions. If you prefer, your identity will be made known in all written data resulting from the study. Otherwise, your individual privacy will be maintained in all published and written data resulting from the study.

## **CONTACTS AND QUESTIONS**

If you have questions about your rights as a study participant, or are dissatisfied at any time with any aspect of this study, you may contact –anonymously, if you wish, the contact person for the Master Thesis Project : [56669dtr@eur.nl](mailto:56669dtr@eur.nl)

Do you have a complaint or concerns about your privacy? Please email [735240@eur.nl](mailto:735240@eur.nl) or visit [www.autoriteitpersoonsgegevens.nl](http://www.autoriteitpersoonsgegevens.nl). (T: 088 - 1805250)

## **SIGNING THE CONSENT FORM**

If you sign this consent form, your signature will be the only documentation of your identity.

Thus, you DO NOT NEED to sign this form. In order to minimize risks and protect your identity, you may prefer to consent orally. Your oral consent is sufficient.

I give consent to be recorded during this study:

Name Signature Date

I prefer my identity to be revealed in all written data resulting from this study

Name Signature Date

## **Appendix C**

### **Interview Guide**

*Please note that the interview guide has been used as a guide only. In some interviews certain questions were skipped/alterd based on the participants response.*

#### Oral Consent Procedure

Hi, I'm Daniel Zeilstra and I'm researching ex-FIFA players as well as current EA Sports FC players in the Netherlands.

This study focuses on your experiences with FIFA and EA football games, especially regarding loyalty, emotional connection, and social influences all of which are believed to affect purchase behavior following the EA-FIFA brand separation.

Your participation involves one informal interview lasting about 45 minutes. It won't bring any direct benefit to you, but it may help the academic community in the Netherlands. Please answer honestly, there are no right or wrong answers.

Participation is voluntary, and you can stop at any time. You may also request that your data be deleted and excluded from the study.

I will do everything possible to protect your privacy. Your identity and personal information will not be shared in any publication that results from this study. Interview notes will be securely stored.

Would it be all right if I audiotaped our interview? Saying no will not affect your participation.

Do you consent to this interview? Do you have any questions?

#### **Section 1**

Can you tell me your age, nationality, and occupation?

How long have you played FIFA?

How often did you play FIFA before the transition to EA Sports FC?

How would you describe your overall relationship with the FIFA series over the years?

Have you purchased EA Sports FC since the rebrand? What influenced your decision?

How did you feel when you first heard about the separation between EA Sports and FIFA?

Has the separation changed how you perceive either brand (EA Sports or FIFA)? Why or why not?

Which brand do you feel more loyalty toward after the separation?

Did you consider switching to a different football game after the change?

What influenced your decision to continue or not continue with EA Sports FC?

Did the absence of the “FIFA” name affect your sense of authenticity or quality?

## **Section 2**

Have you ever continued using or buying from EA Sports despite being unhappy with some of its features or decisions?

What keeps you coming back to EA Sports FC even if there are things you don't like?

Can you recall a moment when you felt disappointed but still played the game?

What role does habit, routine, or your investment (money, time, friends) play in your loyalty?

Would you describe this relationship more as loyalty or as something you do out of routine?

## **Section 3**

Do you feel emotionally connected to EA Sports FC or the FIFA brand? Why?

How would you describe your relationship with the brand, is it just a product or something more?

Do you feel a sense of nostalgia when playing the game?

Does the game connect with your personal identity or past memories?

Would you feel a sense of loss if you had to stop playing it?

Are there any memories or life phases you strongly associate with playing FIFA or EA Sports games?

How do those memories shape your current feelings toward the brand?

Has your experience of the game changed over the years?

Do you play now partly because of those past positive experiences?

## **Section 4**

How do your friends or online communities influence your choice to play EA Sports FC?

Have you ever felt pressure to keep playing or buying the game because others around you were?

Do you talk about or share content from the game with others?

How important are Twitch or YouTube personalities in shaping your opinion of the game?

Have online reviews or Reddit discussions ever changed your view of the game?

Do you follow any streamers, reviewers, or influencers who play EA Sports FC?

Have these figures ever influenced your decision to buy, continue playing, or stop playing?

Do you trust their opinions more than traditional advertisements?

Do you feel a connection with these influencers?

Do you see yourself as part of a community of EA Sports FC or FIFA players?

How important is that sense of belonging to your engagement with the game?

Would leaving the game feel like leaving a group or part of your identity?

Are there specific norms or expectations in your social circle related to gaming?

## Appendix D

Codebook and results table

### Appendix D1: Codebook

Themes (T)	Definition
(T1) Perceptions of FIFA & EA Sports FC: Emotional and Social Foundations	How players feelings and social interactions shape their views of the game. It focuses on emotional connections like nostalgia and loyalty, as well as the influence of peers.
(T2) Structural Dependence and Brand Loyalty	How players continue engaging with FIFA and EA Sports FC due to habit, lack of alternatives, embedded routines. This theme highlights how structural factors can reinforce loyalty, even when emotional attachment is weak or ambivalent.
(T3) Psychological & Behavioral Dynamics	Explores the internal motivations, emotions, and coping strategies that influence how players interact with FIFA and EA Sports FC.
(T4) Influence of Media and Digital Culture	Examines how social media, influencer content, and gaming communities shape players' perceptions and engagement with FIFA and EA Sports FC.

### Appendix D2: List of sub-themes and codes

Subtheme (ST) and Code name
<b>(ST1.1) Importance of Football &amp; Gaming Habits</b>
Annual release cycle perceived as automatic

Deep emotional bond to gameplay mechanics
Football as getaway to FIFA
Football background linked to game choice
Football culture in my life
Football fandom shaped game interest
FIFA as way to kill time
Franchise perceived as a method to kill time
Franchise perceived as socially embedded activity
Game perceived as ritual
Long-term exposure shaping perception
Real-world sport influenced virtual engagement
Satisfied with budget the franchise holds
World Cup as relevant game mode
<b>(ST1.2) Nostalgia and Personal History</b>
Collective memory shaping brand attachment
Childhood fantasy
Earliest versions remembered fondly
Emotional comfort through consistency
Emotional ties to earlier editions
FIFA associated with childhood
FIFA as a means of arguing
FIFA memories tied to family
<i>FIFA</i> name used to describe <i>EA Sports FC</i>
Gameplay nostalgia influencing judgment
Long-term emotional attachment to franchise

Nostalgia influenced by previous music
Nostalgia compensates for dissatisfaction
Nostalgia distorted product judgment
Nostalgia influencing purchase intent
Nostalgic framing distorts present-day judgment
Nostalgic franchise attachment
Past versions idealized
Personal memories override negative feedback
Purchase intent due to familiarity
Unhappy with previous gaming habits
<b>(ST1.3) FIFA as a Social Ritual</b>
Collective nostalgia among friends
Annual disappointment framed as normal
Buying decisions influenced by friends
Buying to stay socially included
Clinging to childhood gaming habits
Consistent social gaming habits
Competitiveness among friends
Diminishing excitement over new editions
Expectation that nothing changes
Face to face communication
Fear of missing out socially
FIFA as shared cultural event
FIFA sessions as bonding moments
FIFA tradition in friend circles

FIFA as a means for having rivalry
Following group norms
FOMO drives purchase
Friend networks sustain loyalty
Friendships maintained through gameplay
Game sessions organized by peers
Group play structured weekly routines
Group driven game adoption
Importance of being part of group
Loyalty based on shared history
Peer expectations shape engagement
Peer influence shaped as personal preference
Playing with friends online
Playing with friends in-person
Repetitive yet oddly comforting
Social comparison drives consumption
Social gaming habits drive consumption
Social circle influence purchase intent
Social gaming habits override critical evaluation
Social identity shaped by franchise loyalty
Social importance of shared experience
Questioning purchase
<b>(ST2.1) Market Monopoly &amp; Lack of Alternatives</b>
Alternative games perceived as inferior
Bought latest version

Brand loyalty based on lack of alternatives
Default brand
EA seen as the only option
FIFA is superior
Lack of choice
Limited awareness of competitors
Limited brand recognition post-split
Marketplace dependency on EA franchise
Monopoly accepted by default
More gaming options available
No viable competitor
Peer group inertia
PES is inferior
PES is not acceptable
<b>(ST2.2) Attitudes toward the Product and Habitual Play</b>
Addicted to unlocking player packs
Angry emotions when playing
Authenticity drives engagement
Brand critique framed as loyalty
Bugs tolerated due to habit
Confusion around brand ownership
Criticism offset by brand familiarity
Critique overshadowed by loyalty
Dissatisfaction voiced without disengagement
Dissatisfied with game price consistently rising

Dissatisfied with pay-to-win strategy
Does not inspire strong emotions
EA Sports associated with football game
Engagement despite acknowledged flaws
Frustration with gameplay
FIFA nostalgia outweighs new features
FIFA as lonely
Gambling traits
Gameplay has not changed much
Gameplay is good
Gameplay is superior
Habitual engagement despite criticism
Habitual loyalty masks disengagement
Habitual play behavior
Love hate relationship
Satisfied with FIFA
Satisfied with overall gameplay
Perceived lack of innovation
Preference for old games
Purchased out of routine
Purchased for monetary convenience
Purchase intent linked to football team
Repetitive cycle of disappointment
Repetitive gameplay without frustration
Regulations impact purchase intent

Rage tendencies
<b>(ST2.3) Fractured Brand Identity Post-Separation</b>
Branding perceived as separate from gameplay
Brand switch introduced ambiguity
Branding perceived as superficial
Confusion over naming and branding
<i>EA Sports FC</i> lacks recognition
Emotional disconnection after brand separation
Franchise identity erosion
Frustration toward franchise stagnation
If FIFA produced its own game
Loss of iconic FIFA label
Minimal loyalty reassessment
Post-split confusion
Split reduced emotional connection
Symbolic loss
Symbolic significance of co-branding
Weak awareness of brand politics
<b>(ST2.4) Addiction</b>
Addicted to playing
Addicted to unlocking player packs
Addicted to playing ultimate team
Automatic continuation of past behavior
Disengagement hidden by routine
Disengagement perceived as unlikely

Habitual engagement despite criticism
Habitual play behavior
Holding onto FIFA identity
Loss of football spirit
Too much excess time
Wasting time playing in the past
Only game friends would play
Ultimate team driving engagement
<b>(ST.2.5) Temporal Displacement &amp; Life Stage Shifts</b>
Adulting limits gaming time
Declining novelty perception
Engagement dropped after high school
Engagement dropped after university
Growing out of FIFA
Life transitions deprioritized gaming
Life transitions impact engagement
Loss of interest
Reduced engagement over time
Reduced excitement after split
Job influenced gaming frequency
<b>(ST.3.1) Social Media and Influencers</b>
Content creator influence
Emotional Investment in cover stars
Forced engagement through online norms
Franchise burnout expressed casually

Game reputation shaped by digital platforms
Gameplay clips drive hype
Influencer commentary replaces official messaging
Influencer hype
Influencer opinions affect purchase intent
Influencers as perceived experts
Legacy player
Media coverage influences expectations
Media saturation impacts decision-making
Online creators influence perceived game quality
Online narratives shape loyalty
Parasocial connection
Peer content reinforces brand narratives
Player identity shaped by online discourse
Buying decision not reviewed-based
Consulted with online discussion
Detached from online FIFA communities
Disregarded influencer endorsements
eWOM has low personal impact
eWOM impacts perceptions
eWOM seems as background noise
Ignored online reviews
Loyalty unaffected by public opinion online
Rarely consultes online discussions
Reliance on personal experience over eWOM

Skepticism toward social media hype
Social media impacts perception
Social media impacts purchase intent
Word-of-mouth over online opinions

## Appendix E

### Statement on usage of GenAI:

I hereby declare that GenAI (ChatGPT and Grammarly) was used throughout the process of completing this thesis. ChatGPT was used for brainstorming, for the production, structure, and development of certain ideas, and for finding synonyms. Grammarly was used for spelling and grammar checks in the whole thesis. Below are some of the prompts that I used when using ChatGPT:

Prompt Given	Purpose
What are some synonyms for 'brand attachment'?	Finding synonyms to improve variety
What's a clearer way to say 'loyalty toward a disliked brand'?	Synonym and clarity support for concept phrasing
Can you help brainstorm ways emotional attachment and nostalgia might interact?	Brainstorming ideas to refine literature connections
What are common ways to frame social influence in marketing papers?	Support with idea framing and structure
What's a better term for 'passive loyalty'?	Synonym exploration for writing
Can you help brainstorm how FIFA players form emotional bonds with the game?	Idea development related to emotional branding
What would be a structured way to discuss nostalgia and habit together?	Brainstorming structure and logic of thematic links

Can you list some words to replace 'important' in academic writing?	Synonym suggestions to improve academic tone
What's a more formal word for 'feel connected'?	Synonym refinement for writing
What are logical ways to transition between emotional attachment and habit?	Support with structural development
Can you help organize my thinking around emotional vs behavioral loyalty?	Idea structuring and clarification
What's an academic way to describe 'feeling stuck with a brand'?	Synonym refinement and phrasing support
What are typical phrases used to describe social gaming influence?	Lexical and idea support for theory section
Is 'symbolic loyalty' a valid term in brand research?	Idea refinement through exploratory questioning
What are some formal ways to say 'players keep coming back'?	Synonym search for polished writing
Can you help explain the key factors of emotional loyalty?	Structure and idea development support
What's a clearer way to say 'shared brand experience'?	Making paper more clear
What's a good structure to compare eWOM and social media influence?	Brainstorming structure
What's a different way to phrase 'express dissatisfaction'?	Synonym enhancement for variation

How can I distinguish between face-to-face and online influence?	Concept structuring support
What academic terms describe loyalty formed through habit?	Vocabulary brainstorming
Can you clarify the difference between trust and attachment?	Support with idea clarification
What's a logical sequence for discussing branding, loyalty, and nostalgia?	Support with development of idea flow
Give some example phrases for describing reluctant loyalty	Vocabulary and phrasing ideas
What's a better word for 'returning customers' in a gaming context?	Synonym finding
Can you help me explore why habitual gameplay influences brand attachment?	Brainstorming and interpretation support
What are some logical connections between nostalgia and ritual use?	Conceptual brainstorming
What is the best way to structure my theoretical framework?	Structural questions
Give me ideas on why my paper could be socially and academically relevant?	Conceptual brainstorming